

Oot and Aboot

A VISITOR'S GUIDE TO ORKNEY

A short trip to experience life at the edge North Ronaldsay

by LUKE WATERSON

AN UNEXCEPTIONAL September day, end of the holiday season. Not, you might think, an obvious time to get away for a while. Indeed, colleagues sceptically asked why I'd want to go to North Ronaldsay at all. "It's hard to get to," they objected, "backward."

Nonetheless, we were at Kirkwall Airport, about to find out. A balmy day, given the summer we've had, sky over the northern isles milky and still. The plane's only other passenger was Dave, who worked at the bird observatory where we were due to stay. "Great flight," he enthused. "You'll love it." The pilot made a rocking motion with his hand. "A little choppy," he said. Both were understating.

There are not many flights in Britain where you can sit behind the pilot, still less where the pilot seems as fascinated with the view as you.

Far below, the gothic turrets of Balfour Castle, windmills churning on Stronsay, Sanday's idyllic dunes. Then the turquoise colour left the water. The view vanished beneath swirling cloud as we headed into the North Atlantic, only re-emerging moments before touchdown in North Ronaldsay.

Hollandstown airstrip is 20 miles from Kirkwall but feels two hundred. I was slightly worried: we were landing not on the airstrip but the grass to one side, rooting at nearby cows. The friendly faces of the folk greeting us at the gate reassured me however. Bad weather had them in fine spirits. Most residents have more than a passing interest in birds and with North Ronaldsay at the crossroads of important migration routes, stormy weather meant birds would take shelter and be easier to spot.

Today, rollers towering above the island, it seems remote indeed. Yet we had arrived, been whisked off to the Observatory and were sipping complimentary coffee with Tiffin in the stylish bar looking over the golden sands of South Bay, all in less time than it takes to drive Kirkwall to Stromness.

"You're twitchers then?" is the first thing we're asked.

"Not exactly..." we replied.

We needn't have worried. True, this is one of Britain's best bird-watching sites. With autumn migration in full swing, there is no better time to visit – until mid-November, waders, curlews and sand pipers are among the 150 species to be sighted. But there's plenty more besides birds. Whether you're a natural history enthusiast, archaeologist or just someone seeking some quiet, North Ronaldsay caters to all tastes.

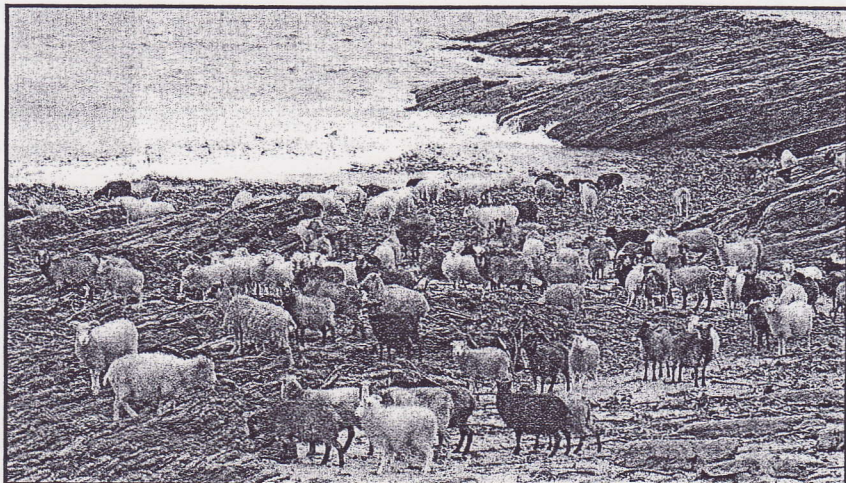
The best way to discover any island is to walk around it. In order to see everything, we allowed for more than the five hours it took.

We started following the sheep dyke, a continuous thirteen-mile wall around the coastline. An A-listed historical attraction, parts are a millennium old. Communal sheep farming here dates back 5000 years to the earliest recorded settlers, today this is one of the last places in Europe continuing the practice.

The dyke keeps the 3000 sheep (outnumbering people 50 to 1) on the shoreline rather than off: their diet being largely seaweed producing a gourmet meat popular in restaurants internationally and a uniquely coloured wool.

On the southernmost headland stands the Broch of Burrian, a well-preserved Iron Age hillfort. Excavations in the 1880s yielded a flat stone carved with an intricate cross, a motif adopted in Orkney jewellery. Beyond, Linklet Bay is one of Orkney's most picturesque stretches of sand, very sheltered for swimming. With the sheep, seals lolled on the rock, isolation having made wildlife curious rather than cautious of humans.

Ahead through tangles of seaweed, the wildest of Orkney's peninsulas. Sea crashes over rocks responsible for numerous shipwrecks, timbers from which serve as building materials even today. For those not liking birds, brochs or beaches, the buildings that stand



A DIFFERENT LANDSCAPE: A taste of life in North Ronaldsay: Above sheep grazing on seaweed on the sea shore, below (from left), Dr Kevin Woodbridge serves up a meal for guests at the bird observatory, details on the Beacons of the Sea and the silhouette of the North Ronaldsay Lighthouse, the tallest in the UK.

defying the elements here alone are worth the walk.

Second-oldest lighthouse in Scotland, the old beacon was made redundant with construction of a light at Start Point, Sanday, and Alan Stephenson, uncle of writer Robert Louis Stephenson, built the new lighthouse, tallest land-based in Britain, nearby.

Its high candy-striped tower gave maximum warning of the dangerous approach to Orkney. Robert's tours with his father around Scotland's remote coasts inspired his books 'Kidnapped' and 'Treasure Island'. It's easy to see how, with the surrounding flatness and the closeness of the waves everywhere, imagination can run away with you.

Isolation meant the lighthouse was last in Britain to be automated. The keeper, Billy Muir, showed us up for spectacular panoramic views. "Nothing

that way until Greenland," he told us, pointing northwards. I believe him.

Scatters of crofting ruins testify how many found life on this wind-swept north coast too remote. Yet the factors making it hard for human life have let nature thrive. All contrasts of the island's improbably diverse topography – rocky coast, moor and wetland are here, environments suiting everything from birds to dolphins and porpoises.

Back at the observatory we enjoyed a hearty meal of roast mutton followed by homebakes. Then time to retire. To the bar, Dr Kevin Woodbridge, the owner, stocks over fifty single malt whiskies. We felt we should oblige.

After a full (I mean full) Scottish breakfast next morning there was just time to have a pint at the Burrian Inn, Orkney's most northerly pub. We lingered longer than planned: Next

door the post office cum cafe with selection of red wine and cakes also has wonderful woollen crafts on sale.

Too soon we piled into the battered land rover for Chris, an enthusiastic staff member, to drive us back to the airstrip. He waited with us until the plane arrived.

"In case weather gets too bad for take-off," he explained "and you have to stay." Half of me hoped we could.

(Return flights to North Ronaldsay are £12 per person conditional on at least one night's stay. Full board at the Bird Observatory starts at £23 per person per night with discounts for those lucky enough to be staying longer.)

■ The Oot and Aboot report will return in April. Business of the Week resumes next week.



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