



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC321
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90285)
Taken into State care:	1906 (Guardianship)
Last Reviewed:	2020 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

STONES OF STENNESS



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

STONES OF STENNESS

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a Neolithic ceremonial enclosure (henge) and internal stone ring, constructed between 3000-2900 cal BC. Today, four stones are standing (some re-erected) of a possible twelve. However, the circle was probably unfinished, as excavations in 1973-4 revealed no stone socket existed for 'Stone 12'. Nearby, the tall standing stone known as the Watch Stone is a part of the same Property In Care (PIC). A contemporaneous settlement at Barnhouse close to the Stones is in the care of Orkney Islands Council. Each discrete PIC area forms part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (WHS).

The henge and stone circle are in an enclosed field of improved pasture. The Watch Stone stands on the roadside at the Bridge of Brodgar, at the south end of the causeway between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, on Mainland Orkney. Between the two, the stone sockets for a pair of standing stones, have been discovered which included the now destroyed Stone of Odin.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- There was substantial antiquarian interest in this site, resulting in a significant number of early illustrations which constitutes an invaluable record of the earlier condition of the site.
- 1814 local outcry when farmer starts to pull stones down, including the famous holed Stone of Odin c.60m to the north; an early example of local action to protect an ancient monument.
- One of the first sites to be scheduled in the British Isles (1882).
- 1906 - passes to State care and the fallen stones were subsequently re-erected; new legal agreement in 1983 because of legal ambiguities with the first. Early 20th-century works involve erection of spurious 'dolmen', now reconfigured, but we remain uncertain about its original form.
- 1999 - Inscribed as part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS, the first archaeological site in Scotland to be designated for its cultural values. Also part of the Brodgar Rural Conservation Area, the only Conservation Area in Scotland designated for its archaeological values.

British Empire connections

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire¹ has highlighted that the Stones of Stenness have ‘property’ Empire connection² as it was owned by the Balfours of Trenabie. The Balfours of Trenabie obtained significant wealth, and subsequently land, through the involvement of John Balfour (1750-1842) with the East India Company. On his return to Britain in 1790 he is thought to have doubled the already extensive fortune he had made while in the Company’s service in southern India. On his death, the bulk of his £180,852 fortune passed to his great-nephew David Balfour (1811-87), who invested heavily in agricultural improvements on his estates. From the 1870s, the estates became divided between different members of the family. By 1905, Colonel James William Balfour (1827-1907) was approached by MP Cathcart Watson and Hon. John Abercromby with regards to preserving the site and, with others in the immediate area, they were taken into guardianship in April 1906.³ There can be no doubting that the passing on of the empire-derived wealth did play a role in preserving Orkney’s ancient heritage. David Balfour, for example, took particular interest in Maeshowe, with subsequent generations placing other sites into care.⁴

Archaeological overview

- Of all the elements of the WHS, this is probably the best understood site in the sense that there were fairly extensive scientific excavations of its interior in 1973-4 and excavations at the nearby Barnhouse settlement (1986-91) have shed considerable light on what is happening in the immediate area and the close inter-relationship between the two sites. The ditches of the henge are likely to retain considerable archaeological potential including, in all likelihood, waterlogged deposits.
- The number of early prehistoric monuments, and associated settlements (Barnhouse, Barnhouse Odin, Bookan and Ness of Brodgar) on the narrow strip of land between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, and around the immediate perimeter of these lochs,

¹ Full report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

² ‘Property’ connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recent enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 30-31 for a full definition of typology.

³ Mullen *et al* 2024, 49.

⁴ Mullen *et al* 2024, 46-49.

indicates that this area was a very special place to the prehistoric inhabitants of Orkney.

- Extensive geophysical survey has highlighted the archaeological richness of the area immediately surrounding the PIC. This is not restricted to the Neolithic period but includes evidence for multiperiod activity (for example, the Iron Age broch site at Big Howe c.150m north-east of the stones of Stenness).
- At least two contemporary Neolithic settlements have been identified in close vicinity so far (Barnhouse and Barnhouse Odin). A third settlement at the Ness of Brodgar lies directly west on the far side of the causeway linking Stenness and Brodgar. Such coincidence of well-preserved settlement evidence and monuments is unique in the British Isles, if not north-west Europe. A specific relationship between the Stones of Stenness and Barnhouse is suggested by similarities in the layout of the interior features of the Barnhouse Hall (Structure 8) and those of the Stones of Stenness, and the use of identical Grooved Ware ceramics at the two sites, probably manufactured at Barnhouse. A radiocarbon dating programme in 2016-17 established that the Stones of Stenness and the Barnhouse settlement were in contemporary use.
- There is no recorded excavation in the vicinity of the Watch Stone, although a stone socket was discovered and recorded nearby in about 1930. This shows that the Watch Stone was originally part of a paired setting. This pairing is replicated at the now destroyed site of the Stone of Odin (a famous monolith pierced with a circular hole, through which couples would hold hands to make their vows absolute) the position of which was discovered in 1991.
- These monuments were erected in a landscape of open grassland with some cereal cultivation.
- Further stone settings are known to have once existed in the immediate vicinity. These include another paired setting of standing stones which included the famous Odin's Stone, to which much local colourful folklore attaches.

Artistic/Architectural overview

- The construction of the henge involved digging a rock-cut ditch, an activity that required a considerable collective effort.
- Judging from the results of the 1973-4 investigation of the stone sockets, the stone ring was never fully completed as no stone socket was located for 'Stone 12' and the socket for Stone 9 was so shallow that it was unlikely to ever have held a stone upright.

- There was in all probability an earlier building at the site partially represented by sections of masonry, empty stone holes and an earlier central hearth setting.
- The form of the stones themselves is of architectural note in that they are very tall and very thin blades of stone that is, they are structurally very slender and probably at the very limit of structural stability.
- The stone monoliths were derived from at least five different sources, one of which was Vestra Fiold, on the west coast of Mainland, north of Skara Brae.
- It should be noted that the outer bank of this henge monument was largely destroyed by ploughing; the present form reflects rebuilding in 1985, to the form recorded in 1851, to protect the underlying old ground surface.

Social overview

- A Community Study addressing this issue was undertaken as part of a Manchester University PhD by Angie McClanahan, supervised by Dr Siân Jones and funded by Historic Scotland.
- The Stones of Stenness are a much photographed and illustrated icon of Orkney. So well-known and powerful is this iconic image that it is often used inappropriately in representing the Neolithic of Scotland as a whole.

Spiritual overview

- See reference to Community Study above.
- The site is considered to have been built for ceremonial and religious purposes.

Aesthetic overview

- The monument is carefully sited on a slight prominence on the eastern section of a narrow strip of land between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, part of a National Scenic Area. The extensive views to and from the site are very striking and atmospheric.
- The angular profile of the quarried stones is particularly distinctive (note the possibility that this may be due to incorrect re-erection).

- The Stones of Stenness are inter-visible with many other upstanding prehistoric monuments, notably key components of the WHS: **Maeshowe, Ring of Brodgar, Barnhouse Stone and Watchstone..**

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Evidence for a pre-existing building is partial and ambiguous and further investigations would be valuable in unravelling the complex history of the site.
- Although one source at Vestra Fiold has been identified and investigated, further research is needed into where the four other lithologies of the standing stones were derived.
- As only small trenches have been excavated across the ditch, there remains a degree of uncertainty as to the activities undertaken at the site, and its material residues.
- An extraordinary number of broken Neolithic maceheads have been discovered in the ploughsoil immediately around the Stones of Stenness, and no investigations of adjacent areas beyond the site boundary have been undertaken.
- The bigger questions relate to understanding the immediate context of the PIC in the Neolithic period, specifically its social and temporal role in relation to other monuments and settlements.
- This extends beyond the third millennium cal BC into later prehistory and subsequent uses of the area. Particularly how the monument is understood and appreciated in later periods, for instance, a group of pits dating to the early historic period were discovered inside the monument in the 1973-4 excavations. Equally, a massive broch at Big Howe is built in close proximity to the site in the first millennium cal BC.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Well preserved (if partly reconstructed), massive stone circle situated amongst a landscape of contemporary and later monuments and settlements.
- Speaks of an early and sophisticated society in northern Britain: it is a rarity to have evidence for contemporary and adjacent ritual and settlements sites; it is an added bonus that their stories appear to

weave together to present an imaginative and new appreciation of life in early prehistoric times.

- Sited in the heart of Neolithic Orkney where there is an outstanding concentration of important early prehistoric monuments.
- Lies in a much-designated area for cultural and natural significances; includes being part of a WHS.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Other sites within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site: **Maeshowe, Ring of Brodgar, Barnhouse Stone and Watchstone, Skara Brae**. Relevance to other Orcadian Neolithic chambered tombs (in a general sense, but also in its close proximity to **Unstan**). Ring of Bookan. Bookan, Barnhouse and Ness of Brodgar Neolithic settlements, the former two as yet uninvestigated. Stone of Odin, Watch Stone and Barnhouse Stone. Other stones circles and henge monuments in Historic Environment Scotland's care elsewhere in Scotland, for example **Cairnpapple, Machrie Moor, Calanais, Kilmartin Glen monuments**. Avebury, Stonehenge.

KEYWORDS

Neolithic, Bronze Age, stone circle, henge, stone setting, burial mounds, Barnhouse village, World Heritage Site, archaeological landscape, quarrying, Orkney.

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Mullen, S., Mackillop, A., and Driscoll, S. 2024 Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997. (Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland). Available online: <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=e192ea9f-0d7e-4745-b499-b0fb010a167a> (accessed: 17 December 2024).