



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:
Designations:

PIC13
Scheduled Monument (SM90042);
Conservation Area (CA369)
Taken into State care:
1906 (Ownership)
Last Reviewed:
2018 (2025 update to include Empire
connections)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RING OF BRODGAR



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RING OF BRODGAR

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a massive ceremonial enclosure, or ‘henge’; its rock-cut ditch (c.123m diameter) encircling a platform with an impressive stone circle set around its circumference. It is thought to date to between 2600 and 2000 BC and is carefully and prominently sited on an isthmus between two lochs on Mainland Orkney.

The stone circle has a diameter of c.103m with 21 stones currently standing erect, but it is thought to have originally incorporated 60 monoliths. The individual stones have a mixed history: some are lost, several are represented only by stumps or packing stones, while others still lie where they fell or were pushed; a number of stones were re-erected by the Ministry of Works at the start of the 20th century, while the remainder have stood through the test of time. One stone carries a Norse runic inscription, and at least one other has been struck by lightning.

In the landscape around the Ring of Brodgar are at least 13 prehistoric burial mounds and a stone setting. The Property in Care (PIC) forms part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (WHS).

The site is divided into two by a B-road; only the main area on the west side of the road is enclosed. Visitors are encouraged to keep to the footpaths, and to use the two prehistoric causeways over the ditch of the henge to enter the Ring (on entry a fence directs them towards the northernmost entrance).

The RSPB, who own the land around the site, have created a circular walk, via access through the PIC fence, which takes in both sides of the lochs to the south of the Ring. Access is now possible between the two.

There are various spellings of the monument, a subject that can be of heated local interest. Bro(d)gar can be correctly spelt with and without the ‘d’. Brogar conforms to the supposed etymology of the name (Old Norse Bridge Farm), but PIC has opted to use the ‘d’ spelling.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- There is a particularly full and early antiquarian interest in this site (the first known account dating to 1529) with both prose and illustrations surviving. One noted outcome of this is that there is an invaluable early record of how the site looked in the past, before some of the stones were re-erected.
- Celebrated historic visitors include Sir Walter Scott, who in 1814 wrote of the Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stenness that

‘Stonehenge excels these monuments, but I fancy they are otherwise unparalleled in Britain’, while in 1846 geologist Hugh Miller observed that the stones ‘look like an assemblage of ancient druids, mysteriously stern and invincibly shaggy and silent’.

- One of the first sites to be scheduled in the British Isles (original 1882 list).
- 1906 passes to state care, and most of the fallen stones were re-erected at this time; guardianship area extended in 1966.
- The monument was apparently used for tank training in 1941. A photograph survives in Imperial War Museum labelled: ‘Bren gun carriers of the 9th Battalion, Gordon Highlanders pass between the prehistoric standing stones of the Ring of Brodgar on Orkney, 18 June 1941’.
- 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.
- Very limited scientific investigation of site; 3 narrow trenches opened by Colin Renfrew in 1973, with two of these (cutting across the ditch) reopened and extended by ORCA in 2008. Several detailed geophysical surveys conducted in recent years.

British Empire connections

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire¹ has highlighted that the Ring of Brodgar has ‘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. However, there can be no doubting that the passing on of the empire-derived wealth did play a role in preserving Orkney’s ancient heritage.

¹ Full report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997](https://www.hes.scot.nhs.uk/hesweb/properties-in-care-and-the-british-empire-c-1600-1997) ([historicenvironment.scot](https://www.hes.scot.nhs.uk/hesweb/properties-in-care-and-the-british-empire-c-1600-1997))

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.

David Balfour, for example, took particular interest in Maeshowe, with subsequent generations placing other sites into care.³

Archaeological overview

- Largest stone circle in Scotland, surrounded by a rock-cut ditch with points of entry and exit provided via two narrow opposed causeways in the northwest (3m wide) and southeast (just over 1m wide). The ditch has filled in over millennia, but at an original depth of around 4m and a width of 10m it would have been particularly impressive when freshly exposed.
- In other examples of henges, the material excavated from the ditch would typically be used to create an external bank, surrounding the monument. However, this feature is absent from the Ring of Brodgar, and no trace of a bank was identified in either phase of excavation. It is likely that some of the material from the ditch was used to form the internal platform.
- Excavation suggested that the enormous ditch was originally dug out in segments, with material quarried out from the bedrock (likely by fracturing the rock along its natural fissures with the use of hammerstones, wedges and antler picks). The fact that the ditch appears to have been dug in discrete sections, rather than as a continuous whole, has prompted archaeologists to suggest that it may have been created by separate workforces, perhaps from different parts of Orkney.
- The standing stones form a near perfect circle, and are fairly regularly spaced, though are apparently positioned more closely together in the groupings adjacent to the causeways. Examination of two stone sockets revealed them both to be extremely shallow, which, if typical of the other sockets within the ring, may go some way to explain the number of stones that fell in antiquity. It may also suggest that longevity was not a primary concern for the ring builders.
- Individual stones have their own histories; whether struck by lightning, engraved with historic graffiti, or even a runic inscription (the name Bjorn) and a small cross. There has previously been some debate over the authenticity of the runic inscription, and a second reported example is no longer visible. Visitors are reminded that today, the carving of graffiti is forbidden by law.
- The stones themselves seem to comprise a number of different lithologies, with potentially up to seven different stone sources represented. Suggestion has been made that in referencing different

³ Mullen *et al* 2024, 46-48.

places in Orkney, they could also relate to different social groups. To date, three probable sources have been identified at Houton, Staneyhill, and Vestra Fiold, with quarried monoliths still present at the latter site - a hill some 10km to the north-west but visible from the Ring

- Both phases of Modern excavation had limited success in retrieving datable material, but the limited scientific evidence we do have suggests that the ditch was dug somewhere between 2600-2400 BC. If this proposed date of construction is correct, then the Stones of Stenness, Barnhouse and the Ness of Brodgar would already have been present and visible when the ditch was dug.
- Pollen samples retrieved from the ditch suggested that in the early third millennium BC the immediate environment of the ring was not dissimilar to the current level of tree and vegetation cover seen today. The monument appears to have been constructed in open grassland. Traces of cereal pollen were also found within the ditch fill.
- There have been no recorded excavations within the *centre* of the monument, and geophysical surveys have yielded little detail, detecting only hints of internal anomalies. As of yet, we do not know whether there would have been anything in the centre, or how this space may have been used. It is possible that much archaeological evidence was lost during the extensive turf-stripping that is known to have occurred in the 1800s
- It has been suggested that the sites and monuments in the surrounding area were used for astrological observations from the Ring of Brodgar, but it is very hard to find conclusive evidence for this.
- While there has been an element of re-erection of standing stones, the quality of the survival of the monuments at Ring of Brodgar and its immediate environs is outstanding.
- The number of early prehistoric monuments on the narrow strip of land between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, and around the immediate perimeter of these lochs, indicates that this was an important place to the prehistoric inhabitants of Orkney.
- Geophysical survey has highlighted the archaeological potential of the PIC and its surroundings area. A large and extraordinary complex of enclosures, field boundaries and other structures was have been identified to the north of Dyke o'Sean.

Associated sites

- To the south-east of the Ring stands the now solitary 1.75m high Comet Stone, but the two neighbouring stumps of stone suggest it

may once have been part of a larger grouping set within the wider complex of sites along the isthmus.

- The neighbouring Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds hint at the importance of this area as a focus for ceremonial activities over an extended period of time. Some of these monuments may even pre-date the Ring and help to explain its existence in this location.
- Some mounds have been subject to unsystematic antiquarian fossicking to varying degrees, but few discoveries were reported.
- Plumcake Mound, named for its distinctive shape, was explored by James Farrer and George Petrie in 1854, revealing two stone cists each containing cremated human remains, one within a decorated steatite urn, the other within a pottery urn. It is not clear whether these represent secondary insertions, but a date of 1745-1566 cal BC from a single piece of calcined bone indicates the use of the mound in the Early Bronze Age.
- The prominent mound of Salt Knowe measures 40m by 6m and is comparable in scale to Maeshowe. Antiquarian investigations and recent geophysical survey have failed to provide any evidence for internal structures, and as such, both its function and date of construction remain a mystery. Its name is thought to derive from its position adjacent to the saltwater Loch of Stenness, as opposed to Fresh Knowe which sits close to the freshwater Loch of Harray.
- A single trench across the north end of Fresh Knowe was investigated by James Farrer in 1853, who reported no finds but observed that the mound had been carefully constructed. This, coupled with the mound's large size and elliptical shape may suggest that it was a Neolithic burial mound, constructed prior to the Ring of Brodgar.

Artistic/Architectural overview

Along with its scale, the truly circular layout of the Ring is an unusual attribute that singles it out as one of the largest and finest stone circles in the British Isles. It is also one of the largest henge monuments in Britain, surpassed only by Avebury, and the Great Circle at Stanton Drew.

- The site represents an extraordinary endeavour of human labour, from the excavation of the vast ditches and removal of the resulting material, to the quarrying, dragging and erection of the huge stones. This must have required considerable person-power and coherent organisation, but also significant resources to support the workforce.
- The absence of a bank around the outer ditch of the henge is most unusual (the typical classification of a henge is a ritual enclosure,

normally defined by a ditch and external bank) and brings into question the usefulness of typological classifications.

- Its landscape setting is of particular interest; situated on rising ground within a natural bowl, on an isthmus of land between two lochs, one salt water (Stenness) and the other fresh (Harray). Standing at the Ring one has the sense of being in a natural amphitheatre; and suggestion has been made that the encircling water-logged ditch may have referenced the experience of Neolithic peoples inhabiting the island world of Orkney.

Social overview

- The origin of the Ring was explained in a local folk story in which a group of giants were frozen to stone as the sun rose upon their circular dance. The neighbouring Comet Stone featured as the fiddler in this folklore, and was associated with its own tradition, whereby locals always removed their hats as they walked past it.
- One of the most popular attraction for tourists in Orkney, with many taking advantage of the free guided tours offered by Historic Environment Scotland's Ranger Service.
- See PhD by Angie McClanahan, highlighting the range of values that different groups and individuals place on the site. Many people are attracted to the site because of its perceived 'natural' state. To the island's people it is a powerful symbol of belonging. It also stands for the purity and 'simplicity' of remote 'untouched' places in opposition to the complexity, development and commodification associated with modern society.
- The quiet tranquillity of the site is often commented upon by visitors, as is the perceived wild quality of its setting. The monument has no dense habitation nearby, and wide open horizons for viewing skies.
- The Ring of Brodgar is 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.
- Place for local gatherings and activities, notably at the winter and summer solstice (when Billy Connolly's nude antics at the site are sometimes relived!). Pagan ceremonies (including weddings) are also known to have been held here.
- There is anecdotal evidence that local schools use the Ring as an educational resource.

- The Ring of Brodgar features in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney Community Map in which the people who live and work nearby, map the aspects of the site that matter most to them.
- Local businesses benefit from their proximity to this site and other parts of the WHS, e.g. The Standing Stones Hotel.
- It is also a haven for wildlife, with its flora and fauna attracting nature lovers. The land surrounding the ring is carefully managed by the RSPB, in order to promote biodiversity. This includes the maintenance of grassland, semi-natural wetland and arable areas, and the encouragement of wild flowers and breeding birds. In order to protect this fragile ecosystem, visitors are encouraged to keep to the mown paths, and to avoid climbing on the mounds.

Spiritual overview

- Not assessed.
- The site is considered to have been built for spiritual or ritual purposes, the nature of which remain opaque.

Aesthetic overview

- This is undoubtedly one of the most visually impressive prehistoric sites in the British Isles.
- It possesses a very ‘natural’, untouched and simple aesthetic. This is particularly enhanced by the weathering of the sedimentary beds of the stone, which with their varying resistance to erosion give a very pronounced layering to faces and ribbing to edges.
- The monument is carefully sited on a slight prominence on a narrow strip of land between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness where it is visible on the skyline from many directions and over a considerable distance: such prominence was intentional. The ‘backdrop’ to the Ring is a National Scenic Area. The extensive views to and from the site are very striking and atmospheric.
- The Ring of Brodgar is inter-visible with many other upstanding prehistoric monuments, notably key components of the WHS: **Maeshowe, Stones of Stenness, Barnhouse Stone and Watchstone.** Note too inter-visibility with **Knowe of Unstan.**

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Despite its fame, very little of the site has been archaeologically investigated to modern standards and fundamental questions remain to be addressed, including:

- Scientific dating to establish the period of construction and use, but also the relative phasing (for example, what came first, the erection of the stones or the digging of the ditch? Were the stones erected gradually over time?).
- How the space was used.
- Whether there are any features in the centre of the ring.
- The fate of the missing monoliths, and the material extracted during the digging of the ditch.
- A wider study with associated sites could better contextualise the monument. For example, when compared with the Stones of Stenness it is possible that their contrasting configurations, scale, and prominence within the landscape reflected different meanings or functions to the social groups that built and used them.
- Although a number of stone sources have been identified, more research is needed into where the monoliths were procured from and how they how they were transported and erected.
- Work to build upon landscape studies of the surrounding area, and the extent to which the lochs were fully formed when the monument was constructed and in use.
- Although there was space for 60 monoliths, we do not know whether the Neolithic builders ever finished erecting all 60. It is important to remember that such monuments have a long lifespan, and the form in which we see them represents only their final stage. It is likely that the monument would have evolved over time.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- One of the largest and best preserved stone circles and henges in the British Isles. Sited within a larger ritual landscape that still includes many upstanding monuments.
- Speaks of an early and sophisticated society in northern Britain.

- Little specific is yet known about the archaeology of the complex of monuments in an around the Ring of Brodgar because few have been scientifically investigated; it includes burials and settlements which may prove contemporaneous with the Ring and the likely co-existence of related monuments demonstrating various aspects of prehistoric life makes its hidden archaeology internationally significant.
- Sited in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney where there is an outstanding concentration of important early prehistoric monuments.
- Thought by a significant subset of archaeologists to fossilise, together with the lesser monuments visible from it, an interest in astronomical events.
- Lies in a much designated area for cultural and natural significances; includes being part of a WHS.
- A special place to visit for many people, for a host of reasons.
- World-famous icon of Orkney.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Stones of Stenness, Maeshowe, Barnhouse Stone and Watchstone, Skara Brae. Relevance to other Orkney neolithic chambered tombs (in more general sense, but close proximity to **Knowe of Unstan**). Neighbouring henge to the north at the Ring of Bookan. Ness of Brodgar and Barnhouse neolithic settlements. Other stone circles and henge monuments in Historic Environment Scotland's care, e.g. **Cairnpapple Hill, Machrie Moor, Calanais Standing Stones, Kilmartin monuments.** Avebury, Stonehenge.

KEYWORDS

neolithic, Bronze Age, stone circle, henge, stone setting, burial mounds, runic inscription, quarrying, archaeological landscape, World Heritage Site.

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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).