



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC322
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90297)
Taken into State care:	1934 (Guardainship)
Last Reviewed:	2003 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# TAVERSOE TUICK CHAMBERED CAIRN



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## TAVERSOE TUICK CHAMBERED CAIRN

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Alternative Spelling: Taversöe Tuick.

The monument comprises a neolithic chambered cairn used for communal burial. It falls into a broad tradition of stone-chambered cairns, which started in Scotland in the 4th millennium BC. The sub-circular cairn contains two separate levels of chamber, the lower rock-cut into a steep hillside, surrounded by a secondary rough platform of stones. Beyond the edge of the platform is a small ancillary structure that is also rock-cut, and is linked to the lower of the two chambers by a stone-covered channel. Skeletal remains from the main cairn included crouched inhumations and several cremated burials. Further finds included pottery, flint artefacts and other stone tools.

First recognised and partially excavated in 1898, the site was further excavated in 1937 and covered shortly afterwards with a concrete roof. Today, visitors access the tomb through the upper entrance before descending via a short ladder into the lower chamber through the broken lintels that divide the two storeys (something which would not have been possible in prehistory). Situated on the south side of the island of Rousay, the enclosure around the tomb is approached through improved pasture, past an active quarry.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical overview

- The journal of Lady Eliza Burroughs provides a contemporary account of the tomb's discovery in 1898 when work was being undertaken for a garden seat. Entitled 'How we found a tumulus', her manuscript is of additional interest for its personal nature and social commentary. Her husband, General Traill-Burroughs, was the controversial owner of the Trumland Estate, who was well-known for his dogmatic views over land ownership. He was also an army officer in India where he commanded forces during the Indian Rising, though it is not certain to what extent, if any, monies made in Imperial service were invested into his Orkney estates. Nonetheless, the intervention of the General and Eliza probably ensured the longer-term preservation of the site.<sup>1</sup>
- One of a series of important prehistoric monuments in Orkney excavated in the 1930s by Walter Grant (the succeeding owner of the

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the connection between Properties in Care and the British Empire download the full report from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

Trumland Estate; an influential rich local antiquarian, who financed the excavation and conservation of many archaeological sites on Rousay).

- Passed to state care in 1934.
- Roofed in 1937.

### Archaeological overview

- By analogy with other sites, this tomb likely dates to between 3500 and 2500 cal BC.
- The upper chamber was entered from uphill via its passage from the north, and comprised two round-ended compartments of unequal size. Upon excavation, the inner end of the passage was found to be deliberately blocked with masonry, with shale beads and a pumice pendant found under the blocking.
- The lower, subterranean chamber would originally have been entered from downhill from the south, via its significantly longer passage. Its stone-lined compartments were shelved with stone slabs, onto which skeletal remains from at least three individuals had been laid, including a crouched skeleton. Three heaps of cremated bone were also found in the associated passage, plus the partial remains of a deliberately broken pestle macehead.
- The small rock-cut ancillary chamber is lined in stone and divided by four upright slabs. Its stonework and layout has the impression of a chambered tomb constructed in miniature, yet upon excavation it was found to contain three Neolithic pots (one of which was complete), but no human bone. While its function remains uncertain, it has been suggested that it was acoustically linked to the main cairn; it may have been possible to 'communicate' with the cairn's lower chamber, via the drain-like feature, which runs along the lower passage.
- Secondary activity included three cists cut into the upper mound, overlaying the upper chamber of the Neolithic tomb. These contained the cremated remains of at least one adult and a child. Early Bronze Age activity was confirmed through the radiocarbon dating of two samples: calcined human remains contained within one of the cists (2131–1751 cal BC), and a cattle scapula from the entrance to the upper chamber (1886–1693 cal BC).
- One of sixteen known chambered cairns on Rousay, an exceptionally high density of such monuments. [Note: not all are publically accessible].

- Excellent illustration of the diversity of tomb architecture and burial practices within a small area of Scotland.

### **Artistic/Architectural overview**

- Both the upper and lower chambers are examples of what archaeologists call the Bookan type of chamber, a sub-type of the classification known as the 'Orkney-Cromarty' group. However, this typology has been challenged because it possibly bundles together chambers with various associations and date, and it is probably best to regard Taversoe Tuick simply as a unique local variant of the general Orkney-Cromarty type.
- The cairn is one of only two known examples in which two separate (but contemporary) chambers have been built with one set above the other (the other being Huntersquoy on Eday). The small ancillary chamber is unique and is the only known example of this feature.
- One of a group of excavated Orcadian monuments that was roofed by Historic Environment Scotland's predecessor body in the 1930s. The approach to the conservation of these monuments, techniques involved and subsequent management problems arising from this is of interest in terms of development of ideas of conservation history and the unusual management issues that arise from this now through the growth of green algae in the interiors of the monuments.

### **Social overview**

Not assessed.

### **Spiritual overview**

Not assessed.

### **Aesthetic overview**

- Good views over Wyre and Eynhallow Sounds and neighbouring islands.
- As with so many Orkney monuments, the fine drystone construction is particularly pleasing.
- The monument is visible as a green mound on the hillside from some distance, including the approach by sea, but so too is the scar of the modern quarry beneath it. The profile of the mound is artificial, and results from its 20th century roof and associated interventions.

## What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Social and spiritual value not assessed.
- Clarity required regarding chronology of the site, particularly date of construction.
- Constructional details and relative phasing such as the relationship of the outer part of the lower passage and the ancillary chamber, and the purpose this served.
- Nothing is known of the activity in the immediate vicinity of this tomb. Judging by the distinctive carinated pottery found in it, the broad community with which it is associated also built Midhowe and other chambered cairns in Orkney; excavations at settlement sites such as Knap of Howar, Braes of Ha'Breck, Stonehall and Wideford Hill suggest that they were farmers and herders who built long round-cornered houses.
- Settlement associated with Taversoe Tuick itself has not yet been identified, though note excavation at Braes of Ha'Breck on neighbouring island of Wyre.
- Building upon the 1985 work by D. Reynolds and G. Ritchie, a history of Walter Grant (and his role in Orcadian archaeology including the various monuments now in state care), would enhance appreciation of recent archaeological history of the site, and its local social significance.

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- A well preserved neolithic tomb of a very distinctive and unusual form.
- Idiosyncratic and personal report of 1898 discovery by Lady Burroughs.
- One of a high concentration of neolithic tombs sited on Rousay. The most obvious indicator of neolithic settlement in most parts of Scotland is its burial architecture and this density of monuments and their relationship to each other and the landscape is particularly important for understanding how neolithic peoples inhabited, organised and shared the landscape and its resources.
- One of a string of excavated chambered cairns now in the care of Historic Environment Scotland on the south side of Rousay.

- One of a group of important prehistoric monuments excavated in the 1930s by Walter G Grant.
- The ecological value of the vegetation on the site should also be noted (see Ecological Survey).

## ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Chambered cairns of **Mid Howe, Blackhammer, Knowe of Yarso, Knowe of Unstan**, Isbister. Huntersquoy (two storeys). Broadly contemporaneous burial monuments of different type in Orkney include **Maeshowe, Wideford Hill, Cuween Hill, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray**, and the **Dwarfie Stane** (also rock-cut). Finds from the excavations are in the National Museums of Scotland; skeletal remains lost, with the exception of a small quantity of cremated bone.

## KEYWORDS

Neolithic, chambered cairn, chambered tomb, Orkney-Cromarty (Bookan chamber), rock-cut, multi-level, platform, burials, Orkney.

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