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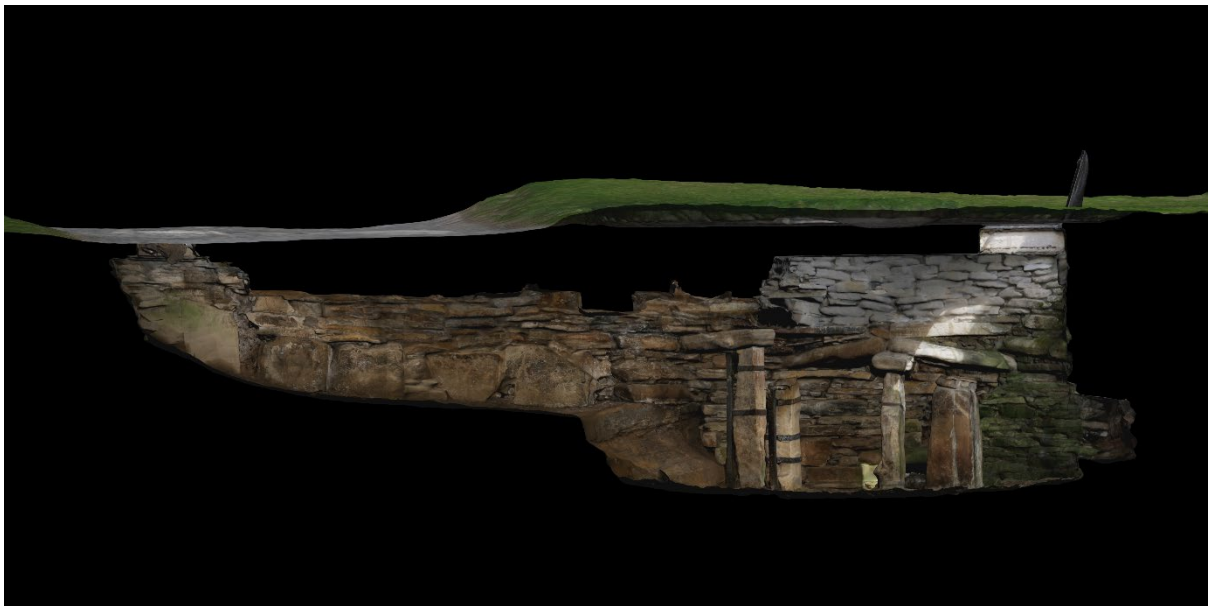
Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90245)

Taken into State care: 1927 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2021

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RENNIBISTER EARTH HOUSE



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Cover: Still image from 3D photogrammetric model of Rennibister Earth House, showing interior of structure in relation to current ground level. Modern access ladder has been removed from render.

Full model accessible at: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/rennibister-earth-house-souterrain-orkney-8ff695693f0a4dd99a662c077ef9bf79>

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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RENNIBISTER EARTH HOUSE

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Please note, the research for this document was undertaken during 2020-2021 with limited access to archives and resources, as a result of Covid-19. While every attempt was made for accuracy throughout the statement, errors or omissions may remain. Please direct comments or suggestions to CRTenquiries@hes.scot

I. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Rennibister Earth House is a stone-built underground structure or 'souterrain',¹ built and used in the 1st millennium BC in the period known as the Iron Age. The principal components of the structure comprise a passage and chamber, walled and roofed with drystone masonry. The chamber is roughly hexagonal, with small recesses built into five of the angled corners; the passage leads from a small entrance at the sixth. The roof slabs of the chamber were supported by four freestanding orthostats, atop a rock-cut floor (now gravel-covered). When excavated, the structure was found to contain disarticulated human bones from up to 18 individuals, carefully deposited within the chamber before it was sealed.

The site is situated on the southern shores of the Bay of Firth, at the heart of Mainland Orkney. It lies within a modern farm complex.

The monument is complete except for the damage to the roof caused by the sudden ingress of a heavy threshing machine in 1926, which led to the site's discovery. Shortly after this, a modern access hatch and ladder were inserted, allowing visitors to enter through the roof of the chamber. A second, grill-covered hatch has been inserted at the far end of the original entrance passage.

Although the site was undoubtedly part of an Iron Age settlement, nothing is visible on the surface of the ground today. An enclosure fence surrounds the modern entrance, with information provided on site via a single interpretation panel.

The site is unstaffed, and free to visit year-round, however, visitors are asked to be respectful of the fact that the monument is within a working

¹ The site belongs to a class of monument commonly referred to as a 'souterrain'; a term which is now generally preferred over that of 'earth house'. Throughout this document the site is referred to by its legal name 'Rennibister Earth House,' as defined in the 2014 Scheme of Delegation for Properties in Care. [For further discussion on the use of the terms 'earth house' and 'souterrain' see Section 2.1.7 Nomenclature, below.] It takes the 'Rennibister' element of the name from the modern farm complex which developed around it.

farm.² The interior of the structure is illuminated by roof lights only. Due to the low height of the chamber, access may be unsuitable for those with limited mobility, or claustrophobia.³

The monument is protected as Scheduled Monument SM90245,⁴ and listed on CANMORE as ID 2081.⁵ The site entered State care via Guardianship Agreement in 1927.

1.2 Statement of Significance

Rennibister Earth House is of national importance as a well-preserved earth house or souterrain: an underground stone-built passage and chamber, dating to the first millennium BC, in Iron Age Orkney. While the precise purpose of earth houses remains unclear, it is likely that they were multi-functional, and served both domestic (storage), and spiritual (ritual) elements. At Rennibister the presence of human bones from a number of individuals, both adults and children, laid to rest in the chamber at the end of the structure's life, adds to the significance of the site. The discovery of human remains within earth houses is extremely rare.

There is high potential for the site at Rennibister to elucidate further detail of life in the Iron Age, if it were possible to apply modern techniques of investigation around the monument.

The significance of Rennibister is enhanced by the wider potential of the site, which includes its association with other Iron Age sites around the Bay of Firth. More detailed study of an assemblage of sites such as these would permit investigation of the networks of Iron Age life across social strata and living landscapes. Orkney is known for a remarkably complete suite of Iron Age monuments, and Rennibister is an important part of this. The contrast between everyday domestic sites such as Rennibister and high-status settlements such as the broch villages like the **Broch of Gurness**⁶ or ceremonial sites such as Mine Howe, plays an important role in providing a more complete interpretation of Iron Age life and society across Orkney.

² Please check access information prior to visiting:

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/rennibister-earth-house/getting-here/>

³ A 3D model of the site is freely accessible via the HES Sketchfab page:

<https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/rennibister-earth-house-souterrain-orkney-8ff695693f0a4dd99a662c077ef9bf79>. This may be of particular interest for those unable to physically explore the monument.

⁴ Scheduling details accessible at:

<http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM90245>

⁵ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/2081/rennibister>

⁶ Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at:

www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/

Earth houses are found across Scotland but are still poorly understood. Rennibister holds a significant role for future research on this class of monuments because of the possibility of undisturbed deposits, and the recovery of human remains from the site.

Rennibister is a significant element of the display and interpretation of the archaeology of Orkney. Entering the structure through the modern hatch, the visitor of today is afforded an immersive experience in the world of Iron Age Orkney. Rennibister provides the rare opportunity for a personal, unsupervised, encounter with the past.

Key aspects of the site's significance include the following:

- Well-preserved Iron Age masonry; Rennibister is a rare example of an earth house with stone-lined recesses around the chamber.
- Accomplished architectural design and skilful stonecraft making use of a range of local stones including both quarried and worn slabs.
- The discovery of the bones of at least 18 individuals, including men, women and children, that had been carefully placed into the chamber before it was sealed. It has been suggested that these bones were brought in from earlier internments elsewhere.
- The possibility, suggested by the location of the site towards the summit of a low mound, that further Iron Age remains survive and would repay investigation (albeit of difficult access given the location of the present farm buildings).
- The potential of undisturbed remains is enhanced by the apparent blocking of the existing passage - this element of the site has never been explored.
- Potential links to other Iron Age sites around the Bay of Firth.
- Part of a wider spectrum of Iron Age sites across Orkney, including high status sites such as the Brochs of **Gurness** and **Midhowe** and ceremonial sites such as Mine Howe.
- Rennibister is part of a suite of Iron Age monuments to be found across Scotland.
- The opportunity for an authentic, personal, unsupervised, immersive experience of the Iron Age.

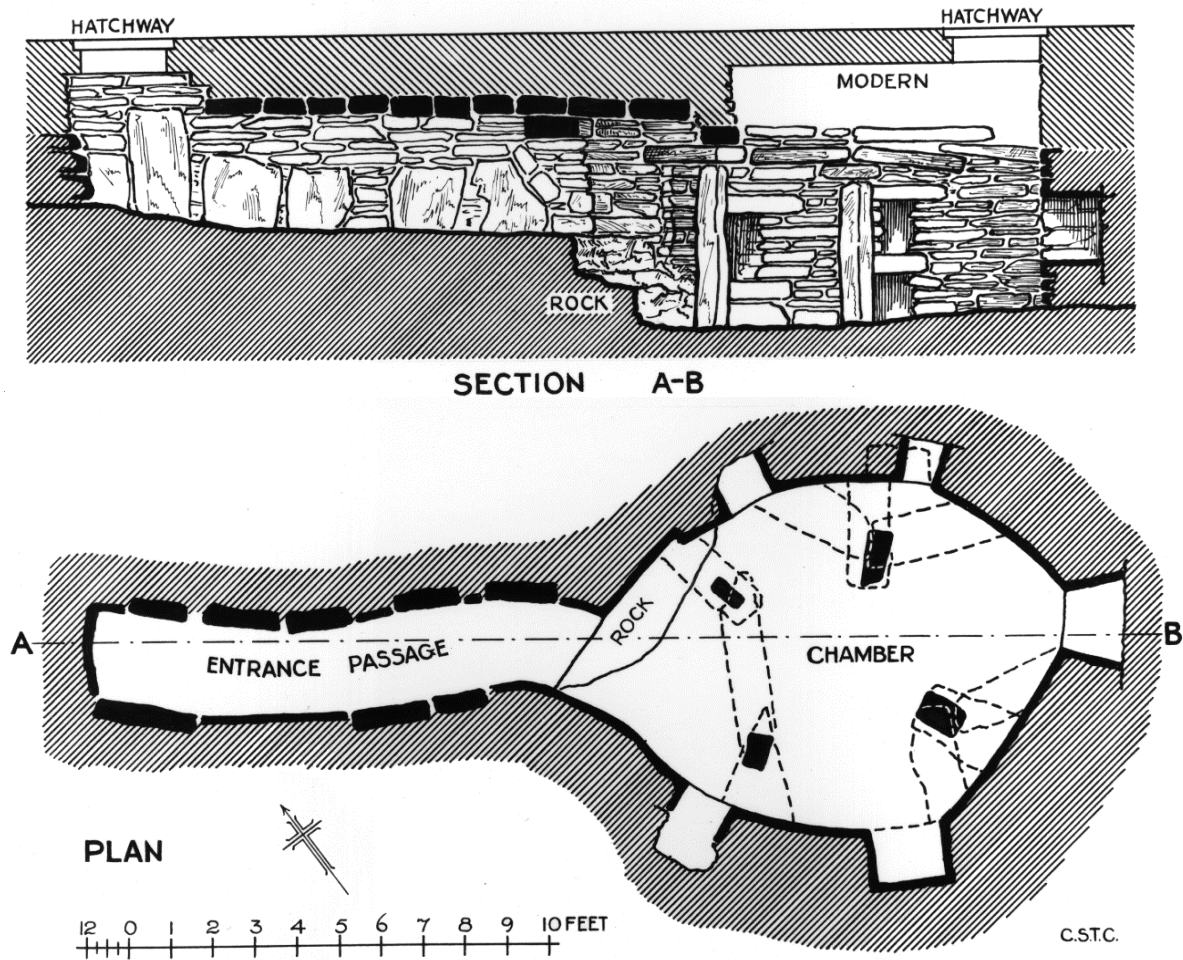


Figure 1: c.1928 RCAHMS drawing: plan and section of Rennibister Earth House. Note line of modern interventions, and split level between base of chamber and passage. © Crown copyright: HES.

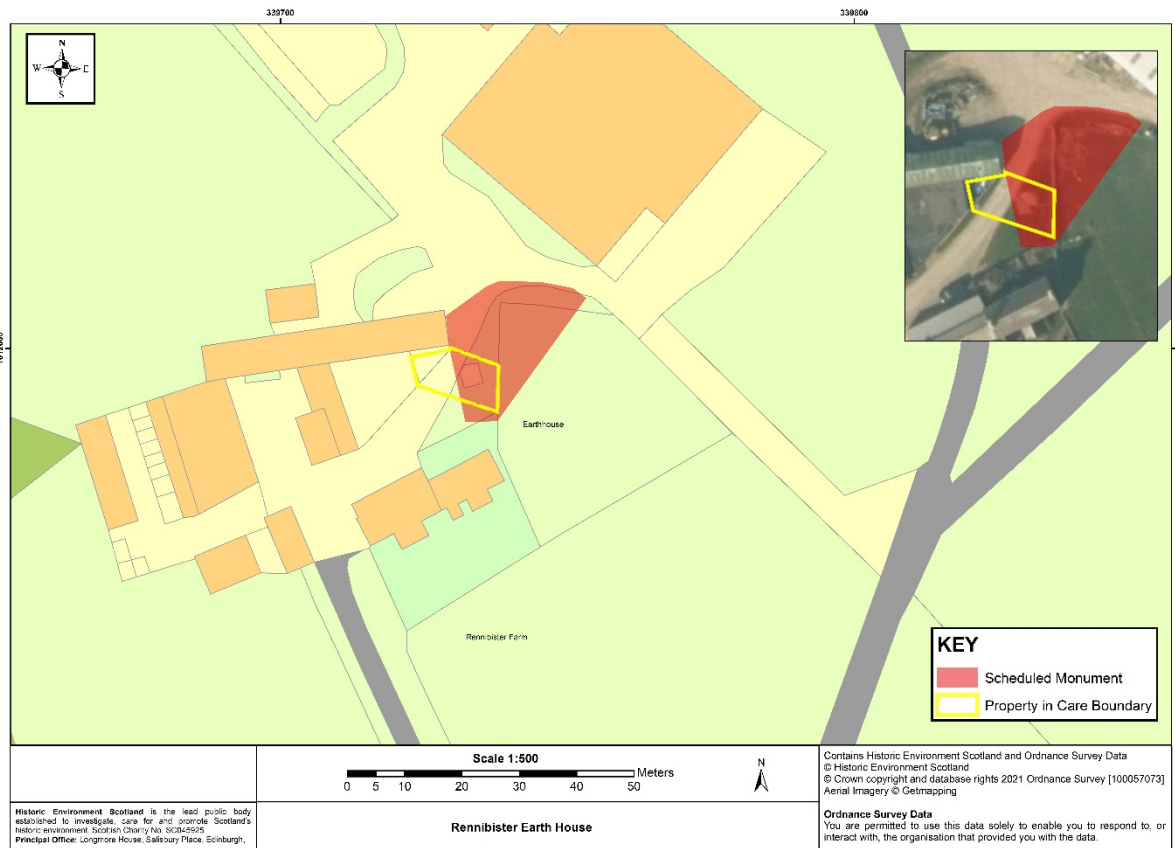


Figure 2: Scheduled area and Property in Care (PIC) boundary. For illustrative purposes only.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Iron Age Orkney

Rennibister Earth House dates to the first millennium BC. It is an important part of the record of everyday life in Iron Age Orkney;⁷ one of many surviving sites, several of which are open to the public, and all of which bear witness to a thriving and sophisticated society with established connections to the world outside the islands. Life revolved around farming, and focussed on the management of cattle, though there is evidence that fishing and hunting practices continued. A range of different types of site indicates the development of social hierarchy. Elsewhere in Scotland the evidence suggests that communities were organised into chiefdoms, and that, as the Iron Age progressed, individual status may have relied increasingly on inherited rank as much as acquired position, and this is likely to have been the case in Orkney.

While many people lived in roundhouses which were often arranged in groups to form small villages, in Orkney there are also several so-called 'broch settlements', clusters of stone-built houses set into courtyards around a central tower known today as a broch.⁸ Broch settlements were usually enclosed, and accessed through a single entranceway. The entrance at **Gurness** is particularly impressive. At the heart of the settlement stood the broch tower, a substantial circular structure with thick stone walls and up to 13m high. Brochs contained several floors and sometimes included a central well or cistern. The broch is thought to have been the habitation of the leading family. For many years brochs were assumed to be primarily defensive in nature, but research now presents a more nuanced picture in which display and ostentation played a role, as well as the facility the structure offered for an overview of surrounding terrain. By controlling the land and waterways in the vicinity of the settlement, the inhabitants of the broch were well informed on the arrival of strangers and able to access information, taxes, and trade goods. Trade was an important element of Iron Age life. It allowed the import of high-status goods which could be used to bolster the social hierarchy, in addition to locally produced craft items.

Other Iron Age sites were more focussed towards the ceremonial side of life, most notably Mine Howe in the east Mainland of Orkney. While spiritual

⁷ Further information about Iron Age Scotland is to be found at <https://scarf.scot/national/iron-age-panel-report/>

⁸ Wickham-Jones, 2012.

and ceremonial elements are to be found within domestic sites, for example the complex cistern at **Gurness**⁹ or some of the post-broch structures at The Cairns in South Ronaldsay,¹⁰ the site at Mine Howe seems to focus exclusively on ceremony and metalworking.¹¹ Other sites include Knowe of Skea in Westray,¹² where structures were apparently reserved for ceremony, and surrounded by an extensive burial ground.



Figure 3: Looking south-west within the subterranean chamber of Rennibister Earth House. Its lintelled ceiling is supported by freestanding orthostats; a feature typical of Orcadian examples. At Rennibister these have been reinforced with modern, metal bars, and the roof has been partially rebuilt following damage by agricultural machinery in 1927. © Crown Copyright HES.

2.1.2 Earth houses or ‘souterrains’

Earth houses, or souterrains, were a common element of Iron Age life in Orkney¹³ and elsewhere. They comprise underground passages, cut into bedrock or local till, and lined with stonework. A stone stair and long horizontal passage lead into a chamber with a stone roof, often supported on freestanding pillars (elsewhere in Scotland, pillars, where used, extend from the chamber walls). Many of these structures have been discovered

⁹ Wickham-Jones, 2012.

¹⁰ <https://archaeologyorkney.com/the-cairns/>

¹¹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/2998/tankerness-mine-howe>

¹² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/2838/westray-knowe-of-skea>

¹³ Canmore records 51 souterrains in Orkney.

and, though few are still visible, new sites are occasionally revealed. Once thought to be isolated sites, modern archaeology shows that most earth houses were accessed from the interior of roundhouses. Where the archaeology survives, traces of settlement usually occur on the ground surface above the earth house. Such traces may include crop marks indicating the location of roundhouses, together with deposits of ash and midden (refuse) material, and occasionally stone walling. Some roundhouses were isolated, others occurred in groups suggesting that they were part of village life. At Rennibister there are no visible traces of other structures, though the modern farm buildings among which it sits have obscured any possible remains. The earth house is, however, likely to have been part of a small settlement and it has been suggested that the low mound, on which the present farm buildings lie, may well conceal the traces of earlier settlement (though there is, as yet, no indication of continuity of occupation).

Over fifty earth houses have been recorded across Orkney. Around four kilometres to the east of Rennibister, four have been recorded in and around the industrial estate at Hatston, including the earth house at **Grain** which is also open to the public. All are likely to have been associated with small settlements, and together they provide an idea of the wider, farmed, landscape of Iron Age Orkney. Less than a kilometre to the west, the broch of Ingashowe lies on the coast. The site has not been excavated in recent times, but there is no clear trace of an associated village here, though antiquarian investigations reported finding deposits of midden, and recent erosion has revealed stone artefacts as well as traces of metalworking. Rennibister lies on the southern shores of the Bay of Firth, and there are other brochs around the bay, including one on the island of Damsay and a site at the entrance to the Ouse on the west coast of the bay, as well as further sites towards the north. This was a fertile, well-settled area sheltered by the surrounding hills.

Many earth houses were examined prior to modern archaeological techniques, and few contained significant deposits, making their interpretation difficult. They have been variously understood as defensive refuges, ceremonial sites and storage chambers. At Rennibister, the remains of about 18 people were discovered in the interior when it was first investigated in 1926,¹⁴ but this is very unusual. Current interpretations suggest that while earth houses provided efficient storage facilities for the inhabitants of the settlement above, they were also likely to have been used for elements of domestic ritual in a society where spiritual and non-spiritual behaviours were less separated than they are today. The skeletal remains at Rennibister are thought to have been inserted into the chamber at a late stage in the structure's life.

¹⁴ Marwick, 1927.

The interpretation of the function of earth houses is also complicated by the long period over which they were in use. While the sites in the north (such as Rennibister) seem to have been active in the first millennium BC, some have earlier dates¹⁵ and further to the south they are much later: in Perthshire and Angus, the archaeological evidence indicates that earth houses were common into the earlier centuries AD.



Figure 4 (left): The original, gently curved entrance passage of Rennibister Earth House, as viewed from the chamber. © Crown Copyright: HES.



Figure 5 (right): Today, visitors enter the chamber via a modern hatch and ladder. Image 1956 © Crown copyright: HES.

2.1.3 Descriptive overview

The earth house at Rennibister is located on the southern shores of the Bay of Firth, just back from the present shore. It was in use in the Iron Age, in the first millennium BC. Today, it lies among the buildings of a modern farm and there is little indication of the site above ground, apart from the modern trappings of the entrance hatchway. But archaeological evidence from similar sites elsewhere indicates that when in use, it was part of a settlement and probably accessed from within a roundhouse. Other Iron

¹⁵ Carruthers, pers comm.

Age sites in the vicinity include three brochs around the shores of the bay, indicating the wider, farmed landscape of which this was a part.

The monument lies close to the ground surface and was discovered in 1926 when the roof collapsed beneath the weight of a threshing machine. It comprises a hexagonal chamber, c.3.3m x 2.5m and 1.5m high, accessed along a gently curved passageway, c.3.7m long and about 0.7m high. The chamber is walled with drystone masonry and, unusually, five small rectangular niches or recesses have been built into the angled corners, with the passage leading from a small entrance at the sixth. The passage opens above the floor of the chamber, it is walled with a mix of coursed masonry and upright slabs, and slopes upwards towards the ground surface, though it remains seemingly blocked by midden deposits and stonework at the far end. The uneven floor of the chamber slopes down towards the corner where the passage enters. Today, the chamber is accessed through a modern hatch built into the roof and there is a second hatch at the far end of the passage.

The structure is cut into glacial till, visible at the rear of the recesses¹⁶ and below that into bedrock, visible on the floor. The passage and chamber were roofed with slabs of stone, although those in the chamber were broken by the entry of the threshing machine. However, it is still possible to see that each of the four uprights in the chamber supported a lintel slab that was keyed into the wall behind, and that these slabs, in turn, supported the overlapping flag stones which made up the roof. This style of roof occurs in other Orkney earth houses, though it is somewhat different to that found elsewhere, where the upright supporting slabs are usually keyed into the wall behind them. The wall niches in the chamber are of different sizes and heights, one is divided in to two by a stone shelf. They were empty when the site was discovered.

On the surface of the ground, the modern entrance to the site is visible, surrounded by a fenced enclosure (Figure 6).

¹⁶ Marwick, 1927.



Figure 6: A fenced enclosure surrounds the modern entrance hatch; the earth house is not currently visible from ground level. © Crown Copyright HES.

2.1.4 Early antiquarian interest and activity

Rennibister Earth House was discovered in 1926 when a steam threshing machine crossing the farmyard at Rennibister Farm fell through the roof. On recovering the thresher, the farmhands discovered the underground chamber below. Marwick reports that members of the Orkney Antiquarian Society arrived to examine the site that afternoon, and investigation of the chamber commenced under his supervision the following morning.¹⁷ After clearing the recent debris from the broken roof, examination of the remains inside the chamber began, but ceased after two days, while plans were made for the site to be taken into Guardianship by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works (as it was then). The skeletal material was removed from the chamber by Marwick, before being sent to the National Museum in Edinburgh¹⁸ for examination by Thomas Bryce.¹⁹ Sadly, the bones have since been lost.

In 1927, the site came into State care via Guardianship Agreement, and work was undertaken in 1928 to finalise the investigations, consolidate the stonework, and provide a means for safe public access.

¹⁷ Marwick, 1927.

¹⁸ Sadly, the bones are now lost. An attempt was made to relocate them in recent times, but this proved unsuccessful.

¹⁹ Bryce, 1927.



Figure 7: View from within chamber, looking towards passage. After the site was taken into State care, the stonework was consolidated and reinforced in places, to provide safe public access to the interior of the structure. Image 1971 © Crown copyright: HES.

2.1.5 Other Iron Age sites in the vicinity

A group of four earth houses with traces of settlement remains is to be found around 4km to the east, in and around the industrial estate at Hatston. These include the earth house at Saverock, excavated close to the shore in 1848 by naval officer, Captain FWL Thomas, assisted by the Orcadian antiquaries George Petrie and Robert Heddle.²⁰ A second site was uncovered during construction of the Hatston wartime airfield in 1939,²¹ and two associated earth houses have been discovered at **Grain**, further into the estate. One of these, discovered in 1827, is also in State care and open to the public, the other was uncovered in 1982, during the construction of a car park for the growing industrial estate.²²

Around the Bay of Firth there are a number of Iron Age sites, mainly brochs, but including at least one earth house, at Redland. The broch of

²⁰ Thomas, 1852.

²¹ Marwick, 1949.

²² Haigh, 1983.

Ingashowe lies on the shore, some 700m to the west, and other sites include Firth, Burness, and Redland. None of these sites has been excavated in modern times, so the extent of Iron Age settlement around the bay remains undefined, but it is clear that this was a fertile area, well able to support a thriving population.

2.1.6 Nomenclature

Rennibister is classified as an 'earth house', a name that was certainly in use by the early twentieth century to describe this very specific type of monument; comprising an underground passage and chamber, usually built of stone. The term was used throughout Scotland.

In 1852, Thomas describes his findings at Saverock as those of a 'subterranean chamber', though by 1867 he refers to 'a great earth-house' in a publication about the Outer Hebrides. Early references sometimes use the various spellings: 'jord', 'eirde', or 'yird' instead of 'earth'. All are dialect words from different parts of Scotland.

Earth houses were generally assumed to be dwellings, and Thomas classifies the Orkney sites as 'Picts houses'; a term commonly used across Orkney in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was generally applied to ancient sites with some sort of internal stone chamber, and actually incorporated what we now understand to be a wide variety of monuments, from Neolithic houses and chambered tombs, to Iron Age brochs and earth houses. At this point there was little chronological distinction; 'The Picts' were assumed to have been the main inhabitants of the past, and the term referred to a generalised antiquity. Local stories abound of childhood explorations of the ancient 'Picts Houses'.

Today, you will see this type of site classed as a 'souterrain' across most of Scotland. It is a term which draws upon the French to describe an underground structure. The National Archaeological Thesaurus notes that the term souterrain is now preferred;²³ though some sites, mainly in Orkney, are still known as earth houses.²⁴

2.1.7 Maintenance and conservation

Rennibister Earth House was subject to investigation and consolidation in the 1920s when it was discovered and taken into State care. The main structure seems to have been in good condition prior to the ingress of the threshing machine. The evidence suggests that it was used for the burial of

²³ <https://canmore.org.uk/thesaurus/1/532/SOUTERRAIN>

²⁴ As the site names for both Rennibister and **Grain** were defined as such under the 2014 Scheme of Delegation for Properties in Care, the name 'earth house' is employed in the 2021 Statement of Significance for both sites.

the disarticulated remains of up to 18 individuals not long after it went out of use, at which point it seems likely that the entrance was also sealed. In 1928, the decision was taken to facilitate public access through the recent hole in the roof rather than along the passage, which is particularly low and narrow. At this time, metal supports were inserted to consolidate some of the upright pillars.

The presence of the surrounding farm buildings means that investigation for surviving settlement remains on the surface of the ground has not been possible.

However, the presence of a low mound under the modern complex of buildings has been suggested to reflect a possible iron Age settlement of some size.²⁵

2.2 Evidential values

In addition to its inherent architectural value (Section 2.4 below), Rennibister has high evidential value because of the human remains found in the interior. Once thought to be the only Orkney earth house with associated human remains, other examples of skeletal material have recently been found during excavations at Windwick in South Ronaldsay.²⁶ At Rennibister, the bones were carefully arranged, with many of the skulls placed together at the foot of one of the pillars in the chamber. Most of them had been set upside down, resting on the lower jaw bones. Most of the other bones were found on the opposite side of the chamber though there were also bones scattered between.²⁷ Those who entered and examined the chamber in the 1920s interpreted the deposit as one that had been carefully put into place, and this has been upheld by more recent analysis.

The analysis of the bones²⁸ revealed that complete skeletons were not represented, and recent thinking has suggested that they may have been moved to the site from elsewhere, though no definite evidence for this has been found. Both adults and children were represented: there were at least 12 children and six adults, some were male and some female, though it is hard to distinguish the bones precisely and as they are now lost, re-examination is not possible. The assumption is that they represent a group who died within a relatively short period, perhaps members of one family group. While skulls and fragments of skulls were well represented in the collection, long bones were much less common and, in general, many of the bones were fragmentary. It is possible to imagine that skulls might have

²⁵ Marwick, 1927.

²⁶ <http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/earth-houses/windwick.htm>

²⁷ Marwick, 1927.

²⁸ Bryce, 1927.

been treated with more care for all sorts of reasons, but we have no precise evidence on this, and it is important not to fall into the trap of projecting our concerns on to the populations of the past.

Although earth houses are no longer considered to represent high status structures, as once thought, it is the very ‘everydayness’ of these sites that makes them special. Everyday life, though ubiquitous, can be more difficult to capture archaeologically. In addition, the light to be shed on the ordinary lives of the Iron Age communities of Orkney provides an important contrast to that recovered from excavations at sites like **Gurness** and The Cairns where settlement is dominated by the broch dwellings of the elite. Rennibister and **Grain** offer a glimpse into the world of the ordinary Iron Age farmer.

Rennibister lies towards the top of a low mound, currently occupied by modern farm buildings, that may well preserve further archaeological material, perhaps from the Iron Age. The enhanced opportunities provided by modern archaeological techniques and their ability to tease intimate detail from preserved remains make the potential of this site particularly exciting. Specific categories of information that might be addressed include: material related to the chronology of the site, the relationships between the earth houses and above ground structures, the differing uses of earth houses, the manifestation of changing social needs, dietary information, domestic technologies and craft specialisation, resource collection and use, and the treatment of the dead.

At a wider scale, the existence of other Iron Age sites around the bay presents the possibility of examining the late prehistoric community of Orkney within a contemporary landscape. No site existed in isolation, and detail of the interrelations between communities is as important as investigation of the site itself. In addition, the excavation of other Iron Age sites in Orkney such as **Gurness**, **Midhowe**, The Cairns, Mine Howe, Swandro, and Knowe of Skea means that any information from the Bay of Firth could be set into the wider picture of Iron Age life in the archipelago. There is exciting potential to reveal detail of the broader networks of trade and exchange, as well as the significant elements of display and social hierarchy that provided the foundations for Iron Age society in Orkney.

2.3 Historical values

The islands of Orkney are known for their remarkable archaeology which stretches back several thousand years to build a story of the people of Orkney over the millennia. The earth house at Rennibister plays an important role in this narrative by showcasing a surviving monument from the everyday lives of those who inhabited the shores of the Bay of Firth

over two thousand years ago. Communities such as that at Rennibister were largely self-sufficient, occupying farming settlements keyed in to a local network, as evidenced here by the other Iron Age sites around the bay. The largely unaltered nature of the passage and chamber at Rennibister provide visitors with the opportunity to experience a part of the world of the Iron Age farmer as it existed at the time. Although people had undoubtedly differing mindsets to those of today, this is an evocative experience which helps to bring the past to life.

The story of Rennibister is a significant part of the wider narrative of Iron Age Orkney, told through an extraordinarily complete suite of sites such as those at **Grain, Gurness, Midhowe**, Mine Howe and Knowe of Skea. Key skills, including stone masonry, animal husbandry, tool manufacture, hide preparation, pottery making, and food preparation were essential aspects of survival, though they played out in different scale depending on one's place in society. The structure at Rennibister helps to shed light on local people: their lives, needs, and choices. It is of particular interest because of the presence of human remains, albeit now lost. The skeletal material found at Rennibister sheds light not only on the actual physical remains of the past community but also on the actions and beliefs of those for whom the bones were meaningful, perhaps family.

Additional value is given to these narratives through the work of those who have sought to understand the sites, from their earliest discoveries to the present day. Archaeology as a discipline has become a significant part of the story of Orkney, and Rennibister provides substantial relevant detail with its links to local farmers and the established local antiquarian society. Many monuments are discovered through agricultural work, and Marwick provides a vivid account of the discovery of Rennibister by this means.²⁹ It is a useful reminder of the positive nature of this relationship. In addition, the quick actions of the Orkney Antiquarian Society in securing the site and undertaking the initial clearance and investigation undoubtedly helped to maximise the information to be obtained, as did the decision to place the site in State Guardianship. Though the human remains have since been lost, Bryce provided valuable detail in his report,³⁰ and the records published by both Marwick and Bryce have stimulated renewed attention from new generations of archaeologists, each with their own theories of life and death in Iron Age Orkney.³¹

²⁹ Marwick, 1927.

³⁰ Bryce, 1927.

³¹ EG: Armit and Ginn, 2007.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

In general, the Iron Age earth houses of Orkney are well-built, though many had started to collapse by the time they were discovered. Although it is not far below the current ground surface, and lies surrounded by modern buildings, Rennibister appears to have been complete before the roofing gave way to the weight of the farm machinery: testament to the care and skill with which it was constructed. The building of the earth house involved a considerable expenditure of labour as well as a high level of expertise. Once the site for the passage and chamber had been selected and cut into bedrock,³² it was necessary to find a source of suitable stone and bring sufficient quantity to site. It has been suggested that the prehistoric excavation of the passage may have provided a source of building stone, but this remains to be tested at individual sites; not all Orkney flagstone is suitable for building. It is, nevertheless, an interesting suggestion. While much of the building stone visible in Rennibister's interior is quarried, the rounded nature of some of the larger slabs suggests that they may have been brought up from the nearby shore, or perhaps re-used from local buildings. The location of the earth house, accessed from within an upstanding roundhouse, required careful planning and execution, and must have been an intrinsic part of the overall house construction. The near-total degradation of the surface structures in any earth house or souterrain complex has tended to separate the roundhouse itself from the underground element for the modern observer but it is likely that they were integrated elements of home building for the Iron Age farmers of Orkney.

Within the overall construction, individual elements of the stone-build emphasise the quality of construction, and skill and knowledge of the builders. Within the chamber, the four orthostats that support the roof stand well away from the side walls. This is an unusual feature for earth houses that is only to be found in Orkney. Each upright supports a massive horizontal slab that is pinned into the wall behind, and these slabs collectively provide support for the great slabs that provide the main structure of the roof. While most of the walling is coursed stonework, the passage also makes use of large upright slabs. This is an unusual feature, perhaps reflecting a very personal preference or skill at Rennibister. The apparent blocking of the passage towards the original entrance offers scope for further analysis of the builder's craftwork. Throughout the structure, thin pinning stones have been skilfully used in order to level up the stone slabs and provide stability to the whole.

³² The bedrock geology of the site belongs to the Upper Stromness Flagstone Formation, with superficial deposits of Devensian Till. For further information, see the British Geological Survey onshore GeoIndex at: <https://mapapps2.bgs.ac.uk/geoindex/home.html>

The planning of the underground chamber at Rennibister incorporated additional spaces in the form of five stone-lined niches cut into the angles of the walls. Each is of a slightly different size and one is divided in two by a horizontal stone shelf. The original purpose of these is unknown, though, they would clearly have been of use were the chamber to have served for storage. They are, however, an unusual feature: while recesses are often recorded in earth house passages, they are rare in the chambers. These structures were not built for simplicity, they were carefully designed to serve the specific needs of their builders, and many were altered in the course of their usage.

The entrance hatch, and associated hatch in the passageway, were added around 1928 when the monument came into State care. As such they provide good examples of a level of site management that, while adding considerably to the visitor experience by allowing access to the monument, might not be undertaken in the same way today.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Rennibister is an important part of the Orkney archaeological experience, not least because of the opportunity it affords to enter and immerse oneself in an Iron Age structure. It is, nevertheless, totally cut off from any sort of contemporary landscape setting, sitting as it does at the heart of a 21st century farm complex. The monument as seen above ground today is entirely a modern construction, located within a modern enclosure, capped by concrete and backed by farm buildings. The juxtaposition this provides, of ancient monument and modern life, is an increasingly important element of heritage management and appreciation everywhere. It acts as an important reminder of the presence and value of the past, and, in this case, serves as a reminder of the enduring significance of farming for the Orkney community, both in the Iron Age and today.

Visiting the monument, while immersive and evocative, is also subject to restrictions of access. As the space below ground is constrained, only a few people can enter at a time, and for those waiting to enter, there is little of interest above ground. Rennibister is, therefore, not suitable for the many tour groups who visit Orkney, not least because it is situated in what is now a working farm. It is very much a site to be found and explored individually. This makes it very different to the majority of Orkney monuments, many of which accommodate larger groups, and this adds to the value of the site.



Figure 8: Rennibister Earth House (circled) as seen above ground today; a modern enclosure within a working farm. 2018 oblique aerial view © Crown copyright: HES.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The site and its immediate surroundings are not currently (2021) protected by any special natural heritage designations. The entrance to the monument consists of a fenced area of concrete, which is of very little wildlife value.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Sites such as Rennibister are a popular element of Orkney Archaeology because of the opportunity they provide for an immersive experience afforded by entering a largely intact Iron Age structure. In addition, the personal and unsupervised scale of the site is preferred by many to the more communal experience of visiting other sites. The past is important to the people of Orkney, and many visitors come to the islands for the opportunity to explore the monuments which are better preserved than in many other parts of the United Kingdom. While in some locations the

visitor experience is carefully supervised and mediated, those who enter Rennibister are free to think independently.

There has not been a formal assessment of the value of Rennibister Earth House to contemporary communities, either of geography or interest.

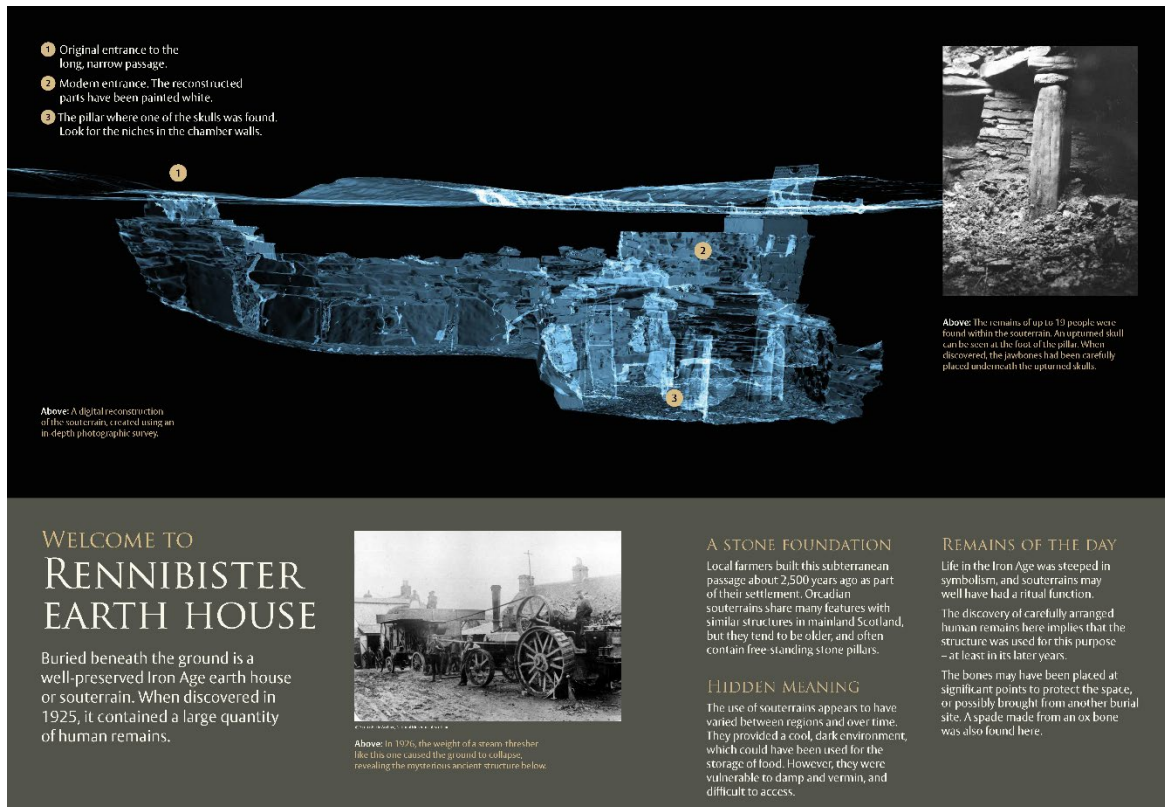


Figure 9: Information is provided on site via an interpretation panel fixed to the fenced enclosure (reproduced above). Once inside the structure, visitors may enjoy an immersive and unmediated experience of the Iron Age architecture. © Historic Environment Scotland.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

- The most significant gap in understanding of Rennibister Earth House relates to the precise function of the structure. At Rennibister interpretation is complex because of the discovery of human skeletal material on site, and the subsequent loss of that material compounds the problems. It is likely that the site served several functions, possibly simultaneously, but also subsequently. Information relating to function might well be obtained from detailed investigation around the monument, and is, in part, covered by current work (2021) at Windwick and The Cairns, on South Ronaldsay.

- Full details of the meaning of individual architectural elements of the site, such as the niches in the chamber, are not known. Details of the blocking of the passage also remain obscure.
- The overall size of the Iron Age site at Rennibister is not known. The earth house relates only to a small part of a bigger site, but it remains unclear whether that site is represented by the mound under the present farm buildings.
- The exact date of the earth house is unknown, as is its lifespan and chronological history.
- Despite the presence of human skeletal remains in the chamber, it is not clear how these relate to the original community that built the structure. The narrative of Rennibister is hence largely devoid of *people*, except through secondary interpretation. We have no detail of the original community, nor of why the site was used as a charnel house or where the bones came from.
- The relationship of the site to other Iron Age settlements around the Bay of Firth and further afield across Orkney, is unknown.
- The precise details of the Iron Age landscape around the Bay of Firth remain obscure.

Added to the specific questions above, there are major knowledge gaps relating to the period to which the monument belongs. Key research questions relating to the Iron Age as a whole are contained within the ScARF National Framework Iron Age report.³³

Please note, the research for this document was undertaken during 2020-2021 with limited access to archives and resources, as a result of Covid-19. While every attempt was made for accuracy throughout the statement, errors or omissions may remain. Please direct comments or suggestions to CRTenquiries@hes.scot

³³ Accessible at: <https://scarf.scot/national/iron-age-panel-report/> / <https://scarf.scot/national/scarf-iron-age-panel-report/>

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Associated properties managed by HES

- Grain Earth House, Mainland Orkney
- Broch of Gurness, Mainland Orkney
- Midhowe Broch, Rousay

Sites not managed by HES

- Broch of Borwick, Mainland Orkney
- Mine Howe, Mainland Orkney
- Burroughston Broch, Shapinsay

Souterrains managed by HES elsewhere in Scotland

- Ardestie, Angus
- Carlungie, Angus
- Castlelaw, Midlothian
- Culsh, Aberdeenshire
- Tealing, Angus

5. KEYWORDS

Rennibister, Iron Age, Orkney, Earth House, Souterrains, Roundhouse, Settlement, Storage.

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Further Resources

Canmore ID: 2081
 Site Number: HY31SE 3
 NGR: HY 3973 1260

Canmore entry: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/2081/rennibister>

Canmore entries for the associated earth houses:
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/2535/hatston>

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/2563/saverock>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/2541/hatston>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/2527/grainbank>

A number of early images of the site are available to view at the Orkney Library and Archive, Kirkwall.

Images of the site may be viewed on SCRAN
https://www.scran.ac.uk/database/results.php?QUICKSEARCH=1&search_term=Rennibister

A 3D digital model of the site can be viewed at: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/rennibister-earth-house-souterrain-orkney-8ff695693f0a4dd99a662c077ef9bf79>

The Orkneyjar website includes information about Rennibister and associated sites: <http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/earth-houses/rennibister.htm>

Further information on Iron Age Scotland is to be found at <https://scarf.scot/national/iron-age-panel-report/>

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

Iron Age	(1st millennium BC) Earth house built and used, forming part of a larger settlement.
Modern	
1926	Site discovered during the course of farming activity, when a heavy threshing machine broke through the roof of the chamber. Investigations by Orkney Antiquarian Society, supervised by Hugh Marwick. The human remains were removed from the chamber and sent to the National Museum for examination by Thomas Bryce.
1927	The site came into State care via Guardianship Agreement.
1928	Work undertaken to finalise investigations, consolidate the stonework and provide a means for safe public access. This included the insertion of the hatch and ladder, allowing visitors to enter directly into the underground chamber.