



**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC311

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90243)

**Taken into State care:** 1932 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2003

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# QUOYNESS CHAMBERED CAIRN



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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# QUOYNESS CHAMBERED CAIRN

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises an oval neolithic chambered cairn used for communal burial. It falls into a broad tradition of stone-built chambered cairns which started in Scotland in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. Situated near to the east shore of Els Ness, Sanday, one of the northernmost of the Orkney Islands, it was likely in use around 3500 to 2500 BC. The tomb, which has a complex history of construction, is surrounded by a secondary low stone platform, from which horns project on the North East (now destroyed) and South West. Cist-like constructions were found in three places against the outside of the platform kerb.

Initially excavated in 1867, The interior is accessed from an entrance passage from the south east side, and contains a main chamber with six symmetrically-arranged side cells. A circular stone-lined pit and shallow linear trench were cut into the floor of the main chamber. Various human remains and artefacts of stone and bone were recovered from the interior.

After something of a hike along the coastline, the visitor reaches an enclosure in which the tomb and its platform are tightly fenced. The tomb itself is entered through the original passage, most of which is now unroofed or modern, with the wider cairn having been extensively consolidated in the 1950s.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

- 1867 investigations by James Farrer M.P. and George Petrie, two antiquarians highly active in Orkney, who originally interpreted the structure as a broch that had been re-used for burial.
- 1932 passes into guardianship having suffered damage and erosion by this time.
- 1951-2 partial excavation by Professor V. Gordon Childe (on behalf of the Ministry of Works), one of the most famous and highly influential prehistorians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Early 1950s works to consolidate the site and make it safe for public access.

### Archaeological Overview

- One of a small group of 'Maeshowe-type' cairns found in Orkney that can be dated approximately 3500-2500 BC.
- Evidence for the sophisticated and developed nature of early society in Orkney and its technological achievements.
- Contains rare and very slight examples of neolithic scratch art (some damage by modern graffiti - visitors are reminded that today, the carving of graffiti is forbidden by law). Such evidence is important because it reinforces the relationship between Grooved Ware settlements (such as **Skara Brae**, **Links of Noltland**, and the Ness of Brodgar) and these elaborate tombs, a relationship that is also reflected in the plans of the houses and tombs.
- Some Grooved Ware found during excavation in tomb interior, also a bone pin and two sculpted stone objects that can be paralleled among finds from Skara Brae, and Pool.

- Human remains were recovered from the side cells, and from the stone-lined pit in the floor of the main chamber. A single sample of human bone was radiocarbon dated to 3098-2907 cal BC.
- There are numerous small cairns on the peninsula, west of Quoyness tomb, some of which are likely to be burial mounds, although what look like field banks link some of them and certain examples may in part or whole reflect stone clearance for agriculture.
- There may be a connection between Quoyness and the partly excavated settlement with Grooved Ware on the north side of Sanday at Pool.

#### Artistic/Architectural Overview

- A particularly good example of neolithic design and fine drystone construction. Exceptionally tall central chamber. Much of the original corbelling survives, including roofs of side cells.
- Since the upper part of the original cairn is lost, the series of internal concentric revetment walls can be appreciated; the stepped profile of the mound - as consolidated in the 1950s - was intended to indicate the internal structure, rather than its original appearance.

#### Social Overview

- Not assessed, but there is some local interest in better promoting the site and information about it.

#### Spiritual Overview

- Not assessed.

#### Aesthetic Overview

- As with so many Orkney monuments, the fine drystone construction is particularly pleasing.
- The individual neolithic carvings are of aesthetic interest in their own right.

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

- Owing to the unscientific nature of the early clearance of this site, appreciation of the monument's full archaeological significance is compromised. In particular, clarity required regarding chronology of the site, e.g. the date of construction.
- Very little is known of the archaeology in the immediate vicinity of the tomb or the community who built it. Bradford University's work elsewhere on Sanday should, however, be noted.

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Geographical outlier of a group of exceptionally well-preserved and internationally renowned Orcadian monuments that embrace and continue to illuminate in an unparalleled fashion the complexities and sophistication of daily life amongst some of the earliest agricultural communities in Scotland.

- Rare survival of neolithic scratch visible in a tomb context, though unfortunately some has been partly defaced by more recent graffiti.
- Original corbelled walls of main chamber survive to great height.
- Since fate has led to the loss of the upper part of this cairn, there is the opportunity to see and understand aspects of its internal construction. However, the visible remains at this site are in truth rather confusing because it was remodelled in the 1950s to show the stages by which it was built rather than the monument's final form.
- Nearly half the 12 known Maeshowe-type tombs on Orkney are in state care. - Doubts about the relevance of this classic categorisation due to their great variety. Exceptionally fine architecture, and apparent association with contemporaneous nearby settlement all serve to emphasise the importance of these monuments individually and as a 'group'.

#### Associated Properties

Chambered Cairns of **Cuween Hill, Maeshowe, Wideford Hill, Holm of Papa Westray**, Viquoy. Broadly contemporary burial monuments of different type in Orkney include **Mid Howe, Knowe of Yarso, Blackhammer, Taversoe Tuick, Knowe of Unstan**, and Isbister. Broadly relates to neolithic houses at Pool, **Skara Brae, Links of Noltland**, Ness of Brodgar, and Barnhouse. Finds from the site are in the National Museums of Scotland.

Keywords Orkney, neolithic, chambered tomb, chambered cairn, Maeshowe type, burials, corbelling, concentric walling, scratch-art, Gordon Childe.