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Last reviewed: 2018

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

NESS OF BURGI



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

NESS OF BURGI

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Ness of Burgi is an Iron Age site consisting of a long rectangular stone-walled structure (surviving to about 1.5m in height) with associated ditches and earthworks. It is one of a small number of sites unique to Shetland known as a blockhouse. There is some debate as to its original purpose, though it is described in the Scheduling documentation as a fort.

On a small cliff-bounded headland stands the blockhouse, a turf-capped elongated rectangular block of drystone masonry. This contains chambers within its thickness and is pierced by a narrow entrance passage. On the landward side of this “blockhouse”, a shallow double ditch and massive bank cut off the headland. It is not certain if the ditches and bank are contemporary with the blockhouse – they could also pre-date it or be later.

The blockhouse contains architectural features similar to those found in brochs, and because pottery recovered during excavation also resembles that from broch sites, Ness of Burgi may be attributed to the same period. On current evidence, brochs were first built in Shetland soon after 400 BC and continue in use for several centuries.

The site was taken into state care under a guardianship agreement in 1935 and was excavated the same year. It is also a scheduled monument. The site is unstaffed, and has a single interpretation board. It is reached after a walk of just over 1 kilometre from the nearest parking space, off a minor road, or 2 kilometres from the main road.

The walk to Ness of Burgi is across sheep-grazed and wind-stunted grassland. There is no clearly defined path. The blockhouse is bordered on three sides by steep coastal cliffs, and defended on the landward side by a ditch and rampart. It’s a fairly difficult walk to reach the monument, so access is only recommended for those comfortable with traversing uneven ground and rocks.

Once safely onto the grassy promontory, the site lies ahead. To the right of the line of approach stands a neat block of drystone masonry, complete with a small chamber: this represents material removed during the 1935 excavations and tidied into its present form in the 1970s. This has been known to confuse visitors, especially when thick fog obscures the view of the “Burgi” straight ahead.

1.2 Statement of significance

Ness of Burgi is a very important site in contributing towards an understanding of the Iron Age in Scotland and particularly for its relationship with broch towers. In this its value lies very much as part of the restricted group of five known Shetland blockhouses and the much wider pool of broch towers. It is also interesting and important in itself, primarily as an example of Iron Age architecture.

Because of this interest, four out of five confirmed Shetland blockhouse sites have undergone some degree of excavation. Despite this, the paucity of distinctive artefacts and of material suitable for radiocarbon dating means that blockhouses have yet to be placed into a firm timeframe or cultural context. However, multiple excavations, with generally slight gains in knowledge, have severely reduced the options for future investigation of this potentially crucial class of monument, whatever may survive at Ness of Burgi deserves particularly careful protection.

There are few known “facts” (date, use, sequence, development) or undisputed interpretations for either of these impressive Iron Age building types. Therefore it is hard to assess the value of blockhouses in wider narratives of the middle Iron Age in Scotland (200BC – AD400) and in Shetland. We are left with the fact that these structures, their sites and deposits represent the best (only) available evidence and continued study and developing techniques might allow us to inch nearer consensus. For Ness of Burgi in particular the good state of preservation and potential for further investigation of the site is probably the most outstanding feature of its importance.

Some key aspects of Ness of Burgi’s cultural significance are listed below:

- its survival as one of the best preserved and (relatively) easily accessed examples of a Shetland blockhouse. This is a rare building type believed to be unique to Shetland
- how far it does, and does not, typify such blockhouses and how it has been referenced in developing theories of architecture, society and economy, especially when taken in combination with the more numerous brochs
- what its location and siting, along with other blockhouses and in comparison with brochs, say about the preoccupations of its builders and the possible purposes of blockhouses
- the relationship of the blockhouse with other archaeological features (such as the outer bank and ditches) and its wider landscape
- the importance of the remains as they survive and of the excavated finds, and the potential for further exploration to add useful evidence bearing on its construction, occupation and modification over time
- its association with significant figures in pre-WWII archaeology, particularly Cecil Louise Curle (née Mowbray) as an early female practitioner
- for visitors, the relatively remote and wild setting and the adventurous walk are memorable; the site itself is impressive in scale and prompts thoughts of what life there might have been like 2000 years ago
- its present-day role as a “presented” Iron Age monument, and one among several Iron Age sites managed by HES, and the opportunities this presents to share the complex questions the site raises

The following sections of this document outline the broader range of heritage values ascribed to the site. Appendices provide a more detailed description of

the site along with some wider discussion of the various theories surrounding blockhouses and their relationship with brochs.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Introduction - context

A handful of sites described as “blockhouses” have been identified within Shetland. These seem to form a group possessing a combination of features similar enough to be classed as a separate type of monument. The features are: an elongated rectangular stone structure which includes an entrance passage, cells within the wall thickness, associated ditches and earthworks. There are some structures in Orkney¹ and on the north coast of Scotland which may be related to the Shetland blockhouses, but they are not identical.

Three of the five identified Shetland sites are set on cliff-edged promontories,² the other two on inland lochs.³ They do not seem to be associated with particularly good agricultural land, nor with safe harbours or landing places;⁴ those on cliff sites are particularly remote and exposed. Of the five blockhouse sites, four have been investigated and excavated to some degree; only Burgi Geos has not been excavated. Sadly, little evidence has been found to enable dating – the site was dug before radiocarbon dating and the few finds, of generic later Iron Age type, may derive from later occupation of the site rather than to its period of construction.

As will be discussed further in this document, the original function of the blockhouse remains open to debate: many interpret the site as a fort, or at least a defensible site. If this were the case, then it might share a common ancestry with the many examples of small promontory sites, defended by simple ditches and banks, which occur on the coasts of northern and western Scotland and also down the western seaboard, with examples in Ireland, the Isle of Man, Cornwall and Brittany.

The other key aspect of blockhouses, and our attempt to understand them, is their relationship to brochs (specifically broch towers). This much larger and more widespread group of sites are understood to be unique to Scotland, dating between 400BC and 100 AD. Blockhouses share several design features with brochs and there is considerable debate about how each may have influenced the other.

Summary description

The place-name, Ness of Burgi, derives from Old Norse; ness meaning promontory and burgi from borg, meaning fort. The name implies that it was regarded as an ancient fortification in Norse-Medieval times. The site is an

¹ For instance the fore-work at Midhowe Broch has been suggested as analogous to the Burgi blockhouse

² Ness of Burgi, Scatness North, Burgi Geos

³ Clickimin, Loch of Huxter

⁴ Only Clickimin is close to a safe landing beach

Iron Age monument consisting of an elongated rectangular 'blockhouse' of drystone masonry. It measures approx. 23m x 5.5m with walls surviving to around 1.5m in height. The blockhouse stands on a small cliff-bounded headland. On the landward side of the blockhouse a shallow double ditch and massive bank curve for a distance of about 40m across the neck of land, cutting off the headland. It is not known if the ditches and bank are contemporary with the blockhouse: they might also be earlier or later. Behind the blockhouse is a flat grassy area which is only about 20 metres square.

The site stands near the tip of Scat Ness, one of the two southernmost points of mainland Shetland. It is clearly inter-visible with Jarlshof and also with the site of a largely destroyed Iron Age fort on Sumburgh Head. A very similar, though more ruined, structure lies on a headland not far to the north, and was excavated in 1983: this site is known as Scatness North⁵ or simply Scatness⁶. It is passed en route to Ness of Burgi.

The site was scheduled in 1934 (and rescheduled in 1999) and it was taken into state care under a guardianship agreement in 1935. The scheduled and guardianship areas are the same (2018), with the landward boundary running a few metres beyond the outermost ditch and the remainder of the perimeter formed by the coastline.

The blockhouse and the entrance gap in the outer bank were excavated in 1935⁷, when a large volume of rubble and other deposits was removed, after which the site was consolidated, creating what is visible today. It has been estimated that the volume of tumbled stone would raise the walls by about 1m overall.

The 1935 excavations were conducted by Cecil Louise Mowbray at the instigation of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, in parallel with excavations which were under way at Jarlshof. The excavations cleared overlying rubble, which was stacked a short distance away, and the form of the blockhouse exposed. A few worked stone objects and sherds of pottery were found.

The site today is largely as it was left in 1935; some consolidation work was carried out in 1971 and since then only minor works have been undertaken, primarily replacement of pinning stones.

The entire structure has recently been recorded using modern digital recording technology combined with high-quality photographic coverage, providing an objective digital record which will underpin future consolidation work. It is intended that this exercise will be repeated at regular intervals. Permanent survey markers were inserted in 2018 to facilitate re-survey. The site has also been the subject of aerial LIDAR survey.

⁵ Lamb 1980, 32-3

⁶ Carter et al 1995

⁷ Mowbray 1936

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of Ness of Burgi centres around its ability to contribute to understanding of a range of related sites as well as the intrinsic value of the site itself. So much is debated yet as little is known for certain about blockhouse and broch sites and their functional and social context that each has an evidential value beyond the intrinsic understanding of the individual site itself.

The site is important for what it offers, in its excavated and consolidated state, by way of comparison with other blockhouse sites and the far more numerous class of brochs, with which it shares features such as the detail of the entrance passage and the chambers in the thickness of the wall-base, one of which opens off the entrance passage, in the style often referred to, in brochs, as a “guard-cell”. The small number of known blockhouses are located in two contrasting landscape positions. Three, including Ness of Burgi (along with Scatness North and Burgi Geos in Yell), stand on headlands adjacent to cliffed coastlines and in areas which are exposed and can never have offered much by way of grazing, with no arable potential at all. Two, including Clickimin (along with Loch of Huxter in Whalsay), stand on islets or promontories in small lochs, where the surrounding land is somewhat better but still by no means of high quality. None is immediately adjacent to a secure anchorage and only Clickimin is close to a safe landing beach (since concealed by land reclamation and urban development).

Ness of Burgi also offers the potential for further excavation and other investigation techniques which could provide additional knowledge about its Iron Age and later context. The relationship in terms of date and function with the outer ditches and bank (features also present at many Shetland broch sites) would be of considerable interest if it could be established, as would construction date(s) for all or any elements.

Blockhouses were previously thought to be defensive, but it seems to be the case at Ness of Burgi that the blockhouse did not block off the entire approach to the enclosed area. This has led to suggestions that blockhouses were not primarily defensive, but may instead represent lookout points, signal stations or symbols of prior possession of land, intended to discourage invaders appearing from the south. The siting of most Shetland blockhouses appears to rule out a function as centres for agricultural activity or even fishing (generally on exposed cliffs and poor quality agricultural land). In most cases their location would be uninhabitable during Shetland’s (long) winter months. Ness of Burgi certainly appears to fit this pattern.

Ness of Burgi is inter-visible with several other sites of Iron Age date – including the nearby (and very similar) Scatness North site and another, largely destroyed, “fort” of unknown type on Sumburgh Head, and also the multi-period Jarlshof, which contains a broch (as well as earlier and later Iron Age remains). This feature of inter-visibility has been noted since the earliest

days of antiquarian study of brochs and continues to loom large in some current interpretations⁸.

The site was emptied out with little regard to context when excavated in 1935, and little considered to be of value was found, apart from a few crude worked stone tools and some sherds of pottery. The only distinctive sherds would date to the earliest centuries AD according to the sequence from the most recently excavated Shetland broch site, Old Scatness⁹. The finds were passed to the National Museum of Antiquities (now the National Museum of Scotland) so should be available for re-examination.

Iron Age archaeological deposits are only likely to survive in two areas of the site:

- In the fill of the two ditches and possibly below or within the intervening bank. (A section cut in 1983 produced little, but was deliberately not cut into best preserved stretch of the bank)¹⁰. However, without stratigraphic evidence to link the ditches to the blockhouse, this would not necessarily date the latter.
- Within or beneath the masonry of the blockhouse. While accessing the area below would be challenging, it is not impossible that evidence for construction-contemporary activity might be preserved there, and could contribute to resolving the relative date and relationship between blockhouses and brochs.

The fact that most of the few known examples of Shetland blockhouses have been disturbed to a greater or lesser extent, means that any potential survival of undisturbed deposits, however limited, is of particularly high value and requires careful stewardship.

There have been a number of recent excavations at broch sites in Shetland, at Upper Scalloway¹¹ and most recently and extensively at Old Scatness¹². The results from these, combined with those from earlier excavations (such as at Jarlshof¹³ and Clickimin¹⁴) provide a tentative cultural context for Ness of Burgi (and also alternative inferences about its date of construction) which the site itself does not.

2.3 Historical values

The historical value of the site derives primarily from its ability to demonstrate the ways of life and concerns of Iron Age people: as discussed throughout this document, the particular function and design intent behind Ness of Burgi (as with brochs) is an ongoing debate and is something of a jigsaw puzzle. A

⁸ Smith 2016

⁹ Dockrill et al 2015

¹⁰ Carter et al

¹¹ Sharples 1998

¹² Dockrill et al 2015

¹³ Hamilton 1956

¹⁴ Hamilton 1968, but see also Fojut 1998, MacKie 2005, Smith 2014 for variant readings of the sequence.

secondary historical value is the site's association with the archaeologists and workers involved in its excavation in the 1930s, and its subsequent role as a monument in care.

Understanding the Iron Age in Scotland, and locally within Shetland

Because of the lack of evidence relating to the use of Burgi and other blockhouses, our understanding of them relies upon interpretation of the site and structure and by analogy with other similar sites. Blockhouses are regarded as relating to the same general period as brochs. It is generally agreed that brochs were created in a social context in which two aspects were significant: defensibility and impressiveness. The balance between these two factors is likely to have varied over time, although we are far from understanding Iron Age society beyond this outline.

In coming to even tentative conclusions about Burgi, a key question remains; is it a "fort" (defensive) or not. While it has external ditches and a bank, these do not seem to have been of any great strength: it is hard to imagine Ness of Burgi holding out for long against even the most desultory attack, especially as its restricted interior could not have held a large defending force. If it is a fortification, it appears a desperate retreat rather than a stronghold. Archaeologists have argued this point since the 1930s and some theories are summarised in Appendix 4.

In terms of location and siting, Ness of Burgi seems highly unlikely ever to have functioned as a farmstead. The site is remote and inhospitable and "unliveable" over the long winter months. Its location does seem to have been chosen for its intervisibility with other sites, so this may have related to its function. This has led some scholars to posit some kind of ritual or ceremonial significance for the site.

To summarise, Ness of Burgi is open to multiple interpretations, none of them ruled in, or out, by the physical remains:

A – as a fort, built either by a group of invaders or by a group of locals seeking to ward off invaders, and:

- The ditches are older and represent a simple fortification, with the blockhouse added later to strengthen the defences.
- The ditches and blockhouse are contemporary and intended as a single conceptual unit
- The blockhouse is older with the ditches added later.

B – as a ritual or symbolic construction

- The blockhouse acted as a platform for acting out various rituals, perhaps to emphasise possession of the land around, or even used for rites of passage as young men entered the warrior class. (This does not rule out the ditch and rampart being defensive in intention, especially if earlier in date.)

C – as a lookout point or signal station against raiding or invasion from the south

- The blockhouse was part of a chain of such establishments, supplementing the more numerous brochs in this function. (This also does not rule out the ditch and rampart being defensive in intention.)

*Association with historical figures in the development of Scottish archaeology*¹⁵

The excavator, Cecil Louise Mowbray, is noted as one of several pioneering female archaeologists. She worked with fellow archaeologists Alexander O Curle and his son Alexander T Curle (who she subsequently married) on a number of sites in the Northern Isles. Further details on their role in excavating Ness of Burgi and contribution to Scottish Archaeology is available in Appendix 5.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

As well as the inherent value of the site as an example of the Shetland blockhouse, Ness of Burgi is important as a near-replica of broch towers – a class of monument of critical national importance. This section articulates some of the design and construction features noted at Burgi and other blockhouse sites, and then discusses the relationship with broch design. There are many different opinions regarding this latter aspect, which are summarised here, and discussed more fully in Appendix 4 along with some of the theories relating to the original purpose of blockhouses.

Construction

The blockhouse, even before its consolidation, was well constructed in roughly coursed drystone masonry. The stone is strong sandstone with a rough surface and slabby character, which is readily available in the cliffs near to the site. The blockhouse appears to be of built masonry throughout, rather than rubble-cored, but this is not absolutely certain. The well-finished face at the north-east end of the blockhouse suggests it may have been intended to be a free-standing structure. Several authorities suggest walls may have abutted each end of the blockhouse, but if this was the case there is no evidence that the flanking walls were bonded to the blockhouse. (A lighter, abutting, enclosure wall was noted at the now-ruinous Loch of Huxter¹⁶ and a similar arrangement may have been the case at Clickimin¹⁷.)

The double ditches appear to be simple scoops, with the loose quarried material forming the intervening bank/rampart. The ditches do not seem deep enough to have acted as quarries for the stone blocks which constitute the blockhouse. It is not known whether the ditches were part of the same constructional phase as the blockhouse, or if they pre- or post-dated it.

Plan

Four out of five known examples of blockhouses have already been examined by excavation and/or survey. The close similarity of plan noted at all 4 examples seems to support the hypothesis that blockhouses were a highly

¹⁵ AR 1987 for most biographical details in this section.

¹⁶ Mitchell 1881

¹⁷ Hamilton 1968, 57-8

specialised class of structure with a particular relevance to the Shetland context and perhaps constructed within a relatively close time-frame.

Key elements of the design are the elongated plan (Burgi measures 23m long by between 5.5 – 6.5 m wide); an entrance passage; the inclusion of cellular structures within the wall thicknesses, especially one entered from the entrance passage (which could be interpreted as a guard cell); the walls stand to around 1.5 - 1m high and it has been estimated that the tumbled stone cleared from the site would have raised the height of the walls by about 1 m.

Again, it is a matter of debate whether the blockhouse at Burgi stood alone, whether there were flanking walls as a defensive or architectural statement, or whether there were other structures around the stone-built core. The chambers within the wall thickness would have been roofed with large slabs. It has also been suggested that blockhouses supported timber-built dwellings, with thatched roofs, which would have leaned against the rear of the stone-built wall. However, no traces of such structures were found at Ness of Burgi (and the evidence from Clickimin is equivocal)¹⁸.

Brochs and blockhouses

Brochs and blockhouses are thought to be roughly contemporary building types, and share some similar design features. Brochs are regarded as identified as a uniquely Scottish building type which all follow a very similar architectural pattern. How and why brochs developed is a matter of debate, as is the relationship of blockhouses to brochs.

The key question which Ness of Burgi may help to inform is the emergence of the architectural features which made possible the broch's tower form: Burgi's entrance passage and the cells closely resemble those in brochs. There has been strongly polarised debate between those who argue for a long, gradual process of experimentation across a wide range of structural types culminating in tower brochs such as Mousa (in which case Ness of Burgi might be an early, experimental structure) and those who argue for the appearance of the broch tower as an act of creative inspiration, with its features subsequently co-opted for use in other types of structure (in which case Ness of Burgi would be later than the earliest brochs but might still be contemporary with brochs built in later years – which begs the question of over how long a period brochs were being constructed).

Several possible theories have emerged to describe the relationship, including:

- Blockhouses represent the very first footholds in Shetland of invaders from the south (who later went on to conquer the islands and to build the brochs).
- Blockhouses were part of the frontline local defence against such invaders.

¹⁸ Hamilton 1968, 55

- Blockhouses are one (of several) ancestral structures which were the testing ground for features which were later combined to produce the broch.
- Blockhouses were contemporary with brochs, draw on the same architectural vocabulary, and were built in locations where a broch is not needed or deemed appropriate – perhaps in areas of low-value land.

This wide range of possibilities shows that we are a very long way from any real certainty about the relationship between brochs and blockhouses; though our ability to interrogate the evidence has increased over time. It is certain that the locations, structures and deposits themselves provide the only absolute evidence for the Shetland Iron Age, with all the evidence pointing to a complex and inventive society with concerns extending well beyond the merely functional.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Ness of Burgi is located on a grassy headland on a low-cliffed coastline. Apart from a ruined wall which runs across the promontory well to the north of the site, there are no other visible remains nearby. It does not appear that there has ever been permanent human habitation on the promontory, due to its exposure and the lack of a known fresh water supply.

The location is windswept and not infrequently wave-swept too, although rocky reefs offshore break the full force of waves from south-easterly gales.

The site looks across the West Voe of Sumburgh towards Sumburgh Head (site of a largely destroyed fort of unknown type) and to Jarlshof at the head of the bay. It has a clear view of the open North Sea to the south east, and anyone arriving by sea and intending to sail up the east coast of Shetland would be seen and would in turn see the blockhouse. From the sea it looks more forbidding than it does from the land.

It's a fairly difficult walk to reach the monument, so access is only recommended for those comfortable with traversing uneven ground and rocks. In fair weather the overall feeling is one of safe, acceptable remoteness, closeness to non-threatening nature (marked by the sight of seals' heads in the water and the call of arctic terns and other birds) and tranquillity. In rough weather a visit is only for the hardy and well rain-proofed, with waves sometimes drenching the entire site in heavy spray. The only shelter is provided by the blockhouse itself and by the nearby block of excavated stone.

The exposed location of the site offers a strong contrast to the more domestic and sheltered impression given by the nearby broch sites of Jarlshof and Old Scatness.

2.6 Natural heritage values

Ness of Burgi is not covered by any natural heritage designations, and the in-care area is not noted as being of high natural heritage value.

Depending on season and weather, the walk from the public road to the site may offer sightings of seabirds, typically fulmars *Fulmaris glacialis* and black guillemots *Cepphus grylle* which nest on the rocky coast, arctic terns *Sternus paradisaea*, great skuas *Stercorarius skua*, arctic skuas *Stercorarius parasiticus*, and a variety of gulls.

Seals of both resident British species, grey seal *Halichoerus grypus* and harbour or common seal *Phoca vitulina*, can often be seen offshore, as are porpoises *Phocoena phocoena* and, more rarely, other cetaceans, notably killer whales or orcas *Orcinus Orca*, of which southern Shetland has a resident breeding group.

Botanical interest is very limited, with a typical, species-poor assemblage for windswept, salt-exposed and closed-grazed coastal grassland. No particular rarities are noted.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Ness of Burgi does not enjoy a high public profile, being overshadowed by more impressive sites such as Mousa, Clickimin, Jarlshof and Old Scatness. Its image rarely appears outside archaeological texts (and rarely even there). When it is mentioned in tourism resources, this is usually as an optional add-on to a visit to Old Scatness or to Jarlshof. Its lack of wider recognition is not aided by the lack of a clear narrative about its purpose.

The fact that blockhouses such as Ness of Burgi are, on present knowledge, unique to Shetland does not appear to have provoked any marked sense of local pride (unlike, say, the completeness of the broch of Mousa or the longevity of the settlement at Jarlshof). Once again, the lack of a clear narrative as to the sites purpose may partially account for this.

No visitor numbers are available (unlikely to exceed 3,000 per year). The site is within reasonable walking distance of both Jarlshof and Old Scatness and can be combined with a visit to either/both of these more major sites. Given its exposed location, visiting is strongly weather-dependent. The site is also visited by bird-watchers and those hoping to sight whales and porpoises, although there are more favoured locations nearby for both activities. Those who do seek out the site report the experience as rewarding, e.g. an appreciative blog post on NorthLink ferries

website: <http://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/shetland-blog/the-ness-of-burgi/>

Few if any pre-arranged tours take in the site, and it does not appear to be on the radar for local schools: the intervening attractions of Old Scatness and Jarlshof offer richer experiences. Those who do visit the site appear to respect it and its surroundings, with littering and vandalism rare.

On-site interpretation is provided by a simple interpretation board.

3 Major gaps in understanding

The preceding text has made clear the wide range of unanswered questions about blockhouses and also their relationship to brochs. Most of these questions fit firmly within the research framework outlined in SCARF's research recommendations contained in their Iron Age Panel report¹⁹. A particular theme might be the link between overtly rectilinear structures and overtly circular plan structures in close geographic and temporal proximity. It is likely that blockhouses and brochs will form a particular focus in the SCARF Regional Research framework for the Islands on which work will commence in 2019.

Some of the key gaps in knowledge and areas for research include:

- Dating evidence for Burgi and other blockhouse construction
- Water sources for Burgi and other blockhouse sites – do any contain wells such as those found on some broch sites
- Whether anything preceded the blockhouse at Burgi
- Environment and landscape at time of construction and subsequent change, including coastal erosion
- Wider questions of economy, demography and social organisation relationship to neighbouring sites and communities
- Relationship to promontory forts more generally
- Comparison of details of broch construction with those found in anomalous (and possibly early) structures
- Purpose of blockhouses in economic and social terms, including defence – in their own terms and as they may relate to brochs
- Comparative dating of construction and subsequent modification in comparison with brochs
- Comparative dating of blockhouses and outer enclosures

There are some areas of inquiry to which Ness of Burgi is unlikely to make a significant contribution. Due to its early date of excavation, and the fact that it has been largely emptied of Iron Age deposits, these will include:

- detailed artefact studies
- analysis of surviving deposits for environmental/economic evidence.

4 Associated properties

4a *Associated visitor properties managed by HES*

- Clickimin (broch and associated remains, Shetland) – which includes a similar, though less elongated but taller-standing blockhouse
- Jarlshof (broch and associated remains, Shetland) – only about 2 kilometres away, walkable
- Mousa (broch, Shetland)
- Gurness (broch and associated remains, Orkney)

¹⁹ <https://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/iron-age-panel-report>

- Midhowe (broch and associated remains, Orkney) – the massive forework, which stands to landward of the broch at Midhowe, has been considered by some to be analogous to blockhouses such as Ness of Burgi
- Càrn Liath (broch, Highland)
- Dun Dornaigil (broch, Highland)
- Dun Beag (broch, Highland)
- Dun Telve (broch, Highland)
- Dun Troddan (broch, Highland)
- Dun Carloway (broch, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)
- Edins Hall (broch and associated remains, Scottish Borders)

4b Associated visitor property managed by Shetland Amenity Trust

- Old Scatness (broch and associated remains, Shetland) – only about 1.5 kilometres away, walkable

5 Keywords

Blockhouse, Shetland, Fort, Broch, Iron Age, Solid-based, Guard cell, Entrance passage, Inter-visibility, Drystone, Pre-historic, Promontory fort, Earthwork

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Unpublished Archive material

Archive material held by in HES (ex RCAHMS) collection, as referenced in several footnotes.

Appendix 1 – Timeline

Iron Age

(400 BC onwards)	Construction of blockhouse; excavation of ditches and creation of bank (sequence unknown)
(100 BC – AD 200)	Sporadic occupation of cells within wall thickness.
(by AD 200)	Site abandoned.

20th century:

Survey	1930 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland staff visit: site described 17 July 1930, plan drawn 26 August 1930 (not published until 1946).
Scheduled	19 June 1934 (based on RCAHMS recommendation). Rescheduled 1999 to clarify boundary (identical to area in state care).
State guardianship	Landowner offers site in 1934 (possibly when advised of intention to schedule it) ²⁰ . Guardianship agreement signed 1935, state takes on all responsibility for maintaining the site, though title to the land remains with the proprietor.
Excavation	1935 Blockhouse and pathway through outer bank excavated (published 1936).
Additional survey	Office of Works staff draw revised plan and cross-sections after excavation, possibly in 1935 or 1936, and share with RCAHMS.

²⁰ HES (ex-RCAHMS) collection: MS/269/2 copy letter from James S Richardson, Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Office of Works to his (junior) colleague Mr Mackay [possibly John B Mackay, but not certainly so – JBM does not appear in (fragmentary) staff lists until several years later]

Consolidation

1971 Ministry of Works staff remove excavated stone from the site, building a neat pile nearby. Blockhouse consolidated.

1983 Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments) - Central Excavation Unit personnel excavate section across bank at north east end, and also excavate more fully a nearby similar, though more eroded and ruined, site at Scatness (North).

21st century

Recording

2018 Digital recording undertaken, with a view to regular future repeats. Consent given to insert permanent ground markers (3) to facilitate this.

Appendix 2 – images



Above: aerial view, south towards top of frame:

Interior view of entrance passage showing door jambs:



Picture of current interpretation panel:

NESS OF BURG IRON-AGE BLOCKHOUSE

Built about 2,000 years ago, this blockhouse was probably occupied about the same time as Shetland's brochs. Ness of Burgi shares several features with broch architecture – the imposing drystone walling, the hollow chambers, the narrow entrance and the bar-holes for a wooden door.

Above: On the landward side, two shallow ditches flank the jamb. Coastal erosion has destroyed the southern end of the blockhouse. The large rectangular heap of stones that was created when the site was consolidated in the 1970s.

Insert: Several ruined brochs and forts lie nearby, emphasising the importance of this landscape from the Neolithic. The iconic site of Jarlshof lies across the bay.

Main image: At first, it is hard to see the attraction of this location, quite distant from good farmland, and very exposed. However, the ditches and inlets could have provided swanfish, eggs, and access for fishing and seal-hunting. Pollajava, a small specialised community exploited marine resources, trading with other groups.

Above: The pottery found at Ness of Burgi is similar to that found at broch sites.

HISTORIC SCOTLAND

East elevation:



View of approach



View of approach to site showing rock ridge and safety rail fixing:



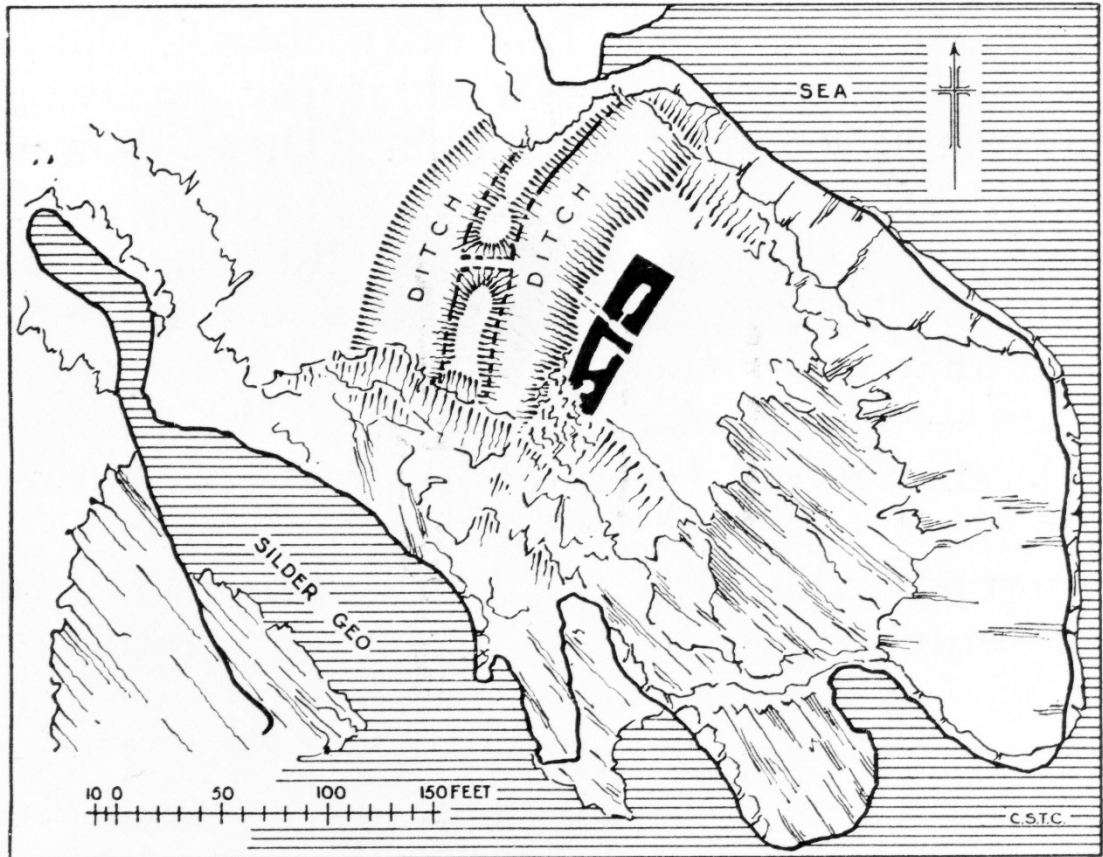


FIG. 502.—Fort, Ness of Burgi (No. 1154).

Above: RCAHMS plan



© Courtesy of HES (Curle Collection).
Photograph taken during 1935 excavations: AO Curle (front) and AT Curle (beyond)



Above: Photograph taken during 1935 excavations: entrance passage looking out:



© Courtesy of HES (Curle Collection).

Above: Photograph taken during 1935 excavations: workmen clearing north-east chamber:



© Courtesy of HES (Curle Collection).

Above: Photograph taken during 1935 excavations: workmen apparently clearing the passageway in outer bank, between piles of stone already removed from the blockhouse:



Above: 1971 photo by RG Lamb, showing site soon after stone clearance and consolidation:

Appendix 3 – Full site description

The place-name, Ness of Burgi, derives from Old Norse; *ness* meaning promontory and *burgi* from *borg*, meaning fort. The name implies that it was regarded as an ancient fortification in Norse-Medieval times. Around 1935 it seems to have been referred to as “Da (=the) Brough or “Da Burgi”, but this usage appears to have lapsed locally and it is now usually referred to simply as Ness of Burgi.

Ness of Burgi appeared on the 1903 1st edition 6-inch Ordnance survey map, marked as “Brough”, but does not appear to have been described in print before the report of the 1935 excavations, which was published in 1936²¹.

The site was visited by John Corrie of RCAHMS and his description, adapted following the 1935 excavations, forms the basis of the entry in the RCAHMS Inventory²².

The walk to Ness of Burgi is across sheep grazed grassland to a small promontory where the site lies ahead. To the right of the line of approach stands a neat block of drystone masonry, complete with a small chamber: this represents material removed during the 1935 excavations and tidied into its

²¹ Mowbray 1936

²² Corrie’s notebook is in HES collection – MS/36/109. He visited on 17 July 1930

present form in the 1970s. This has been known to confuse visitors, especially when thick fog obscures the view of the “Burgi” straight ahead.

Two shallow ditches, just over 40m long in surviving extent (but probably eroded at both ends by the sea) curve across the neck of a small headland, which is bounded otherwise by low but steep cliffs. The intervening bank or rampart appears in places to be faced with larger stones, especially to either side of a dip in the middle of the bank, which represents the original entranceway. This runs through the bank at a slight angle, aligning with gaps in the ditches and emerging opposite the entrance to the blockhouse. When this entrance gap was excavated in 1935 it was found to be paved with large flat slabs, now grassed over. A cross-section excavated across the bank in 1983, towards its northern end, revealed that it was composed of up-cast soil and weathered bedrock²³. It is not possible to determine from the field evidence how the ditches and bank relate in terms of date to the blockhouse, nor has excavation so far resolved this.

Within the area enclosed between the ditches and the cliff edge, on a natural platform which stands slightly higher, stands the ‘blockhouse’. This is elongated parallel to, and about 2 metres back from, the inside edge of the inner ditch. It consists of a long rectangular block of drystone masonry aligned north-east to south-west, and survives to about 1.5 metres high. It measures 23 metres long by between 6.5 and 5.5 metres wide, but it may originally have been a little longer, having suffered some erosion at its south-west end. Its north-east end, by contrast, is neatly squared off, leaving a level gap between it and the cliff edge. There is no sign of any wall linking this end to the cliff edge, nor was anything found during the 1935 excavation. (Plans drawn before excavation took place hint at a continuation of the blockhouse to the cliff edge at the north-east end, but this appears to have been based solely on supposition²⁴.)

The blockhouse is pierced centrally by a narrow entrance passage, three lintels over this survive *in situ* (or, less likely, had been replaced prior to 1935). This passage is about 1 metre wide as it passes through the outer face of the blockhouse, and widens out at about 1.6 metres in, where a door-jamb and two bar-holes survive. The inner portion of the passage is about 1.3 metres wide.

Two large hollow chambers are set within the thickness of the masonry. To the north-east of the entrance passage, one such chamber is accessed by a low, lintelled passage off the north side of the entrance passage, four lintels being recorded *in situ* in 1935. This chamber is approximately oval, about 5.5 metres by 2 metres. The walls corbel in slightly at the top and the chamber may originally have been roofed by long lintel stones, examples of which were found within it upon excavation. To the south-west of the entrance passage, the second large chamber is accessed by a doorway from the rear of the blockhouse. Three lintels over its entrance are recorded *in situ* in 1935. This

²³ Carter et al 1995

²⁴ Plans by CST Calder of RCAHMS in HES collections: refs SHD/39/4 and SH/39/5

chamber measures about 5.5 metres by 3 metres. A third, smaller chamber is visible in the eroded south-west end of the blockhouse, and measures about 1.8 metres across. No entrance to this chamber is visible in what survives, and may have been lost to erosion.

Behind the blockhouse is a flat grassy area which measures no more than 20 metres square and is fully exposed to the elements. The soil and turf here are very shallow and bedrock clearly lies just beneath. There are no obvious traces of any structures in this area, which seems not to have been excavated in 1935.

1935 Excavations

Excavations were conducted by Cecil L Mowbray at the instigation of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and with the support and encouragement of A O Curle, then at the National Museum of Scotland, and presumably employing workmen from Jarlshof, where Curle was excavating at the same time. Little seems to have survived by way of information about the day-to-day conduct of Mowbray's excavation in 1935, other than a few photographs. These are of good quality and include a splendid image of A O Curle (father) relaxing and A T Curle (son) at work washing finds²⁵.

The dig appears to have taken the usual approach for the time, with overlying rubble cleared by labourers under sporadic supervision. When underlying deposits containing artefactual material were reached, the labourers continued with the work, but with constant supervision. One photograph (SC1401137) shows a workman sieving excavated deposits, indicating a careful procedure. Records of stratigraphic layers kept by the supervisor and the association of finds with layers was also noted. Finds were washed and inspected on site

The few sherds of pottery found were not ascribed to any particular date, and the report is almost entirely descriptive. It appears that Mowbray assumed she was excavating a site which was broadly of the same period as the brochs, but even this is not stated in the extremely brief report. The brevity of the report is a marked contrast from excavation reports of later years, and especially that of Hamilton at Clickimin²⁶. Mowbray's report did question the blockhouse's supposed function as a defensive structure but she did not speculate an alternative function. "It is remarkable that, through the building was so strongly protected in front by ditches and rampart [...] As it stands there is nothing to prevent easy access to the undefended doorways at the back."²⁷

The excavation report did not contain a plan: Mowbray knew that the Royal Commission had already visited and planned the site (see below) and deferred to the RCAHMS Inventory, "shortly to be published" for this and also for a wider discussion of this type of monument – in the event, various delays

²⁵ HES (ex-RCAHMS) collection – ref SC1401142

²⁶ Hamilton 1968

²⁷ Mowbray 1936, 385

meant that this did not appear until 1946²⁸. The plan and sections published then were based upon the 1930 plan but updated following the 1935 excavation, probably with drawings supplied by the Office of Works. The discussion of blockhouses was very short, only remarking that the “affinity to the latest phase of broch architecture is unmistakable”²⁹ and thus (by implication) that the ditches and rampart were later. (The Inventory having already noted that Shetland’s brochs were “generally defended by an outer wall or by a system of ramparts and ditches” which were seen as later in date than the brochs themselves³⁰.)

Surveys

The site was planned by RCAHMS in 1930, and John Corrie’s notebook³¹ and the original Charles Calder field drawing and an amended draft version survive, the latter annotated “New plan to be made by O.W.”³². The plan which was eventually published in 1946, along with cross-section drawings through the structure, appears to be based on additional material supplied by the Office of Works after 1935, although it is attributed solely to Calder³³.

Raymond Lamb visited in 1968 during his research into northern promontory sites: he seems to have based his sketch plan on RCAHMS, with some minor added detail.

In more recent times, aerial and ground-based photography has been undertaken for and by the Office of Works and its successors (until recently Historic Scotland and nowadays Historic Environment Scotland).

The entire structure has recently been recorded using laser scanning or modern digital recording technology combined with high-quality photographic coverage, providing an objective digital record which will underpin future consolidation work. It is intended that this exercise will be repeated at regular intervals. Permanent survey markers were inserted in 2018 to facilitate re-survey. The site has also been the subject of aerial LIDAR survey.

Repair and consolidation works

When the blockhouse was excavated in 1935, tumbled stone was removed from around the blockhouse and from within its cells and passages. This appears (based on photographs taken in 1968) to have been piled close by, outside the blockhouse and partly within the inner ditch. There is no record of significant consolidation between 1935 and 1971. In the latter year, the Ministry of Works squad removed the excavated material and consolidated the blockhouse, presumably using the 1935 photographs as reference material. This stone pile gives a clear idea of the volume of tumbled masonry

²⁸ RCAHMS 1946 vol 3, 34-36

²⁹ RCAHMS 1946 vol 1, 35-36

³⁰ RCAHMS 1946 vol 1, 33

³¹ Corrie’s notebook is in HES (ex-RCAHMS) collection – ref MS/36/109, p27-8

³² Calder’s field and partially worked-up plans are in HES collection – refs SHD/39/5 and SHD/39/4

³³ RCAHMS 1946 vol 3, 34

which had been removed in 1935 from the chambers, the entrance passage and around the front and back of the blockhouse: enough to have raised the overall height of the surviving structure by a small amount, but not more than 1 metre overall. Since then, occasional campaigns of minor consolidation have taken place to ensure the continued stability of the structure. The visible surface of the walls has been subjected to the insertion of small stone pinnings, to mitigate against stone slippage. The replacement of these pinnings is the most significant component of routine maintenance.

On the short rocky slope which forms part of the approach to the promontory on which the site is located, holes were drilled into the rock and metal stanchions inserted, linked by chain or rope to offer support. These decayed over the years, but have now been replaced and are regularly maintained.

Appendix 4 – Theories and interpretations: blockhouses and brochs

1. Purpose of the blockhouse

Blockhouses are regarded as relating to the same general period as brochs. The above noted architectural features – drystone construction, entrance passage and guard cell – seem to confirm this. It is generally agreed that brochs were created in a social context in which two aspects were significant: defensibility and impressiveness. The balance between these two factors is likely to have varied over time and this overarching context has influenced interpretation of blockhouses too, although we are far from understanding Iron Age society in any great certainty.

As is the case for some brochs, it is clear that Ness of Burgi's exposed location makes it highly unlikely that it functioned as a farmstead. Its siting seems to have been chosen for its wide outlook (including inter-visibility). While it has external ditches and a bank, these do not seem to have been of any great strength: it is hard to imagine Ness of Burgi holding out for long against even the most desultory attack, especially as its restricted interior could not have held a large defending force. If it is a fortification, it appears a desperate retreat rather than a stronghold.

The excavator, Cecil Mowbray, questioned the blockhouse's supposed function as a defensive structure but could offer no alternative. "It is remarkable that, through the building was so strongly protected in front by ditches and rampart [...] As it stands there is nothing to prevent easy access to the undefended doorways at the back."³⁴ However, she conceded that a lightly constructed wall might have extended from the end of the blockhouse to the cliff edge, and since been washed away.

John Hamilton, who completed the excavations at Jarlshof and then dug at Clickimin, ignored these reservations and looked to Ness of Burgi not only as a fort but as the possible bridgehead for the invaders his broch origin theory required, referring to it as "a strong promontory fort"³⁵ in his Clickimin report.

³⁴ Mowbray 1936, 385

³⁵ Hamilton 1968, 45 et seq

Raymond Lamb (later for many years County Archaeologist for Orkney) studied northern Iron Age promontory sites as a PhD thesis, visiting Ness of Burgi in 1968 and subsequently. He published a thoughtful monograph on the topic in 1980. Lamb also questioned the feasibility of blockhouses as defences, and his views were later expanded by Richard Hingley, who identified a wider set Iron Age sites (including brochs) which he argued “project an outward image of defensibility without being strictly defensible”. He suggested that “blockhouses may represent platforms for ritualised warfare or display”³⁶.

The excavations in 1983 of the nearby Scatness (North) site (published in 1995) describe a structure of very similar plan to Ness of Burgi, though more eroded. It produced no material capable of closely dating its construction³⁷. The excavation report offered a useful discussion of the problems inherent in constructing coherent narratives in the Iron Age of Shetland and beyond, occasioned in part by the existence of a few very rich excavated sites but a general paucity of data.

Euan MacKie had long considered Shetland blockhouses (he preferred the term “gatehouse”) as one of the possible sources of elements of broch architecture, and in his 2002 corpus followed Hamilton as regarding Ness of Burgi as a fort, arguing that there “must have been a wall” linking the north end of the blockhouse to the cliff for it to have functioned as a defence, although “no traces now remain of it”³⁸. Against this, the excavator, who sought such a wall in vain found no evidence and suggested that “if there was, as presumably there must have been, a flanking wall, it was not bedded into the building...if such existed [it] was of lighter construction, and has since been washed away.”³⁹

So, while Ness of Burgi may indeed have been a fortified site, Hingley’s suggestion that it was intended to “project an outward image of defensibility without being strictly defensible” or a “platform for ritualised warfare or display”⁴⁰, while perhaps ultimately unprovable, remains worth consideration.

Noel Fojut characterised the alternative interpretations in 2006: ‘Were they even forts as we understand that term: defensive structures? It has been suggested that [sites] such as Ness of Burgi were nothing more than massive “posing platforms” for Iron Age warriors to display their martial ardour without actually engaging in combat. But such ideas, which have also been aired for the brochs, go further than present-day archaeological skills can take us.”⁴¹

³⁶ Hingley 1992, 19

³⁷ Carter et al 1995

³⁸ MacKie 2002, 73

³⁹ Mowbray 1936, 385

⁴⁰ Hingley 1992, 19

⁴¹ Fojut 2006, 59

To summarise, Ness of Burgi is open to multiple interpretations, none of them ruled in, or out, by the physical remains:

A – as a fort, built either by a group of invaders or by a group of locals seeking to ward off invaders, and:

- The ditches are older and represent a simple fortification, with the blockhouse added later to strengthen the defences.
- The ditches and blockhouse are contemporary and intended as a single conceptual unit
- The blockhouse is older with the ditches added later.

B – as a ritual or symbolic construction

- The blockhouse acted as a platform for acting out various rituals, perhaps to emphasise possession of the land around, or even used for rites of passage as young men entered the warrior class. (This does not rule out the ditch and rampart being defensive in intention, especially if earlier in date.)

C – as a lookout point or signal station against raiding or invasion from the south

- The blockhouse was part of a chain of such establishments, supplementing the more numerous brochs in this function. (This also does not rule out the ditch and rampart being defensive in intention.)

2. Blockhouses and Brochs

As noted above, the consensus is that blockhouses are broadly contemporary with the early brochs, and that their shared architectural features indicate the building types are related. The presumption being that they were designed for a possibly related but distinctive purpose. Some researchers think brochs developed over time from simpler structures such as blockhouses, but others argue that the presence of broch-like architectural features is more likely to point to borrowing from pre-existing brochs.

Therefore a key question to which it is believed Ness of Burgi may relate is the emergence of the architectural features which made possible the broch's tower form: the entrance passage and the cells closely resemble those in brochs. There has been strongly polarised debate between those who argue for a long, gradual process of experimentation across a wide range of structural types culminating in tower brochs such as Mousa (in which case Ness of Burgi might be an early, experimental structure) and those who argue for the appearance of the broch tower as an act of creative inspiration, with its features subsequently co-opted for use in other types of structure (in which case Ness of Burgi would be later than the earliest brochs but might still be contemporary with brochs built in later years – which begs the question of over how long a period brochs were being constructed).

The relative construction date of blockhouses and brochs is therefore a key gap in knowledge: much more data is needed from more sites, especially sites where more than one type of Iron Age structure exists (as at Clickimin and Jarlshof). Unfortunately, blockhouses such as Ness of Burgi are few, with only one reasonably certain blockhouse remaining unexplored (Burgi Geos on the remote west coast of the island of Yell in northern Shetland). The fact that

fact that most of the few known examples of Shetland blockhouses have been disturbed to a greater or lesser extent, means that any potential survival of undisturbed deposits is of particularly high value.

As with brochs, almost all of the archaeological evidence for activity in and around blockhouses relates to their occupation and not to their construction. This leaves open the possibilities either that society at the precise time brochs were first built was radically different from what followed in the subsequent centuries, from which most of our excavated evidence derives, or that blockhouses, along with brochs, were the product of some short-lived phenomenon.

Appendix 5 – Cecil Louise Mowbray

The excavator at Ness of Burgi, Cecil Louise Mowbray, studied art-history first at Glasgow College of Art and then at the Sorbonne in Paris (along with other female scholars later to become prominent in art-historical circles, notably Francoise Henry). She worked under the direction of the Abbé Breuil at the Lascaux Caves, where “her youth and agility made her specially useful in drawing the almost inaccessible cave-paintings in cramped corners”.

Mowbray was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1934, and in 1935 was invited to assist Alexander O Curle at Jarlshof, also excavating with him at Wiltrow, where she undertook the surveying of the site, as well as directing for the first time at Ness of Burgi in 1935. This led to her appointment to supervise excavations for the Ministry of Works in Orkney, at the Brough of Birsay (a Norse/Medieval settlement and ecclesiastical centre with possible pre-Norse or Pictish antecedents), where she worked under the oversight of J S Richardson.

At Jarlshof Mowbray met Curle’s son, Alexander T (“Sandy”) Curle, who was assisting with the finds at Jarlshof during leave from the Army. Both men worked with her at Ness of Burgi. Mowbray and Sandy Curle married in 1938.

After these few seasons of excavation, Mowbray returned to art-history and artefact studies. In 1940 (now writing as Mrs Curle) she published a major study on the incised and sculptured stones of Early Christian Scotland, a topic to which she continued to make made significant contributions⁴². She became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London (1943).

After the war Mrs Curle and her young daughter accompanied her husband to Ethiopia (where he was in the colonial and diplomatic service attached to the British Embassy in Addis Ababa). She took the opportunity to add studies of Coptic ecclesiastical art to her repertoire. In the 1970s, by then long back in Scotland, she was encouraged by Stewart Cruden (Ministry of Works) and Robert Stevenson (National Museum) to take on the huge task of publishing the finds from excavations at the Brough of Birsay (both her own and others’) which had run intermittently from 1934 until 1974. This was a vital task, and

⁴² Curle 1940, Curle 1962

its completion helped to underpin fresh excavation work on the Brough of Birsay in the 1980s, by Chris Morris and John Hunter.

Mrs Curle's last northern field excursion seems to have been to the Birsay Conference, held in the Birsay village Hall in 1982⁴³, the year which saw the publication of her magnum opus on the finds from Birsay⁴⁴. Always generous with her time and supportive of aspiring young archaeologists, she bridged the pre- and post-war generations of Scottish archaeology, and indeed went some distance to bridging to the next-again generation, lecturing into her late 70s. She died in 1987, after a short illness, at the age of 85.

⁴³ Reported, with papers presented, in *Orkney Heritage*, 2 (1983).

⁴⁴ Curle 1982