



Orkney: 5,000 years of culture

Neolithic, Iron Age, Viking, present day

6–12 August 2026 (MM 128)

7 days

Lecturers: Julie Gibson & Tom Muir

Study the 'Heart of Neolithic Orkney', a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Includes a private tour of the Ness of Brodgar dig with the director, Nick Card.

Neolithic, Iron Age, Viking and 20th-century sites with plenty of time to explore picturesque Kirkwall.

The archipelago of Orkney has been inhabited for 10,000 years. Down the millennia, the mild climate and fertile soils have nurtured a creative community here. The 67 islands are home to some of the best preserved archaeological sites in the United Kingdom, conserving an unusual amount of detail which provide a rare and intimate glimpse of life in the past.

Central to Orkney's archaeological significance is the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Heart of Neolithic Orkney', comprising four locations that give insight into life on the islands for the first farming communities 5,000 years ago. They are among the most important Neolithic sites in Western Europe and include Skara Brae, a well-preserved village of prehistoric houses; the great stone circles of the Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stenness; and the ceremonial site of Ness of Brodgar, discovered in 2004. Neolithic chambered tombs can be found across the archipelago, punctuating the windswept rolling hills and dramatic sea cliffs.

The islands came under Viking rule in the ninth century and remained part of Norway until the end of the 15th century. The Vikings left their distinctive mark: the magnificent cathedral of St Magnus was built by Earl (later Saint) Rognvald, and the Neolithic tomb of Maeshowe features the largest collection of Viking runes outside Scandinavia. Orkney is unique in Scotland in having its own Icelandic saga, documenting the semi-mythical history of the islands and the earls who ruled them.

20th-century Orkney felt the impact of both World Wars, when thousands of troops were stationed on the islands, as well as many Prisoners of War. The remains from this period add to the long history of archaeology. Post-war, the collector and artist Margaret Gardiner had a long-standing connection with the islands and several of her works and those of her friends, including Barbara Hepworth, can



Kirkwall, steel engraving c. 1850.

be seen in Stromness, a town that is home to a thriving artistic community.

From vast standing circles that predate Stonehenge and the evocative poetry of the Viking earls, to the scars of modern-era conflict and the rich cultural tapestry of the 20th century, Orkney's history and stunning natural landscape offer much to stimulate the intellect and stir the soul.

Itinerary

Day 1: Kirkwall. Arrive in Kirkwall independently (see 'Practicalities' for further details). Hotel rooms are available to check in from 2.00pm. The tour begins at 6.30pm with a lecture.

Day 2: Heart of Neolithic Orkney. Visit the sites that make up the UNESCO World Heritage 'Heart of Orkney': Skara Brae, the stone-built Neolithic village; the Standing Stones of Stenness; and the chambered Cairn of Maeshowe. See also the Ring of Brodgar.

Day 3: Stromness. View the Stromness museum, then walk through the town to the Pier Arts Centre, home to Margaret Gardiner's collection of art that includes works by Barbara Hepworth, Terry Frost and Naum Gabo, as well as contemporary works by Anish Kapoor. After some free time in Stromness proceed to the Ness of Brodgar. A working archaeological site until 2024, some surprising insights into

Neolithic ceremonial life were unearthed here. Tour the site with Nick Card, the director of the dig.

Day 4: Rousay. Board the morning ferry to the island of Rousay. From here view a series of Neolithic chambered cairns including the double-decker Taversoe Tuick. It is a short walk from the road down to the coast to view Midhowe Cairn, one of the largest tombs in Orkney and the impressive Iron Age Midhowe Broch with its immense defensive walls.

Day 5: Birsay. Cross the tidal causeway from Mainland to Birsay – there are Pictish, Norse and medieval remains on this dramatic, uninhabited island. Visit the 16th-century Earl's Palace and the Kirbuster Museum, a small farm museum that houses the only surviving unaltered 'firehouse' in Northern Europe. Broch of Gurness is an Iron Age complex on the edge of Eynhallow Sound, affording beautiful views of Rousay. *Today's visits are subject to change based on tide times.*

Day 6: Orkney Museum, Italian Chapel, Churchill Barriers. Drive through Mainland and cross the Churchill Barriers, built to prevent any further attacks on the fleet stationed in Orkney after the sinking of HMS Royal Oak in 1939. See also the tiny, beautiful Italian Chapel, erected in two Nissen huts by Italian Prisoners of War in 1943.

Orkney: 5,000 years of culture continued

Day 7: Kirkwall. Visit the 17th-century Earl's and Bishop's Palaces in Kirkwall. From here the coach takes you to the hotel by 12.45pm or Kirkwall Airport by 1.00pm. A transfer is also available to Stromness ferry terminal, arriving by 3.45pm.

Lecturers

Julie Gibson. Recently retired from the post of County Archaeologist for the Orkney Islands, which she held for many years, Julie maintains an up-to-date overview of the archaeology of the archipelago. Arriving as a student to help excavate a Pictish and Viking cemetery in Rousay (now her home) her continued love for Viking and later archaeology has driven her participation in several North Atlantic and Scandinavian programmes. She has a great interest in the archaeology of coasts and islands and climate-driven coastal erosion and is the author of a popular book on the effects on Orkney's heritage.

Tom Muir is an Orkney man and has spent his life championing and reviving the islands' traditional folk tales. He recently retired from the Orkney Museum after 37 years, where he was Engagement and Exhibitions Officer. This involved working with the media and television, as well as writing the text for exhibitions on a wide variety of Orkney related subjects. His background is in archaeology, history and folklore. He has written numerous books on folk tales, Icelandic Sagas and Orkney history. He is also a professional storyteller and awarded an MBE in the 2025 King's New Years Honours List, 'for services to Orkney Folk Tales.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach, including transfers to meet recommended flights and ferries on the first and last days; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 4 lunches and 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturers and tour manager.

Accommodation. The Lynnfield Hotel, Kirkwall (lynnfield.co.uk): small 4-star hotel on the edge of Kirkwall with a good restaurant. It is more comfortable than the options available in the town centre. *Single rooms are double for single use.*

Transport to Orkney is not included in the price of the tour. It is possible to fly to Kirkwall from London with Loganair via Edinburgh, Aberdeen or Glasgow. Direct flights to and from London are also available on certain days of the week. It is also possible to take a ferry from Aberdeen to Kirkwall or Scrabness to Stromness. We will send the recommended flight and ferry options with your booking confirmation, and ask that you make your own reservation. Transfers will be provided for these recommended flights and ferries.

How strenuous? There is a lot of walking or scrambling over archaeological sites. You will be on your feet for long stretches of time, in some cases on exposed sites and walking over rough terrain and steep slopes. Therefore sure-footedness and agility are essential. Average distance by coach per day: 25 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.