

My trip to the Orkney Islands was an amazing and unforgettable experience. The island itself was so far removed from modern day life despite having a functioning town in the 21st century. The mind-blowing contrast between the calm of the island and the forever fast pacing life of London living cannot have gone unnoticed. Life on the island seemed pretty normal albeit a little strange for a city girl born and raised. We stayed at a lakeside B&B which was about a 20 minute drive from Kirkwall, the city centre. Every morning we woke up to a hot Scottish breakfast overlooking the glistening lake opposite us. Our days were usually packed with sampling and tours between various Neolithic archaeological sites.

The Orkneys was a very unique experience; it was a place which seemed lost in the abyss of time. A place where time had stood still and the ocean surrounding the island acted as a watery barrier to the modern way of life. Farmland scoured the landscape from as far as the eye can see, with sheep's, cows and horses at every turn. Isolated bungalows were surrounded by archers and archers of lush green grass with animals grazing peacefully. As we drove to and from our various destinations the landscapes surrounding us were breathtaking. Beyond the farmlands were sparkling blue lakes and over in the distance picturesque hills lined the background. There were days where fog filled the morning air and the landscape turned into a mystical backdrop of towering dark hills in the background and dark blue lakes in the foreground.

Our lunchtime breaks were usually spent at different beaches in the island. These beaches rarely had any visitors so we had the entire beach to ourselves. We sat on top of large boulders overlooking the sparkling blue ocean which looked as though a thousand stars had fallen on the ocean surface. The cold, crisp and thin air was a delightful change from the dense and thick congested London air. We watched as the tides crept inland and engulfed the sandy beige beach and then quickly retreated exposing vibrant green seaweed. As we stared out into the ocean we noticed small black specks bobbing up and down the surface of the water. These strange black specks were coming closer and closer and their features became more distinguishable. Baby otters had come to join us for lunch! They kept their distance only edging closer out of curiosity and then scurrying back into the ocean never to be seen again.

The most memorable location was at Yesnaby. Once again we were on the road looking for a scenic place to have lunch. As we drove up the road we noticed the road disappearing ahead of us and with it the lush green fields at either side also seem to have gone and left in front of us was just the sky. We slowed the car down and continued to slowly drive up hill until we reached a small car park overlooking the most spectacular peak! We had reached the edge of the island! As we walked over closer and closer to the edge we were met with a sudden rush of excitement and fear. Excitement at the sight of the luscious greeny-blue of the Atlantic Ocean crashing against the cliff face, imagining if we continued forward what land mass we would hit, the southern most of Greenland and then Canada! Fear at the sheer scale and magnitude of the drop right in front of us! The sound of the waves crashing against the gigantic rocky cliff face could be heard from way back down the road and to a city girl such as me the waves sounded like a wave of car engines during rush hour!

The stunning view was a refreshing and dramatic change from the scenery of London. We sat as close to the edge as we felt safe and had lunch watching the waves violently crashing against exposed rocks in the ocean and against the cliff, active erosion at work! Despite the strong winds and crashing waves we had a pleasant lunch and just as we were about to leave the sun crept out

from behind the clouds and the skyline turned into a soft orange colour with the sun's rays beaming down through pockets of openings between the clouds. The soft orange of the sky against the vibrant greeny-blue of the ocean created a perfect picturesque moment full of awe and wonder at the beauty of the natural world!

During our stay we visited a number of Neolithic and megalithic archaeological sites. One of these locations was The Ring of Brodgar which is a stone monument, almost 104 meters wide and said to be older than Stonehenge in Wiltshire. The sheer scale of the megaliths which make up the monument makes it visible from miles. The individual structures are placed a few meters apart and form a circle with a huge empty space in the middle. Walking in the huge vacant space within the stone structures felt rather surreal and eerie, as if within a matter of moment something supernatural was about to take place. There was definitely an air of mystery about the place! Why was it built? What was it used for?

We also visited Skara Brae, a Neolithic village regarded as one of the most remarkable monuments in Europe. Today Skara Brae consists of eight dwellings which are linked together by a series of low roof covered passage ways. Because of the protection provided by the sand which covered the settlement for 4000 years, the buildings and their contents are very well preserved. Compared to modern day villages, this ancient village was considerably small! From the beds, to the fire place to the walls, everything was so minuscule which made us wonder about the size of prehistoric man. Were they really as small as their dwelling suggest or was there a reason behind making everything so small scale. The rooms were lined with only the basic necessities and when compared to a modern room we realise how much time has changed and man has evolved!

The trip to the Orkneys was part of my undergraduate IGS to research Holocene palaeoenvironmental change of the Bay of Firth, Orkney Islands. The site is known to involve sea-level rise over the past 10,000 years, resulting in marine incursions into freshwater lochs as well as flooding of land surfaces including archaeological sites of human activity. It is also the focus of ongoing Neolithic archaeological investigation. Samples used in this research were taken from the Bay of Firth as part of the Rising Tides Project and is in conjunction with Dave Horne's (IGS supervisor) own project in support of the archaeological investigation. The Rising Tides Project explores landscape changes, sea level rise and human activity in the Orkneys since the Holocene. The aims of the project is to use ostracod and foraminifera shells recovered from a sediment core within the Bay of Firth to reconstruct the palaeoenvironmental history of the loch, with emphasis on identifying sea level changes. During our stay we had the opportunity to collect contemporary samples from the loch of Harray and Stenness along with pH and salinity measurements for comparison between modern and fossil assemblages. By the end of my IGS project, the data and information I have gathered will contribute to David Horne's current research in the Bay of Firth.

This trip has been a great opportunity to undertake fieldwork in a location which I may necessarily not ever visit. I have gained new skills and insight into the field micropalaeontological research and Neolithic archaeology. The IGS has provided me with experience of working independently to design and carry out a project from start to finish. Such skills are transferable in the working world and hence will improve my employability when looking for post graduate work. The trip was definitely a memorable and unique one and one which I will not be forgotten anytime soon.