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**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC325

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90315)

**Taken into State care:** 1934 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2003

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# WIDEFORD HILL CHAMBERED CAIRN



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Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

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# WIDEFORD HILL CHAMBERED CAIRN

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

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The monument comprises the excavated, turf-covered remains of a circular neolithic chambered cairn, on Mainland Orkney. Situated on an artificial terrace on the steep western-facing hillside of Wideford Hill, it commands fine views over the Bay of Firth. Its long entrance passage leads to a central chamber with three corbelled side cells; the interior deliberately in-filled in prehistory. It falls into a broad tradition of building stone-chambered cairns which started in Scotland in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

Visitors gain access by descending through the modern roof via hatch and ladder, rather than the narrow original entrance passage. There is no artificial lighting. A hike across the hillside is necessary to reach the site, some of this along a formal path. The site is tightly enclosed from the surrounding rough grazings by a fence.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

- 1849 first recorded exploration by George Petrie.
- 1934 passes into guardianship.
- 1935 further site clearance by Kilbride-Jones (on behalf of the Ministry of Works).

### Archaeological Overview

- One of a small group of 'Maeshowe-type' cairns found in Orkney that can be dated to c. 3500-2400 BC. The antiquarian excavators found no evidence for human burial (only animal bones), but this function can be inferred by analogy with other sites.
- The base of the tomb was cut into bedrock, and covered in a layer of soil and clay.
- Petrie recorded a central hole within the roof, from which the tomb was deliberately in-filled with rubble, perhaps as an act of closure. The roof was no longer *in situ* in 1935.
- Contains rare (and very slight) examples of neolithic scratch art (some damaged 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** and the Ness of Brodgar) and these elaborate tombs, a relationship that is also reflected in the plans of the houses and tombs.
- Evidence for the sophisticated and developed nature of early society in Orkney and its technological achievements.
- Two neighbouring settlements have been identified out-with the area in care; Wideford Hill settlement, excavated between 2002-3 at the base of the hill to the north west, and the Brae of Smerquoy on the lower south-western slopes, excavated in 2013-16. Both contained buildings constructed of timber, and of stone which pre-dated the construction of the tomb, strengthening a pattern of association between tombs and settlements in this part of Orkney. Both sites were excavated as part of the Cuween-Wideford Landscape Project; a field-based research project partially funded by HES' predecessor Historic Scotland,

which has significantly enhanced understanding of Neolithic occupation in the Bay of Birth area.

#### Artistic/Architectural Overview

- A particularly good example of neolithic design and fine drystone construction, retaining a part of its original roof. The corbelling throughout is very impressive, and includes some extremely large stones.
- Since the upper body of part of the cairn is lost, the series of internal concentric revetment walls can be readily appreciated. The current stepped profile is a product of 20<sup>th</sup> century consolidation works, and the original cairn configuration is likely to have been more domed.
- Amongst the smallest main chambers of this tomb type.

#### Social Overview

- Not assessed.

#### Spiritual Overview

- Not assessed.

#### Aesthetic Overview

- It would appear that the builders of the tomb consciously chose a conspicuous location. Its original visibility, and inter-visibility with other monuments, notably **Cuween Hill**, is therefore an important aspect in appreciating the landscape setting. However, in its present form, the site is not a particularly imposing landscape feature, scarcely noticeable from a distance but for the change in vegetation within the PIC enclosure.
- As with so many Orkney monuments, the fine drystone construction is particularly pleasing.
- The hillside on which the tomb is sited is rough grazing with excellent views over Wide Firth to other Orkney islands.
- The individual neolithic carvings are of aesthetic interest, and a full survey of the detail, location and condition of the art is due to be undertaken by Dr Antonia Thomas, in order to situate the motifs within the wider context of Neolithic art recorded at sites such as the Ness of Brodgar and **Skara Brae**.

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

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- Social and Spiritual values not assessed.
- Owing to the unscientific nature of the early clearance of this site, and the slight nature of the publication of the 1930s work 40 years after excavation, appreciation of the site's full archaeological significance is compromised.
- There are no scientific dates for this monument (the monument-type as a whole is poorly dated).
- The hole in the roof, as identified by Petrie, is intriguing due to examples of aligned apertures and 'light boxes' in other passage tombs. It is not known whether this served a function prior to its apparent use in the infilling of the Wideford chamber.

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Member 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 example of part of the original corbelled roof of the cairn surviving. Since the upper part of the original cairn is lost, the series of internal concentric revetment walls can be appreciated, providing the opportunity to see and understand these aspects of its internal construction.
- Ongoing archaeological research is revealing evidence for the local community who may have built this tomb, the type of evidence that is lacking in so much of Scotland.
- 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, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray**, Viquoy. Broadly contemporary burial monuments of different type in Orkney include Isbister, **Mid Howe, Knowe of Yarso, Blackhammer, Taversoe Tuick**. Broadly relates to neolithic houses at **Skara Brae**, the Ness of Brodgar and Barnhouse. The excavated settlements at Wideford and Smerquoy are under cultivation and not visible, while the nearby tomb of Quanterness is not publicly accessible. Finds from the site are lost.

Keywords neolithic, chambered tomb, chambered cairn, Maeshowe type, burials, corbelling, concentric walling, deliberate infilling, scratch-art, Orkney