

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC321

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90285);

Taken into State care: 1906 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

STONES OF STENNESS



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.

STONES OF STENNESS

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a neolithic ceremonial enclosure (henge) and stone ring (originally 12 stones), constructed around 3100-2900 cal BC. Nearby the so-called Watch Stone, a tall standing stone, is a part of the same PIC. A contemporaneous settlement at Barnhouse close to the Stones is in the care of Orkney Islands Council. Each discrete PIC area forms part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (WHS).

The henge and stone circle are in an enclosed field of improved pasture. The Watch Stone stands on the roadside at the Bridge of Brodgar, at the South end of the causeway between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- There was lots of antiquarian interest in this site, resulting in a significant number of early illustrations of the site, an invaluable record of the earlier condition of the site.
- 1814 local outcry when farmer starts to pull stones down; early example of local action to protect an ancient monument.
- One of the first sites to be scheduled in the British Isles (1882).
- 1906 - passes to state care and the fallen stones were subsequently re-erected; new legal agreement in 1983 because of legal ambiguities with first. Early 20th-century works involve erection of spurious 'dolmen', now reconfigured, but we remain uncertain about its original form.
- 1999 - Inscribed as part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS, the first archaeological site in Scotland to be designated for its cultural values. Also part of the Brodgar Rural Conservation Area, the only Conservation Area in Scotland designated for its archaeological values.

Archaeological Overview

- Of all the elements of the WHS, this is probably the best understood site in the sense that there were fairly extensive scientific excavations of its interior in 1973-4 and excavations at the nearby Barnhouse settlement have shed considerable light on what is happening in this area and the close inter-relationship between the two sites. The ditches of the henge are likely to retain considerable archaeological potential including, in all likelihood, waterlogged deposits.
- The number of early prehistoric monuments on the narrow strip of land between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, and around the immediate perimeter of these lochs, indicates that this area was a very special place to the prehistoric inhabitants of Orkney.

- Ongoing geophysical survey is highlighting the archaeological potential of area immediately surrounding the PIC.
- At least two neolithic settlements have been identified in the near vicinity so far. This close coincidence of evidence for the domestic and ritual spheres of neolithic life is a truly rare survival. A specific relationship between Stones of Stenness and Barnhouse is suggested by similarities in the layout of the interior features of the Barnhouse Hall and those of Stones of Stenness, and the fact that radiocarbon dating makes it likely that the Stones and the settlement were used at the same time as each other or in immediate sequence to each other.
- There is no recorded excavation in the vicinity of the Watch Stone, although a stone socket was discovered and recorded nearby in about 1930. This shows that the Watch Stone was originally part of a paired setting.
- These monuments were erected in a landscape of open grassland with some cereal cultivation.
- Further stone settings are known to have once existed in the immediate vicinity, including the famous Odin's Stone, to which much local colourful folklore attaches.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The construction of the henge involved digging a rock-cut ditch, an activity that required considerable manpower.
- The form of the stones themselves is of architectural note in that they are very tall and very thin blades of stone i.e. they are structurally very slender and probably at the very limit of structural stability.
- It should be noted that the outer bank of this henge monument was largely destroyed by ploughing; the present form reflects rebuilding in 1985, to the form recorded in 1851, to protect the underlying old ground surface.

Social Overview

- A Community Study that will in part address this issue is in progress as part of a Manchester University PhD by Angie McClanahan, supervised by Dr Siân Jones and funded by Historic Scotland.
- The Stones of Stenness are a much photographed and illustrated icon of Orkney. So well known and powerful is this iconic image that it is often used inappropriately in representing the Neolithic of Scotland as a whole.

Spiritual Overview

- See reference to Community Study above.
- The site is considered to have been built for ritual religious purposes.

Aesthetic Overview

- The monument is carefully sited on a slight prominence on a narrow strip of land between the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, part of a National Scenic Area. The extensive views to and from the site are very striking and atmospheric.
- The angular profile of the carved stones is particularly distinctive (note possibility that this because not all stones correctly re-erected!)
- Stones of Stenness is intervisible with many other upstanding prehistoric monuments, notably key components of the WHS: **Maeshowe, Ring of Brodgar, Barnhouse Stone** and **Watchstone**.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Refer to forthcoming WHS Research Agenda.
- More research is needed into where the standing stones were procured from and how they reached the site.
- The bigger questions relate to understanding the immediate context of the PIC in prehistory, and the later use of the area.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Well preserved (if partly reconstructed), massive stone circle situated amongst a landscape of contemporary and later monuments.
- Speaks of an early and sophisticated society in northern Britain: it is a privilege to have evidence for contemporary and adjacent ritual and settlements sites; it is an added bonus that it appears possible to weave their stories together to present an imaginative and new appreciation of life in early prehistoric times.
- Sited in the heart of neolithic Orkney where there is an outstanding concentration of important early prehistoric monuments.
- Lies in a much designated area for cultural and natural significances; includes being part of a WHS.

Associated Properties

Maeshowe, Ring of Brodgar, Barnhouse Stone and **Watchstone, Skara Brae**. Relevance to other Orkney neolithic chambered tombs (in more general sense, but close proximity to **Unstan**). Ring of Bookan. Brodgar Farm and Barnhouse neolithic settlements, the former as yet uninvestigated. Odin's Stone. Other stones circles and henge monuments in Historic Scotland's care, e.g. **Cairnpapple, Machrie Moor, Calanais, Kilmartin monuments**. Avebury, Stonehenge.

Keywords neolithic, Bronze Age, stone circle, henge, stone setting, burial mounds, Barnhouse village, World Heritage Site, archaeological landscape, quarrying, Orkney.