

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC287

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90092)

Taken into State care: 1933 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CUWEEN HILL CHAMBERED CAIRN



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.

CUWEEN HILL CHAMBERED CAIRN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the turf-covered remains of a now circular neolithic chambered cairn situated within an enclosure on a moorland hillside in the parish of Firth, Orkney Mainland. The tomb was constructed on an artificial terrace. Four cells open off a central chamber that is accessed down a passage.

Visitors enter the totally unilluminated tomb through the original entrance, which had been blocked in antiquity.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- 1901 exploration of tomb.
- 1934 passes into guardianship; presume some unrecorded site clearance around this time.

Archaeological Overview

- One of a small group of Maeshowe-type cairns found in Orkney, dated by analogy with other similar monuments to around 3000-2400 cal BC.
- Evidence for complex burial rites within tombs that have been used over many years. The presence of 24 small dog skulls is unique, and may imply that the dog was a symbol or totem for the local community. (Note concentration of sea-eagle bones at another tomb, Isbister).
- Evidence for the sophisticated and developed nature of early society in Orkney and its technological achievements.
- Contains rare (and very slight) examples of neolithic scratch art. Such evidence is important because it reinforces the relationship between Grooved Ware settlements (such as Skara Brae) and these elaborate tombs, a relationship that is also reflected in the plans of the houses and tombs.
- A twig-rune is a modern addition, apparently copying one in Maeshowe. Unlike other publicly accessible unsupervised chambered tombs the interior of this monument has scarcely been vandalised by modern graffiti, probably because there is no light (other than by torch) within the tomb. This also means that there is very little of the green algal growth that grows in other tombs in state care.
- Recent excavations downhill from the tomb have revealed a settlement, part of which was probably contemporary with use of the tomb.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- An exceptionally good example of neolithic design with particularly fine stonework construction. One of the cell roofs may be original; otherwise all walls and corbelled roofs have survived to a considerable height. One of smallest main chambers of this tomb type. Parts of the outer portion of the passage have been reconstructed.

Social Overview

To be assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- Attests to a belief in an afterlife 5000 years ago. If the dog remains were deposited by people rather than reflecting animal activity they suggest that animals also may have been thought to have an afterlife.
- Secondary burials at the west side of the cairn may reflect a continued reverence for the site.

Aesthetic Overview

- The builders of the tomb consciously chose a conspicuous location. Its visibility, and inter-visibility with other monuments, notably **Widford**, is therefore an important aspect in appreciating the landscape setting.
- As with so many Orkney monuments, the fine flagstone construction is particularly pleasing.
- The hillside on which the tomb is sited is pleasant rough grazing with excellent views over Wide Firth to other Orkney islands.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Social and spiritual values not assessed.
- Understanding of the site's full archaeological significance is compromised due to the historic methods of excavation.
- There are no scientific dates for this monument
- Very little is known of the archaeology in the immediate vicinity of the tomb, although neolithic settlement has been discovered a short distance away as part of a Historic Scotland sponsored study in the Cuween-Widford area that seeks to explore the context of such monuments. There are also neolithic settlements within a few hundred metres of the Widford and Quanterness tombs and the settlement at Barnhouse is close to the contemporaneous Stones of Stenness. This fascinating apparent correlation between settlements, tombs and the stone circle promises to allow a greater understanding of life in Orkney 5000 years ago than is currently possible in most other parts of Europe, and is of international significance.

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.
- Ongoing archaeological research is revealing evidence for the local community who may have built this tomb.
- Evidence for complex, apparently totemic, burial rites.
- Nearly half the 12 known Maeshowe-type tombs are in state care. Doubts about the relevance of this classic categorisation, their great variety,

exceptionally fine architecture, and their apparent association with contemporaneous nearby settlement all serve to emphasise the importance of these monuments individually and as a 'group'.

Associated Properties

Wideford, Maeshowe, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray South, Isbister, Vinguoy; also neolithic tombs at **Midhowe, Knowe of Yarso, Blackhammer, Taversöe Tuick**. Relates to neolithic houses at **Skara Brae** and Barnhouse. The excavated settlement at Cuween is under cultivation, although in good lighting conditions and with a little guidance its location can be seen from the tomb. Unfortunately the finds from the excavated site have been misplaced.

Keywords neolithic, chambered tomb, Maeshowe-type, corbelling, burials, dogs, totems, scratch-art, runic inscription