

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC237

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90219)

Taken into State care: 1934 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

MID HOWE 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.

MID HOWE CHAMBERED CAIRN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Alternative Spelling: Midhowe.

The monument comprises a neolithic chambered cairn used for communal burial. It falls into a broad tradition of stone-built chambered cairns which started in Scotland in the 4th millennium BC. A short passage leads to a long interior divided by pairs of upright stone slabs into 12 compartments, some with low stone benches. The remains of at least 25 human skeletons were found, mostly lying on these benches, as well as some pottery, worked flint and animal bones. Walls, perhaps forming an enclosure, spring from the NE and SE corners of the cairn. The original roof does not survive since it had collapsed *in situ*. Secondary use of the site has been recognised but little understood.

The tomb was excavated in the early 1930s and enclosed shortly afterwards within a stone-built 'hangar' within which visitors can walk around and over the tomb. Situated on the south coast of the island of Rousay, this large cairn is accessed across steep fields from the road on the hillside above, or from the Westness Heritage Walk, which runs along the coast.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- One of a series of important prehistoric monuments excavated in the 1930s by Graham Callander (Director of National Museum of Antiquities) and Walter Grant (influential rich local antiquarian and owner of the Trumland Estate, who financed the excavation and conservation of many archaeological sites on Rousay). Following their excavations in 1932-3, it subsequently passed to state care in 1934, with the excavations completed by the state.

Archaeological Overview

- Human burials were found to be either crouched (8 relatively complete examples were placed with their backs to the chamber walls), or disarticulated bones that had been gathered together to form a heap. Many were concentrated on the 'bench' or 'shelf' –like features found in the east-side stalls of cells 5-11. These remains provide important evidence for the rituals associated with the treatment of the dead at such burial places over extended periods of time. It is possible that the different treatments represented separate phases in the burial process; bodies may have been laid on the benches to deflesh, before being relocated and reorganised at a later date.
- By analogy with other sites, this tomb likely dates to between 3500 and 2500 BC. Radiocarbon analysis of two human skulls produced dates of 3415-3365 cal BC and 3370-3320 cal BC respectively.
- A number of artefacts were recovered during excavation. These included pottery, hammerstones and a flint knife, plus a variety of animal bone including cattle, sheep, various birds and a heap of limpet shell.
- The passage appeared to have been deliberately blocked when the tomb went out of use.
- Secondary activity included modification of the upper levels of the northernmost end, and apparent re-entry to the chamber.

- The two low walls springing from the north and east corners of the cairn are little understood, and their purpose and date remain unknown.
- This type of cairn is found in north and west Scotland, but the greatest density is here on Rousay. It is one of sixteen known chambered cairns on the island (not all are publically accessible), an exceptionally high concentration of such monuments.
- Parallels are often drawn between stalled cairns and the houses at **Knap of Howar** on Papa Westray, due to their similar shape and subdivision by upright slabs; the inference being that these tombs were built as houses for the dead. However, recent excavations elsewhere on Orkney seem to support the contemporaneity of stalled cairns with early neolithic timber houses, which appear to predate the 'classic' linear stone houses.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- A particularly large and well-preserved example of what archaeologists call the 'Orkney-Cromarty' type of chambered cairn: a rectangular cairn with stalled chambers.
- No original roofs of this type of tomb survive, but the walls here have survived to a considerable height (up to 2.5m in the centre).
- The external façade of the cairn includes stonework arranged in a herringbone fashion. Instances of such decorative features in the construction of neolithic chambered tombs are relatively rare.
- There is evidence for the dressing of the edges of the upright slabs that divide the stalls, an early instance of working of shaping of stone for architectural purposes.
- One of a group of excavated Orcadian monuments that was covered in the 1930s. In this instance, and exceptionally, an imposing stone hanger was built to enclose the whole cairn. The approach to the conservation of these monuments, techniques involved and subsequent management problems arising from this is of interest in terms of development of ideas of conservation history; so too the unusual management issues that arise from this in the present through the greening of the interiors of the monuments.

Social Overview

- Not formally assessed, but the monument forms part of the Westness Heritage Walk, a guided footpath along a section of coast that embraces a number of prehistoric and Norse archaeological sites. As such, this is one of a number of monuments recognised as of importance by the local community.

Spiritual Overview

Not known.

Aesthetic Overview

- The decorative stonework is of interest because of its resonances with other neolithic art and pottery decoration.
- The 'hangar' and neighbouring Iron Age broch have a significant visual presence, particularly from the road above. From outside the hangar, exceptional views of the coastline and islands beyond can be enjoyed.
- Gantries enable visitors to view the visually striking layout and interior of the cairn from above.

- Arguably the interior of the tomb is rather marred by the greening effect of algae, a direct product of how the site was conserved in the 20th century.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- There are very limited scientific dates for this monument and stalled cairns in general.
- Nothing is known of activity beyond the outer wall of the cairn. The walls projecting from the cairn are particularly significant since they may enclose an area where rituals or other associated activities took place. These have not been scientifically investigated.
- Was stone from the cairn used in the construction of the neighbouring broch, or was the ready supply of stone from the shore utilised? 1934 excavation report from Mid Howe Broch notes incorporation of two stones decorated with cup-and-ring marks. No Neolithic art has as yet been identified within Mid Howe chambered cairn.
- Building upon the 1985 work by D. Reynolds and G. Ritchie, a history of Walter Grant (and his role in Orcadian archaeology including the various monuments now in state care), would enhance appreciation of recent archaeological history of site and its local social significance.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- A very well preserved, large neolithic tomb of a distinctive form that has parallels in some contemporary neolithic domestic architecture.
- Particularly large cairn of this type.
- Evidence for burials recovered from this site provides particularly good evidence for a sequence of events which appear to involve placing the dead in a crouched position on shelves, allowing their decomposition and then rearranging the bones.
- Decorative stonework is a relatively rare feature of such monuments.
- One of a high concentration of neolithic tombs sited on Rousay. The most obvious indicator of neolithic settlement in most parts of Scotland is its burial architecture and this density of monuments and their relationship to each other is particularly important for understanding how neolithic peoples inhabited, organised and shared the landscape and its resources.
- One of a string of excavated chambered cairns in the care of Historic Environment Scotland on the south side of Rousay.
- One of a series of important prehistoric monuments excavated in the 1930s by Graham Callander and Walter Grant.

Associated Properties

Chambered Cairns of **Knowe of Yarso, Blackhammer** (both with decorative stonework), **Knowe of Unstan, Taversoe Tuick**, Isbister. Knowe of Rowiegar and Ramsay (for similar scale cairns). Broadly contemporary burial monuments of different type in Orkney include **Maeshowe, Wideford Hill, Cuween Hill, Quoyness, Holm of Papa Westray, Wideford** and the **Dwarfie Stane**. For parallel neolithic house forms, **Knap of Howar**, Braes of Ha'Breck. Immediate proximity to **Mid Howe Broch**, a later prehistoric settlement. Finds from the

excavations, including skeletal remains, are in the National Museums of Scotland and University of Aberdeen.

Keywords neolithic, chambered cairn, Orkney-Cromarty (stalled)-type, burials, house, decorative stonework.