



Kelp Making in Stronsay
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I often think that visitors walking around the Stronsay shores must wonder what the circular hollows above the beach could have been in days gone by. So, I will try to explain why they are there.

In the 19th century, kelp making was a big industry in Orkney and the north of Scotland. First the seaweed tangles had to be gathered from the seashore and laid upon raised stones to be dried thoroughly. This was usually done in the winter when a rough sea had driven the tangles ashore. Then, in early summer, the hollows were lined with stones along the edge, with a row of raised stones in the middle for a vent. The dried seaweed was then placed on the stones and set alight, as it was important to get the tangles burning fiercely. It took a long while to get a substantial amount of white ash, which went into a hot, sticky, hard mess and left to cool down before it could be moved. Once it was cold, it was then broken into clumps and put in sacks and weighed so everyone knew how much they had earned. As was usual in those days, the hard worker got the least, but it was extra money much needed, as wages were not high for farm workers, etc.

The kelp was shipped, I think, ending down in England being used in soap, glass, iodine, etc. This industry went on till round about 1928-1930. The building down on the shore at Housebay was called the kelp store so that meant the kelp made around Housebay shores was stored there--meaning, the owner of Housebay got a share in the selling. This would have been the same all over the island wherever the tangles came ashore.

My mother was known to have been very good at keeping her fire going, burning the tangles, and my sister often spoke about all the young ones enjoying helping to carry the dry seaweed and running through the kelp reek (smoke).