

**Excavations at Links House, Stronsay
March 2008: Some questions, some
answers and a lot more thinking to do!**

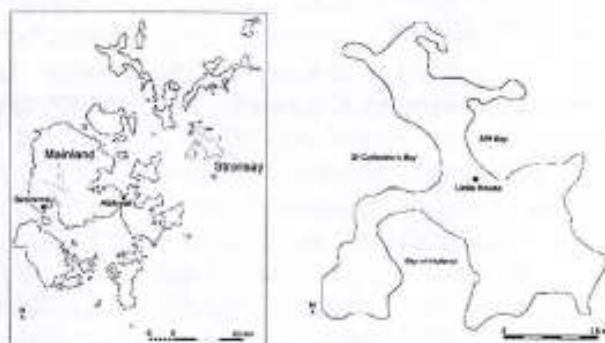
What follows is an initial report of the excavations undertaken at Links House, Stronsay in March 2008 - the site of possible early Mesolithic activity.

First discovered in 2007, during field walking undertaken as part of the Stronsay Archaeological Survey (Woodward, 2007), this project was instigated as a result of dissertation research which I undertook for the MA in Archaeological Practice at Orkney College during 2006/2007, with a bursary from the Orkney Archaeological Trust. Although aware of the scatters existence immediately after field walking, the potential of the site was not fully realised until during the post excavation process. When the flint assemblage was being catalogued, it appeared as something quite different to what had generally been collected elsewhere in Stronsay during the project. The assemblage included two tanged points, a variety of large blades and knapping debitage. Collectively over 60 pieces of worked flint had been collected and it all came from a fairly discrete location within the field. Initial thoughts were that this collection may represent something quite early especially given typological parallels with Late Upper Palaeolithic/Early Mesolithic (10 - 12,000 years BP) material from Scandinavia and NW Germany which the Links House flints seemed to have (Ballin and Saville, 2003). This was a tantalising prospect and has created many captivating questions concerning the nature of the first human inhabitants of Orkney.

The site and archaeological background

Stronsay lies approximately 12 kilometres north of Mull Head, East Mainland. The island is approximately 11 kilometres long by 9 kilometres wide and has a lengthy and complex coastline. The island's coast is deeply cut by large bays which create the impression of three distinctive peninsulas, and gives Stronsay a highly irregular shape.

The island itself is fertile and low lying, with its highest point being 76 metres above sea level. The site of Links House is located on the E side of the island, in a field adjacent to Links House farmsteading.



**General location map of Stronsay and the
site of Links House**

There is a paucity of evidence relating to a pre-Neolithic Orkney and no clear evidence in Orkney or within Scotland, to suggest human occupation or activity before the end of the last period of glaciations, circa 8050 BC (Ashmore et al, 2000). For sometime, Orkney had been regarded as having little potential for the study of this period (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1981) and the only evidence for the Mesolithic consisted of a handful of the diagnostic artefacts known as microliths, that had been collected in several different fieldwork projects (Wickham Jones and Firth, 2000). Most recently however, during the excavation of a Bronze Age burial cairn at Long Howe, Tankerness, directed by Dr. Jane Downes, Orkney College and Caroline Wickham Jones (Card et al, 2004; Robertson and Woodward, 2008), examples of microliths and a fragment of a carbonised hazelnut shell were produced from material comprising the cairn and deposits beneath it. The fragments of the hazelnut shell were C14 dated, giving a result of 7900 ± 35 BP (6820-6660 BC, OxCal v.3.10), which has subsequently pushed back the earliest dated evidence for human settlement in Orkney by three thousand years. However, this excavation was unable to produce any in-situ evidence for the period and it was

acknowledged that it was likely the Mesolithic site itself was probably destroyed during the construction of the cairn in the Bronze Age (Robertson & Woodward, 2008). Is this what is all to be expected of the nature of Mesolithic remains in Orkney and what could Links House contribute to the picture?

The tanged flint points discovered during field walking at Links House in 2007, are an addition to several other examples of the artefact that have been discovered in a variety of locations across Scotland. These locations include Sheildaig, Loch Torridon, Wester Ross (Clarke, 1987; Walker 1973); Balevullin, Tiree (Edwards and Mithen, 1995:351); Brodgar, Stenness, Orkney; Millfield, Stronsay, Orkney (Livens, 1956) and Bridgend, Islay (Morrison and Bonsall, 1989). These artefacts are considered relatively rare and as of yet, none have been discovered within a stratified prehistoric context and few have any reliable provenance. They are however continued to be tentatively attributed to the Late Upper Palaeolithic/Early Mesolithic.

The occurrence of the tanged points within the flint scatter collected at Links House, and the suggestion that the other pieces of the assemblage may also be associated or contemporary, offered a unique opportunity to address possibly the earliest prehistoric evidence in Orkney. The significance of this assemblage may also be strengthened by its geographical association to another example discovered in the 1920's at Millfield Farm, Stronsay (Livens, 1956). This example was found within 2.5km of Links House but is now untraceable. Millfield was excavated by Caroline Wickham-Jones (1993) but these excavations did not produce any further diagnostic flint material; it was concluded that Millfield may well have been a more extensive prehistoric site, but that it had been largely destroyed through time. Could the Millfield and Links House examples possibly be connected and would this pattern of site destruction be followed at Links House?

Aims and Results

The Late Upper Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic periods are discussed as having populations who were highly mobile and transient by nature, this results in the evidence for them being particularly ephemeral and subtle. Taking this into account and coupled with the prospect of continued agricultural practice at the site, the excavation location at Links House was deemed to be at significant risk, especially from further damage by ploughing.

The aims of the project were to record and characterise the nature of the site and undertake further artefact collection prior to the next season of agricultural activity taking place. These aims were fulfilled by the application of a geophysical survey by Dr.Susan Ovenden of Orkney College Geophysics Unit; initial field walking prior to any ground breaking excavation and targeted test pitting. A total area of 60m square was surveyed which was located in the vicinity of the flint scatter discovered in 2007.

The condition of the site prior to work beginning was very challenging not only for the excavation but also the geophysical survey and general on site logistics. The sheer volume of surface water and the heavily silted and waterlogged nature of the site, coupled with extremely poor weather conditions throughout the excavation, made working conditions quite unfeasible and difficult at times – progress was often tailored to practical conditions as a necessity.

The results of the combined methodologies of geophysical survey, field walking and targeted test pitting at Links House has however allowed the identification of two areas of possible Mesolithic activity. The results of the geophysical survey showed several areas of responses which were proven through test pitting to be indicative of modern interference, in the form of either Fe objects lying directly in the upper plough soil or in some circumstances, a series of modern field drains. The initial field walking prior to ground breaking excavation

suggested two particularly dense scatters of material in two separate areas of the site and in total over one thousand pieces of flint were collected coming both from the surface collection but also from within the circa 8,700 litres of soil samples that were wet sieved during the two weeks.

Test pitting allowed the location of two in situ, negative features to be discovered, interpreted as possibly the bases of post holes. These were left as scoops into the natural glacial till and were heavily truncated by ploughing, but interestingly they were found in test pits opened in close relation to the densities of surface flint. This form of evidence is indicative of the Mesolithic elsewhere in Scotland and Britain and in relation to Links House, they are important as they show that such remains may still be left preserved, suggesting potential for the discovery of further related features such as possible evidence of fires or pits at the site. So what next?

Conclusions and future work

The first indications of the flint assemblage collected during the excavation suggest a Mesolithic date for the site, this is however a suggestion in advance of dating evidence being available and is based upon lithic typologies. If this is the case, Links House may well represent the earliest and largest in situ evidence for the Mesolithic period in Orkney. The findings of the excavations were positive, but the actual nature and true extents of Mesolithic activity at the site were not able to be totally examined and confirmed by these first stages, and significantly the presence of the tanged points continues to lie in ambiguity.

The archaeological remains found within the assessment area are considered to be capable of supporting a more detailed characterisation through further field walking, survey and excavation and it is intended that further field walking shall take place immediately after this season's ploughing has occurred. In the future it is thought a larger scale excavation will take place, specifically over the two locations of

possible post holes, this in order to examine their apparent natures and the relationships they may share with the surface flint concentrations. It is also intended that further test pitting will be undertaken in areas adjacent to the current site in order to address the potential of further archaeological remains in the vicinity. Such a project would work in tandem with a proposed landscape characterisation programme which has initially been begun on a peat deposit, located approximately 200m from the site which can be seen eroding out of the beach cliff at Mill Bay. Professor Ian Simpson of the University of Stirling has begun work on this, obtaining samples for soil micromorphology and Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating on a possible old land surface found beneath the peat deposit. It is hoped that future work shall also begin a coring programme between this peat deposit and the site itself, to examine the extent of the peat deposit inland and its relationship to the site. Could the site be some sort of temporary occupation on the shores of a large loch now drained? It would also be an interesting location for collaboration with the current research being undertaken into sea level changes in Orkney through prehistory (Wickham-Jones and Dawson, 2008). Links House certainly offers many opportunities for future research and not least it shall be the basis of my proposed future PhD research!

The 2008 excavations at Links House were funded by Historic Scotland, Orkney Islands Council and facilitated by the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology (ORCA) at Orkney College UHI. They occurred over twelve days between March 3rd and 15th and were directed by myself Naomi Woodward. Many thanks are directed to the landowners Mr and Mrs Proudman and the excavation team: Dan Lee, Rebecca Enlander, Jakob Kainz, Dave McNicol and Jim O'Brien. Thank you also for the support, advice and consultation to Torben Ballin, Nick Card, Jane Downes, Julie Gibson, Ian Simpson and Caroline Wickham-Jones.

References.

- Ashmore, P.J.; Cook, G.T and Harkness, D.D. 2000 'A radiocarbon database for Scottish archaeological samples' *Radiocarbon* 42(1): 41-48.
- Ballin, T.B. and Saville, A 2003 'An Ahrensburgian-type tanged point from Shieldaig, Wester Ross, Scotland and its implications' *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 22(2): 115-131.
- Card, N, Downes, J, Murray, D and Sharman, P 2004 *Mine Howe and Long Howe, Tankerness, Orkney Excavation 2004*, p64-68, unpublished report for Historic Scotland held in the Orkney SMR.
- Clarke, A. 1987. 'Sheildaig and Redpoint' in Ballantyne, C.K. and Sutherland, D.G *Wester Ross: Field Guide*. Cambridge: Quarternary Research association, 142 – 143.
- Edwards, K.J. and Mithen, S. 1995. 'The colonization of the Hebridean Island of Western Scotland: evidence from the palynological and archaeological records' *World Archaeology* 26(3): 348 -365.
- Livens, R. 1956. 'Three Tanged Flint Points from Scotland.' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries Scotland* 89:438-443.
- Morrison, A and Bonsall, C. 1989. 'The early Post-Glacial settlement in Scotland: a review' in Bonsall, C. (Ed) 1989. *The Mesolithic in Europe. Papers presented at the third international symposium, Edinburgh, 1985* Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd, 134 – 142.
- Ritchie, G. and Ritchie, A. 1981. *Scotland: archaeology and early history* Thames and Hudson.
- Robertson, J. and Woodward, N. 2007. *Excavations at Long Howe, Tankerness, Orkney 2008*. Data Structure Report for Orkney Islands Council, Society of Antiquarians of London, Society of Antiquarians of Scotland and Orkney College.
- Walker, M. 1973. *Archaeological excavation of a microlithic assemblage at Sheildaig, Wester Ross, Scotland*. 24/iii/73-6/iv/73: preliminary report (unpublished typescript held at the NMRS, Edinburgh).
- Wickham-Jones, C.R. 1993 'Millfield Stronsay (Stronsay Parish)' *DES* 1993
- Wickham-Jones, C.R. and Firth, C.R. 2000 'Mesolithic settlement of northern Scotland: first results of fieldwork in Caithness and Orkney' in Young, R. (Ed) 2000 *Mesolithic Lifeways: Current Research from Britain and Ireland*. Leicester Archaeology Monographs No.7.
- Wickham-Jones, C.R. and Dawson, S. 2008 *Submerged Landscape of Orkney Interim Report March 2008*.
- Woodward, NL 2007. *Stronsay Archaeological Survey 2007* Data Structure Report for Orkney Islands Council.