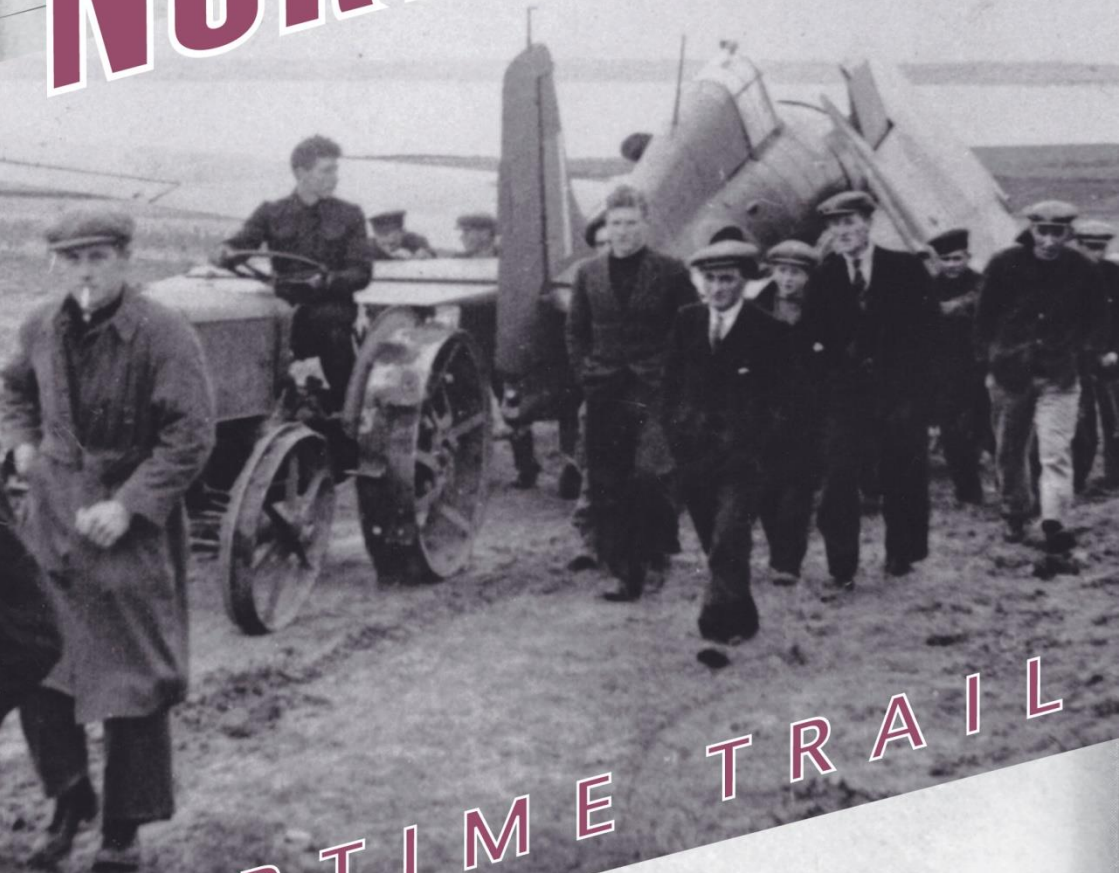




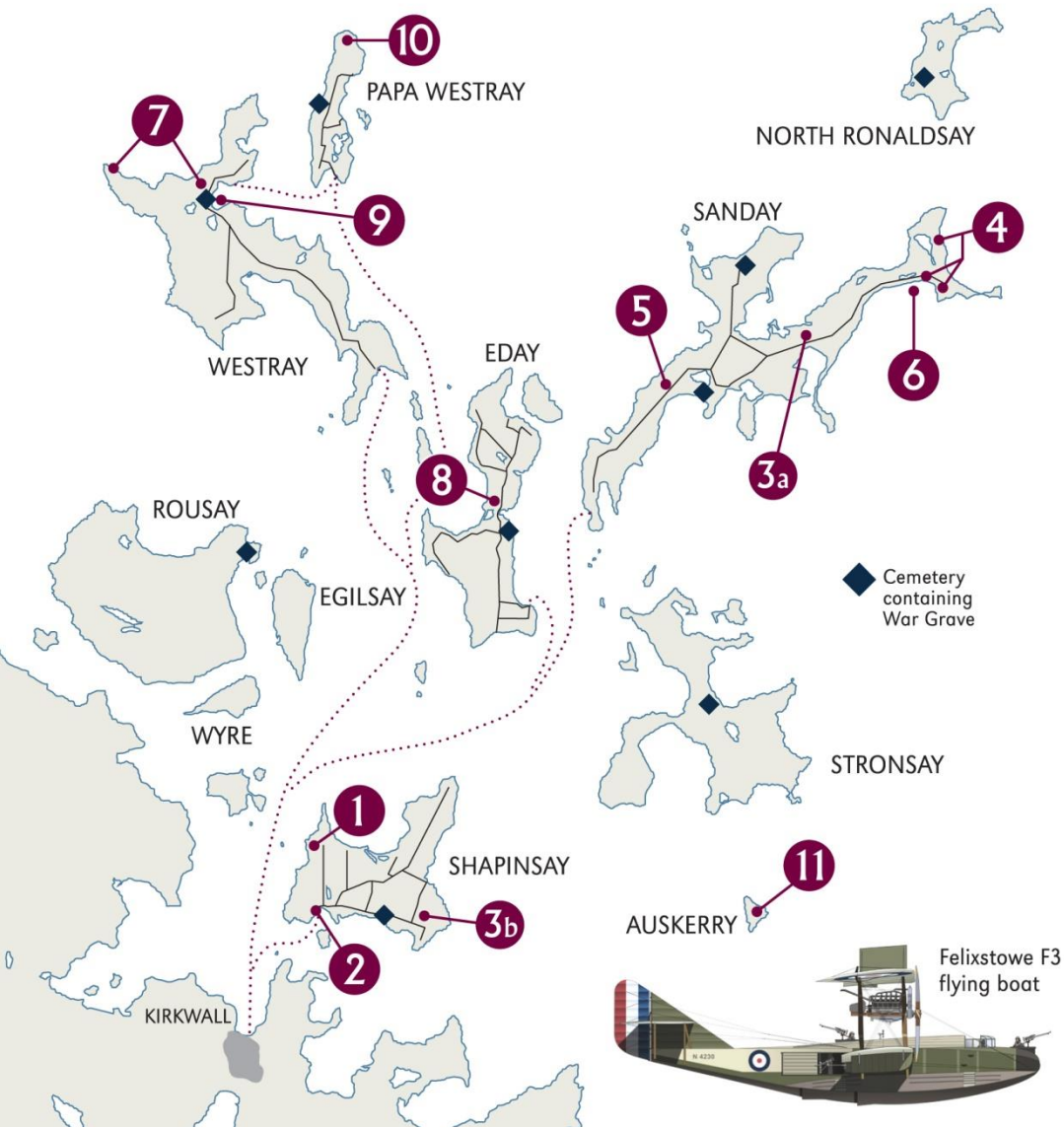
Nº5

# NORTH ISLES



# WARTIME TRAIL





**Navigating the Digital Leaflet:** 1 Click on the numbers on the map page to jump to the site entries.

Click on this icon to jump back to the map from each site entry.

Click on underlined titles on the back page for web links.

RAF Airspeed Oxford photographed by George Mainland, lighthouse keeper, Auskerry.

Orkney Library & Archive L2168/4




# Small Islands with Big Stories

War, and the threat of war, has profoundly affected the physical and social landscape of the Orkney Islands. The sheltered natural harbour of Scapa Flow was the Royal Navy's main fleet base during both World Wars, its strategic importance being largely due to its location between the North Sea and North Atlantic Ocean. The inadequacy of pre-war defensive measures designed to protect the Fleet at Scapa Flow were shown shortly after the outbreak of WW2 when HMS *Royal Oak* was sunk at anchor in October 1939 and air raids seriously damaged other warships. Consequently, the islands rapidly became one of the most heavily defended and militarised parts of the UK.

Across Orkney, homes, hotels and farmland were requisitioned and restrictions on civilian liberties imposed. In WW2, the resident population of 22,000 islanders was outnumbered by the presence of up to 40,000 military personnel. Although military activity focused around Scapa Flow, the North Isles did not escape the reach of this global conflict. Physical traces of military installations and activity remain engraved in their landscapes; tales of action, accident and adversity prevail through

## 1 Castle and Galtness Coast Artillery Batteries

Core path SH1. Balfour to Salt Ness (10km return). Both of these sites date from WW2. Castle Battery was originally used to cover the anchorage of the contraband control area where the identity, intentions and cargo of merchant shipping was checked. It also controlled a minefield in Gairsay Sound. Galtness, along with Wasswick Battery in Rendall, would have protected the expanse of Wide Firth and the approach to Kirkwall harbour against seaborne attacks.

After 3.9km the path passes the two open-top gun emplacements of Castle Battery; the one furthest from the path has an adjacent magazine and crew shelter, with the concrete pillar for the rangefinder / director just beyond (once housed in a wooden hut). In the fields either side of the path are the foundations for the accommodation camp that served both sites. Next is an engine (generator) house, a Nissen hut reinforced with concrete; there is another in the field 130m to the SW. At the end of path is Galtness Battery with its director tower, covered gun emplacement, magazine and crew shelter. There are four searchlight emplacements along the shoreline, though coastal erosion is undermining them (KEEP CLEAR). 

Galtness Coast Battery



shared memories. Family losses are found etched on memorials and tombstones. On every island and in each community it is possible to find sites and stories that catalogue wartime events that brought dramatic changes to island life.

At the end of hostilities most of the armed services personnel departed as military facilities were downgraded. As the installations were dismantled, many of the timber huts were repurposed and relocated, serving the North Isles as community centres, halls, shops and hostels, some of which are still in use today. The remaining earthworks, concrete structures and repurposed buildings have become enduring, albeit accidental, monuments to the military occupation, some of which might last as long as the Neolithic sites for which Orkney is better known.



A Sunderland flying boat stranded off Mull Head, Deerness on 6th July 1944 after a double engine failure and losing one of its floats. It is about to be towed to RNAS Hatston by one of two 67 foot Thornycroft HSLs based in Shapinsay. Note the aircrew perched on the wing to keep it upright!

Photo: Shapinsay Heritage Centre

## 2 No.2 Air-Sea Rescue Unit, Shapinsay

The RAF set up an air-sea rescue base here in 1941 with the crews for two high-speed launches (HSL) billeted in a Nissen hut just behind the gatehouse of Balfour Castle. During WW2, RAF air-sea rescue crews are believed to have saved 13,269 lives worldwide. [↑](#)

## 3a Decoy control buildings. Plain of Fidge, Sanday and Cot-on-Hill, Shapinsay

3b During WW2 there was an extensive programme of decoy construction throughout the UK, designed to fool enemy aircraft into believing that they were attacking 'real' targets. Daytime raiders were misled by dummy military installations such as fake runways, factories and encampments along with wooden aircraft and vehicles; the so called 'K' sites. Night raiders were presented with 'Q' sites that had lighting to imitate features such as airfields, harbours, buildings and roads along with reservoirs of flammable liquid that could be ignited to simulate a target under attack. Seven decoy sites were laid out in Orkney, all of which were type Q.

The Plain of Fidge decoy control building is on the roadside by Cata Sand. Built to a standard design, it has an entrance area and a room to either side; one contained the generator which supplied power for the lights, the other acted as a crew room, look-out and air-raid shelter. Additional protection was provided by layers of soil. There are identical remains at Cot-on-Hill, Shapinsay NGR HY 522 169. Both sites were designed to imitate airstrips. [↑](#)

## 4 RAF Whale Head Chain Home (CH) Radar Station, Remote Reserve and camp, Sanday

Core path SA3. Following the development of radar in the 1930s, the Air Ministry began building CH stations around the UK coastline. These were designed to provide long-range early warning of air attack. RAF Whale Head became operational in March 1942 and was defended by a minefield and four light anti-aircraft positions. It was attacked in air-raids during March and June 1941 whilst still under construction. There are three distinct groups of buildings; the main station at Lopness, the remote reserve at Lettan and the camp at Langamay.

The main station is in farmland near Lopness and can only be viewed from a distance; a good viewpoint is by the brick-built main power station beside the road on core path SA3 at NGR HY 493 723. From here you can see three large reinforced concrete buildings that were once protected with earth banking.

Further north, at Lettan, are the impressive remains of the remote reserve station. The building next to the farm is the reserve transmitter block with adjacent remains of a tower base; 200m further north is the receiver block also with a tower base. On the east side of the road is the standby power station.

At Langamay, above Lopness beach, is the site of an accommodation camp that included a cinema, canteen, air-raid shelters and timber huts. The brick building with a reinforced concrete roof standing alone in a field is a hardened sleeping shelter. The outline of the camp and hut-foundations are readily seen on satellite imagery, as are the two outfall sewers that cross the beach.



◀ RAF Whale Head main power station.

▼ RAF Whale Head transmitter block.  
Two 107m tall steel towers once stood nearby, clearly visible in the photograph on the back page.

Photo: Ian Collins 2024



Photo: Ian Collins 2024



Photo: Ian Collins 2024



RAF Whale Head standby power station (left). The receiver block (distant, right) had two 73m timber towers nearby.

## 5 Fea Hill (VHF) Direction Finder (D/F) station, Sanday

Beside the B9070 at NGR HY 643 398 is the garage-like 'Power House' for a VHF D/F station, one of three 'Fixers' set up in Orkney during 1941 to enable the accurate positioning of friendly aircraft by triangulation. On the brow of the hill is 'a Rest Hut' for the crew; beyond that (not visible from the road) is a brick-built octagonal wall that shielded the equipment and operator from bomb blasts and once supported a timber tower to protect the rotatable receiver antenna from the weather. The other Orkney stations are at Warthill (Holm) and Cauldhame (Birsay); the remains of similar installations can be seen across the UK. [↑](#)

The octagonal blast-wall and antenna tower of the 'fixer' station at Cauldhame, Birsay in 1956. [▲](#)

Fea Hill, the octagonal blast-wall in 2024. [▶](#)



Photo courtesy of the Moor family and Tommy Matches



Photo: Ian Brown

## 6 Lopness beach, Sanday Wreck of the German destroyer SMS B98

Information board, picnic spot, beach and car-park. Best seen at a low tide. The impounded SMS *B98* was being towed from Scapa Flow to Rosyth for scrapping when she broke loose in stormy weather and was stranded here in February 1920. Most of the ship has been salvaged, though the two steam turbines, drive shafts and parts of the boilers remain visible at low tide. [↑](#)



The *B98* stranded at Lopness. Date unknown; probably early 1920's.

Photo: Collection of Roderick Thorne

## 7 Westray Home Guard and look-outs


The Westray Heritage Centre in Pierowall was opened in 1995 (see back page for information). Dating from c.1853, it was originally a schoolroom. During WW1 it was commandeered to house airmen of the balloon-defence base, created for the protection of the seaplane station. It then served as a village hall until WW2 when it became HQ of Westray Home Guard. Look-out posts were set up at Noup Head lighthouse (core path W2) and in the requisitioned front rooms of islanders' homes. At the end of WW2 the hall was used for 'Welcome Home' parties and dances. [↑](#)




Photo: Orkney Library & Archive L1779-4

Westray Home Guard during WW2.

## 8 Eday Hostel

The hostel on Eday is a prime example of a military hut that was sold, moved and repurposed following the end of WW2. The local story is that the hut came from Hoy, and it seems likely that it once formed a part of a canteen at the Lyness naval base. 

## 9 RAF Pierowall Seaplane Station

Core path W3. During 1917-1918 the RAF operated a variety of seaplanes from Pierowall Bay, notably the twin-engine Felixstowe F3 flying boats (below left). Their main role was to hunt for German U-boats (submarines). Personnel were billeted in homes including Pierowall Cottage, opposite the landing stage. 


Seaplanes moored at the Bay of Pierowall in WW1.  
In the foreground are a Short Type 320 (left) and Sopwith Baby (centre).



Photo: Orkney Library & Archive RHR 6389


## 10 Training for D-Day: Naval shell craters, North Hill, Papa Westray

Core paths PW1 & PW2. *The RSPB reserve at North Hill is protected during the bird breeding season (April-August) when access is restricted to the coastal footpath shown on an information board at the entrance to the site; craters are easily seen from the path.*

As part of the preparations for the Normandy landings of June 1944, the Navy used North Hill for bombardment practice. Dummy vehicles, trenches and gun emplacements imitating the German Atlantic Wall defences were constructed to provide realistic targets. During these exercises, residents were moved from this part of the island; some stayed with relatives, others were given temporary accommodation in the school hall. The many hundreds of shells that landed here have left a landscape peppered with craters that are now home for a wide variety of plants and insects. 

## 11 Auskerry

In WW1 this small island was the site of a makeshift gun emplacement manned by the Royal Navy. During WW2 the lighthouse was attacked by the Luftwaffe leaving two craters, one of which can still be seen; this incident led to the installation of two Hotchkiss anti-aircraft guns for use by the lighthouse keepers. The gun mountings remain in place.

On the 16th December 1943 the pilot of an Airspeed Oxford was on a training flight from RAF Fraserburgh when he became disorientated in poor weather conditions and ran out of fuel, leading to an emergency landing on the only visible land, the island of Auskerry. He had to spend Christmas as a guest of the lighthouse keepers as the adverse weather prevented his rescue. 



▲ Andrew Wilson's yawl, *Lizzie*, with the towers of RAF Whale Head behind. Date unknown but likely post WW2, the towers were dismantled in 1954.

Photo: Horne Photographic Archive HPA102 Courtesy of Sanday Heritage Centre

This leaflet is the companion to the **Lyness, Hoy & Walls, Eastern Defences** and **West Mainland and Graemsay** Wartime Trails. It offers an introduction to a few of the many wartime archaeological sites across the North Isles.

The selected sites are generally visible from public roads or paths.

Path numbers refer to the Orkney Core Paths plan; details and maps can be downloaded from: [www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/C/Core-Paths.htm](http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Service-Directory/C/Core-Paths.htm)

**PLEASE TAKE CARE**, respect property, livestock and the hazards of ruinous buildings by not entering the sites unless otherwise indicated; many have open drops and pits.

**North Hill RSPB Reserve Papa Westray**: The RSPB Scotland warden lives on the island during the spring and summer months. Information on guided walks and on access in the breeding season is available from the RSPB's office 01856 850176

Exhibits and visits relating to the wartime heritage of Orkney:

**Scapa Flow Museum**, Lyness, Hoy 01856 791300 [www.orkneymuseums.co.uk](http://www.orkneymuseums.co.uk)

**Shapinsay Heritage Centre**, Balfour Village [www.shapinsayheritage.co.uk](http://www.shapinsayheritage.co.uk)

**Sanday Heritage Centre**, Lady Village 01857 668332 or 01857 600724

**The Orkney Museum**, Kirkwall 01856 873191 [www.orkneymuseums.co.uk](http://www.orkneymuseums.co.uk)

**Orkney Wireless Museum**, Kirkwall 01856 871400

**Westray Heritage Centre**, Pierowall 01857 677414

For further archaeological information and archive photographs visit:

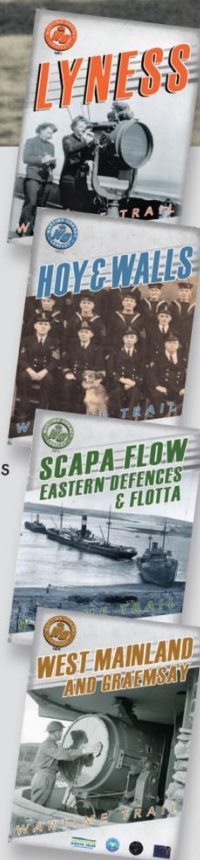
[www.hoyorkney.com/](http://www.hoyorkney.com/) (Wartime Heritage page) [www.canmore.org.uk](http://www.canmore.org.uk) [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)

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Cover: The congregation of the church on Westray turned out in their Sunday best on 25 April 1943 to help recover this force-landed Grumman Martlet. Photo: Orkney Library and Archive, Lamb Collection Ref. L70-3.

