



Case reference	SMC-ORK-003
Application details	Excavation of the cairn passage
Site address	Chambered cairn at South end of Tres Ness, Sanday, Orkney (SM 1330)
Applicant	University of Central Lancashire
Determining Authority	Historic Environment Scotland (HES)
Local Authority Area	Orkney Islands Council
Reason(s) for notification	Notification Direction 2015 – works to be granted Scheduled Monument Consent by Historic Environment Scotland go beyond the minimum level of intervention that is consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in a monument
Representations	1
Date notified to Ministers	3 June 2020
Date of recommendation	21 July 2020
Decision / recommendation	Clear

Description of Proposal and Site:

- Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) is sought for the excavation to remove the contents of the passage within Tres Ness chambered cairn, which is located on an exposed promontory to the mid-south of the Isle of Sanday, Orkney.
- The monument comprises the remains of a chambered tomb composed of flat loosely-laid slabs covered by a turf-covered cairn formed from rubble. The passage has been partly exposed by coastal erosion from the sea.
- The monument is of national importance because the cairn is an upstanding funerary monument likely to have been used during the Neolithic period (circa. 4000 BC to 2500 BC) that has high potential to contain archaeological remains which could provide information on the prehistoric societies that built and used it.



Figure 1. The location of Tres Ness, Sanday, Orkney highlighted in red



Figure 3. Vertical view of the monument at Tres Ness with the agreed trench location (indicated in red). This application for the excavation of the passage is indicated in orange

Consultations and Representations:

- The sole representation made during HES' consideration of the application was from Scottish Natural Heritage. They consider the effects on natural heritage interests are temporary in nature and conclude that the proposal is unlikely to have a significant effect on the features of the East Sanday Coast Special Protection Area and Sanday Special Area of Conservation thus have no recommendations for conditions to be imposed.
- PAD consulted Scottish Government's Culture and Historic Environment Division (CHED) following notification. They consider the proposal does not raise any specific issues of national importance given it is adjoining an excavation which has been previously consented and is good opportunity to record a site threatened with coastal erosion and engages local community interest. The planned works align with the aims of Our Place in Time – the Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland and the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework around understanding chambered cairns.

Assessment:

1. Historic Environment Scotland's (HES) Heritage Directorate are minded to grant SMC for the excavation of the contents of the passage of Tres Ness chambered cairn which impacts on the Scheduled Monument as the removal of material goes beyond the minimum level of intervention which is consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in the monument.
2. The application has been submitted by University of Central Lancashire. The proposed works would be led by an experienced team drawn from the Universities of Central Lancashire and Reading and National Museums Scotland, supported by two supervisors and undergraduates with existing excavation experience as well as volunteers from the local archaeology group. HES consider that the team are experienced and well-qualified to work on a monument of this type.
3. The proposed works involve the opening up of an area roughly 5m x 2m incorporating the entirety of the passage and a contingency area just beyond (See Figure 3 above). Turf and top soil would be removed by hand to expose the upper masonry of the passage. Any remaining deposits in the passage would be excavated at the same time as those in the chamber, but the walling stones that form the passage would not be removed and be left in situ.
4. The application has been accompanied by a detailed Project Design that sets out a well-considered, appropriate and careful methodology and sets out a suitable method and timetable for reporting and process for designing post-excavation analyses and reporting. When excavation is complete, the exposed trench would be covered with a semi-permeable membrane and all stone and soil returned to the trench and backfilled as close to its original appearance with the turf carefully relaid. Previous SMCs exist for the excavation of the cairn's internal chamber. The passage to be cleared leads east from the chamber, close to the eroding vulnerable coastal edge, therefore excavating now will retrieve information before it is lost or compromised by further erosion.

5. HES believe the proposed works must be assessed as an extensive intervention but respond to the unavoidable circumstances and threat of coastal erosion. Consequently, the proposed works are compliant with their Scheduled Monument Consent Policy 3. Although the form of the monument would be reinstated following excavation, the archaeological remains within half of it would be disturbed reducing the cultural significance of the monument. However, as the deposits would be carefully removed by archaeological excavation and fully recorded, this would increase our understanding of Orcadian Neolithic tombs, which form an important group within a class of monument identified across Western Europe.
6. HES consider as the works have been clearly justified and are required for the purposes of research, with the lowest level of intervention consistent with achieving the project's objective while increasing our understanding of this particular monument type. The works are therefore not in conflict with their Scheduled Monument Policy 2. The application is, on the whole, carefully considered, sensitively designed and properly planned. However, further information on the timescale of works, to ensure they are appropriate, would be required in advance of the works to enable compliance with their Scheduled Monument Consent Policy 4. HES recommend that a condition of consent is imposed to clarify the proposed timetable for works.
7. The proposal is concluded by HES to be consistent with relevant policy. However, the proposal is not considered the minimum necessary consistent with conserving the cultural significance of the monument, hence the requirement to notify Scottish Ministers.
8. In summary, and for the reasons set out above, this SMC application does not raise any issues of national importance that would merit intervention by Ministers.

Decision/Recommendation:

- The application should be cleared back to Historic Environment Scotland to issue Scheduled Monument Consent with one condition.