



Case reference	SMC-ORK-004
Application details	Excavation of two small evaluation trenches within area of Clouston's 1920's excavation to characterise and date the site
Site address	The Wirk, tower and hall, Westness, Rousay (SM 5773)
Applicant Determining Authority Local Authority Area	Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology, UHI Archaeology Institute, Orkney College Historic Environment Scotland (HES) 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	Nil
Date notified to Ministers Date of recommendation	14 September 2020 1 October 2020
Decision / recommendation	Clear

Description of Proposal and Site:

- Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) is sought for the excavation of two small evaluation trenches at The Wirk, a tower and hall complex, sited adjacent to St Mary's Kirk and graveyard on a coastal strip on the SW side of the island of Rousay. (See Figure 1).
- The monument comprises the remains of a substantial medieval hall which had a stout square tower attached. A shore wall crossing the monument delineates two distinct features of the remains. (See Figure 3). The size and manner of construction of the tower suggests a construction date sometime in the late 12th or early 13th centuries. The remains of the hall extend approximately 23m from the shore wall and are visible only as slight undulations in the ground surface. Its overall dimensions are comparable to the 12th century Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall which is a property in state care.
- The monument is of national importance as a fine example of a late Norse or medieval fortified dwellinghouse, with very deep deposits offering the potential for archaeological recovery of important information relating to the evolution of fortifications and the organisation of the upper levels of society in Orkney during its transition from Scandinavian to Scottish kingdoms. The Wirk is also linked to Sigurd of Westness, a powerful Norse chieftain described in the Orkneyinga Saga. The monument therefore has the potential to provide information about this power struggle within medieval Orkney and how this related to wider rivalries for the archipelago as a whole.

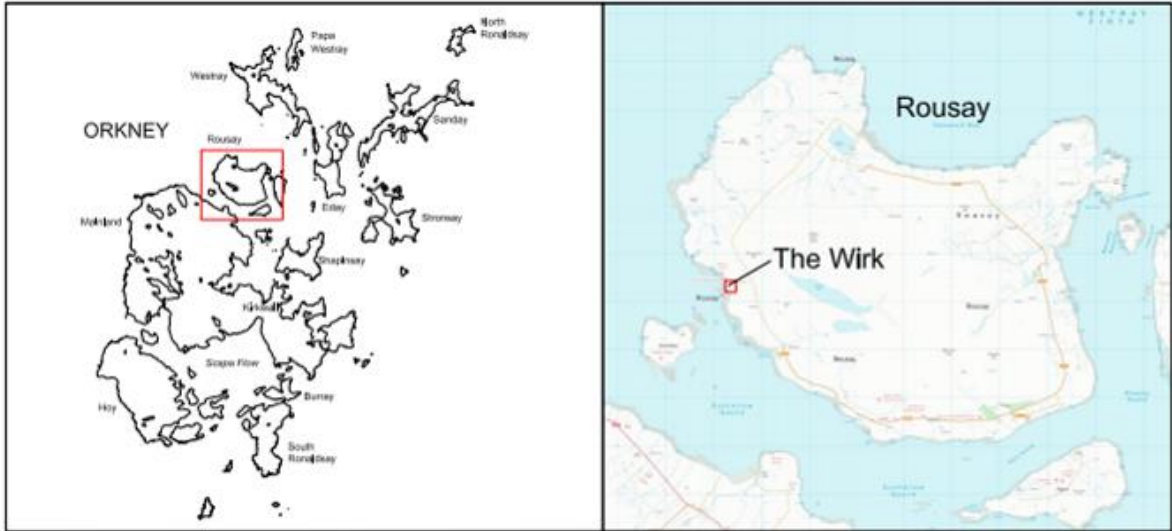


Figure 1 – Location map of The Wirk

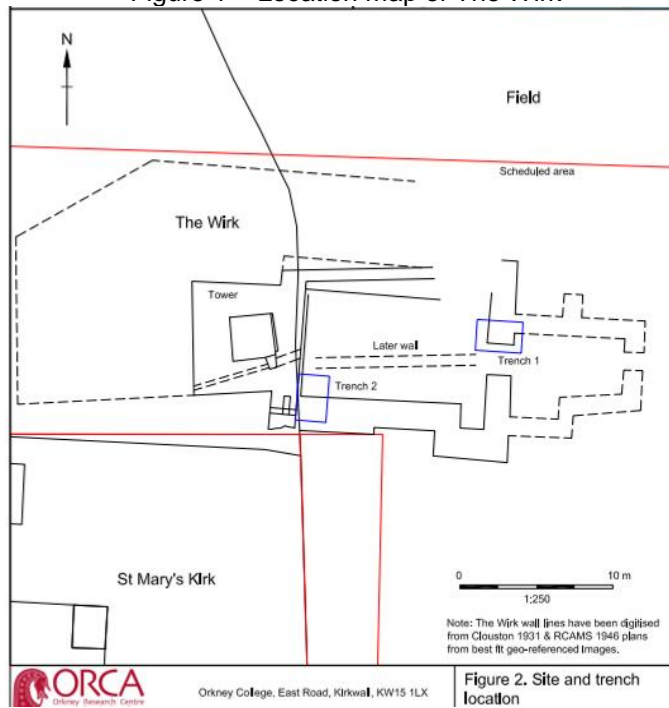


Figure 2. Site and trench location

Figure 3 - Ariel overview of The Wirk and shore wall - adjacent St Mary's Kirk and graveyard



Consultations and Representations:

- No representations were made during HES's consideration of the application.
- PAD consulted Scottish Government's Culture and Historic Environment Division (CHED) following notification. They consider the proposed SMC does not appear to raise any specific issues of national importance as the proposed excavation should have minimal long-term impact on the monument due to the previous excavations. There will be expert archaeological monitoring during the works, and there are opportunities for increased community engagement and education. The project offers additional intelligence in terms of understanding the monument and of Orcadian - Scandinavian relationships.

Assessment:

1. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) are minded to grant SMC for the excavation of two small trenches 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 Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology, part of Orkney College. It is accompanied by an archaeological written scheme of investigation (WSI). HES's Heritage Directorate have undertaken extensive pre-application discussions with the applicant, and the application accords with the outcome of these discussions.
3. The proposed works focus on the remains of the hall, east of the tower, and involves the archaeological excavation of two trenches across this area in order to better understand the hall and its origins. This part of the monument lies in an agricultural field, most of which is ploughed regularly however a small section of this field is covered in rough pasture/scrub and it is this location the trenches will target. Samples will also be removed from the trenches and they will be backfilled by hand with the site being left 'as found'. Both the tower and the hall were partly excavated by the antiquarian and novelist J. Storer Clouston in the early 1920s. Clouston published notes on his findings in 1923 and subsequently revisited the site to conduct further excavations between 1927 and 1930. His recording is considered basic, therefore the nature of buried structures in the field to the east of the extant stone tower and the origins and date of The Wirk remain open to debate.
4. Both trenches will measure 2m x 3m, be excavated by hand and are intended to investigate the internal and external areas of the building and recover artefacts from Clouston's backfill and selected in-situ deposits. The WSI has built in scope to extend each trench by up to 1m in length at each end (i.e. each trench could feasibly reach dimensions of up to 2m x 5m) if key structures or deposits are encountered. The excavations would not exceed a depth of 1.2m.
5. HES consider the trenches have been targeted in such a way as to minimise their impact on the monument. By focusing on a small part of the possible entrance in trench 1, and only one of at least two connecting points between the tower and hall in trench 2, the application has ensured that the same questions

could be explored again at a later stage. Soil deposits would survive in various undisturbed locations across the site to allow these topics to be assessed further.

6. HES believe the proposed works would have minimal impact on the cultural significance of the monument and so are compliant with Scheduled Monument Consent Policy 1. The proposed works are assessed as extensive but would clearly generate public benefits of national importance which outweigh the impact on the nationally important cultural significance of the monument. Consequently, the proposed works are compliant with Scheduled Monument Consent Policy 3. The application is carefully considered, based on good authority, sensitively designed, and properly planned and so is compliant with Scheduled Monument Consent Policy 4.
7. HES conclude that the works are assessed as extensive but would have a minimal impact on the monument's cultural significance. The proposed works are the lowest level of intervention required to meet the project's aims, and the proposals have been well-targeted to ensure that impacts on the monument are minimised. The project can be expected to deliver important public benefits, including increasing our understanding of the monument. A condition of consent would normally be imposed to allow for HES to undertake a site visit while the excavation works are ongoing. However due to the current Covid-19 pandemic such a visit would not take place and HES have not added this condition as a result.
8. HES consider believe the proposal is broadly consistent with relevant policy. 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 without conditions.