

Note on a grave excavated by Joseph Banks and George Low at
Skaill in 1772

by *Averil M Lysaght*

The first detailed account of any of the prehistoric burial mounds that used to be a feature of the Links of Skaill, Sandwick, Orkney (NGR HY 238192), was published in *Archaeologia* III, 1773. It was based on a letter from the Reverend George Low, an ecclesiastical naturalist

living at Stromness where he was earning his living as a tutor, to George Paton, antiquarian and book collector, who worked in the Edinburgh Custom House; it was read to the Society of Antiquaries of London by Richard Gough in March 1773. Although Low mentioned a Mr Banks as his co-worker in the excavation of two of the burial mounds, no one in recent years appears to have identified his companion as the man who was already well known for having travelled round the world with Captain Cook in the *Endeavour*, 1768-71, and who was to become very much better known as President of the Royal Society for more than forty years. The purpose of the present note is to draw attention to a survey of the Links of Skail by one of Banks's artists, and to two pencil sketches of a cist and skeleton excavated there by Banks and Low, together with a large party of helpers. A paper already in the press elsewhere gives particulars of some other early records concerned with this site, and of a survey and drawings of the stones at Stenness by Banks's artists (Lysaght 1974).

When Banks decided in the summer of 1772 to withdraw from Cook's second voyage round the world, he commissioned a brig, the *Sir Lawrence*, 192 tons, and sailed for Iceland via the Hebrides, taking with him most of the staff he had intended to take in the *Resolution*. In addition to Lieutenant John Gore (? 1730-90), one of his chief friends in the *Endeavour*, he was accompanied by two competent scientists, Daniel Solander (1733-82), a most able botanist and one of the favourite pupils of Linnaeus, and James Lind (1736-1812), a physicist and physician, with a keen interest in astronomy and meteorological phenomena. The artists on board were James and John Frederick Miller whose dates are unknown - they were members of a family of 27 children, their father being a Nuremberg engraver who was an accomplished botanical artist; both of these sons worked for Banks for a number of years. In addition to them there was John Cleveley, Junr (1747-86), who, like his father, was a marine artist of ability, and a nautical surveyor, Frederick Herm. Walden, about whom very little appears to be known; years later he wrote to Banks about a method for estimating the area of the sails of ships of the line. There was also Sigismund Bacstrom, surgeon and naturalist, who, on this occasion, acted as secretary, and two servants from Revesby, Banks's Lincolnshire home: Peter Briscoe who had been with Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador in 1766, as well as in the *Endeavour*, and James Roberts who when only sixteen years old had likewise embarked in the *Endeavour*, and was only twenty when he sailed for Iceland.

Banks kept a careful diary when the *Sir Lawrence* was in the Hebrides, and for much of the time in Iceland; there are also letters to friends amplifying some of his experiences. However, he does not appear to have recorded in any detail his return journey through the Orkneys, that is to say no journal has so far been found giving particulars of the Orkney antiquities in which he was obviously much interested. Luckily for us James Roberts kept a diary, now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, in which he briefly outlined many events of the voyage not noted elsewhere, including the stay at Orkney, particularly the facts that some of the standing stones at Stenness were measured, and that a whole day was spent excavating two graves at Skail, altogether thirty people being engaged in this task. It seems scarcely possible that Banks would have failed to record particulars of these operations when he had so meticulously recorded the dimensions of the formations at Staffa in the Hebrides; he handed these over to Pennant who published them in his *Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides* (1774; 1776). All that we have on the Orkneys in his own hand are a few lines of jottings at the end of the second part of his Icelandic journal, now in the County Records Office, Kent (the first part is at McGill University). There are, however, in the British Museum four folio volumes of drawings of the Hebrides, Iceland and the Orkneys, by the Millers, Cleveley, Walden and a certain Charles Ruotte who made some fair copies later. The British Museum (Natural History) owns a small folio volume of drawings

of Iceland plants, some of which are signed by J F Miller, and two notebooks, one containing miscellaneous scientific notes on plants, animals, geology, etc by Solander, the other, mistakenly ascribed to Solander, is a list of Icelandic plants with references to the records in the literature of that period. Notes on the Hebrides and Orkney are missing. Banks has stated that he was a trespasser on Pennant's territory when he was visiting the Hebrides, and that he was going to hand over to him all his material from those islands. Accordingly many of the careful drawings of the people and landscape there were published by Pennant in the work cited above. Perhaps the material to do with the Orkneys was similarly given to someone else, possibly to James Lind. It may even be found in the British Museum where only in 1973 have the first three volumes of Banks's famous collection of maps been 'discovered' by the percipience and energy of Mrs S J Tyacke.

Walden's survey of the Links of Skaill (Add. MS 15511, f 11) shows the tent, presumably occupied by Banks's party, between two of the burial mounds, the tops of which look as if they had been disturbed (pl 38). It appears probable that these mounds were selected to provide some shelter and that those actually excavated were firstly a large one, shown NNE of the tent and just to the left of the top of the dune on the right hand side of the plan, and secondly a smaller one, SSW of the tent, near the shore. The reasons for supposing that these two burial mounds were selected for examination is that slabs of a cist can clearly be seen on the surface of the right-hand one, and a trench is marked quite plainly on the smaller one near the shore.

Low first described the excavation in the letter mentioned above; it was altered slightly in the published version. The following extract is taken from his original letter to George Paton, which is now in the National Library of Scotland:

'When Mr Banks was here I was with him every day and he was pleased to make me Director of his Orkney tour; One day in Particular we went a Grave Digging in the Links of Skail on the Mainland where there are great numbers of tumuli. We pitched upon one which seemed never to have been moved since its first construction and Mr Banks ordered his People to begin at one Side and dig to the other that we might see the whole fabrick of it. It was of a flattish Conical Shape . . . after digging away a great quantity of sand till we came near the Center of the hill the people Struck their Spades on several large Stones upon which Mr Banks ordered them to dig round them and the whole construction appeared as I have sketched it with my pen first a large quantity of sand and then a large parcel of great Stones which seemed to have been taken from the neighbouring Sea Shore; when these were removed the Coffin or Chest appeared which was composed of four Stones covered with a very large fifth stone: In this lay the Old Gentleman (for so it appeared by his teeth he was) on his Side with his hands folded on his breast, his knees drawn up to his belly and his heels towards his hips, this was a highly preserved skeleton notwithstanding the Length of time it must have lain all the bones remained, only they were softish till they hardened in the air; the flesh was in the form of a whitish Earth lying about the Bones of the thicker parts of the Body, and on the Arms &c was Scattered a sort of blackish fibres which Dr Lind supposed might have been the Vascular System. What was very remarkable was a bag of some very Coarse Vegetable Stuff which was laid at his feet containing the Bones of a Younger person, which seemed to have been a Woman, upon which was made a very ingenious conjecture. That this might have been the wife who dyed perhaps at thirty years of age & who might not have been buried till her husband dyed, and when this happened her bones might have been collected in to this Bag and laid at his feet in the same Grave -

'What was something odd, in Examining a piece of the Bag to see whether it was made of a Vegetable or Animal Substance I discovered it full of a Species of Insects called by Linæus Dermestes. These together with the Bag were reduced to a blackish mass which might be reduced to powder between the fingers but the warp and woof of the Latter as well as the entire Shape of the Insects might easily be traced.'

A sketch amongst the Low papers in the Library of the University of Edinburgh illustrates one of these graves, and is labelled in Low's own handwriting (MS Dc 6 107, f 135).

Banks himself wrote as follows (Kent County Archives U 951 Z 31) 18 October:

'See fig. stones caves & cliffs Burying places in the Links people of Barra superstitious in relation to the Standing Stones Story of Girl that parish still has people who speak danish

Vitrified burnt stuff near the Parsons with bones

burying places coffins of Slate 4-3 2.4 sides & top no bottom

immense abundance of Tumuli commonly covered with stones on the whole face of the bray ashes or bones sometimes both in one coffin beads 400 locket with Dr Ramsay found among ashes bones in the same Coffin hair

20 October See burying places open one See . . .

James Roberts' account is much more informative; his date for the excavation is 21st October; there is some evidence that both he and Banks wrote their notes after they had left the Orkneys.

'Moderate Breezes and Hazy weather, at four this morning Mr Banks, Dr Solander, with the rest of the Gentleman, and Servants, and many of the Natives with Spades went to a place call'd Sandwick, where we open'd two Antient Tombs, or Tumuli, in each of them was found the Bones of a man, and woman, the form of their Interment was somewhat Singular, they were laid in a very coarse mat which was entirely rotten, the bones of the woman were laid at the man's feet, the Tomb was form'd of Flagstones, one on each side, one at each end, and one at the top, the other was the same with the addition of one at the Bottom. I measured one of the Tombs, it was four feet Eight Inches long, two feet Eight Inches broad, and two feet four Inches in depth; the other was nearly the same; the man was laid with his feet nearly up to his Chin, which perhaps was the custom of the times, for without his being Buried in this manner, the place could not have contained him, as he must have been about seven feet high in proportion to his thigh bone which measures nineteen Inches. The Draughtsmen made drawings of both the Tombs. In the Evening our party (which consisted of about thirty hands) return'd to Stromness we had with us our two French horns and Saunders with his Violin, so that we spent the day very agreeably.'

There seems little doubt that the pencil sketch reproduced here (pl 39) represents the skeleton and bag of bones described both by Low and Roberts, especially since Low noted the presence of the bag as a remarkable occurrence. There is a faint drawing of a part of the bag on the verso of the figure of the skeleton (Add. MS 15509, f 56); it seems to be made in strips, and is torn. It is inscribed 'Part of the Bag 1½ asunder'. An accompanying sketch, f 57, shows a rough outline of the slabs constituting the cist; on the verso is written 'The Thighbone of the man from out of the Second grave Measured ^{foot In"} 1 6 . There is nothing to show who was respons-

ible for the drawings; the writing bears some resemblance to captions on some of the sketches of Iceland, but these need not necessarily have been written by the artists concerned.

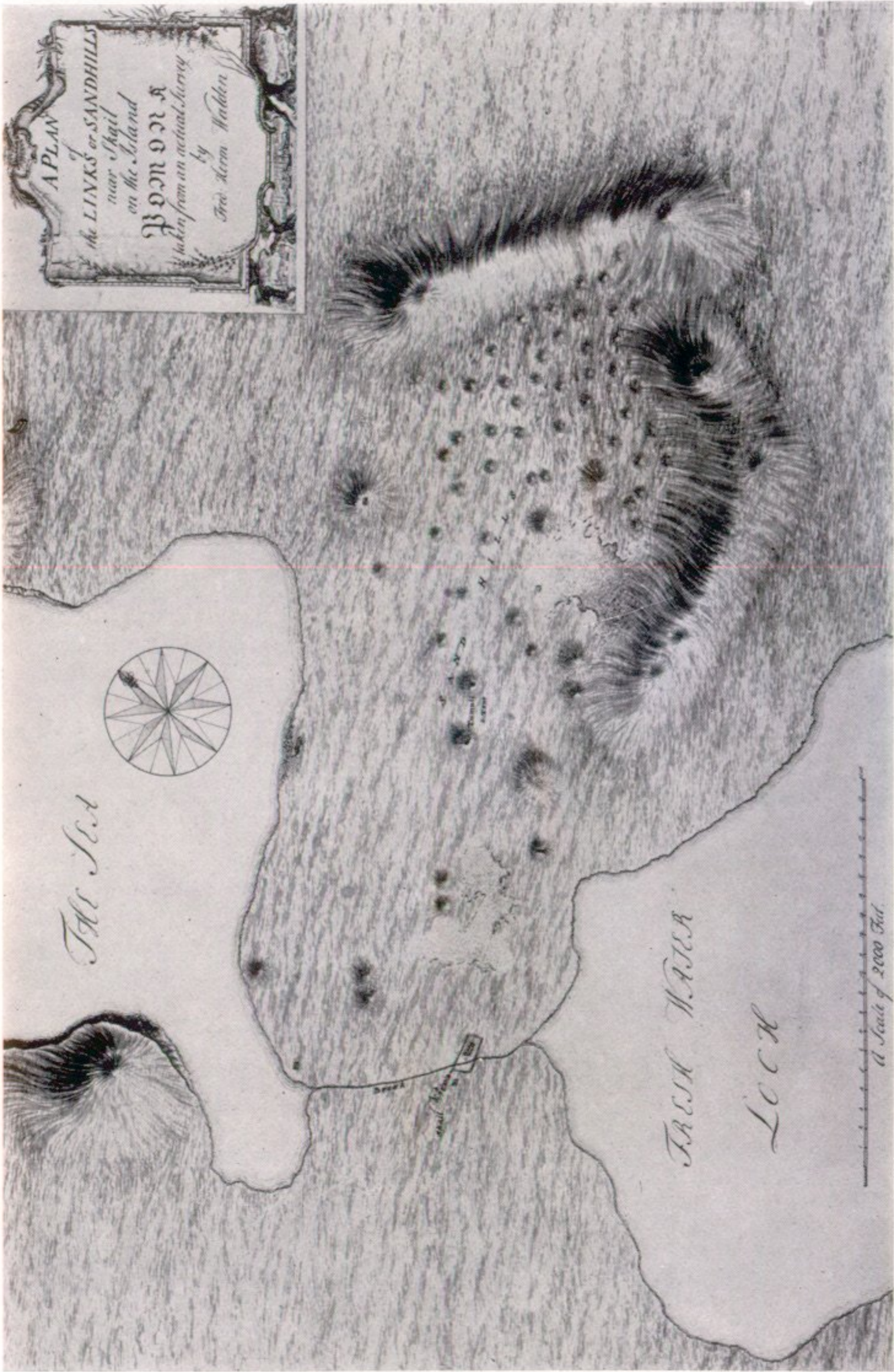
Dr Anna Ritchie comments: 'It is not now possible to establish the precise location of the mounds excavated by Banks on the Links of Skail (RCAMS 1946, 267-8). From the various descriptions it is, however, clear that these mounds covered short cist burials of Early Bronze Age date.'

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting that Banks himself does not appear to have made a large collection of British archaeological material. There is very little that can be ascribed to him amongst the collections in the British Museum, although he had a long-lasting interest in prehistory. He seems to have given away most of what he turned up himself; we can see that he was a very careful worker from the detailed descriptions he wrote of two other excavations in which he was involved, one in South Wales, now being prepared for publication by Mr S R Broadbridge, and another near Goldsborough in Yorkshire.

Thanks are due first of all to Dr Anna Ritchie for her kind help in the preparation of this note. It is again a pleasure to acknowledge my gratitude to the Librarian and Staff of the Lyon Playfair Library, Imperial College of Science and Technology, for the facilities I have enjoyed while working on Banks's antiquarian interests. Thanks are also due to the National Library of Scotland for the use of George Low's letter to George Paton, and to the Trustees of the British Museum for the photographs of Banks's Orkney drawings, to the Trustees of the Mitchell Library, Public Library of New South Wales for the extract from James Roberts's diary, and to the County Archives Office, Kent, for the passage from Banks's journal of his voyage to Iceland.

REFERENCES

- Lysaght, Averil M 1974 'Joseph Banks at Skara Brae and Stennis, Orkney, 1772', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 28, (1974), 221-34.
 RCAMS 1946 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Inventory of Orkney*, vol II. Edinburgh.



Walden's survey of the Links of Skail (British Museum copyright)



Skail grave (British Museum copyright)