

# Isbister, an Orkney Islands Council Guardianship Monument

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## SUMMARY

*Excavations conducted in order to allow the consolidation, roofing and display of this chambered tomb are described.*

## INTRODUCTION

The main chamber, side cells and entrance of the tomb were originally excavated by the landowner, Mr Ronald Simison. This work was completed in 1976 and written up by J W Hedges (1983). Further work was undertaken by Mr Simison in 1980–82 behind the north hornwork and west of the tomb where a retaining wall was located (*ibid*, frontispiece).

In 1987 the tomb was received into Guardianship by Orkney Islands Council. The Council's aim was to cover the tomb, to make it safe and to display it to the general public. With this in mind a programme of archaeological excavation, consolidation and building works was initiated. Partial excavation of the tomb masonry was necessary in order to house the foundations of a concrete roof which was constructed to cover the central chamber. The walls of the tomb on either side of the entrance were built up to meet the new roof and to improve the appearance of the site. The roof was then covered with earth and grassed over to blend in with the surrounding relief.

The work was funded jointly by Orkney Islands Council and the Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate.

## EXCAVATION

Through this excavation further details of the construction of the tomb came to light (illus 1). The tomb chamber and cells were situated within an oval cairn of masonry c 10 m by 7 m broken only by the entrance passage. West of the main chamber the cairn was composed of repeated layers of flat overlapping flagstone with larger stones used for the cairn facings. East of the chamber and to either side of the entrance, the construction was slightly different due to the presence of the cell north of the entrance. South of the passage the foundations of an intervening wall were noticed (illus 2 & 3). The alignment of this wall continued across the entrance passage as a lintel and was then lost in the rebuilt masonry of the east cell. Its south end also disappeared and merged into the cairn material.

The central cairn was enlarged by the addition of an encircling wall c 2 m in width (illus 1). This was part of the original design of the tomb as evidence of ties which joined the two walls together were

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ILLUS 1 Plan of the tomb



ILLUS 2 General view of tomb entrance



ILLUS 3 View of south-east corner of tomb and the entrance after cleaning to reveal stonework



ILLUS 4 Tomb and north horn after roofing

found in the crumbling masonry west of the chamber. This pattern is slightly different from that envisaged by Hedges (1983, frontispiece), although reasons for his hypothesis were found at the front of the tomb. The encircling cairn wall had within it foundations of two extra walls to the south of the entrance (illus 3) and one to the north. From ground level either side of the entrance, these extra walls were found to oversail the masonry of the second cairn wall but their western ends disappeared into higher levels of it.

To complicate the pattern still further an additional outer wall with basal plinth (previously noted at the north end of the tomb by Hedges) had been added to the cairn to complete the initial design. From the front of the tomb the wall and plinth reduced in width towards the apices of the cairn and then presumably petered out to the west. The ends of this outer wall were not traced in the limited extent of the excavation, and they were not found in Mr Simison's 1982 trench which cut westwards through and beyond the cairn material. In the south the outer wall was badly slumped and was not excavated.

Interpretation of the complex cairn construction at the front of the tomb was not aided by coastal and human erosion and general weathering. The wide approach to the tomb was enhanced by the elaborated entrance facade. With evidence of six walls to the south and a minimum of four to the north, the passage was extended and the masonry either side of it possibly stepped and tiered, focusing in and down to the entrance.

## PRESENTATION

The excavated details have been preserved where possible, in spite of the constraints of the new tomb roof, and the entrance area has been partly rebuilt (illus 4). A course of slate was used to mark the division between old and new masonry. Intact floor deposits were found within the main chamber and side cells and have been left. Reconstructed funeral deposits have been placed in one cell and should give the visitor a better understanding of one aspect of the Orcadian Neolithic.

## LOCATION OF FINDS AND ARCHIVE

A complete archive of the 1987 investigation, building works and finds is lodged with the National Monuments Record, Edinburgh. The largely unstratified small collection of finds of bird, fish, animal and human bone, pottery sherds and land and marine shell was deposited with an archive report at Tankerness House Museum, Kirkwall, Orkney, where the majority of the Isbister collection is kept.

## REFERENCE

Hedges, J W 1983 *Isbister: a chambered tomb in Orkney*. Oxford. (= *Brit Archaeol Rep*, 115.)

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