

Walking in Orkney

Orkney has such a wealth of natural history and archaeology that even the shortest stroll can become an exciting adventure. It is almost impossible to travel anywhere in Orkney without stumbling across some intriguing remains, turning a corner to be faced by a magnificent view, or being startled as a bird takes flight before your eyes.

This leaflet provides a sample of the walking opportunities in Orkney. All of the routes below are fairly short, and are easy to moderate walks. There are several publications available which provide more routes of varying difficulty.

Though walking in Orkney is fairly safe, it is a wise precaution to always inform a third party of your route before you set off. Stout walking shoes are recommended for all routes and due to the variability of the Orkney climate, waterproof clothing is also important.

Take a map because paths are not always marked and be aware of local conditions.

Marwick Bay to Sand Geo

This short walk leads to a small cove ideal for a picnic or barbeque as the sun sets! The cove also has some traditional fishing huts which have been restored to their former glory.

TERRAIN: Easy path with a small incline down to the cove.

TIME FOR ROUND TRIP: 40 minutes if you don't stop for a picnic!

THE WALK: Park at the car park at Marwick Bay. To the North stands Kitchener's Memorial. This tower was erected to commemorate Lord Kitchener and the crew of HMS Hampshire. The Hampshire hit a mine just off the coastline here in 1916 and sank with the loss of nearly all on board.

From the car park, walk south, with Marwick Bay on your right. Marwick Bay is a large tidal lagoon and an excellent place to spot shore birds hopping amongst the pools. If you hop off the path and onto the beach, you should find vast collections of beautiful shells accumulating on the sand.

Return to the path and continue south. Along the way you should find a variety of wild flowers, depending on the time of year. If the tide is low, admire the dramatic coastline of huge flat slabs of rock with large faults allowing water to come closer in to the shore. These rock inlets were traditionally used to bring the fishing boats ashore from the turbulent waters. After the wrecking of a ship to the north, the fishing huts at Sand Geo were built. After about 15 minutes you will reach these huts.



They were built by local fishermen and boats were pulled up from the cove below using a winch (the remains of which can still be seen).

Drop down into the cove and carefully explore the rock pools or turn over small rocks lower on the shore. You should find many weird and wonderful creatures such as colourful sea anemones and scurrying crabs!

Return to the car park by the same path.

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR: Shore birds in Marwick Bay, colourful shells on the beach, wild flowers along the path, and weird critters in the rock pools!

FURTHER INFORMATION: There is a small information board at the fisherman's huts giving more information on their history.

OS Explorer 463 reference 229241 (car park).

The Castle at Yesnaby

This walk follows some very dramatic coastline (pictured below) dipping down into a little inlet before gently climbing to a magnificent view of the sea stack known as the Castle at Yesnaby.

TERRAIN: Moderate path with moderate incline, take extra care in high winds. This is a well trodden path which can be muddy in places. At two points small burns must be crossed using makeshift stepping stones.

TIME FOR ROUND TRIP: 1.5 hours stopping to admire the views! ➤



THE WALK: Leaving the car at the World War II military buildings, head south following the cliff edge (though not too close)! The path passes through beautiful displays of coastal flowers such as sea pinks (thrift) and the purple sea squill. The path will drop down to a small bay. As you cross the burn and continue up the hill along the fence, you may spot Eider Ducks or the occasional seal in the bay on your right. At the end of the fence you can continue straight on up to the Brough of Bigging. From the top there are wonderful views of the Atlantic Ocean crashing into the cliffs. You can also catch a glimpse to the south of the Old Man of Hoy. Return down to the fence and turn right, continuing south along the coast. Along this section of the coastline there was once a millstone quarry. Taking care crossing the second small burn, you will see a partly formed sea stack which is still connected to the cliffs by a flimsy looking piece of rock. Continue past this and you will arrive at the Castle of Yesnaby. For the best views follow the path that curves around just beyond the stack. Return the way you came and admire the view in reverse!

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR: This walk has something for everyone – wild flowers (in particular the rare *Primula scotica* (Scottish Primrose), geological formations, birds, seals, a Millstone Quarry, the World War II buildings, fossils ... and much more!

FURTHER INFORMATION: There are two information boards near the war buildings which provide excellent information on the area.

OS Explorer 463 reference 221161 (car park).

The Gloop and the Brough of Deerness

A short walk to The Gloop (a collapsed sea cave) before continuing along the coast to the site of an ancient settlement, this walk offers fantastic views and the last part (up a steep path onto the Brough) feels very adventurous!

TERRAIN: Easy path with very little incline until you reach the Brough of Deerness. To access this you must go down a steep path onto the beach and then up a pathway (with rock cut steps and a handrail) to the top of the settlement. Extreme care must be taken.

TIME FOR ROUND TRIP: 2 hours.

THE WALK: From the car park, follow the short marked path towards The Gloop. The Gloop was once a sea cave which formed due to the power of the waves crashing against the cliffs. At some point, the roof of the cave has partially collapsed leaving a chasm which has a land bridge crossing it at the seaward end. As a visitor, you can look down into The Gloop from the viewing platforms at either end. From the seaward end of The Gloop, follow the cliff path north. Along the path you will pass through wildflowers such as sea pinks (thrift), and spot rabbits hopping between burrows. To the north you can see one

of the north isles of Orkney, Stronsay.

After about 15 minutes you will come to an information board for the Brough of Deerness. To access the Brough, pass to the left of the information board and follow the path (and burn) down the slope to the beach below. At the small wall, bear right and climb the rough stepped path to the top of the Brough. It is thought that this little island was once joined to the mainland by a land bridge which has subsequently collapsed. The history of the Brough is not fully understood. Some think it is some kind of iron age cliff-top fortification. As the area was used as a naval gunnery range during World War II, it could be that the strange indentations in the ground may just date back to this period! The only substantial remains on the Brough today are of a chapel. Thought to originally date to pre-Norse times, the chapel was used during the Viking era and later as a place of pilgrimage.

Have fun exploring the island, or lie in the long grass and listen to the calls of the sea birds and the waves crashing below.

Leave the island via the same path. Once back at the information board, you can return via the same route, or continue to Mull Head for a longer walk (check local information for route details).

FEATURES: The natural phenomenon of The Gloop, rabbits, wildflowers and birds throughout and your own pilgrimage to the top of the Brough of Deerness!

FURTHER INFORMATION: Behind the car park at the start of the walk, there is a small building which contains excellent information boards on the area.

OS Explorer 461 reference 591079 (car park).

The Brough of Birsay

An exciting walk crossing a small causeway to the tidal island of the Brough of Birsay (pictured below), this walk encounters seals, wildflowers, archaeology and puffins!

TERRAIN: Clearly marked path with a fairly steep climb to the top of the Brough of Birsay. This is a tidal island and so can only be accessed when the tide is low enough. If you cross, please check how long you have before the tide comes in or you will be stranded!

TIME FOR ROUND TRIP: 1–2 hours depending on how long you spend at the archaeological site.

THE WALK: Park the car at the car park just before the causeway which crosses over to the island. On a rough day the ocean will look magnificent from here as the waves crash over the great natural slabs of rock which form the coastline. To the north you can see the island of Westray, one of the north isles of Orkney. To the south are the cliffs of Marwick Head, and ➤



Kitchener's Memorial.

Walk down the steps and onto the beach. Pick up a handful of sand and you will spot that it is made of lots of tiny pieces of broken shell. Start to cross the causeway to the island but pause occasionally to admire the tidal pools. You should spot majestic seaweeds swaying in the water, and crabs scurrying between rocks. On the causeway itself, tiny periwinkles cross from one side to the other, so watch your step!

Walk up the slope and into the archaeological site on the island (small entrance fee during summer months). Birsay was once an important centre in Orkney before Kirkwall was fully established. The earliest evidence of settlement on the island seems to date back to the 6th century and the remains of a Pictish village can be found to the right of the entrance. The Vikings also lived here on the island between the 9th and 13th centuries and the remains of a Romanesque church and Viking long houses can also be seen here.

Behind the warden's hut you will find a small gate. Pass through this and follow the path straight up the hill towards the lighthouse. This is a bit of a climb, so pause occasionally to admire the view behind you. This grassy hill changes colour through the seasons as different wild flowers bloom. You will also spot rabbits and oystercatchers running across the slope.

The path will even out as you come to the light house. Beyond here the path is less even and the cliffs are high so take extra care. Bear around to the left and skirt around the south edge of the island. You should pass a chasm on your right, then bear

right to look back at the cliffs. From here you should see lots of cliff birds, including cormorants, fulmars and (at the right time of year) puffins! Out to sea, you may also spot graceful gannets flying across the water.

Continue following the coastline around the island. As you drop back down the hill look into the large bay below. In here you often see Eider Ducks and seals. Drop back down through the gate, onto the beach and across the causeway.

FEATURES: Shore life in the rock pools, Pictish and Viking Settlements, stunning wildflower displays, dramatic views across the Atlantic Ocean and cliff bird colonies.

FURTHER INFORMATION: The archaeological site is managed by Historic Scotland and in summer months there is a small entrance fee.

There is a small information board at the car park.

OS Explorer 463 reference 242283 (car park).

Consult tide tables or ask locally for information on low tide times.