

SKARA BRAE

By Christy Stanmore

On the southern shore of the Bay o' Skaill, in the West Mainland parish of Sandwick, is the Neolithic village of Skara Brae - one of Orkney's most-visited ancient sites and regarded by many as one of the most remarkable prehistoric monuments in Europe.



Skara Brae's houses



The houses in Skara Brae were very simple, with the furniture laid out in a uniform manner, which could have been important symbolically to the residents. It has long been suggested that the standardised house design was a sign that no one person was more important than another. There is no evidence that any structure was grander or more elaborate, so it was suggested that all villagers were generally equal.

Aside from the fire, in the centre of each room, the only light came, presumably, from a smoke hole in the roof. Possibly hanging from the rafters were fish, curing in the fire's smoke.

For fuel, the villagers probably burned a combination of seaweed and dried animal dung - fuels that remained in use until the 19th century - possibly along with the poor quality peat available to the villagers.

Whether they burned driftwood is open to debate. In more recent years, driftwood was generally regarded as too valuable to burn.

Villagers' diet

Bones found surrounding the houses, shows that cattle and sheep formed the main part of the Skara Brae diet, with barley and wheat grown in the surrounding fields.



Complementing the farming produce, fish and shellfish were harvested in great quantities - and perhaps kept fresh within custom-built tanks within the houses. Fish were shore caught - mostly cod and saithe - while the wide range of shellfish reflects those that formed a staple part of the Orcadian diet until the 20th century.



Huge quantities of limpet shells were found, but these may not have been a staple part of the Skara Brae diet. Through the centuries, limpets were generally regarded as an "emergency" food in Orkney, used only when there was nothing else available. Instead, they were harvested for bait, something that probably explains the quantities found in Skara Brae. The tanks

within the houses could have been used to soak the limpets, softening them up before being used.

Tools

As well as providing meat, the animals, hunted and farmed, provided the skin and bone that was the raw material for the tools and needed for everyday life - needles, shovels, pins, knives, picks and adzes. The flint, or chert, required for their cutting edges, was either "imported" or gathered from the shore.

Many of the bone tools found suggests that animal skin was the main material for clothing. No evidence was found for equipment or tools that could have been used in the manufacture of textiles.