

## Part II.—The Isles and the Folk.

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### A SURVEY OF THE ISLANDS.

#### On Wideford Hill.



HERE is no better view-point from which to make a general survey of the Orcadian Archipelago than Wideford Hill. It is less than half the height of the Ward Hill of Hoy, but it is at once more central and more easily accessible. The Ward Hill of Orphir exceeds it in height by nearly one hundred and fifty feet, and affords a much finer view to the westward; but Wideford Hill is more isolated from other hills, and from its summit we can obtain a better general outlook over the islands.

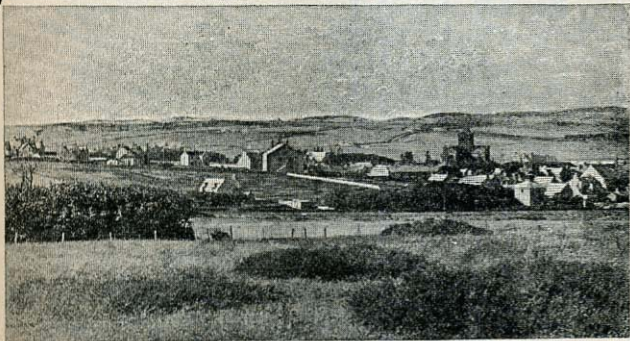
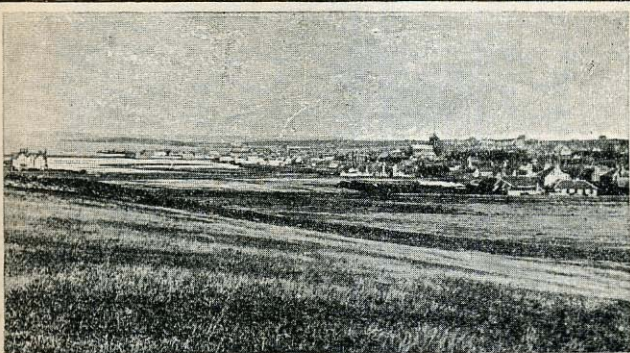
Wideford Hill rises to a height of seven hundred and forty feet, and, standing within two miles of Kirkwall, it may be easily approached either from the main Stromness road over the Ayre, or from the old road above the site of the Lammas market. If we choose the right kind of day, when a cool northerly breeze gives us a horizon free from haze, and when

thin gray clouds veil the sun only at intervals, we shall see from Wideford a panorama which surpasses in loveliness and in human interest that seen from many a mountain top.

The charm of Orkney scenery lies in its colour rather than its form, in its luminous distances rather than its immediate foreground, in its restfulness rather than its grandeur. The landscape does not overwhelm the beholder with a sense of his puny insignificance, as great mountains are apt to do; it wins his love by suggestions of peace and of home.

But let us look around and note what we see. Far to the southward lies the silvery streak of the Pentland Firth, very innocent now in its summer calm. Beyond it stretch the low shores of Caithness; and in the blue distance we see Morven and the mountains of Sutherland, the "southern land" of the Norsemen. Nearer is the green expanse of South Ronaldsay, much foreshortened to the view, with the lighthouse towers of the Pentland Skerries showing beyond, and the island of Burray at its nearer end. To the right, over Scapa Flow, rises the long brown ridge of Hoy, separated by streaks of shimmering sea from Flotta, Fara, Cava, and its other neighbours. Very stern and solemn look its heath-clad heights as the passing shadows fall across them.

The whole of the East Mainland lies at our feet—Deerness, bright and sunny, with the Moul Head stretching boldly out to sea; nearer is St. Andrews, and Holm, half hidden by the ridge of high ground in the north of that parish; and, nearer still, St. Ola, deeply cut into by the Bays of Kirkwall and Scapa, which look as if they only awaited the next spring



*Round about Kirkwall.*



tide to join hands across the narrow isthmus, the Peerie Sea lying ready to do its part.

Kirkwall, the "Kirk Voe" of the Norsemen, is more worthy of its name to-day than when the little church of St. Olaf was the chief object in the landscape. Approach it how we may, the great Cathedral of St. Magnus arrests our attention. Seen from Wideford Hill the tower does not break the skyline, as it does from the sea; yet the mass of sombre reddish masonry asserts itself, and dominates the pearl-gray cluster of walls and roofs that spreads around, as it has done for nearly eight hundred years.

"Tame" and "uninteresting" are the words often used to describe the appearance of our island capital. It does not seem so to-day. As the eye sweeps down over the purple shoulder of the hill to the green fields below, and passes over the silver gleam of the water with broken reflections of tower and gable beyond, it rests upon a picture filled with many charms of line, mass, and colour, from which the deep cool green of tree and shrub is not wholly wanting. Open to the north and the south by the "Viking path" of the sea, and joined to the east and the west by more modern paths, the thin white lines of curving roadway, Kirkwall shows itself the natural focus of our island commerce and social life, and the centre of a wide and fair landscape.

Northward and westward next we turn our view. Kirkwall Bay opens out into the "Wide Fiord," which doubtless gave our hill its name, and westward into the "Aurrida Fiord," or Sea-trout Firth, which first gave its name to the parish of Firth, and then received in exchange its present name, the Bay of

Firth. Its shores are low and well cultivated, but to the north rises the dark brown ridge formed by the hills of Firth and of Rendall, which hide from our view most of the parish of Evie and parts of Harray and Birsay.

To the left of this ridge, through the central valley of Firth and Stenness, a charming vista opens out. A rich and fertile sweep of low ground forms the basin of the great lochs, and on the long peninsula between them we can distinguish the Standing Stones rising as needle points against the blue expanse of the Loch of Stenness. The green mound of Maeshowe, too, is clearly visible. Far away, over the cultivated slopes of Sandwick, we see the soft shimmer of the Atlantic, and to the northward the undulating skyline of the Birsay Hills.

Due west from where we stand the view is shut in by the long ridge of the Keelylang Hills and the bold outline of the Ward Hill of Orphir, and the fairest part of the West Mainland, Stromness, with its bays and islets, is beyond our ken. To enjoy a view of these we must take our stand upon the Ward Hill itself, but this will come into the programme of another day.

Of the island-studded sea to the north and east we have not yet spoken. We can hardly disentangle the maze of sounds and bays, of holms and promontories, except by the aid of a map, and if we are wise we shall have one in our pocket. With this before us the maze becomes clear. The bold hills of Rousay stand clear of the Mainland to the north, with the lower islands of Gairsay, Wyre or Veira, and Egilsay near at hand. Westray is all but hidden,

but the blue ridge of Eday stands boldly forth, shutting out from view the greater portion of Sanday and North Ronaldsay. The tall lighthouse pillar on the Start, however, is clearly seen.

Close to Kirkwall Bay, and protecting it from the eastern sea, lies the fertile island of Shapinsay, with Balfour Castle standing in clear view among its gardens. Beyond we see the bold outline of Stronsay, and to the south of it Auskerry and its lighthouse.

Now we let our eye rest on the horizon, a sharp and clear line where we can trace the smoke of trawlers and other craft which are themselves hidden by the great curve of the ocean plain. There, right over Balfour Castle, something catches our eye. It might be the smoke of a passing steamer, but it does not change its form as we look; it stands clear and sharp, a tiny blue pyramid showing over the horizon. There is only one thing it can be—the Fair Isle, distant some sixty miles from where we stand! Only on rare occasions is this lonely sea-girt rock so free from cloud and mist that its top is thus to be distinguished. Yet if we know where to look for it, we may occasionally see it as we do to-day; and it is useful to remember that from Wideford Hill its bearing is directly over Balfour Castle.

### Among the North Isles.

A glance at the map of Orkney will show that most of the important islands lie north of the Mainland. The term "North Isles," however, is generally used to mean only the more distant of these—Stronsay, Eday, Sanday, North Ronaldsay, and Westray,



with the smaller islands adjacent to them. These can be visited by steamer from Kirkwall in one day, with the exception of North Ronaldsay; and at the same time a good view can be obtained of the nearer islands—Shapinsay and Rousay, with the smaller group of Egilsay, Wyre, and Gairsay. North Ronaldsay may also be seen on the far north-eastern horizon.

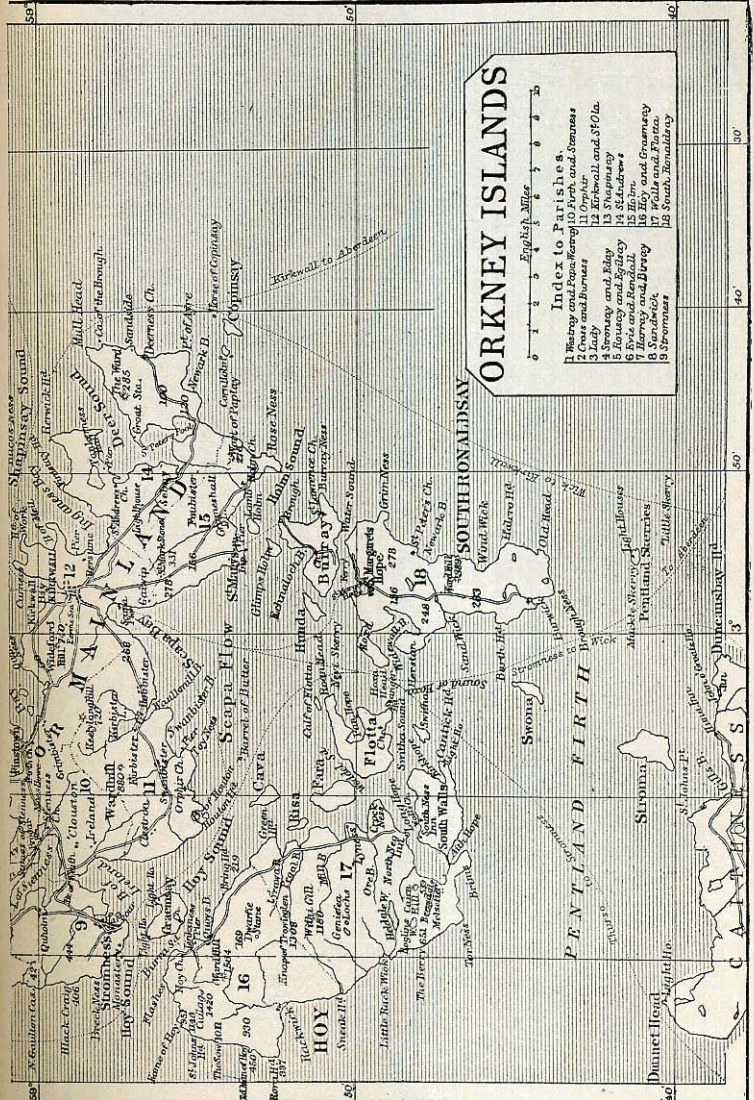
Leaving Kirkwall pier in the early morning, we sail northwards out of the bay, when the String opens on our right, and Shapinsay is close at hand. There, sheltered by Helliar Holm, we notice the bay of Ellwick, where, in 1263, King Haco moored his hundred ships when on that ill-starred expedition which ended at Largs. West of the bay stands Balfour Castle, the finest specimen of modern domestic architecture in the islands, surrounded by its noted gardens.

The sea to the west of Shapinsay is dotted with shoals and skerries; but as we pass Gairsay on the left and sail round Galt Ness, the north-western point of Shapinsay, we find open water before us, and steer north-east towards Eday, passing the Green Holms on our way.

Eday, the first island at which we call, is hilly and heath-clad, with abundance of peat. Ever since the days of Torf Einar, no doubt, it has yielded a supply of peat for such unprovided islands as Sanday, up to modern times when coal has come into more general use. Even yet the peat industry is considerable, and Eday peats have been recently seen in use for drying malt in a distillery near Edinburgh. The most interesting part of Eday,





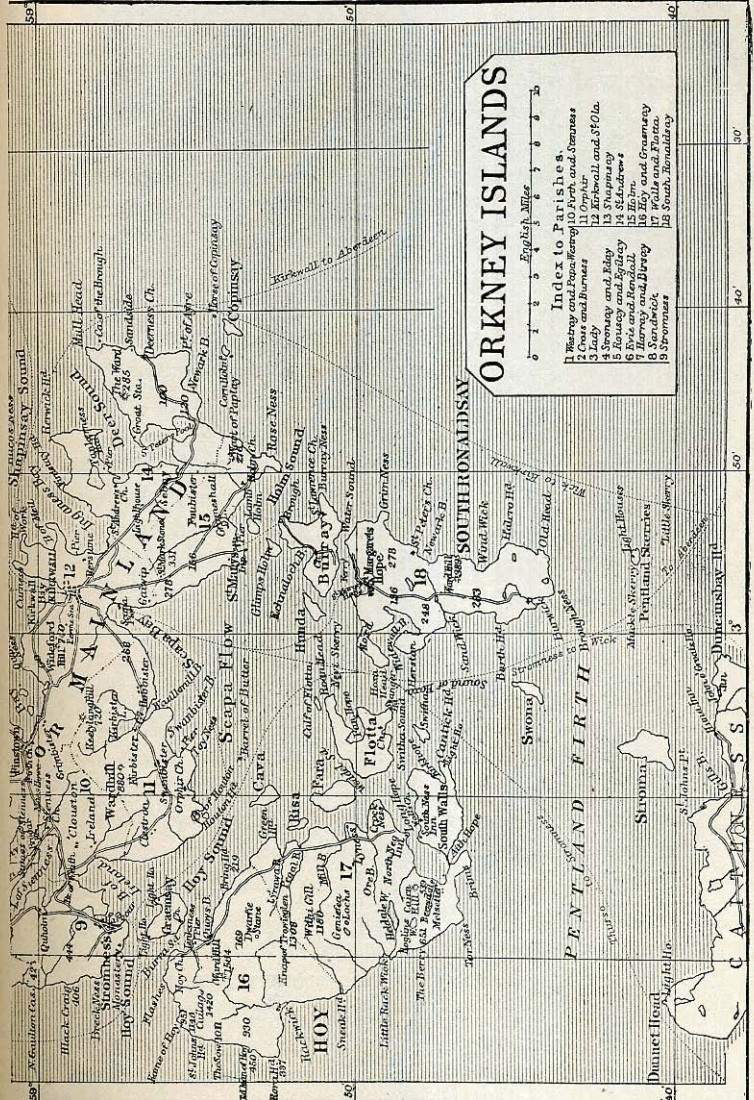


# ORKNEY ISLANDS

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however, is the north end of the island, where our steamer will call later in the day.

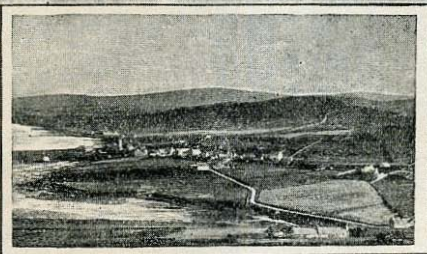
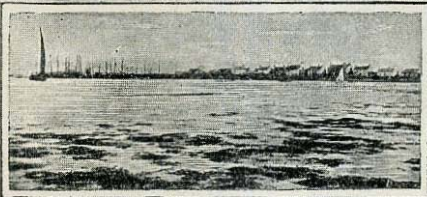
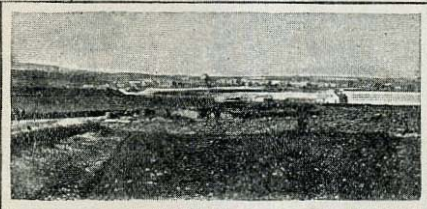
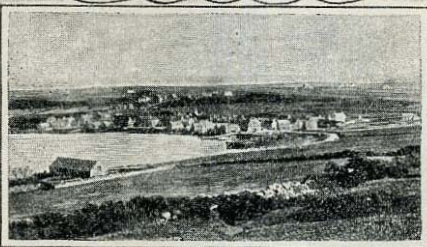
From Eday we cross to Stronsay, keeping to the north of that island, and then turning southwards to the village of Whitehall in Papa Sound, protected on the north-east by the small island of Papa Stronsay. This sheltered roadstead so near the open eastern sea has long been an important centre of the herring fishery. About the middle of last century as many as four hundred Orkney boats and many from the Scottish mainland found anchorage in Papa Sound. In modern times Stronsay has again risen in importance as a fishing station.

Stronsay is one of the best agricultural districts in Orkney, and is noted for the size and the excellence of its farms. Near Lamb Head, in the extreme south-east of Stronsay, are the remains of a very extensive pier, erected before the time of the Norsemen.

Leaving Whitehall pier, we next sail due north across Sanday Sound to Kettletoft Bay in Sanday. This bay and that of Otterswick in the north afford safe anchorage; but the low, flat island, with its numerous projecting points and skerries, presents many dangers to navigation. As early as 1529 a lighthouse was erected on the extreme eastern point of the island, and was called the Star, from which, it is said, the headland derived its name, Start Point. Long after that time, however, the island was noted for the number of shipwrecks which occurred on its shores.

Sanday is emphatically the "Sand Island." Its soil is sandy and generally fertile, and its surface is low and flat. Only in the south-west is there





*Orkney Villages.—I.*

1. St. Margaret's Hope, South Ronaldsay. 2. Pierowall, Westray.  
3. Whitehall, Stronsay. 4. Finstown, Firth.

any rising ground, where the highest point in the island reaches a height of a little over two hundred feet.

From Kettletoft pier our course is now south-west, until we double Spur Ness, the most southerly point of Sanday; then turning northwards, we make for Calf Sound, at the north end of Eday. This sheltered channel, between Eday and the Calf of Eday, is memorable as the scene of the capture of the pirate Gow in 1725.

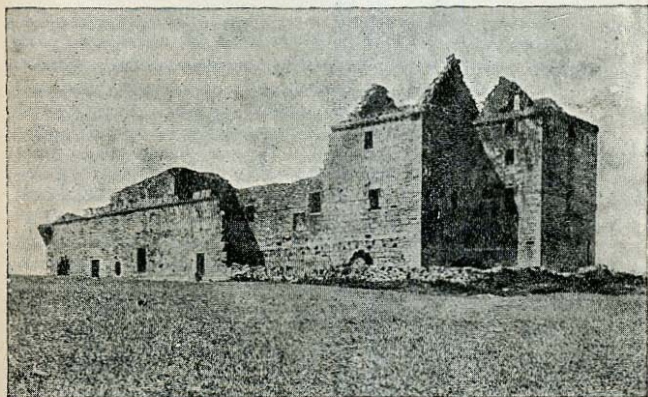
Gow, or Smith, was a native of Stromness, where "Gow's Garden," a name given to a patch of ground on the east side of the harbour, afterwards occupied by a shipbuilding yard, seems to mark the site of his father's house. The name Gow, however, which is the Gaelic equivalent of Smith, indicates a Scottish rather than an Orcadian descent. In 1724 Gow was sailing as second mate on board the *George*, an English vessel of two hundred tons, mounting eighteen guns, and trading on the Barbary coast. He and several others of the crew mutinied, murdered the captain, and started on what proved to be a very brief career of piracy.

After a few months' cruising, Gow carried his ship, now named the *Revenge*, into Stromness to refit; but as he soon made the place too hot for safety, he put to sea in February 1725. Having sailed north round Westray, he turned south towards Eday, and in beating through Calf Sound ran his ship aground on the Calf, opposite Carrick House, then occupied by Mr. James Fea of Clestran. To him Gow applied for help to get his ship off the rocks; but the opportunity was too good to be missed. and Fea by various stratagems succeeded in making



prisoners of Gow and his crew. They were handed over to the authorities, and afterwards suffered the penalty of their crimes in London.

Nearly a century later, in 1814, Sir Walter Scott made his memorable visit to Orkney and Shetland, and the legends which he collected regarding Gow formed a centre round which he wove his well-known story, "The Pirate."



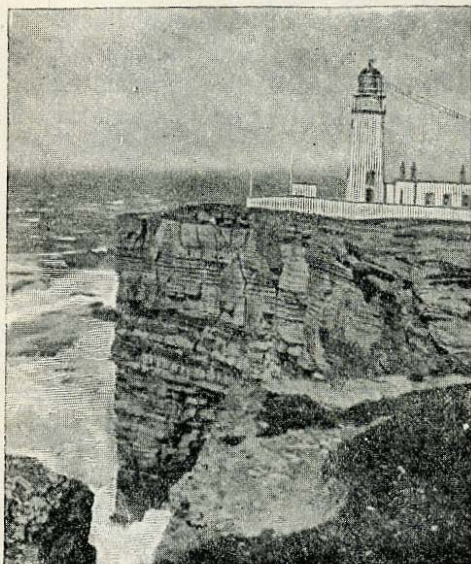
*Noltland Castle.*

Carrick was at one time the site of a thriving manufacture of salt, but that too is now a tale of the past.

On leaving Carrick our steamer passes out of Calf Sound between the Red Head on the west and the Grey Head on the east, so named from the colour of their sandstone cliffs. The stone of the former has been much in favour for building purposes, as St. Magnus Cathedral can testify, and has on occasion found its way as far south as London.

A north-westerly course now brings us to Pierowall

in Westray, our last port of call. The long, low island guarding it on the north-east, fertile and well cultivated,



*Noup Head Lighthouse.*

is Papa Westray. Towards its south end is a small lake, on a holm in which are the ruins of a chapel dedicated to St. Tredwall, a place of great sanctity in former days, and a special shrine for such pilgrims as suffered from sore eyes. Long

after the Reformation, indeed, we are told that the minister of the island had much difficulty in preventing his flock from resorting thither to pay their devotions to the saint before assembling in the church.

The chief point of interest in Westray is Noltland Castle, now roofless indeed, but scarcely yet a ruin. It was built early in the fifteenth century by Bishop Tulloch, and afterwards passed into the hands of Sir Gilbert Balfour, Master of the Household to Mary Queen of Scots. After the escape of the unfortunate queen from Lochleven Castle, he was



ordered to prepare Noltland for her reception. Had the ill-fated Mary turned northwards instead of southwards when the day went against her at Langside, and had she sought shelter among these northern islands instead of trusting to the tender mercies of her cousin and rival, Queen Elizabeth, what a romantic



*North Ronaldsay Lighthouse.*

chapter might have been added to the history of Orkney!

Westray contains much good arable land, and supports a large population. On the west side the scenery is bold and romantic; and from Fitty Hill, which is over five hundred and fifty feet in height, the view extends to Foula in Shetland and the Fair Isle. The cliffs facing the Atlantic are lofty and picturesque. About a mile south of Noup Head, the western extremity of the island, is the Gentlemen's Cave, where five Orcadian adherents of "Prince Charlie" are said to have found shelter for several months after the "'Forty-five."

From Fitty Hill we may obtain a distant view of North Ronaldsay, the most northerly and perhaps the

most verdant island of the group. Separated from its nearest neighbour, Sanday, by the wild and stormy North Ronaldsay Firth, the crossing of which in the usual open boat is often dangerous, even when possible, this island impresses the visitor as being very much cut off from the world. But in such matters all depends upon comparison, and doubtless there are many who regard the whole of our islands as similarly remote and inaccessible.

A stone dyke surrounds the island of North Ronaldsay, outside which a number of native sheep pick up a living on the "banks" and even in the "ebb." On the most northerly point, near Dennis Head, stands one of the finest of our lighthouses; for North Ronaldsay, like Sanday, has been the scene of many a shipwreck.

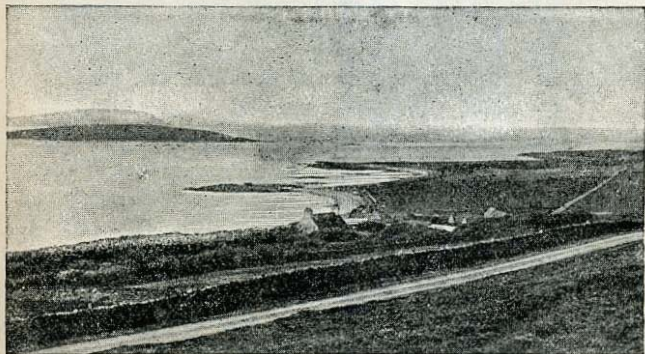
Our return from Westray to Kirkwall is made direct, and we now keep to the west of Eday, passing Faray and its Holm, and having the heath-clad hills of Rousay clear in view to the westward. Rousay far surpasses the other islands of the northern group in its hill and cliff scenery, its highest elevation reaching eight hundred and twenty feet, and its western shore presenting many romantic effects in stack and cave. Among its other attractive features are the Loch of Wasbister, in the north; the Burn of Westness and Westness House, overlooking the sacred isle of Eynhallow and the tumultuous Roost of Burgar; and the modern mansion of Trumbland, looking out on the calm sound and the green island of Veira or Wyre.

Nearer our course, however, lies the long, low stretch of Egilsay, the "Church Island" of the



Norsemen, where the saintly Earl Magnus was done to death. The present ruined church, with its far-seen round tower, though of later date, doubtless occupies the site of that earlier church which was the scene of his murder.

Wyre, too, soon opens out to view, with its ruined chapel, and the mound which marks the traditional site of "Cubbie Roo's Castle," the home of the once formidable Kolbein Hruga, whose name is even yet used to terrify into good behaviour some obstreperous youngster, in the awful threat, "Cubbie Roo'll get thee!"



*Westness, Eynhallow, and Costa Head.*

Gairsay, with its rounded hill over three hundred feet high, next claims our attention, and the name of Sweyn Holm, lying off its eastern shore, recalls to us Sweyn Asleifson and the great drinking-hall which he built on the island when he made it his winter home: the summer home of the stout old Viking was on board his long-ship. But now the tower of St. Magnus rising ahead reminds us that our day's sail is at an end, and we are shortly alongside Kirkwall pier once more.



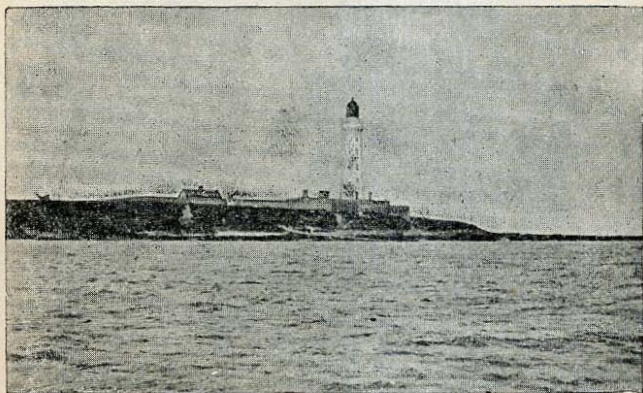
*Stromness Harbour.*

### Among the South Isles.

For a visit to the South Isles of Orkney, Stromness is our best starting-point. It is the natural centre of communication for this group—or rather for the western division of the group, for South Ronaldsay and Burray may be visited equally well from Kirkwall by way of Scapa Bay. The small steamer which makes the regular round of the islands will serve us for the beginning of our tour, but we must soon branch off from the ordinary route if we are to see much of interest.

The green island of Graemsay, with its beach of gleaming white sand, looks very attractive as we sail out of Stromness harbour. Its chief attraction to visitors is the lofty tower of the East Lighthouse, which serves, along with the lower West Lighthouse,





*Graemsay East Lighthouse.*

to guide ships through the swift tideway of Hoy Sound. The official name, indeed, for these lights is not Graemsay, but Hoy.

Graemsay is separated from Hoy by Burra Sound, and here we shall leave our steamer, landing at Linksness, the best starting-point for the long walk and climb which we have before us. Hoy is next to the Mainland in size, but little of its surface is cultivated, and roads are few and far between. So we strike westward, and, leaving cultivation behind, make for the Meadow of the Kame, keeping the Ward Hill and its neighbour the Cuilags on our left. There is a famous echo here, which we may stop to test before beginning the climb to the Kame itself—a long ridge some twelve hundred feet high, which runs from the Cuilags to the sheer precipice on the north.

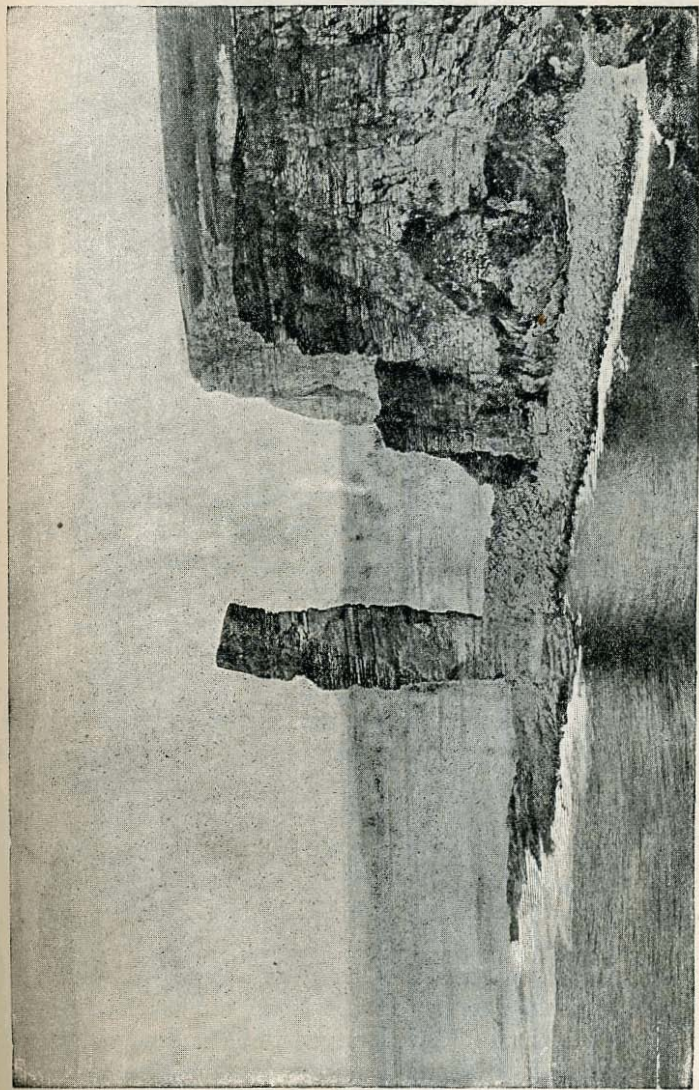
The coast-line we now reach is one of the loftiest in the British Isles, rising at St. John's Head to a perpendicular height of 1,140 feet. With due care

we may approach the edge and look down this fearful and giddy height, but it is not a place for foolhardy daring. The view of this stupendous cliff, with the white surges breaking a thousand feet below in a slow and strangely noiseless movement, and the sea-gulls flitting like midges in their mazy dance midway between us and the blue water, is something which cannot be described and cannot be forgotten.

Beyond St. John's Head the ground falls to half the height or less, and a couple of miles brings us to the far-famed Old Man of Hoy. This wonderful pillar stands well out from the cliff, on a ledge of rock which connects with the land near sea-level. The height of the pillar is four hundred and fifty feet; that of the cliff on which we stand is about fifty feet less. Tradition tells us that the Old Man of Hoy has suffered considerably from the battering of wind and wave even within recent times. It is said that he formerly stood on two legs, but that many years ago part of the divided base fell before the Atlantic breakers, and left him standing on one leg, as we now see him. Doubtless time and the weather will one day lay him low, but in the meantime he looks fairly solid and durable.

Another mile or more and we reach Rora Head, the most westerly point of Orkney, and turn south-eastward towards Rackwick Bay, and now one of the finest views in all the islands meets our gaze. Beyond the deep glen at our feet stretches the great western sea-wall, gleaming red in the sunshine. In the bay below us the rollers are breaking in ceaseless foam over a strip of shining sand and gravel. The little township of Rackwick is a patchwork of





*The Old Man of Hoy.*

green and gold, contrasting strangely with the dark glen and the towering hills behind.

The glen itself, we find as we make the descent into it, is a bit of true highland scenery—the only bit, indeed, which Orkney has to show. Its rugged, lonely grandeur is unique in these islands. Heather and bracken, wild rose and honeysuckle, juniper, dwarf birch, and willow mingle in such luxuriance as to suggest a more favoured latitude. The glen of Berriedale, which opens out of the main valley to the west, is sometimes called the “Garden of Orkney,” but it is a garden of nature’s own.

Hoy is for the most part of a sterner aspect, as we shall quickly find if we cross the valley and dare to attack the Ward Hill. The only risk we shall run in doing so will be that of stiff limbs for several days to come, unless, indeed, a sudden descent of cloud or mist should find us unprovided with a guide who knows the “lay of the land.” The sturdy luxuriance of the heather is likely to be our chief difficulty in the climb.

Standing at last on the summit of the Ward Hill, we find ourselves at a height of 1,564 feet above the sea, on a somewhat bare and stony plateau, and not far from the highest point there is, curiously enough, an excellent spring of water. A very clear day is necessary if we are to enjoy the sight of all that this elevation commands. We shall then see the whole archipelago spread out before us as on a map—a marvellous panorama of sea and land. Even the Fair Isle shows its conical head above the north-eastern horizon. The north coast of Scotland stretches out westward to Cape Wrath, and in the blue distance



to the southwards many a peak of the Northern Highlands can be distinguished.

If we descend the hill on its southern slope, we shall find a short though a steep way to the next point of interest in Hoy—the Dwarfie Stone. The description of this curious relic of the industry of some unknown workman has been well given by Hugh Miller, whose name may still be read carved on its bare interior, while the legendary interest may best be gathered from Sir Walter Scott in his notes to “The Pirate.”

South of the valley in which the Dwarfie Stone lies, the ground rises to a long stretch of moorland, broken only by burns and lochs, till it dips down to the fringe of low, cultivated ground round Longhope, in the parish of Walls. This part of the island, however, is too distant to be included in our day's excursion, and may be visited direct by steamer from Stromness some other day.

Longhope, as we shall then see, is a sheltered bay nearly four miles long and about one mile in average width, and forms a magnificent natural harbour. Before the days of steam as many as a hundred and fifty vessels might be seen at anchor here, sheltered from the westerly gales which barred their passage through the Pentland Firth. The martello towers on either side of the entrance remind us of a time when storms were not the only danger to our shipping. Protection of a kind more necessary to-day is afforded by the strong revolving light on Cantick Head, and on occasion by the Longhope lifeboat, the heroism of whose hardy crew has often shown itself in deeds of noble daring such as no sea-roving Viking of the ancient days could have surpassed.

At the western extremity of Longhope stands the mansion house of Melsetter, with its extensive gardens. On the farther side of the bay is South Walls, a peninsula which is literally "almost an island," as the waters of Aith Hope almost meet those of Longhope across a narrow "aith" or isthmus.

Opposite the entrance to Longhope, whence we start on our return journey to Stromness, we pass the island of Flotta, the "flat island" of the Norsemen, thriving and well cultivated, especially towards the east, where it curves round Pan Hope. To the south of it lies the green island of Switha, to the north-east the tiny Calf of Flotta, and to the north-west, off Mill Bay, the island of Faray. Farther north, and close to the shore of Hoy, lies Risa, or Risa Little, a favourite nesting-place of many of our sea-birds. The last island we notice on our homeward sail is Cava, a couple of miles eastward of which we see the beacon which marks a skerry known as the Barrel of Butter.

The eastern group of the South Isles is more closely connected with the East Mainland, being divided from Holm by Holm Sound, where lie the two green islets of Lamb Holm and Glims Holm. Immediately to the south is Burray, the *Borgarey* of the Norsemen, so called, doubtless, from the two brochs or *borgs* whose ruins still exist in the north of the island. To the west of Burray lies the peat-covered islet of Hunda.

South of Burray, across the narrow channel of Water Sound, lies the large and populous island of South Ronaldsay. At the head of the little bay of the same name stands the neat and thriving village



—almost a town—of St. Margaret's Hope, pleasantly situated among its fertile gardens and fields, and with a substantial pier to accommodate its increasing traffic.

Westward from "The Hope" lies Hoxa, a peninsula cut off by Widewall Bay on the south. On the narrow isthmus or "aith" stands a green mound, the "haug," or howe, from which the name of *Haugseith* or Hoxa is derived. On the shores of Widewall Bay at low water we may see the submerged peat-moss and decaying remains of large trees which mark a bygone stage in the climate of the islands, and likewise tell of gradual subsidence of the land.

From south to north, South Ronaldsay measures about seven miles. The surface is well cultivated, and the highest point, the Ward Hill, is only some three hundred and sixty feet high. The bay of Burwick, in the south-west corner of the island, was formerly the landing-place for the south mails, which were carried across the Pentland Firth in an open boat. Some of the rock scenery in the southern part is very fine, especially "The Gloup," near Halcro Head, an open pit near the shore into which the sea enters by a subterranean channel.

To the south-west we see the lonely, storm-swept island of Swona with its half-dozen or so of houses, and to the south rise the twin lighthouse towers on the Pentland Skerries, only one of which is now used as a light. Here we reach the southern extremity of the county, some forty miles in a straight line from North Ronaldsay, the extreme northern point.