

THE NESS OF BRODGAR

Investigating a prehistoric complex in the heart of Neolithic Orkney

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News from the Ness No. 36



Sponsor a Square 2023

Autumn gales, Storm Babet, rain and beautiful rainbows have been the weather theme in Orkney this October, while we keep busy dealing with finds and samples from the 2023 excavation, writing grant applications, planning for 2024 (and beyond) and generally working hard.



This newsletter is to showcase some of finds and excavation activity at the Ness of Brodgar in July and August 2023.

We are very grateful to all of you who visited the Ness this year and sponsored a square. If you haven't seen the site yet we thoroughly recommend a visit in 2024 - your last chance to see digging in action, although our work will continue when excavation ends.

The 2024 dig dates are here.

If you decide to visit, we cannot emphasise enough the need to book accommodation soon – Orkney fills up fast for the summer and here's a good website to start with.

And don't just come to visit the Ness of Brodgar - although we look forward to welcoming you - Orkney has much to offer.



The finds...

Now to the business at hand. Many of you sponsored an excavation square this summer and the square number is the first element of each find that follows:



Square AC14: Structure One. Trench P. Small find 43885.

A polissoir made from quartz - a hard, tough waterworn rock, probably found on an Orkney beach - used to polish and sharpen stone tools, like axes.

As we progress further into our post-excavation research, pieces like this, and the tools polished on it, will be examined for use-wear, which can tell us about how they were used.

We can also look for residues, also revealing information about what it was used for, and we may even be able to extract plant or animal DNA from the surfaces.



A35: Structure Twenty-Six. Trench P. SF 44152.

A stone slab, with a hole drilled in it, that had been re-used as paving outside Structure Twenty-Six. This piece caused much speculation and discussion - the standing stone outside Structure Ten was also perforated and, of course, there was the nearby Odin Stone - until it was destroyed in 1814.

This slab will need careful thought and study in the future.

Did it originally have a practical role? Was the hole for cord to pull the slab into place in some way? Or is it decorative, or otherwise significant?



X82: Trench J. SF 44169.

A row of cattle teeth, which came apart as soon as we tried to remove them from between the rocks they (and their jawbone) had fallen between.

This, and other photographs, are our best record of these teeth, which will tell us much about the animal they came from.



AH78: Structure Twenty-Seven. Trench T. SF 44252.

Estella was one of our 2023 Field School students from Willamette University, Oregon.

The picture shows her in the Finds Hut, with Rosalind, a member of the Ness finds team, about to clean a flint scraper Estella found.

This must be done very carefully to ensure no residues or wear marks are damaged/removed.

Digging is the archaeological process we all - diggers, finds team and visitors - find instantly exciting. But it's actually the part that tells us least. Most of what we understand about our Neolithic ancestors comes from the post-excavation analysis and work.



U47: Structure Twelve. Trench P. SF 44334.

A stone spatulate tool - a regular find at the Ness of Brodgar, with a few rougher pieces from other Orcadian sites, but not further afield.

[Watch the two videos linked here](#) to see what archaeologists do when they study artefacts after excavation.

It's about building knowledge, making comparisons, testing and documenting the observations and science for future scholars.



AF39: Central paved area. Trench P. SF 44751.

This was an exciting exciting find! It's a pretty much complete, small, decorated pot, well excavated by Denise, one of the UHI Archaeology Institute students.

Admittedly, it's a squashed complete pot, but it's rare for us to find intact ceramic pieces.

We will carefully examine all aspects of the vessel, when we get it into the laboratory, to tell us what it was used for and to think about the clay it was made from. And also to consider why a whole pot, rather than pieces, was deposited where it was found.



H44: Structure Twelve. Trench P. SF 44838.

This was another exciting find, following two previous discoveries of peck-dressed stone triangles in and around Structures Ten and Twelve.

Peck dressing is striking a stone face with another, harder, rock - perhaps quartz or flint - to make a make dimpled surface.

It's a technique used to great decorative effect on sandstone used in Structures Ten and Twelve.



AP81: Trench T. Structure Twenty-Seven.

Two Willamette University diggers working on a grey-blue clay surface in Structure Twenty-Seven and keeping back a little to allow for some experimentation by one of our artists-in-residence, Diane Eagles.



F75: Trench J. Structure Five. SF 44238.

A "Skaill knife" - a stone flake, made from a beach cobble, with a useful sharp edge for butchering, skinning and chopping. [Click here](#) to find out more, and to understand how these artefacts got their name.



T46: Trench P. Structure Twelve. SF 44349.

A lump of haematite from beside the building's west central pier. You can see the areas smoothed down when it was rubbed against another surface - be that stone, pottery, hide and wood. to apply its beautiful red colour.



J26: Trench P. Structure Ten.

This is Lisa, planning the area she had previously been excavating.

It looks uncomfortable and bad for backs - and it is - but it's a vital part of the record-keeping process.

[Find out lots more here](#) and [look at the contortions needed to do the job justice here](#).



R88: Trench J. Extension over the "Great Wall".

Another archaeologist, Lewis - "in a crull" as we'd say here in Orkney - in the tight space outside the newly exposed section of the northern boundary wall.

He is recording the masonry found at the bottom of the trench that had been deliberately toppled from the monumental wall during its prehistoric demolition.

A vital task so we have scale plans of the whole site.



AN83: Trench T. Structure Twenty-Seven.

The legs and arms belong to Rick, Structure Twenty-Seven's supervisor. He's just lifted a stone roof tile to reveal a deposit of pebbles, along with a hammerstone, in a damp depression in the debris covering the building's floor surface.

In this photograph you can see the area differs from that around it.

Archaeologists always study the surfaces they're working on, examining what's there, what it's made of and when it changes by colour, texture or in any other way.

All are indicators of past activity and our role is record and save that information so that we, and researchers of the future (with techniques we can only dream of), have as much information as possible for interpretation.

And what did we think was going on with this patch of gravel?



AN32: Trench P. Structure One. SF 44914.

You can see how small this piece of decorated stone is.

When Emma found it in the northern end of Structure One, the stone was lying face down. It had an unusual gingery brown colour, unlike other stones in her area, and she turned it over to find this.

The incised decoration is typical Ness lines and cross-hatching, but to the left is almost a Ness "butterfly" and other fine markings.

Our expert on Neolithic artwork is Dr Antonia Thomas and you can [view her very recent talk on the subject here](#).



T46: Trench P. Structure Twelve. SF 45895.

This piece of pottery is a carination – which is at the point of joining together a rounded base to the sides of an inward sloping pot.

This paper has a fine illustration of a large carinated bowl on its front.

The paper is also an introduction to dating Neolithic pottery, another important process in the life of artefacts after they've been excavated. This will be a major post-excavation task, and cost, for the Ness of Brodgar project.

The sherd came from Structure Twenty-Four, which lies under Structure Twelve, and the fact that the bowl is carinated places it in an early Neolithic tradition of pot-making. It also has residues on its inner face, which can tell us about the pot's use.



R72: Trench J.

We're very fortunate to see many thousands of visitors every dig season. This one turned up, with his creator, Peter Lord, in early July.

Here Morph is sitting on one of sets of steps built into the inner face of the "Great Wall".



AP, AQ and AR 79, 80 and 81: Trench T.

Structure Twenty-Seven produced many exciting finds in 2023, including multiple fragments of prehistoric wood.

They were small, approximately postage stamp size, slivers in a grey/blue clayey deposit. That was overlain by stone roof tiles and their removal revealed the timber fragments, perhaps part of Structure Twenty-Seven's roof.

At the Ness, wood (and other organic material) rarely survives - except in very special conditions - and in this case seems to be due to an anaerobic micro-context created by damp clay below and stone above.

We may also have some grass matting surviving from this area too!





AR82: Trench T. Structure Twenty-Seven. SF 45890.

Structure Twenty-Seven also produced the most exciting find of 2023.

We believe this is substantial part of a plank of wood.

Its survival was totally unexpected and it took several days of discussion, careful planning and excavation by Elena before the plank could be removed.

It has now been boxed up, with water, to preserve it until UHI Archaeology Institute botanical specialist, associate professor Scott Timpany, takes over.

We will be able to tell much from his examination, but already know it features tool marks.

Will the wood be a native Orcadian species, or something washed north from mainland Britain? Or, even more exciting, driftwood that made its way across the Atlantic from the Americas?



C44: Trench P. Structure Thirty. SF 46169.

A most beautiful fragment of a Late Neolithic pillow stone - a type of artefact we find at the Ness and rarely at other sites.

What makes this treasure particularly interesting is that we already have two other pillow stones made from this beautiful rock - rhodochrosite - which comes from inaccessible veins in the island of Hoy.



AV17: Trench P. Structure 14.

Sue and Rosalind, both research students with the UHI Archaeology Institute, are masked and gloved up as they undertake a programme of eDNA sampling across the Ness.

Here's what environmental DNA is about. In archaeology it may allow us to fill in gaps in our understanding of life on ancient sites where no other traces - such as seeds, pollen, bones and fibres - have survived.



AP64: Trench T.

The smaller rectangles in this picture are where eDNA samples were taken in the midden layers in Trench T.

The larger rectangles are where micromorphological samples were previously removed.

Techniques like these allow us to lay down sample material for future analysis. Not only for the Ness team to examine and question during post-excavation analysis, but also future researchers who might have even more sophisticated techniques.



W42,43,44: Trench P. Structure Twelve.

The very red surface in this image is the by-product of intensive heat and [here's where you can learn a great deal about what was going on.](#)

The photograph is of Structure Twelve's north-western recess - the "slow cooker". Note the arc of stake-holes.



H19: Trench P. Structure Ten.

Last, but not least, here's Nick Card (site director), Professor Mark Edmonds (Ness research coordinator - among many other tasks) and 2023 Structure Ten supervisor, Nick, pondering Structure Twenty and other possible early walling peeping from underneath the building.



Thank you again for your interest and involvement in the Ness of Brodgar project.

We hope you can continue to support us and here is where to do so. Digging is coming to an end but exploration is not.

Christmas is inexorably coming and we're working on some exciting new lines for the Ness online shop. The plan is for pieces to appear by early November, and we hope you'll enjoy them when they do become available.



On our website, most of the individual [structure pages](#) have been updated (there's still a few to do) and there's lots of new content, including [superb annotated 3d models](#) from Paul Durdin and [assorted videos](#) from Prof Scott Pike and Jim Rylatt.



Finally, Nick and Anne had a fine time with BBC Radio Scotland's excellent Rachel Stewart of *Out of Doors* this summer, taking her on tour of the Ness.

[The podcast is available now](#), so get a cup of coffee, even a dram, and transport yourself to Orkney and the glories of the Ness.