



Until fairly recently, Late Neolithic houses in Britain were extremely rare and almost unknown outside of the Northern Isles. The best known settlement is Skara Brae on Orkney and this has often been considered as the archetypal 'Neolithic Village' though this hypothesis is becoming increasingly challenged.

The Late Neolithic conventionally spans the period from 3000 BC until the arrival of Beakers at about 2400 BC. This is also the currency of a pan-British pottery type called Grooved Ware with which the settlements are usually associated. This pottery appears to have had its origins in Orkney but quickly spread over Britain and Ireland.

The site at Skara Brae was discovered around 1850 after a great storm had washed away part of the sand dunes on Skail Bay, Orkney. The major excavations took place in the late 1920s during consolidation of the remains. Since then, comparable house sites have been found in the Orkney Islands at Rinyo, Crossiecrown, Links of Noltland, Pool, Barnhouse, Ness of Brodgar and, despite subtle differences in architecture and internal arrangement they display an undoubted cultural unity.

Like slate, the Caithness flagstone that forms the bedrock of the Orkneys and NE Scotland splits along natural fault lines thus offering an excellent and durable building material. The tabular nature of the sandstone is such that internal fittings can also be constructed from thin flagstones and what makes these sites special is the internal 'furniture' that they preserve.

These stone built houses are roughly square internally with thick walls often with alcoves built into them. They usually have a central hearth defined by a rectangular setting of edge-set stones. Against the wall, either side of the entranceway, two larger rectangular areas, also defined by edge-set flagstones, are interpreted as frames to contain bedding materials. Opposite the entrance, built against the back wall, is a stone-built set of shelves or 'dresser': these seem to be deliberately placed so as to be

immediately visible when one enters the building. Set into the floor may be other smaller features, also defined by edge-set stones perhaps for short term storage of foodstuffs or water. There may also be quern or grinding stones for the preparation of grain and other foods.

Despite the similarity in architecture, some buildings may have had different functions. At Barnhouse, for example, House 2 is a double structure whilst House 8 is surrounded by its own enclosure wall. At Skara Brae, House 8 is slightly more oval in internal plan and is set apart from the rest of the settlement. At Ness of Brodgar, the buildings are very much larger than the other sites, effectively halls with internal stone-built piers and the settlement is enclosed by what appears to have been a large defensive wall.

In the Shetland Isles, a series of small stone built houses also seem to date to this period and are associated with cairns and field systems. Less regular than the Orcadian examples, and not securely dated, these Shetland houses may also preserve traces of internal fittings, have wall alcoves, and internal piers may be to facilitate roofing.

In other areas, with less suitable or no building stone, survival is less good and few structures are known. In 1972–3, a small rectangular structure defined by postholes and with a central square and stone-lined hearth was discovered below a kerbed cairn at Raigmore near Inverness. There were also some internal pits and postholes and the structure was associated with Grooved Ware pottery. In 1979 two flimsy structures were located below round barrows at Trelystan in Powys. The walls were formed by wooden stakes but each contained a square central hearth and internal pits. There were no traces of furnishings but the internal area of these structures is similar to those at Skara Brae. Heat cracked stones from the internal pits may suggest cooking activities although it has also been suggested that they may have operated as sweat houses.

Structures similar to Trelystan have also been discovered beneath the bank at the large Wessex henge monument at Durrington Walls. Here hearths were set into beaten chalk floors and traces of slots within these floors suggest that they had furnishings similar to those at Skara Brae but made out of wood. The Durrington structures seem to have had various phases of occupation, perhaps suggesting seasonal visits.

The evidence from Durrington Walls, Trelystan and Raigmore indicate that outside of Orkney these structures were quite flimsy and therefore are only likely to survive in protected environments such as below later burial monuments or banks. It is unlikely that they would survive any ploughing or similar agricultural activity. Ness of Brodgar aside, the size and layout of these structures, if indeed they are houses, suggests occupancy by small family groups.

## Further Reading

**Britnell, W. J.** 1982. The Excavation of Two Round Barrows at Trelystan, Powys. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 48, 203–278

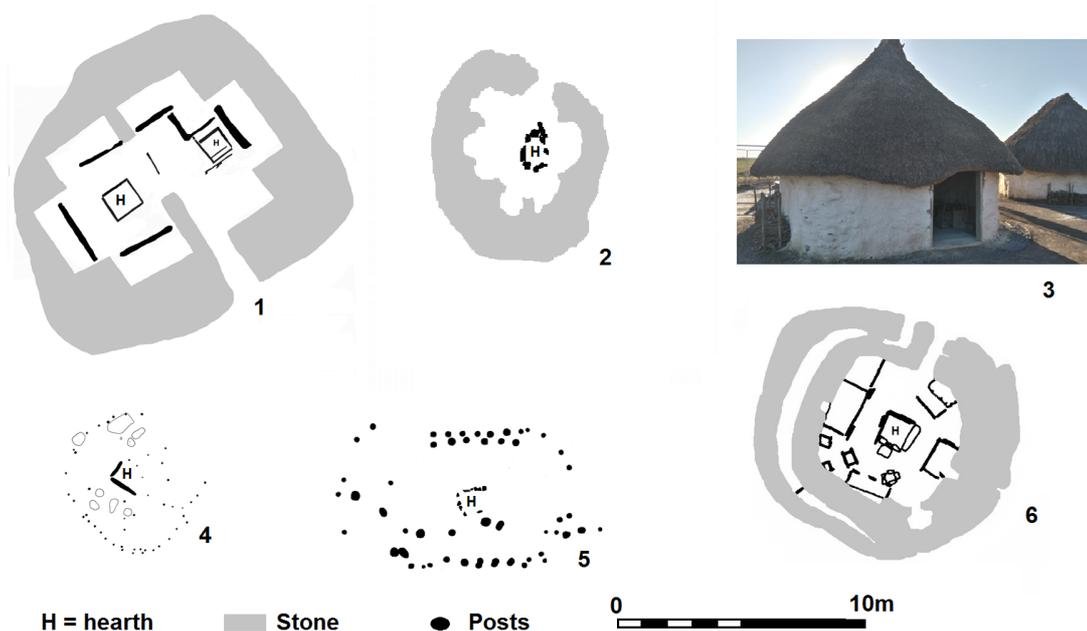
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**Richards, C.** 2005. *Dwelling among the Monuments. The Neolithic village of Barnhouse, Maeshowe passage grave and surrounding monuments at Stenness, Orkney*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute Monographs

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*Plans of Late Neolithic houses mentioned in the text. 1 – Barnhouse, Orkney; 2 – Scord of Brouster, Shetland; 3 – Reconstructions of the Durrington Walls structures at Stonehenge visitor centre, 4 – Trelystan, Powys; 5 – Raigmore, Highland; 6 – Skara Brae, Orkney.*

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