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# SKAILL FARM, WESTNESS, ROUSAY, ORKNEY:

A MEASURED SURVEY OF A  
19TH CENTURY FARMSTEAD



Piers Dixon

2019



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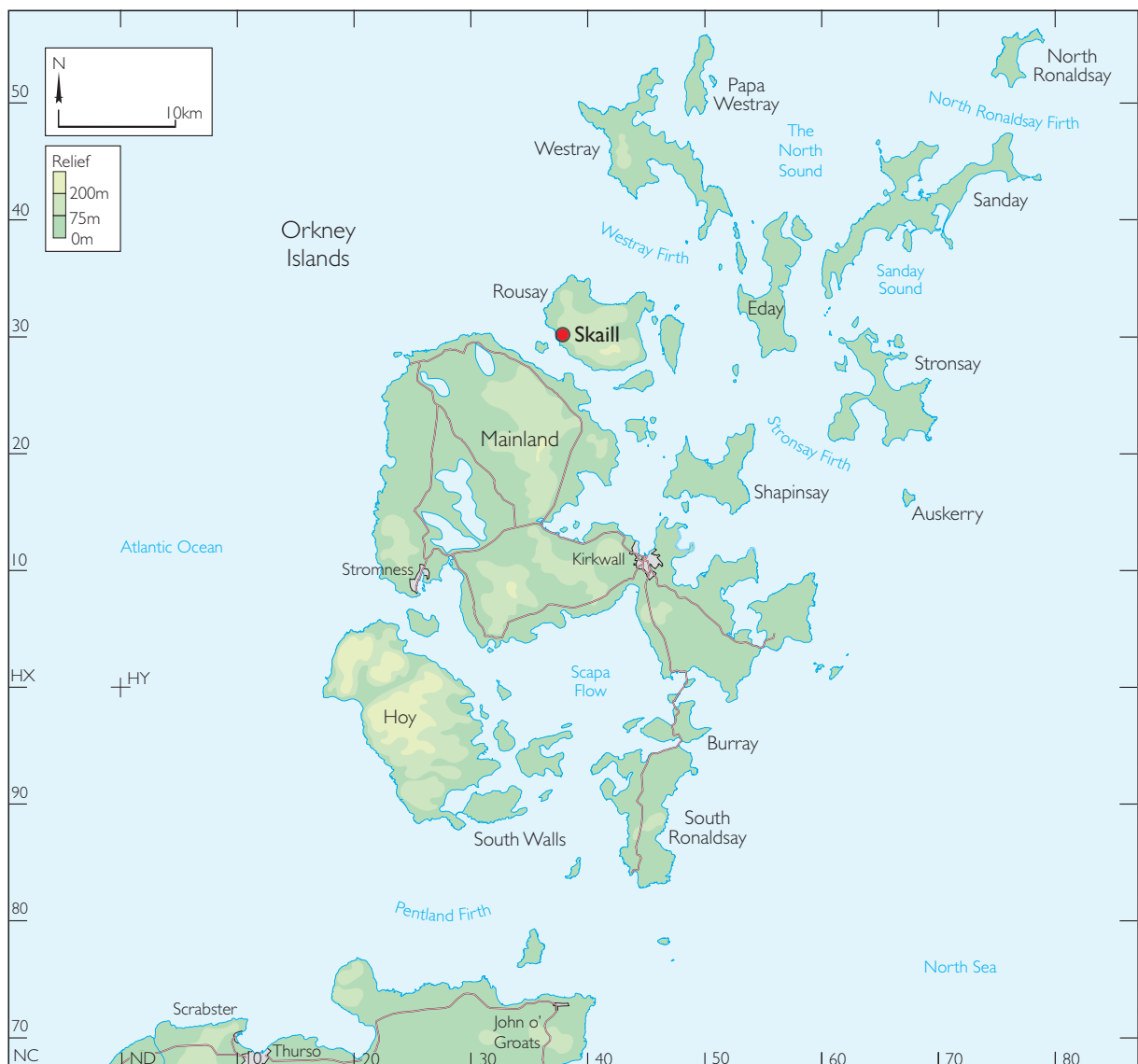
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# INTRODUCTION

The farmstead of Skail (Canmore ID 351514) is situated on the west coast of the island of Rousay (Illus 1), immediately south of the graveyard of St Mary's Church of Westness (Canmore ID 2281). It lies within three conjoined drystone enclosures situated between the pebble storm beach on the west and the improved fields to the east (Illus 2). A measured survey of the farmstead was carried out by Historic Environment Scotland (HES) in June 2017 and April 2018 as part of its contribution to a community heritage and research project led by Dan Lee of Orkney College, University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), into 'The Landscape of Change: Archaeologies of the Rousay Clearances'.

The HES survey team comprised Piers Dixon, George Geddes, Heather Stoddart, Steve Wallace and William Wyeth. The survey resulted in a plan of the entire site being drawn at a scale of 1:250, detailed building plans and sections drawn at 1:50, ground photography and low-level aerial imagery gained using an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). This report was written by Piers Dixon and edited by John Sherriff. The drawn illustrations have been prepared by Georgina Brown, Kat Gilmour, Alison McCaig and Heather Stoddart.

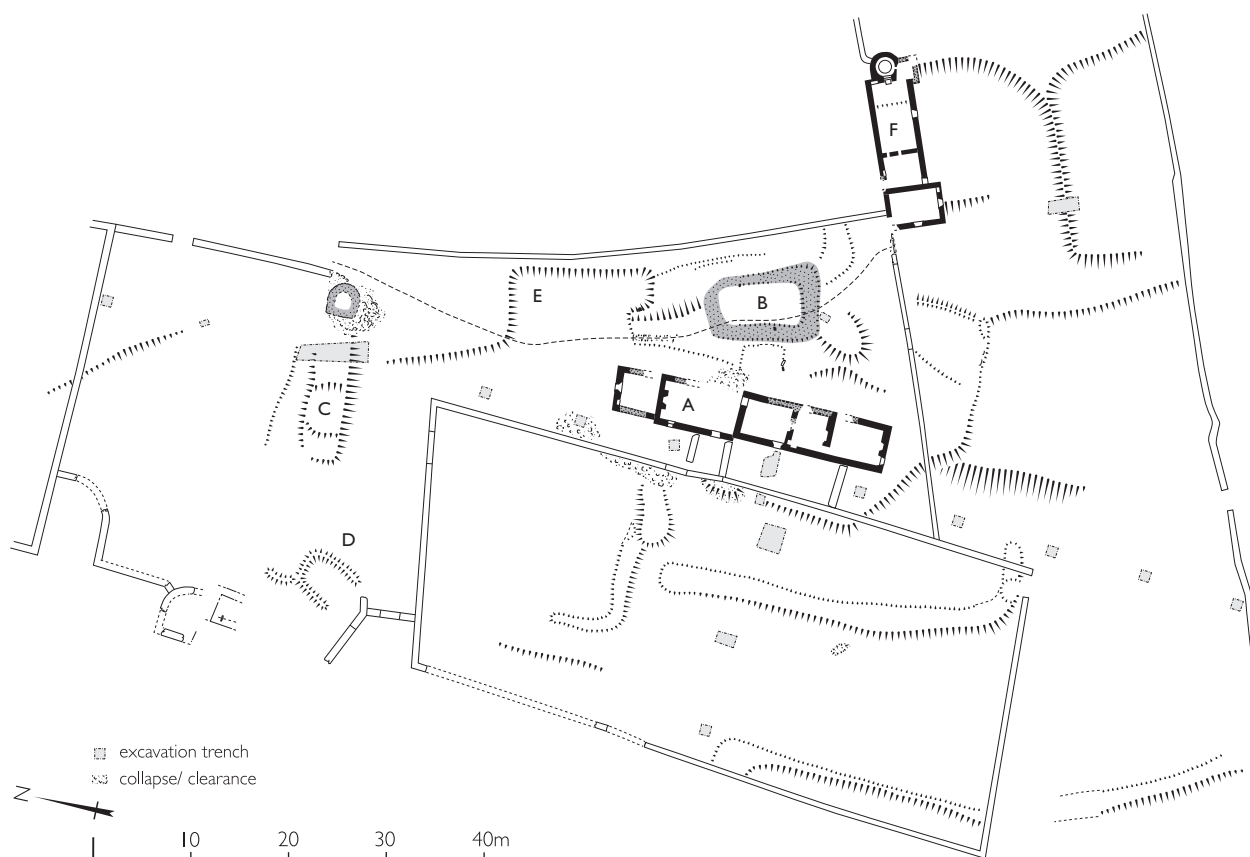


Illus 1. --- Location map SCI777303

# THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY FARMSTEAD

The earliest useful map evidence is provided by an estate plan (Robson 1842) which shows that the farmstead at that time comprised five buildings set within a partly enclosed landscape containing a patchwork of cultivated and uncultivated ground. However, while this plan is useful in depicting the disposition of buildings within the steading and the character of the landscape in which it sits, it contains too many inconsistencies for it to be considered anything other than a sketch plan that ought to be used with caution. These inconsistencies, which become apparent when comparing features shown on the plan with the same features depicted on later Ordnance Survey mapping, include the line of the coast in relation to both the alignment of the Loch of Skail and the farmstead. The angle of error (about 40°) suggests that the plan was compiled from a series of small divorced surveys that were probably comparatively accurate in themselves but simply stitched together wrongly.

In 1842 the farm was in a joint tenancy - Drummond Louttit and his family farming the north part of the land and William Corsie and his family the southern part. What the estate plan does not inform us about, however, is what the function was of each of the buildings in the steading. And, while it is reasonable to suppose that each family would have required a dwelling, it is not at all clear whether each family would have had use of its own byre or corn-drying kiln.



Illus 2. Plan of farmhouse and associated buildings and enclosures. SC1777303

The estate plan depicts a long range standing on the east side of an enclosure with an outshot attached to the north half of its west side. This corresponds closely with the surviving remains (A on Illus 2) and the construction of this building can therefore be assigned with some confidence to the period before 1842. Also existing at this time were buildings B, C and possibly D, all now reduced to footings, and perhaps the kiln-barn (F). Building B stands immediately east of the farmhouse and is subrectangular on plan, measuring 12m in length by 8m in breadth over walls reduced to spreads of rubble about 1.75m in thickness. The remains are somewhat depleted at the north-east corner by a later track. The building also appears to overlie a thick, but low, bank which runs into and below its north end and emerges from under its south-east corner. From here it extends 6m east-south-east to a point where it is overlain by a field wall, beyond which there is no sign of it in a cultivated field. Excavations by UHI in 2018 revealed demolition rubble and the presence of earlier buildings in this area (Lee *pers. com.*).

About 35m to the north are the footings of a kiln-barn (C) with a pot at its east end measuring about 1.8m in diameter within a wall 1m in thickness by 0.5m in height. The grass-grown footings of the rest of the building extend 15m downslope to the west and contain three compartments. A trench excavated across the northernmost by UHI in 2017 (Illus 3) revealed a flagstone floor between two parallel stone walls (Lee et al. 2017, 146). Another possible building (D), its walls reduced to grass-grown banks, is situated 10m to the west. Either this structure was intentionally open-ended on the south-west or this end has been truncated – perhaps removed when the adjacent stone walls associated with the later period of occupation, were built.



Illus 3. Excavation across the kiln-barn in 2017, the exposed paving probably belonging to a winnowing floor.  
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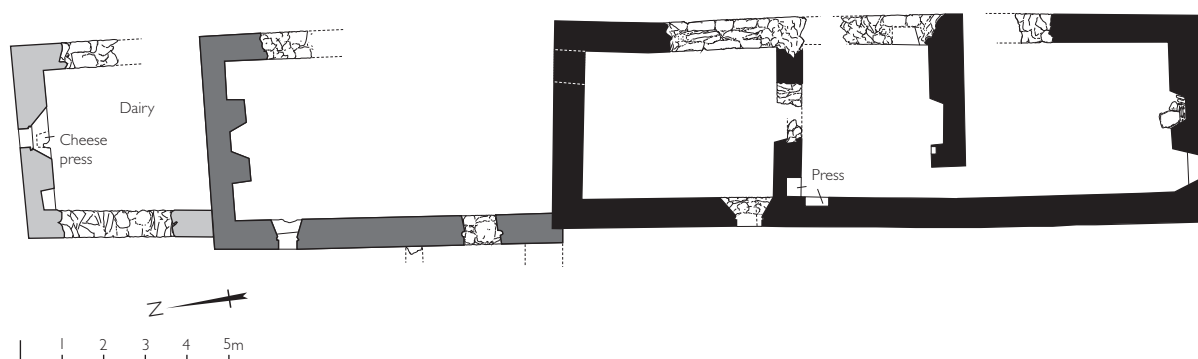
The fifth building depicted on the estate plan is shown standing more or less where the kiln-barn and dairy is situated (F on Illus 2), though at a slightly different angle in relation to the farmhouse than the present building. This difference of angle may simply reflect the imprecise way in which the results of the 1842 survey were collated or it could mean that this kiln-barn replaced an earlier structure. It is most

unlikely that two comparatively small farms, especially two that were conjoined, would have required two kiln-barns, yet the estate plan depicts both this building and the other kiln-barn (C) roofed. The most likely answer is that building (C) was indeed roofed in 1842 but by that time it had either been abandoned or converted to another use, with corn-drying being undertaken in a replacement barn (F) the construction date of which is unknown. A less likely explanation is that the barn (C) was still in use in 1842, only being replaced by (F) at a later date. The impetus for this could have been when William Corsie became the sole tenant of the farm in the late 1840s but given the date – just after the first wave of clearances in 1845 and with more surely expected – it seems unlikely that the estate would have invested in such an expensive venture.

The only building not depicted on either the 1842 estate plan or the later OS map is that which is suggested by a rectangular platform (E on Illus 2). Unless it was constructed in the 19th century for a purpose that is not recorded on any plan or map, this platform probably marks the site of a building of 18th century or earlier date. As such, it may be broadly contemporary with the complex of grass-grown terraces and enclosures that are clearly earlier than the 19th century farmstead. Truncated banks at the south end and east side of the site indicate that the earlier remains once extended into fields that have since been heavily cultivated. Geophysical survey by the UHI in 2015 identified a ‘strong’ but otherwise unidentified anomaly in the field to the east. The geophysical survey indicated ‘earlier boundaries on a different alignment to the present’ ones (Lee et al. 2015, 131).

## THE MID-19TH CENTURY FARMSTEAD

The mid-19th century farmstead comprised two buildings - a domestic range or farmhouse (A) and a kiln-barn and dairy (F), 20m apart and set within two conjoined stone-walled enclosures. The 1st edition of the OS 25-inch map (Orkney 1880, Sheet LXXXIX.4), surveyed in 1879, depicts the enclosure immediately to the west of the farmhouse and the one in which the kiln-barn and dairy is situated. The third enclosure, the one in which the farmhouse now stands, was formed sometime after 1880, when a wall was built to complete the enclosure of the cultivated field immediately to the east. The 2nd edition of the map, surveyed in 1900, shows that this had already taken place by then (Orkney 1902, Sheet LXXXIX.4).



Illus 4. Plan of Farmhouse. SCI777300

### THE FARMHOUSE

The farmhouse (A), which is the product of several phases of development, comprises a building of three compartments that has seen two further compartments added to its north end (Illus 4). The initial structure measures 15.8m from north to south by 5m transversely over walls 0.7m thick which stand up to 1.9m in height. The masonry is of local stone, clay-bonded with traces of lime mortar pointing, and the gables, which survive to their full height of 4.15m, are surmounted by broad chimney stacks with a

plain drip-course. A straight joint which is visible in the west wall under the window sill of the north compartment may indicate that the building was once shorter, with the southern part being the original structure. An alternative and perhaps more likely explanation is that the feature is one side of a blocked doorway.

The southernmost compartment has a doorway in its east side and a fireplace and splayed window in its south end. However, unlike the window openings throughout the other parts of the building, that in the south compartment displays no trace of a groove for a frame. Features that are visible include the remains of a slab-paved floor and wall plaster. The south compartment is linked to the central by a doorway at the west end of the partition wall, which survives to its wall-head. In this compartment, which has no doorway that leads directly outside, there is a fireplace in the south end, adjacent to which on the west is a small recess (0.3m high, 0.2m wide and 0.12m in depth) which may have been used to keep salt dry. In the east wall there is a window recess and in the west wall there is an ambry in the north-west corner, set about 1m above floor. Immediately adjacent, in the north wall of the compartment but at ground level, is a second recess. In its final form there was no direct access between the central and northern compartments of the principal structure, though what may be a blocked doorway is marked by a rough, but straight, edge in the middle of the partition wall. Features of note within the northern compartment include a fireplace in the south end, a window in the west side and a blocked doorway on the north.



Illus 5. Farmhouse from the north-west showing the main phases of construction. DP256459.

The first addition to the original farmhouse was a fourth compartment, which is wider by 0.3m and extends the building a further 8.5m to the north. Like the earlier compartments, the walls of this one were bonded with light brown clay and they stand up to 1.9m in height. The north gable contains a fireplace which is set in a chimney breast with presses to either side. It is lit by a window in the west wall near the fireplace and was presumably accessed from a doorway in the now collapsed east wall. A blocked doorway towards the south end of the west wall once led into an outbuilding which has since been demolished, though fragmentary footings of its walls remain visible.

The fifth compartment is narrower than the fourth and extends the length of the range by 4.5m. It had a doorway in the east wall where there is now a gap in the stonework, and at the west end of the north end-wall there is a stacked pair of ambries. In the middle of the same wall there is a window, below which



is a recess that may have contained a cheese press (Illus 6). It measures 0.4m in width by 0.35m in depth and 0.75m in height. Similar recesses containing presses may be found in farm-buildings of 18th and 19th century date in other parts of Scotland (e.g. East Eninteer, Aberdeenshire (Canmore ID 178522) or The Hill, Ayrshire (Canmore ID 233945)). Running along the entire length of the east side of the building is a terrace, 2m-3m in breadth, which has been cut into the natural slope on the east. Adjacent to this terrace and opposite the centre of the range is the site of a possible midden, marked by a rectangular hollow measuring 3.5m from north to south by 2m transversely. Excavations by UHI in 2016 revealed evidence for an earlier phase of farmhouse parallel and to the west of the surviving range, with Norse structures below this on a different, east to west, alignment (Lee et al. 2016).



Illus 6. View from south-east of the inside face of the north wall of the dairy that is attached to the north end of the farmhouse. Like all the windows in the range, the one shown here has a wide internal splay, and the small ambry or niche to its left is but one of a number throughout the building. The possible cheese press under the window sill is an unusual but not unknown feature of rural buildings of this date. DPI51832.

### THE KILN-BARN AND DAIRY

The kiln-barn and another dairy are contained within a range measuring some 18.1m in length from east to west, the barn occupying most of this space and the dairy tacked on to the west end (Illus 8). The kiln-barn measures 14.4m by 4.85m over walls 0.6m thick, clay-bonded with occasional traces of lime pointing. The gables at either end stand to their full height and incorporate a ledge 0.3m deep to take the purlins and roof covering. The barn contains two main compartments – a small one at the west end and a larger one with the kiln and a grain store at its east end. The west compartment was lofted, evidenced by joist sockets which are visible at a height of 1.7m in both the north and south walls. Light was provided by an unframed window opening in the south wall, and there are two small apertures (set about 1m above ground level) and a blocked doorway in the wall that forms the partition between the two compartments. In addition, an ambry, 0.5m wide is located immediately east of the doorway in the north wall.

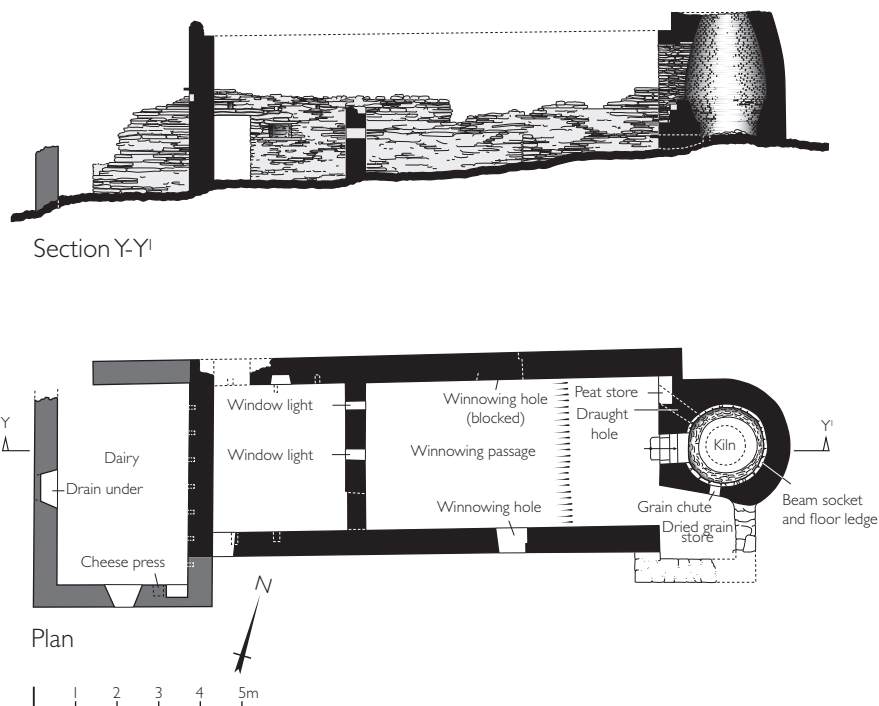
The larger of the two compartments measures about 11m in internal length, but its floor is on two levels, the east end being 0.4m higher than the west. The scarp that runs across the compartment from north to

south, 2.2m from the kiln, may indicate the position of a timber screen that would have separated the kiln and its fire-chamber from the winnowing floor. Apertures to assist the winnowing process are present in the south and north walls. That on the south is still open, measuring 0.65m in breadth and 0.7m in height, with a rebate for a wooden shutter. That on the north, however, has been blocked, probably when the building was converted for use as a sheep-pen, and all that is now visible of it is a single straight vertical joint.



Illus 7. An oblique aerial image taken from the west by a UAV, showing the relationship of the two buildings that comprised the mid-19th century farmstead. DP255131.

The kiln measures up to 1.8m in diameter within walls 0.6m thick and its chimney stands to a height of 3.3m above ground-level. However, it has evidently lost a few courses off its top. Rubble within the bottom of the bowl will account for some of the missing courses but it is probably the case that, like numerous similar structures in Orkney and Caithness, the upper, narrowest, part of the chimney was made of turf, now dissipated by the wind and rain. There is a ledge (0.1m wide) that once supported a drying floor 0.9m above the rubble infill in the base of the kiln. Additional support was provided by a timber beam that spanned the void between the entrance to the kiln and its east side, where the end of the beam was secured within in a socket in the ledge. Access up into the kiln was from the interior of the barn via four steps in an opening 0.7m wide, 2m high on its outside but only 1.3m high where it met the inner face of the bowl (Illus 8 & 9). On the south side of the kiln, just above the level of the drying floor, a chute 0.25m wide allowed dried grain to be transferred directly into the grain store. A narrow flue runs north-west from the base of the kiln to the location of the fireplace in the north-east corner of the barn above which is an ambry that may have been used to store peat. The dairy is an addition to the kiln-barn, its north-east corner abutting the north-west corner of the earlier structure and its east wall being bonded in to the barn's south-west corner. A row of joist sockets with a drip-course above in the external face of the west gable of the barn shows that the roof of the dairy was a lean-to construction. Access to the interior was via a doorway at the west end of the north side and there was a window in the middle of both the west and south sides, the former situated over a drain which ran out of the building beneath it. In the south wall there are three ambries, stacked one above another, in the east corner and a tall, narrow cheese press is situated at floor level between them and the window (Illus 10).



Illus 8. Plan of outbuilding, comprising a kiln-barn and dairy. SCI777301



Illus 9. View from west of the east end of the kiln barn, showing the flue (bottom left) with an ambry (possible peat-store) above and the entrance into the interior of the kiln. The grain-store stood immediately to the right of the kiln, its walls now reduced to footings. DP256441.

## CONCLUSION

Excavation by UHI has demonstrated that the ruins of Skail farmsteading occupy a site that stretches back to the Norse period. Given that the site may have seen nearly a thousand years of, albeit possibly intermittent, occupation, it is unlikely that any of the visible earthworks date this early. More likely they mainly represent 18th and early 19th century activity, and this assertion is generally supported by the

available map evidence. The ruins display features common to Orkney farmsteads recorded by Sandy Fenton (Fenton 1978, 116ff) and by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments (RCAHMS) in the Farm Buildings Survey (Dixon 2008, 187-8). The kiln, with its stone-built chimney, is a well-preserved example of a type that may be found anywhere from Caithness in the south to the southern part of Shetland in the north. Cheese presses have not been noted before in the Northern Isles, although cupboard recesses or ambries with stone shelves have been recorded, though not with this use in mind. The triple stone shelves and cheese press in the dairy attached to the kiln-barn represent a particularly good example.

Robson's 1842 estate map depicts Skail farmsteading at a time just before the first wave of major changes that saw so many of the crofts and small farms on Rousay converted to sheep runs in 1845. Skail escaped the first round of clearances but fell victim to the second in 1855, when its lease was not renewed. By this time, however, all the buildings that are visible today were in existence.



Illus 10. View from north of the stacked shelving, cheese-press and window in the south wall of the dairy. DP256478.

The evidence suggests that major changes took place at Skail probably fairly soon after Robson's plan was completed. The main dwelling and the kiln-barn (A and F on Illus 2) remained in use but three other buildings, one of them a kiln-barn (C), were demolished. It may have been at this time that the dairy was added to the west end of the kiln-barn (F).

The impetus for this happening may have been a reversion of the farm to single tenancy, William Corsie assuming that role in the late 1840s or very soon after. In 1855, however, the lease on the farm was not renewed. By this time Colonel (later General) FWT Burroughs had inherited Rousay from his uncle George William Traill and he resumed his uncle's policy of converting small farms in the Quandale and Westness areas of the island into sheep-runs (Thomson 1981, 49-53). It is not known when the Corsies left the farm, but the farmhouse continued to be occupied until the 1880s. In the early 1860s Alexander Gibson, a stonemason, and his wife were in residence, Mrs Gibson remaining after her husband died until 1878. Also in residence from the early 1860s was Barbara Smith, described in the 1861 census as

a general servant, and her mother and two nephews (Rousay Remembered). Smith is last mentioned at Skail in the 1881 census, when she and one of her nephews still lived there. The 1st edition OS 25-inch map (Orkney 1880, sheet 89.4) was surveyed two years before the 1881 census and depicts both of the surviving, but ruined, buildings as partly roofed. In the farmhouse the three southernmost and the northernmost compartments were roofed, and it is presumably here rather than the dairy, which is also shown roofed, that the Gibsons had lived and in which the Smiths at that time still lived.

By 1881 Barbara Smith is noted as an agricultural labourer, and it is undoubtedly she who was occupying the 'cottar house' referred to in the contemporary OS Name Book (No.16, p.125). The Name Book also alludes to Peter Reid, then 'occupier' of Brough, the neighbouring farm to the north, as the 'occupier' of Skail too - 'occupier' here almost certainly meaning farming the land rather than residing in the steading. The 1891 census recorded no-one living at Skail and the OS 2nd edition shows that by the end of the 19th century the only parts of the farmstead that remained roofed were the two southern compartments of the farmhouse (Orkney 1902, Sheet LXXXIX.4).

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