

Fetlar2013

Early History

Fetlar has been inhabited for at least 5,000 years, and probably even longer than that – prehistoric sites have been found across the island, but since there are no written records, we cannot be sure of the exact time that Fetlar was first settled.

What we do know is that the island holds many archaeologically interesting sites, from Neolithic cairns to Bronze Age stone circles and the remains of Iron Age brochs. There are a number of other structures and features that can be found in Fetlar, perhaps the most enigmatic being Finnigert Dyke.

Finnigert Dyke

Also known as Finns' Dyke, Funzie Girt Dyke, or Finnigord.

Finnigert Dyke is probably Fetlar's oldest surviving man-made structure, having been built prior to the 1st millennium BC, and with large sections still visible today. A precise date of construction is unknown, but various sources have cited Mesolithic, Neolithic, or the Bronze Age as the likely time of construction.

This prehistoric structure was once a formidable dyke that stretched from one side of the island to the other from north to south, separating the island into two halves of roughly equal size. The structure was still complete when the early Viking settlers came to Fetlar, and its influence was such that they treated Fetlar as two entirely separate islands, Est Isle and West Isle.

The dyke is about a metre wide and was built with heavy local stones, and is considered to be one of the best surviving examples of ancient boundary dykes. The human effort required to construct such a structure would have been considerable.

There are many stories about how the dyke came to be constructed. One claims that it was built overnight as the result of a disagreement between two landowners.

Another claims that the Finns – possessors of mystical powers and magic – built the dyke overnight for a farmer who had promised to give up his best cow in return.

Hjaltadans

Also known as the Fairy Ring, Da Haltadans, or Haltadans Stone Circle.

The name means "limping dance", a reference to the local legend that surrounds the stone circle. It is said that the outside ring of stones are trows, Shetland's little people, and that the two centre pillars are a fiddler and his wife. Having danced and fiddled all night long, they were caught by the light of the rising sun, which turned them all to stone.

Built in the Bronze Age, it is now unknown what the original function of the stone circle was, but there is speculation that it was once used as a place of trial and judgement. The site is a ring of 38 stones and has a diameter of 11 metres (37 ft). Within the stone ring is another, earthen ring, and in the centre of these are two rectangular pillars.

Fiddler's Crus

A short way from the Hjaltadans is a small grouping of probable Stone Age stone circles known as Fiddler's Crus, "the fiddler's enclosure". It has been speculated that the area was in some way involved with the Hjaltadans: the three rings were where criminals were tried and condemned. A white boulder, in the centre of the southeastern circle, is said to have been the judge's seat.

Fetlar's Cairns

Fetlar's chambered cairns at Vord Hill are grave sites, heel-shaped structures which have survived for thousands of years. The best-preserved cairn is the one to the north; a First World War shelter was built into the wall of the south cairn. There are a number of other cairns present on the island which can be found using Ordnance Survey maps.

Fetlar's Brochs

The remains of at least 7 brochs and their defenses are present on Fetlar – Sna Broch, near Snabrough, has been washed away by the sea, but the defensive earthworks can still be seen. The Broch of Houbie, now largely destroyed, can still be traced by the outline of the building and surrounding defensive works. Other brochs can be found using Ordnance Survey maps.

Brochs are Iron Age structures unique to the Northern Isles, the Hebrides, and parts of mainland Scotland.

Other Archaeological Remains

A Bronze Age standing stone, known as the Ripple Stone, is situated in the gardens of Leagarth House. Little is known about when or why the stone was erected, but it is likely it was used as a marker of some sort.

The outline of the structure of Gallow Hill may still just be seen on Lamb Hoga. This was a place of punishment for the island, and many accused witches were hanged here. According to Jeemsie Laurenson, Fetlar's storyteller, the last witch to be hanged was charged with sinking a fishing boat.

There is a huge range of other features on the island, though less prominent archaeological features can be hard to find without a good map or GPS coordinates. Just a few examples of the rich variety of Fetlar's archaeological history include a burial cist, burnt mounds, a range of chapels and ancient burial sites, and even early Celtic monastic settlements.

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