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SKARA BRAE

Skara Brae is a remarkably well preserved Stone Age Village built in the Neolithic period, around 3000 BC.

It was discovered in 1850 after a heavy storm stripped away the earth that had previously been covering what we can see today.

The Houses

The remains of eight houses stand on the site. The site was lived on for around 600 years and there were two stages of construction. At any one time between 50 and 100 people may have lived there. The remains of the oldest houses are visible as rough stone outlines, they had a small, circular shape. The later houses were larger and more rectangular, although the corners were still rounded and the core design was the same. Apart from one building, which stands slightly separate from the others, the layout of the houses is very similar. The houses were linked by covered passageways.

There was one main room with a fire pit or hearth in the middle. There were no windows for light, but there may have been a smoke hole in the roof. The hearth gave warmth and light as well as a means of cooking, and burning rubbish. As people would today, they were likely to have gathered round the fire when it was cold, and told stories. The position in the centre of the room would have allowed the largest number of people to gather round it for warmth. As wood was (and still is) scarce in the Orkney Islands, they were more likely to have burnt seaweed, dried animal dung and peat.

Beds were built into the walls at the sides of the earlier houses, in the later houses beds stuck out towards the centre of the room, like stone boxes. The beds on the right are bigger than the beds on the left. Perhaps the right side of the house was for the men, and the women and children slept on the left.

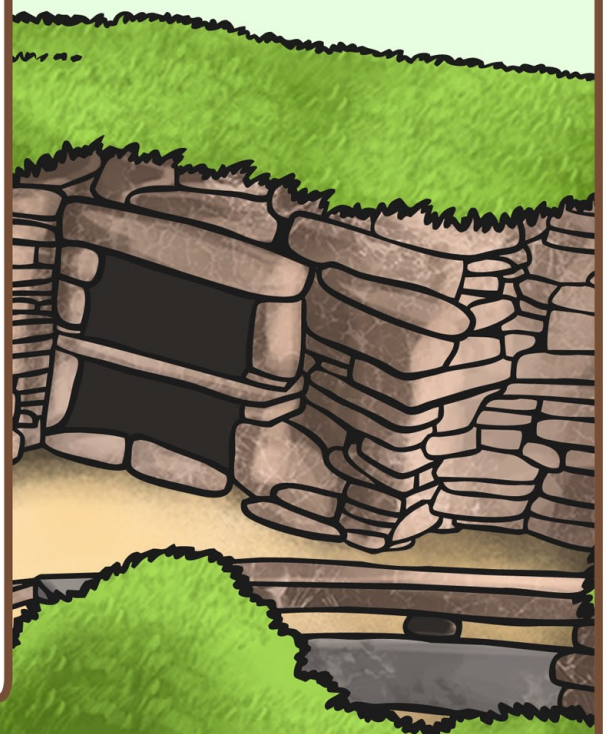
Each house had a set of stone shelves, called a dresser. The dresser was carefully positioned opposite the door, this meant that it was the first thing people would see as they entered the house, and also that it would be illuminated by both the light from the fire and light coming through the door. This suggests it was an important piece of furniture, possibly used to show off prized possessions to demonstrate wealth and importance.

Although the doorways seem very small to us, it's worth remembering that early humans were shorter than we are today. It also meant that visitors would be forced to bend down or kneel as they entered, perhaps a forced show of deference. In addition, lower doorways would have helped keep the weather out. The doors were stone slabs, and the bars holes still visible today indicate they could be bolted shut.

The floor area inside would be between 36 and 40 m². Some people today in small apartments might have the same living space. With straw and heather to make mattresses and animal skins for blankets it would have been relatively cosy - at least compared to outside!

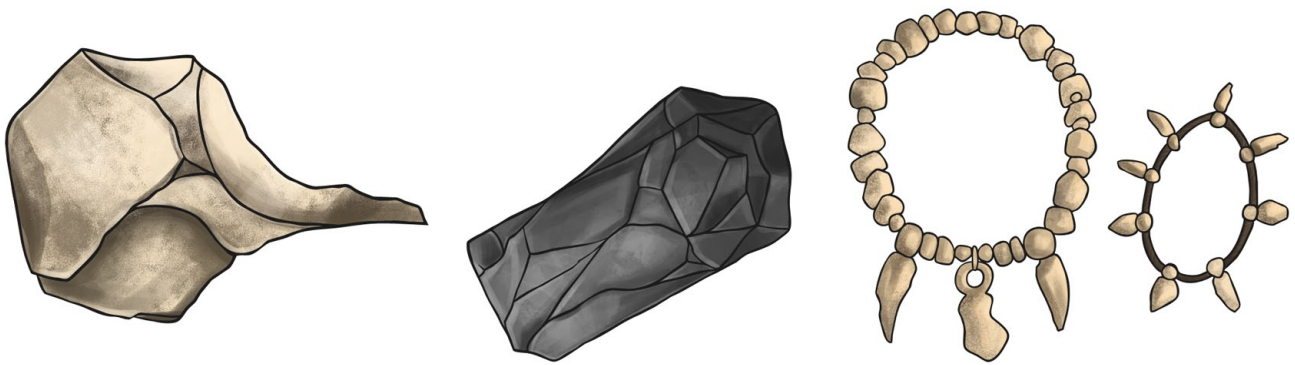


The Orkney Islands sit off the North coast of Scotland. Skara Brae can be found on Mainland, the largest of the Orkney Islands.



WHAT ELSE WAS FOUND THERE?

- Animal bones including cattle and sheep, and barley and wheat grown nearby, suggest a farming community.
- Plentiful remains of fish and shellfish indicate they were also skilled fishermen. Large piles of limpets were found but these weren't necessarily part of their diet, they may have been used for bait.
- The lack of weapons found suggest that life was peaceful.
- Richly carved stone objects might have been used in religious rituals.
- Bone tools, along with the absence of tools for weaving, indicate that animal skins were used for clothing.
- Many examples of jewellery were found including pendants, pins, necklaces and beads.



House 7

At first glance, house seven is the same as all the others. However, it's worth looking a little more closely.

Some interesting facts about house seven:

- The bodies of two women were found in a stone grave under a wall. They were buried before the house was built. This could have been part of a ritual.
- The door could only be bolted from the outside. The people inside the house would not be able to leave of their own free will.
- Unlike the other passageways, the passage to house seven went only to house seven.

House 8

Unlike the other houses, all built closely together and linked with passageways, house eight stands alone. It had carved patterns on the walls and no beds or shelves. The remains of tools were found inside. It could have been a workshop or meeting place, or simply built on the site at a later date. From the surrounding land, the village would have been relatively well hidden with only the roofs visible. It would have appeared to be a low mound. The walls of the houses were built against and within 'middens', piles of discarded rubbish that would have protected the walls from the elements as well as provided a layer of insulation. None of the houses still have a roof, so they must have been made from something that has since perished. A common early roofing material in Orkney was seaweed, fixed with ropes and stones. They could also have used straw, animal skins or turf, laid over a frame of driftwood or whale bones found on the shore.

It is possible that they had some form of toilet! There is evidence of a well structured drainage system.

Date _____

Name _____



Skara Brae Questions

1. Draw an arrow and label the location of Skara Brae on the map.

2. What do you think House 7 was used for? Why?

3. What do you think House 8 was used for? Why?

4. What were the main differences between the earlier houses and those built later?



5. What were the advantages of a lower doorway?

6. Why was the hearth important?

7. What might the roof have been made from?

8. What elements of the houses in Skara Brae could be found in a house lived in today?

9. Give an example of evidence found at Skara Brae and what it tells us about the lives of the people who lived there.

10. What would be your main concern if you had to live for a week in a house reconstructed to match those at Skara Brae?