

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.



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The Orkney Islands sit off the North coast of Scotland.

Skara Brae can be found on Mainland, the largest of the Orkney Islands.



The remains of eight houses stand on the site.
They were not all built at the same time, so at some point the original village was added to.
Apart from one building, which stands slightly separate from the others, the layout of the houses is very similar.



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The houses were linked by covered passageways.



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The earlier houses had more of a circular shape.
There was one main room with a fire pit in the middle, and beds built into the walls at the sides.



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Each house had a set of stone shelves called a dresser.



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The later houses were slightly bigger and more rectangular, although the corners were still rounded.
They still built stone beds, but not into the walls.
The fire pit and stone shelves remained.



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Although the doorways seem very small to us, early humans were shorter than we are today.
Lower doorways would also have helped keep the weather out.
The doors were stone slabs, and could be bolted shut.



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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.



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What could these facts tell us?

What do you think the house might have been used for?

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. It could have been a workshop or meeting place, or simply built on the site at a later date.



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There were no windows, but there may have been a smoke hole in the roof. There would have been some light from the fire. As wood was scarce in the Orkney Islands they were more likely to have burnt seaweed, dried animal dung and peat.



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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!



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The walls of the houses were built against 'middens', piles of discarded rubbish that would have protected the walls from the elements as well as provided a layer of insulation.



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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.



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What else was found there and what does it teach us?

- 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.

