



### Location and Context

Orkney *Holms*, from the Old Norse word for islet, are small islands, generally oval in plan and usually measuring less than two kilometres in length. There are twenty-seven Holms, scattered around and between the islands of Orkney Mainland, Hoy and South Walls, South Ronaldsay, Burray, Flotta, Shapinsay, Egilsay, Eday, Papa Westray and Stronsay.

### Key Characteristics

- Small, low-lying, often oval-shaped islands.
- Smooth domed or flat topography, occasionally with ridge lines of underlying strata.
- Coastline is edged with occasional low cliffs, wave cut platforms of sandstone and flagstone strata, and ridges in sandy or shingle beaches.
- Low-lying vegetation, frequently grazed by sheep, of short-grazed and rough grassland with occasional heather cover.
- Lack of habitation and roads on most islands.
- Abundant archaeological sites, visible in the short ground cover, including prized examples of prehistoric landscapes.
- Occasional ruined crofts, fishing stations, beacons and wartime defence structures.
- Islands are frequently the focus of views from inhabited islands, seen as flat or domed silhouettes in the sea, usually free from modern structures.
- Sense of remoteness, wild character and history from a combination of the remote and exposed location, the lack of easy access, habitation and man-made structures, and the abundant archaeology.
- Sights and sounds from wildlife, including seals and a variety of moorland and sea birds enhance the landscape experience.

### Landscape Character Description

#### *Landform*

*Holms* are small islands generally oval in shape and measuring less than two kilometres in length. They are mostly low, between 5 and 20 metres above sea level, occasionally rising up to almost 40 metres above sea level. The smooth, flat to gently domed profile is fringed by rock platforms. Occasional lochans are found in depressions on a few islands. Occasionally the underlying Old Red Sandstones and Flagstones are visible as striking, tilted strata forming cliffs on one side of the island, or more frequently seen as wave-cut

platforms and ridges in the sandy and shingle beaches which occur around the gently sloping edges of island coasts. Low, repeated ridges of underlying strata are also visible through the thin soils and low groundcover on some islands.

### *Landcover*

Landcover is low lying and trees are absent in these exposed landscapes. The islands' low vegetation is an important characteristic for revealing archaeological sites and underlying landform. A range of soils, mainly acid and peaty or saline gleys and blown sand deposits, support short and rough pastures on many islands. Elsewhere the islands are peaty, covered with heathers and rough grassland. Saline soils give rise to vegetation such as sea plantain, maritime grass and crowberry heath. Land use on many islands is sheep grazing, and on accessible islands small scale peat cutting has occurred.

### *Settlement*

Holms are mainly uninhabited and most are only accessible by sea. Two holms north of Burray are connected by causeway roads, and one of these includes a runway, but this is unusual for the Landscape Character Type. Modern man-made structures are generally scarce. Occasional historic sites include remnants of former crofts, field systems or fishing stations. Archaeological sites dating from prehistoric to more recent times are abundant on many holms, and cairns and tumuli are also characteristic features which stand out as artificial irregularities on the natural contours and short vegetation. The chambered cairn on Holm of Papa is one of the most impressive tombs in Orkney. More contemporary features are beacons and wartime structures such as the Churchill Barriers which occupy some of the more strategically located holms.

### *Perception*

An important feature of this landscape is that it is closely related to the coast and sea, with views from high vantage points being strongly influenced by the surrounding expanse of water. Holms are frequently the focus of views from neighbouring inhabited islands, as they interrupt the surrounding sheets of water and provide foreground interest, seen as a silhouette in the sea; the numerous cairns and mounds on the islands indicate that they may also have been important focal points in the landscape in the past. The low, flat profile, low ground cover and scarcity of structures are an important aspect of this character. The experience of holms is influenced by the sight and calls of wildlife including seals, moorland birds and colonies of seabirds. The lack of habitation and modern structures, the presence of ruins and archaeological remains, and the distance to main islands give a great sense of remoteness and history. In combination with the rugged coastal features, the presence of wildlife, and open landform which is exposed to the effects of the sea and weather, this gives the islands a strong character of wildness.



This is one of 390 Landscape Character Types identified at a scale of 1:50 000 as part of a national programme of Landscape Character Assessment republished in 2019.

The area covered by this Landscape Character Type was originally included in the Orkney LCA (Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership), published 1998.