



Location and Context

Whaleback Island landscapes are found on the smaller, mostly inhabited islands with an uneven oval shape and domed profile in Orkney. Nine islands contain this landscape character type, and in most cases it covers the whole island, as on South Walls, Fara, Graemsay, Gairsay, Wyre, Eynhallow, Egilsay and Faray.

Key Characteristics

- Islands with a low, domed profile with gentle convex slopes.
- Patchwork of smooth landcover of improved pastures mixed with arable, rough grass, heather and bog.
- Fields in geometric patterns and occasionally in walled enclosures with orientation towards the sea.
- Scattered settlement of crofts and farms mainly on higher land away from the coast.
- Minor roads relate to field patterns and rarely follow the coast.
- Abandoned crofts and small farms on more remote islands.
- Islands are focal points in views from other islands, highlighted by regular field patterns, upstanding historic buildings, ruins and archaeological sites.
- The sharp contrast between smooth, regular field enclosures and the rugged coastal edge.
- A sense of isolation and solitude on all but the larger islands.
- Sights and sounds of wildlife and play of light on the sea.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The *Whaleback Islands* generally have an uneven oval shape and have a domed profile reaching up to between 20 and 50 metres above sea level. Slopes are generally gentle and convex, often with local undulations, terraces and depressions related to underlying inclined strata and the presence of fault lines. Slopes fall to a low, usually simple coastline of shingle beaches and rock platforms. Occasional wave-cut platforms and low cliffs, some with geos (clefts), reveal the Old Red Sandstone and Flagstone bedrock.

Landcover

Landcover is low level and trees are absent in these exposed landscapes. The vegetation is predominantly improved grassland and varying proportions of arable fields on better soils, with some areas of rough grass, heather moorland and peaty bogs. This landcover often occurs in inter-mixed geometric patches which usually extend to the coastal edge. Larger areas of unenclosed heather moorland often occur on slightly raised areas or deeper peat. Surface water is largely absent, occurring only as occasional small burns, ditches and lochans or as small reservoirs on a few islands.

Land use is agricultural, mainly sheep, with some arable land, and cattle grazing on larger islands such as South Walls. Improved pastures are enclosed in fields, sometimes walled, with an orientation down to the sea. Areas of small scale manual peat cutting occur in a few parts of this Landscape Character Type.

Settlement

Most of these islands are inhabited and contain a few small roads or tracks. Settlement consists of a few scattered crofts and occasional larger farms, usually on higher ground and away from the coast. Properties are served by a sparse network of minor roads and tracks on higher ground that crosses and circles the island or runs along its spine. Roads tend to follow the straight lines of field edges, and rarely occur close to the coast except at piers and bays. Access to individual properties is often by cul-de-sac tracks.

Occasional beacons and lighthouses occur as bright, contrasting features on the outer points and promontories of many islands. Occasional small piers and jetties are usually minor features set into the landform. The number and variety of prehistoric archaeological sites demonstrate the early and continued occupation of the islands. On Eynhallow the remains of a monastic church, probably dating from the 12th century, still stand, while Cobbie's Row Castle on Wyre is the earliest documented medieval castle in Scotland. Abandoned crofts and enclosures tend to be a feature of the smaller islands. Many archaeological sites are likely to have been lost during agricultural improvements or are buried in peat. Wartime structures such as Martello Towers, military camps and chapels occur on some of the more strategically located areas of this type.

The islands' low vegetation is an important characteristic for revealing archaeological sites and underlying landform. Archaeological sites and ruined buildings tend to be less prominent than in the smooth, un-enclosed landscapes such as Holms, although islands such as Faray are an exception. Some historic sites are notable in the landscape, such as St Magnus Church on Egilsay. The small to moderate scale, regular shapes of intermixed patches of landcover and the lines of peat cutting tend to be the over-riding pattern on larger, agriculturally improved islands. On some islands, the abrupt, uneven edge where the smooth, regular field enclosures meet the rugged coast provides a sharp contrast in pattern, colour and texture.

Perception

A sense of isolation and solitude is generated by the small size of many of these islands and by the scarcity of human population. This is accentuated on smaller and more remote islands of this type, and by the presence of abandoned buildings and field systems. The experience of these landscapes is enhanced by the play of light on the sea and the sight and calls of wildlife including seals, moorland birds and colonies of seabirds.

The islands tend to be seen as focal points in views from other islands, highlighted by the presence of regular field patterns, occasional upstanding ruins and cairns, and modern structures such as beacons, lighthouses and a mix of scales of wind turbines.

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.