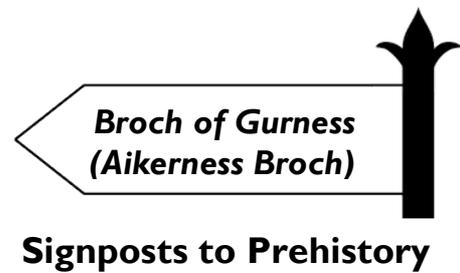




THE
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Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Broch of Gurness (SH 123 124) lies on the NW coast of Orkney beside Eynhallow Sound with views across to the island of Rousay.

Main period: Iron Age

Access & ownership: The site is managed by Historic Scotland. It is open only in Summer (25 March–30 September) Mon–Sun, 9.30am to 5.30pm (last entry 5pm). There is an admission charge. Parking available 180 m away from site. Most of the site is accessible to visitors using wheelchairs or with limited mobility but assistance is recommended.



Fig. 1. Broch of Gurness. By Chmee2 [CC BY-SA 3.0]

Broch of Gurness (Fig. 1) is one of the best surviving brochs. This type of Iron Age settlement, is unique to northern and western Scotland with 500 examples spread throughout the Highlands and the islands. Many of the tall circular towers stood alone, but in Orkney they were usually surrounded by large villages. Until 1929, only a large grassy mound, known as the Knowe o' Aikerness, stood by the shore. Orcadian poet and antiquarian, Robert Rendall discovered the remains while sketching. His stool sank into the mound, revealing a set of stone steps. Excavations soon uncovered the full extent of the broch and the village, but World War II intervened. The site was revisited in the 1950s, to consolidate the remains for public access but it was much later that the material was pieced together by John Hedges (1987) who concluded that the village was occupied from 200 to 100 BC, and was built on an earlier settlement.



Fig. 3. Kite aerial view of the Broch of Gurness.
By James Gentles

The northern part of the site has suffered significant coastal erosion, but an area of around 100 m², 45 m across, would have been defined by three, deep rock-cut ditches and three stone ramparts (Fig. 3). The innermost rampart was contemporary with the settlement; the others are earlier and may pre-date the broch. An entrance causeway was added on the eastern side, and the circular broch tower built in the western half. A settlement of small stone houses arose around this. At some time after AD 100, the broch was abandoned and the ditches filled in, but the site continued as a single farmstead until the 8th century. The final event in the life of the settlement was the burial of a Viking woman in the 9th century.

Gurness Broch itself was accessed via a causeway lined with houses (Fig. 4). The tower once stood to around 8 m, with an internal diameter of 20 m. A thatched roof would have been surrounded by a wall walk, accessed by stairs. The broch was probably home to the most important family of the community, but its 4.1m thick walls also provided a defensive retreat. The entrance passage (see Fig. 5.) was originally 5m long and blocked by a door set halfway along, indicated by doorjambs, a stone sill, a pivot stone and bar holes where a beam could be run.



Fig. 4. Causeway lined with houses. John Allan [CC BY-SA 2.0]

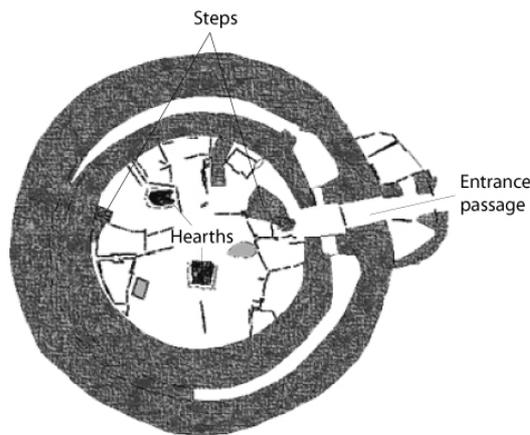


Fig. 5. Plan of the broch showing entrance passage, and hearths. After Hedges 1987, fig. 2.3

The broch originally had a single central hearth, stone cupboards, and a sunken feature interpreted as a 'well': a large cavity cut out of the bedrock, perhaps before the broch was built. Stone steps led down to a chamber with a cistern. When the broch collapsed after years of neglect, its upper sections were dismantled, probably for building material. The 'well' was filled in and the interior partitioned with upright sandstone flags forming two distinct living quarters, as seen today. Each 'room' had its own hearth and double-decker compartments, used either for storage or as beds. Stairs (Fig. 5) led to an upper storey in the smaller of the two rooms.

The village at Gurness is extremely well preserved with several 'semi-detached' stone houses; it may once have housed up to 40 families. Some 850 artefacts from the period of occupation were recovered, mainly of bone and stone, and a great deal of pottery. Each house had an entrance leading to a large living space, off which lay smaller side rooms. The main room had a hearth, cupboards and sleeping spaces, stone furniture, and even a recognisable toilet. Some houses had a yard and a separate shed.

When the broch was abandoned the village also declined, but the site was still in use in the 5th century when Orkney was part of the Pictish nation. The 'Shamrock House' from this period was found buried in rubble on the SE part of the site and subsequently moved, stone by stone, to the modern entrance. Pictish finds from Gurness included an ogham-inscribed bone knife handle and a stone carved with Pictish symbols. The fragmented remains of a Pictish symbol stone were uncovered at nearby Evie.

By the time the Norse people settled in Orkney in around 800 BC, Gurness site was probably just a grassy mound. The Vikings often used the mounds of earlier settlement sites as burial places. The female burial, in a stone-lined grave, contained a pair of 'tortoise' brooches and a sickle blade, was found dug into the old rampart surrounding the settlement. Human bones and other Viking objects, including shield bosses, suggest that Viking men were also buried at Gurness.

References and further information

- Hedges, J. 1987. *Bu, Gurness and the Brochs of Orkney, Part III*. Oxford: BAR British series 163
 MacKie, E. W. 1994. Gurness and Midhowe brochs in Orkney: some problems of misinterpretation. *Archaeological Journal* 151(1), 98–157
 Gurness on Historic Scotland: www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/broch-of-gurness

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