

Skara Brae, Orkney: Background information for teachers

House I at Skara Brae was partially revealed when a great storm broke down sand dunes in 1850. The beds and the dresser were so like contemporary wooden furniture in Orkney farmhouses – some of which also had a central hearth – that it was thought impossible that it could any older than Pictish times (AD 300–800). Only in the 1930s was it recognized as a Neolithic village. We now know it dates to about 3000 BC.

The houses at Skara Brae are not the earliest houses of farmers in the British Isles. Traces of wooden houses dating from 3800 BC have been uncovered across Britain but, unlike [Skara Brae](#), nothing survives above ground. A stone-built house (the Knap of Howar) a few centuries older than those at Skara Brae survives on Papa Westray, Orkney but it lacks the remarkable furniture.

The remains of houses recently excavated at [Durrington Walls](#) near Stonehenge are of almost identical size and plan to those at Skara Brae, as is the house from Trelystan near Welshpool that is in the PowerPoint presentation. They have been variously reconstructed at the Stonehenge Visitor Centre.

The Neolithic heralded a revolution – the introduction of crops (wheat and barley), domesticated animals (cattle, sheep, goats and pigs), and polished stone axes that made clearance of woodland for fields much easier. Freed from the need to follow herds for hunting, people could now settle in one place. This revolutionary change had begun between 7000 and 6000 BC in the Middle East and spread slowly across Western Europe arriving in Britain about 4000 BC.

Further reading

Wickham Jones, C. 2015. *Between the Wind and the Water: World Heritage Orkney*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Windgather Press

Ritchie, A. 1995. *Prehistoric Orkney*. Edinburgh: Historic Scotland

National Curriculum: Prehistory Units

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