

**HISTORIC SCOTLAND BOARD****LINKS OF NOLTLAND PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT, WESTRAY****Purpose**

1. To inform the Board of current activity and discoveries at Links of Noltland during excavations being undertaken to mitigate the identified risk of loss and damage caused by wind erosion, and to seek support for an outline future strategy.

**Background**

2. Links of Noltland lies in a now deflated dune system behind Grobust Bay on the north coast of Westray. The site was first recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by antiquarian George Petrie. Archaeological excavations were carried out between 1978 and 1981 led by Dr Clarke from the National Museums of Scotland, part funded by our predecessor body and as yet unpublished. Clarke's excavations revealed a large Neolithic building, known as the Grobust house, and this was backfilled in 1981.

3. A large area was scheduled, almost 300m east-west, and about two-thirds of this was taken into care by Historic Scotland in 1984, at which time dune management and planting works were undertaken. Noltland was taken into the PIC portfolio with the sole purpose of protecting its rich archaeological resource, since there were no visible remains it was not promoted for visitors.

4. Noltland is one of Orkney's richest and most threatened sites. Severe wind erosion is causing the collapse of the dune system which has protected the archaeology for thousands of years. Five thousand year old ground surfaces are now exposed to the elements across much of the site. Periodic recording of the collapse of the dune system has been carried out during the last 20 years. The recorded rate of loss is charted on the plan below which was produced as part of a management proposal for the site, commissioned by the Inspectorate in 2000. This report forms the basis for the present strategy and highlights that much of the archaeology of this site will be lost in the next ten years. In response to this, a programme of detailed assessment, geophysical survey, sampling, and targeted rescue excavations has been put in train by PIC commencing in 2006. This has been coupled with rescue excavation of areas of Bronze Age settlement commissioned by HSI within the scheduled area immediately outwith the PIC.

5. Excavations currently underway have produced important discoveries, including the so-called Orkney Venus figurine (c2500BC), the oldest representation of a human known in Scotland. The present excavations are being managed by the Cultural Resources Team within PIC, and executed by EASE Archaeology who have a 10 year association with the site. This is working in parallel with the HSI work to ensure that we provide a coherent approach to the work.

## **Risk**

6. The site features as an ‘Extreme’ risk on the PIC Risk Register. This states that the *Risk is high due to storm force winds in this area and there being no realistic means of protecting the site.* The main actions there stated are:

- *Continued monitoring and management of process*
- *provide recording strategy and long term managed retreat to ensure we retrieve archaeological value in advance of wind erosion.*

7. Sand is blowing off the PIC into our neighbour’s farm and also into the Westray nine hole golf course to the E, causing significant problems for both. This has been going on for 20 years, having worsened in the last few years. An additional risk therefore is that to reputation, possibly even resulting in financial claims against the agency.

## **Cultural significance**

7. This is a settlement site, rather than a ‘ritual’ or funerary site, and therefore has the potential to inform an understanding of everyday life. The site is extensive, with houses dispersed amongst their contemporary middens and field systems. Opportunities to investigate and interpret such sites are rare in Europe.

8. The settlement shows parallels to the contemporary site at Skara Brae, where multi-cellular structures were built by revetting the walls against midden. Noltland however displays a greater time-depth than Skara Brae and uniquely spans the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age.

9. The structures are generally robust and survive well, albeit now being exposed to the elements, with interior deposits such as floors and artefacts in situ. Finds, including decorated pottery and worked bone tools, are perfectly preserved. As well as palaeobotanical elements surviving within buildings, contemporary fields and soils survive intact. Animal bone survives in excellent condition, rare on sites of this date anywhere in Scotland.

## **Strategy**

10. From the outset of the current work it was recognised that a range of responses will be required to bring this project to a satisfactory conclusion. These are:

Management – a project team is now being established within HS, led by PIC and supported by HSI. The approach was discussed in July 2009 at a project review seminar attended by internal; and external specialists. This provided the opportunity to raise the profile of the site, seek partnership involvement from academics and other institutions (NMS and SNH in particular) it also helped PIC to ‘sense check’ our prioritisation of this site with a wide range of views, confirming the relative importance of the site as opposed to others that are at risk in the area. The project will look at all aspects of the future management of the site, including dune stabilisation, the long term prioritised rescue excavations and along with managed retreat, it will consider whether there is potential for the retention of important structures as a future heritage tourism attraction for Westray.

Dune stabilisation – small areas of dune now survive to the N and E of the site. PIC North commissioned a report on these in 2007, while advice is now being sought from SNH specialists re the feasibility of achieving any stabilisation.

Prioritised rescue excavations – informed by extensive assessment and sampling across the site, combined with a close understanding of where areas of high archaeological density are being affected by the worst erosion. This has resulted in the set-piece rescue excavation of two groups of Bronze Age houses and farmyards in 2006-08, along with the partial excavation of a group of large Neolithic houses in the SW part of the site currently underway.

Interim reporting – it is proposed that PIC will commission EASE Archaeology to produce a full interim report for publication at the end of the current season's work. PIC will also use this document to publish a strategy for the completion of the project

Managed retreat – varying degrees of rescue archaeological responses will be applied within the constraints of funds, to ensure that at least the most important data is recovered. Ultimately this may result in areas of the PIC being abandoned and given over to our neighbouring farmer who has already had success in ploughing and planting highly eroded areas, thus stemming the flow of sand into the surrounding area.

Presentation – excavated structures, including the Grobust house excavated by NMS, will be assessed by PIC for their potential for future long-term presentation. This is considered to be difficult to achieve without significant loss of authenticity, but is something that the Westray community are very keen to see happen.

### **Community involvement**

11. Westray is a small, close-knit community which has aspirations to promote itself as a heritage tourism destination. They have been long-suffering in accepting the tons of sand blowing off the PIC into fields and golf course, while we are excavating and making important discoveries. Community engagement has been one of the main parts of the project in recent years, especially involving the Westray Heritage Trust. Senior PIC staff visited Westray in August 2009 and held a meeting with the Heritage Trust, the community development organisation, the golf club and others. They are aware of the difficulties and nothing was done to raise expectations unrealistically, but they were keen to see some public benefit from the investment in the site – at whatever level – and are happy to contribute. This positive response from the community will inform a shared agenda for action. It has already resulted in a shared excavation web-blog (<http://www.westrayheritage.co.uk/>). The Director of PIC will visit and meet community representatives late August.

12. Long-term legacies of the project are inevitably an aspiration for the community, and will form an important part of the project strategy, where feasible.

### **Recent discoveries**

13. In summer 2009 PIC commissioned EASE Archaeology to excavate a group of large Neolithic buildings (area 5 on plan below) in an elevated and heavily eroding area in the SW part of the site. These were demolished in the late Neolithic and backfilled with large amounts of midden material rich in artefact, food debris etc. Within this backfill was found a small sandstone figurine, apparently of a woman, and likely to have been deposited around

2500BC. This is the oldest human representation found in Scotland, and the only one from this early period, and is therefore of great cultural significance. PIC media and marketing have ensured that this has attracted considerable media attention. Another building close by has produced a group of ten or more cow skulls, buried in the wall of a neighbouring building, with their horns interlinked.

14. These discoveries reinforce our view of the importance of the site, its potential for producing further discoveries of international importance, and the need to invest further in the conservation and investigation of the Noltland site. But it also raises the cost of both excavation and post excavation and finds of this importance will bring pressure from archaeologists to dig the site comprehensively.

### **Disposal of artefacts**

15. The standard procedures apply whereby the assemblage will be retained by EASE Archaeology on our behalf until such time as post-excavation study, analysis and reporting is complete. At that point, likely to be at least 3-5 years from now, the assemblage will be reported to the Treasure Trove Panel who will decide on which museum will be awarded the assemblage. In the meantime it may be possible for PIC Collections Management Unit to mount a temporary exhibition in the Orkney islands, and this possibility will be discussed with the Westray Heritage Trust and Orkney Museums.

### **Resources**

16. From 2006 to date, PIC has spent £165,000 at Noltland on archaeological survey, excavation and post-excavation analysis. This project has the highest priority within the PIC Archaeology budget, which is wholly inadequate in terms of addressing the likely expenditure required to complete this project. The future development of the project is now being formulated in terms of sourcing partnership funding from within the agency, from HLF, Orkney Islands Council, community sources and sponsorship. In the scheduled area outside the PIC HSI have taken a similar approach and have spent £41,000 from 2007 to date, with post-excavation costs yet to come. It is proposed that there will be a single post-excavation project and publication encompassing all work on the site, past and present.

17. It is estimated that to complete the archaeological project will require funds of between £750,000 - £2.25 million, possibly more should there be an opportunity to achieve long-term presentation of one or more buildings.

### **Recommendation/ Actions for HSB**

18. The Board is asked to note the risk associated with the wind erosion of the Links of Noltland, and to approve the project strategy outlined above. PIC will report to the board with a clearer management plan once the interim report is produced and discussions with potential funding partners have been explored.

19. Because of the quality of the small finds emerging from the excavation it is likely that there will be pressure on Historic Scotland to report the assemblage in advance of the end of the project (the point at which it would normally be reported). The finds from the Clark excavation are held by NMS, although it is not entirely clear whether they have been formally disposed to them. In the normal course of Finds Disposal it could be expected that the

assemblage would be kept together. If Historic Scotland wishes to depart from this and to bid for the finds from the present excavations, including the figurine, we would need to make a case in terms of the public benefit and we would have to consider the long term resource implications of display of the important objects and the storage of the remainder of the assemblage in perpetuity. In the short term, during the excavation, we would like to retain the assemblage in order to promote the work to aid in fund raising and to work with the Westray Heritage Trust to display a representative sample of the finds in their centre on the island. For this reason we would prefer not to report the collection in advance of the end of the project. We would welcome the Boards support for the short term retention of the assemblage, and its views on the longer term issues of disposal.

**PETER BROMLEY**

Properties in Care

August 2009



Links of Noltland in 2007 showing deflated dunes and PIC boundary.





Excavation of cow skulls in wall core.



Noltland 'Venus'