

Skara Brae – VSCG Case Study



Skara Brae, on Orkney, is the best preserved prehistoric village in Northern Europe. The excavated farming settlement dates back 5,000 years, and is part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site.



It is a very popular tourist attraction, visited by many coach parties and organised tour groups as well as families and individuals. There can be as many as 300 people on site at once during the height of the season.

In order to see the details of the furniture that is still preserved within the dwellings visitors walk around the narrow wall heads. Over the years many initiatives have been taken to improve the visitor experience, reduce the risk to visitors, and help in the conservation of the monument. These include:

- consolidation of wall heads and paving narrow points to improve the paths
- protecting a few areas with handrails (but many drops were still left exposed)
- constant supervision by a minimum of two stewards

- building a replica house so visitors can experience how the houses would have been from the inside
- an audio visual presentation in the visitor centre allowing visitors to take a “virtual tour” of the monument
- installing a toughened glass roof over the best preserved house



However these methods of control and protection did not prevent visitors occasionally falling into the remains of the dwellings, suffering serious injuries. The risk assessment was reviewed, and a decision taken to prohibit visitor access to the wall heads of the houses, allowing access only along a dedicated route around the perimeter of the monument. It is also planned to install cameras inside one of the houses so it can be viewed from the safety and comfort of the visitor centre.

This will

- remove the risk of visitors falling into the monument
- allow less able visitors to enjoy the site
- enable a number of visually intrusive structures and handrails to be removed

By following the guiding principals adopted by the VSCG, both safety and the presentation of the monument will be improved.

Liz Crichton, Historic Scotland, October 2006

Extract from Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group's website (www.vscg.co.uk)