



A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

EDITOR: Mark Brandon

EMAIL: jandthistory@outlook.com

WEBPAGE: jot-and-tittle.com



FAREWELL TO STROMNESS¹

In the winter of 1850, a severe storm hit Scotland, causing widespread damage and over 200 deaths. In Orkney's Bay of Skaill, the storm stripped earth from a large irregular knoll. (The name Skara Brae is a corruption of *Skerrabra* or *Styerrabrae*, which originally referred to the knoll.) When the storm cleared, local villagers found the



outline of a village consisting of several small houses without roofs. William Graham Watt of Skaill House, a son of the local laird who was a self-taught geologist, began an amateur excavation of the site, but after four houses were uncovered, work was abandoned in 1868.

The site remained undisturbed until 1913, when during a single weekend, the site was plundered by a party with shovels who took away an unknown quantity of artefacts. In 1924, another storm swept away part of one of the houses, and it was determined the site should be secured and properly investigated. The job was given to the University of Edinburgh's Professor V. Gordon Childe, who travelled to Skara Brae for the first time in mid-1927.

The inhabitants of Skara Brae were makers and users of grooved ware, a distinctive style of pottery that had recently appeared in northern Scotland. The houses used earth sheltering: built sunk in the ground, into mounds of prehistoric domestic waste known as middens. This provided the houses with stability and also acted as insulation against Orkney's harsh winter climate. On average, each house measures 40 square metres (430 sq ft) with a large square room containing a stone hearth used for heating and cooking. Given the number of homes, it seems likely that no more than fifty people lived in Skara Brae at any given time.

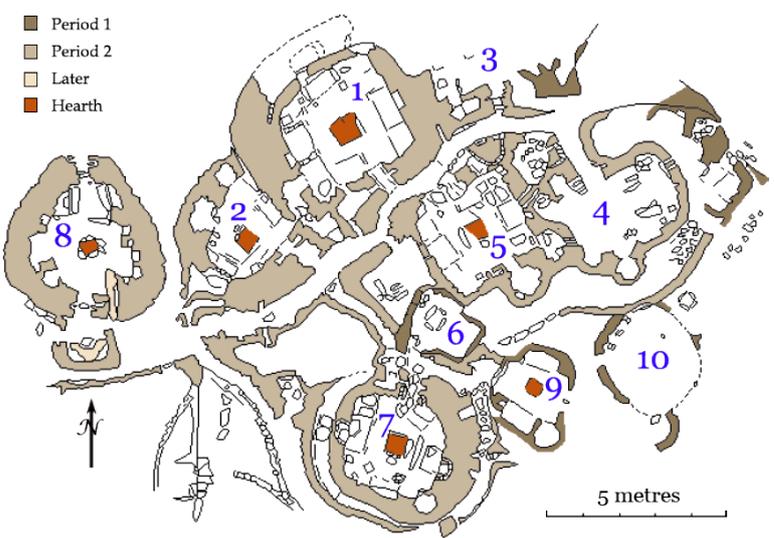
It is not clear what material the inhabitants burned in their hearths. Childe was sure that the fuel was peat, but a detailed analysis of vegetation patterns and trends suggests climatic conditions conducive to the development of thick beds of peat did not develop in this part of Orkney until after Skara Brae was abandoned. Other possible fuels include driftwood and animal dung. There is evidence that dried seaweed may have been used significantly. At some sites in Orkney, investigators have found a glassy, slag-like material called "kelp" or "cramp" which may be residual burnt seaweed.

The dwellings contain several stone-built pieces of furniture, including cupboards, dressers, seats, and storage boxes. Each dwelling was entered through a low doorway with a stone slab door which could be shut "by a bar made of bone that slid in bar-holes cut in the stone door jambs." Several dwellings offered a small connected antechamber, offering access to a partially covered stone drain leading away from the village. It is suggested that these chambers served as indoor toilets.

Seven of the houses have similar furniture, with the beds and dressers in the same places in each house. The dresser stands against the wall opposite the door and is the first thing seen by anyone entering the dwelling. Each of these houses had a larger bed on the right side of the doorway and a smaller one on the left. Lloyd Laing noted that this pattern accorded with Hebridean custom up to the early 20th century suggesting that the husband's bed was the larger and the wife's was the smaller. The discovery of beads and paint pots in some of the smaller beds may support this interpretation. Additional support may come from the recognition that stone boxes lie to the left of most doorways, forcing the person entering the house to turn to the right-hand, "male", side of the dwelling. At the front of each bed lie the stumps of stone pillars that may have supported a canopy of fur, another link with recent Hebridean style.

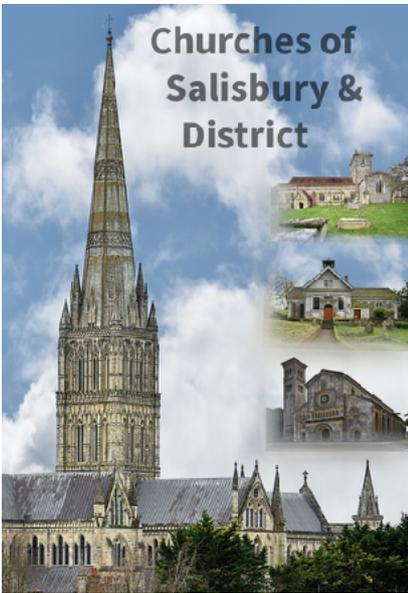
House 8 has no storage boxes or dresser and has been divided into something resembling small cubicles. Fragments of stone, bone, and antler were excavated suggesting House 8 may have been used to make tools such as bone needles or flint axes. The presence of heat-damaged volcanic rocks, and what appears to be a flue, supports this interpretation. House 8 is distinctive in other ways as well: it is a stand-alone structure not surrounded by midden; instead it is above ground with walls over 2 metres (6.6 ft) thick and has a "porch" protecting the entrance.

The site provided the earliest known record of the human flea (*Pulex irritans*) in Europe. The Grooved Ware People who built Skara Brae were primarily pastoralists who raised cattle, pig and sheep. Childe originally believed that the inhabitants did not farm, but excavations in 1972 unearthed seed grains from a midden suggesting that barley was cultivated. Fish bones and shells are common in the midden indicating that dwellers ate



seafood. Limpet shells are standard and may have been fish bait that was kept in stone boxes in the homes. The boxes were formed from thin slabs with joints carefully sealed with clay to render them waterproof.

Originally, Childe believed that the settlement dated from around 500 BC. This interpretation was coming under increasing challenge by the time new excavations in 1972–73 settled the question. Radiocarbon results obtained from samples collected during these excavations indicate that occupation of Skara Brae began about 3180 BC with occupation continuing for about six hundred years. Around 2500 BC, after the climate changed, becoming much colder and wetter, the settlement may have been abandoned by its inhabitants.



SARUM CHRONICLE

Sarum Chronicle is delighted to announce the imminent publication of its latest book *Churches of Salisbury & District* and is offering the opportunity for anyone involved with local churches or interested in their history to buy the book at a pre-publication price of £15 soft-back or £20 hardback if ordered online or by post by 23rd May 2025.

The book includes descriptions of 65 churches in the city and surrounding towns and villages. For further information go to <https://sarumchronicle.wordpress.com/churches> or see the order form here. PS Sarum Chronicle needs a Treasurer so if you think you may be interested please make contact with Emily at e.naish@salcath.co.uk.

**Sarum Chronicle
"Churches of Salisbury and District"
Pre-Publication Offer for April/May 2025**

We are pleased to announce a new publication from Sarum Chronicle. This new edition, entitled *Churches of Salisbury and District*, is a publication devoted to the rich variety of churches in the city of Salisbury and its surrounding area. It is written by John Elliott and Malcolm Sinclair, with photographs by Roy Bexon. The publication is designed to appeal to a wide audience with an interest in churches and includes essays, photographs, maps and suggested tours of the 65 churches.

Publication is scheduled for early June 2025. The book is 168x240mm and comprises 264 pages.

Pre-publication offer price £15.00 softback or £20.00 hardback until 23 May 2025

Plus £3.50 p&p per single copy* in UK

(or collect your prepaid copy at the launch event or from the address below).

Note: The hardback edition will only be available to pre-order and will not be in retail outlets

Churches of Salisbury & District launch event

Date: 12 June 2025 at 6.30 pm. **Venue:** Salisbury Methodist Church

*Tea/coffee and nibbles will be available at the launch

There will be short talks by the three authors

See Sarum Chronicle website, page "Churches" for further details.

www.sarumchronicle.wordpress.com

Image overlay: By Roy Bexon

Pre-Order Form

Please return this completed form by post or e-mail us by 23 May 2025 to:

Sarum Chronicle, 16 Atwood Road, Salisbury, SP1 3PR

Phone: 01710 472017 email: sarumchurches@gmail.com

	Price £	Number	Cost £	Collect copy from		Attend Lecture?
				Launch	Atwood Road	
Paperback	15.00					
Hardback	20.00					
P&P £3.50 per copy*	3.50					
Total						

Pay by BACS: Account: Sarum Chronicle; Sort code: 30-90-90 Account Number: 15085288, with reference Churches

OR Enclose a cheque payable to Sarum Chronicle

* For p&p for multiple copies please phone the number above.

If you intend to collect your copy, either pick it up at the launch or collect from 16 Atwood Road. Please telephone or email beforehand to ensure that someone will be available to hand over your book(s). This collection arrangement will be available until 30 June 2025.

Name:

Address:

Postcode: Email:

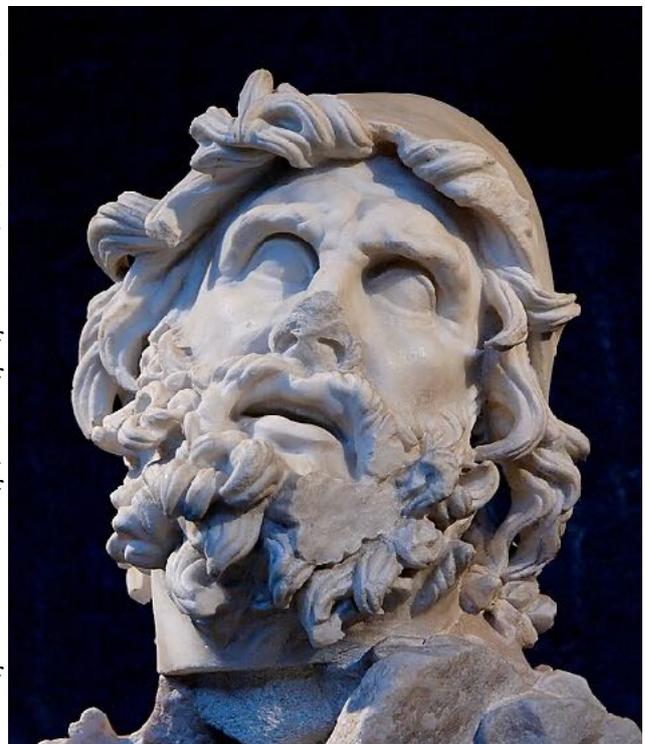
Add my name to the Sarum Chronicle subscribers list, to receive email notification of publications.
YES / NO. We will keep your contact details ONLY for communications relating to Sarum Chronicle.

Any questions please email sarumchurches@gmail.com

ULYSSES FOUND

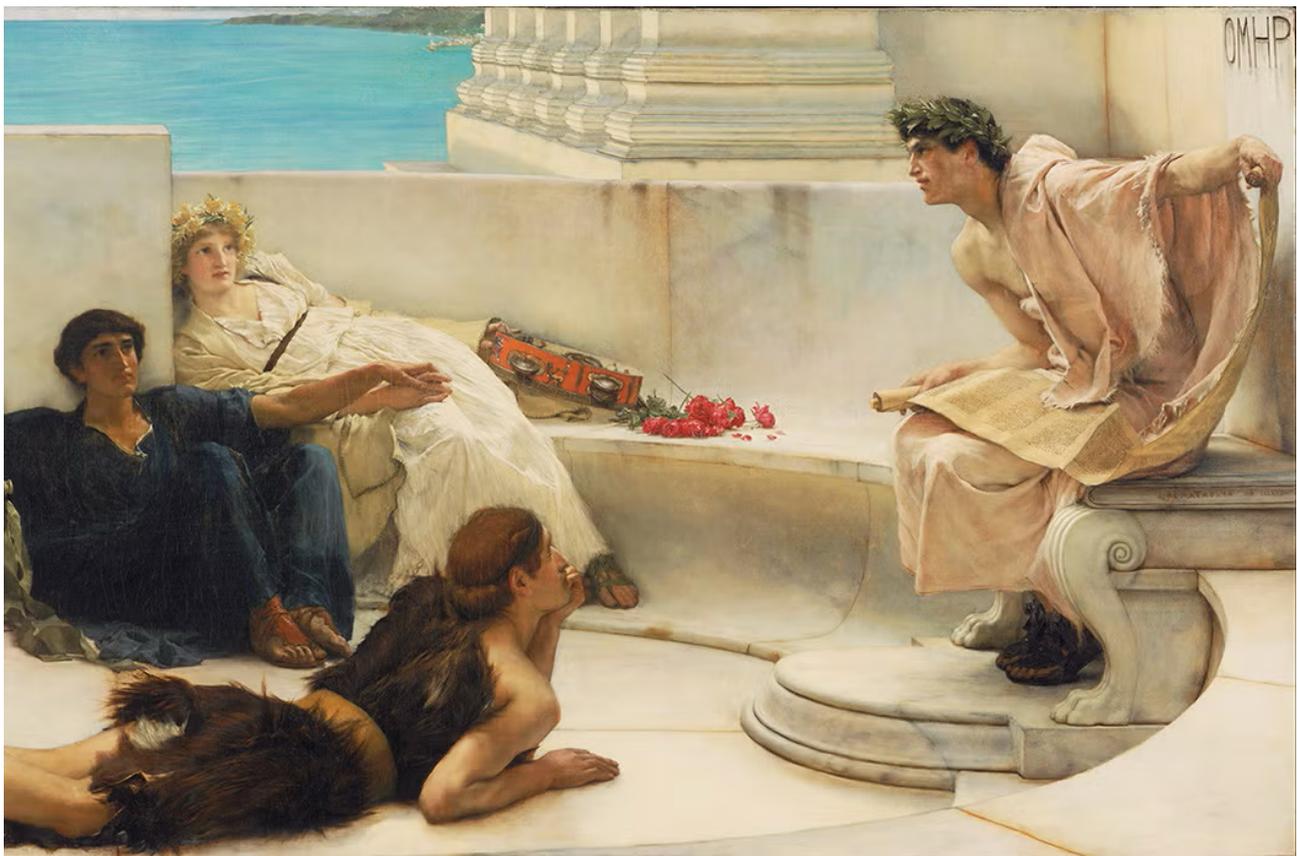
This book by Ernle Bradford was published by Sphere Books in 1967. Ernle Dugate Selby Bradford was a noted British historian specialising in the Mediterranean world and naval topics. He was a keen yachtsman based in Malta, where there is a street named after him. Sailing around the Med in his Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter with a copy of Homer's *Odyssey*, he came up with the idea that much of the geographical descriptions only made sense if your viewpoint was at sea-level. Indeed the whole idea behind the saga is probably a mythical rendering of the Greek's exploration of the western Mediterranean.

Right, head of Odysseus from a Roman period, Hellenistic marble group representing Odysseus blinding Polyphemus found at the villa of Tiberius at Sperlonga.





Ernle maintains that *the main geographical descriptions in Homer's account of Ulysses' voyage are accurate. They read as if they were meant to be, and in fact they often bear an uncanny resemblance to our own Admiralty Pilots.* The passage concerning Scylla and Charybdis has been placed firmly in the Strait of Messina (12 and 13 above). The Admiralty Pilot states *the currents and whirlpools, famous from antiquity, are such as to necessitate some caution in the navigation of the strait; moreover, in the vicinity of the high land, on either side, vessels are exposed to violent squalls which descend through the valleys with such strength as, at times, to inconvenience even steamers.* Imagine what they would do to a boat of Homer's era - the eighth century BC. Of course, as you might expect, not all historians agree with Ernle. The set-book on my OU course was *The Odyssey of Homer* by Richmond



Lattimore (Harper Perennial 1991). In the introduction Richmond refers to this question: *the descriptions may well be based on authentic reports from mariners. But they may also be in the wrong place. That is, to say it another way, for this is important, it is possible to combine topographical accuracy with geographical incoherence.*

We are back in the realms of such poems being transmitted orally. This means that repetitive descriptions such as *the wine dark sea* are deliberately used to keep the audience's participation. Kipling used the same technique with children in *The Just So Stories*. In *How the whale got his throat*, you are periodically reminded *not to forget the suspenders*. In early times when brains were not as cluttered as ours, it was not unusual to find people who could recite the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from memory. In fact many 'illiterate' peoples could recite long epics and sagas. The painting on page 4 is *Reading from Homer* by Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema dated 1885 (Wikimedia Commons).

WHATS IN A NAME

A digression: Ernle, pronounced *earnly*, is an interesting name, more often associated with the landed gentry and probably descended from Earnley in Sussex. One of the big Dorset estates belongs to Richard Grosvenor Plunkett Ernle Erle Drax, late a Conservative MP, and the descendent of Admiral The Honorable Sir Reginald Aylmer Ranfurly Plunkett Ernle Erle Drax. And yes, this is where James Bond author Ian (Lancaster) Fleming got the idea for one of his villains.

THE COPPICE³

Coppicing is the traditional method in woodland management of cutting down a tree to a stump, which in many species encourages new shoots to grow from the stump or roots, thus ultimately regrowing the tree. A forest or grove that has been subject to coppicing is called a copse or coppice, in which young tree stems are repeatedly cut down to near ground level. The resulting living stumps are called *stools*. New growth emerges, and after a number of years, the coppiced trees are harvested, and the cycle begins anew.



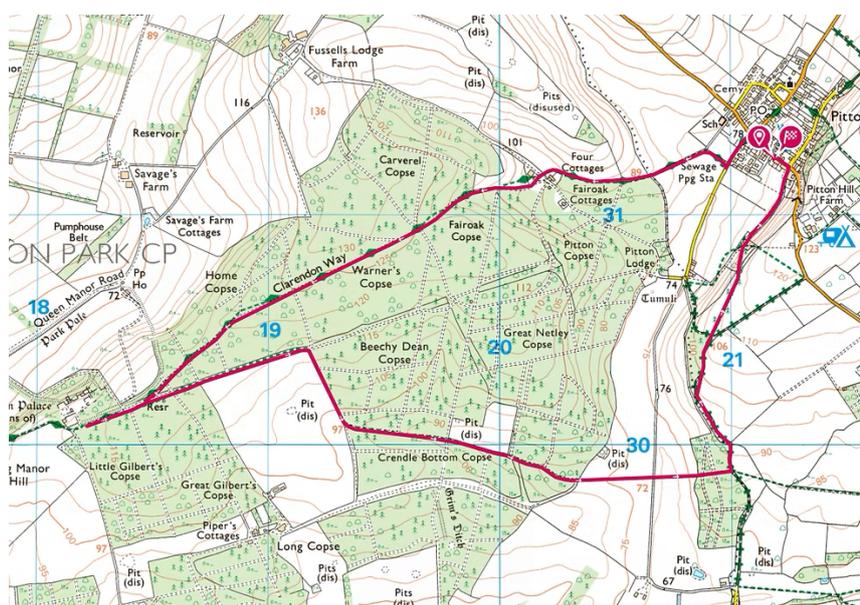
www.canisfamiliaris.co.uk

Many silviculture practices involve cutting and regrowth; coppicing has been of significance in many parts of lowland temperate Europe. The widespread and long-term practice of coppicing as a landscape-scale industry is something that remains of special importance in southern England. Many of the English language terms referenced in this article are particularly relevant to historic and contemporary practice in that area. Typically a coppiced woodland is harvested in sections or *coups* (also spelled 'coupe' but pronounced 'coop' and descended from the French or Norman French *couper*, to cut) on a rotation. English terms for an area of coppice include *cant*, *panel* and *fall* which can be interchangeable and regionally-based. In this way, a crop is available each year somewhere in the woodland.

Coppicing has the effect of providing a rich variety of habitats, as the woodland always has a range of different-aged coppice growing in it, which is beneficial for biodiversity. The cycle length depends upon the species cut, the local custom, and the use of the product. Birch can be coppiced for faggots on a three- or four-year cycle, whereas oak can be coppiced over a fifty-year cycle for poles or firewood.



Trees being coppiced do not die of old age as coppicing maintains the tree at a juvenile stage, allowing them to reach immense ages. The age of a stool may be estimated from its diameter; some are so large—as much as 5.5 metres (18 ft) across—that they are thought to have been continually coppiced for centuries.



Royal Clarendon Palace to the east of Salisbury was probably the largest medieval deer park in Europe. The copse names shown are sometimes hundreds of years old. These trees came under the protection of officers called *regarders*. Coppicing went hand in hand with other country activities such as hurdle making, charcoal burning, hedge laying, wattle for building and of course fuel. Many coppices were surrounded by hedges, banks and ditches to keep out the

deer who would otherwise feed on the young growth.

1. Courtesy of Wikipedia and the title courtesy of composer Peter Maxwell Davies.
2. Map courtesy of World History Encyclopaedia and painting courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art.
3. Courtesy of Wikipedia and Clarendon Palace news. Photo and diagram courtesy of Econation and map from Ordnance Survey.