Place names in Orkney from 16th- and 17th-century maps

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For this project, I recorded the Orkney Island placenames found on maps published in the second half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century. I compared those spellings to modern Ordnance Survey maps.

Nearly all placenames in Orkney are of Scandinavian origin, and very few are of Gaelic origin. Norse migration from the North completely superseded the previous, Pictish inhabitants of the islands. Especially characteristic are suffixes of Old Norse origin; -ay (meaning ‘island’), -holm (meaning ‘round topped or grassy islet’) and -skerry (meaning ‘rocky islet’).

The maps

I have organized the period maps at my disposal into two categories: those based upon early sixteenth century data, and those based upon the survey of Timothy Pont in the 1580s and 1590s. Maps in the former category were published in the late 16th C and very early 17th C For simplicity sake, I refer to these maps as “16th-C Maps”. Maps of the latter category were all published in the 17th C, after Pont’s death. I refer to these maps as “17th-C Maps”.

16th C maps

In the “16th-C Maps” category are the maps of Abraham Ortelius, Gerhard Mercator, and John Speed. These maps are based upon documentation completed in the early sixteenth century, which is now lost. In his article, “A History of Orkney Maps”, John Chesters theorizes that Ortelius’ map, circa 1575, was based upon an early draft of Gerhard Mercator’s. The surviving Mercator map, published 1595 is slightly improved over that of Ortelius, but largely similar. While Chesters does not talk about John Speed’s 1610 map, an examination of the coastal lines and placename spellings suggests that his map is related to Mercator’s as well.

The general inaccuracy of shorelines on these earlier maps can make drawing parallels with modern maps very difficult. Particularly vexing is the tendency to label parishes, which can be very hard to find because the
churches have generally fallen into disuse and ruin. Many have disappeared entirely. However it is somewhat humorous to note the repetition of the church names, “Our Lady” and “St Peter’s”, on island after island. There were three “Our Lady” churches on the Orkney Mainland alone!

Mercator, Gerhard (1512–1594). “Scotiae Regnum [north sheet] per Gerardum Mercatorem” printed 1595. This map presents northern Scotland, the Orkney Islands, and the western Scottish islands in fine detail. A majority of the Orkney Islands are indicated with shorelines which do not closely match those of modern maps. As one follows the map northward, the shorelines become more and more vague. As is typical of sixteenth century maps, Mercator indicates the locations of several parishes and a few towns.

Ortelius, Abraham, (1527–1598). “Scotiae tabula / Abraham Ortelius” printed circa 1575. This is a truly beautiful map. While of a smaller scale than Mercator’s map, this map makes an equal attempt to name all the islands and the towns and parishes in the islands. It does a better job of naming waterways between the islands, which the cartographer calls ‘roads’. This map is oriented with west at the top of the page.

Speed, John (1552?–1629). “The Kingdome of Scotland / performed by Iohn Speed” printed 1610 [1627 issue?]. Though published in 1610, coastlines and spellings are consistent with the maps published in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Speed’s rendering of the Orkney Islands is very similar to Mercator’s, though at a smaller scale. Here the entire kingdom of Scotland is shown on a single sheet, the Orkney Islands being removed to an inset map in the upper right-hand corner of the sheet. Speed did not use Latinized names as other cartographers tended to (e.g., The Yles of Orknay rather than Mercator’s ORCADES Insulæ). Otherwise, the placenames are very similar to those of Mercator and Ortelius.

17th C maps
The second category of maps consists of those based upon Pont’s survey in the late sixteenth century. The earliest of these were prepared in the early seventeenth century and consist of the maps of Blaeu and Hondius. It is not clear whether one copied the other as competing publishing houses raced to publish their new maps. Despite the seventeenth century publication date, it is reasonable to assume that the spellings on the map are indicative of spellings from Pont’s time, at the end of the sixteenth century.

Pont’s influence on maps throughout the seventeenth century is easy to spot:

1. An improvement in the accuracy of the shorelines, except for the errors described in 2 and 3, below.

2. Due to a Renaissance copy-and-paste error, the north-western-most islands are rotated ninety degrees counter-clockwise from their proper
orientation. This error was copied from one cartographer to the next, throughout the 17th C and occasionally even into the 18th C.

3. A more subtle defect is the under-representation of the western highlands of the Orkney Mainland.

4. Finally, the characteristic spelling, Øy (Norse for ‘island’) on a majority of the larger islands.

Blaeu, John (Dutch, 1596–1673) and Gordon, Robert (English, 1580–1661). “Scotia regnum cum insulis adjacentibus / Robertus Gordonius a Straloch descripsit” published 1654 (Blaeu’s *Atlas Maior of 1654*). Though published in 1654, the engraving for this map was prepared by Willem Blaeu before 1628 [J. Chesters, in “A History of Orkney Maps” indicates this date is from “Moir (1973), *The Early Maps of Scotland*. Volume 1. p. 43, The Royal Scottish Geographical Society, Edinburgh”] This map of Orkney appears in a large inset map, along with the Shetland Islands. Additionally, the southern Orkney Islands are seen at the top of the main sheet map of Northern Scotland. The map has very fine detail and legibility. The characteristics of Pont’s survey are evident.

Hondius, Hendrik (Dutch, 1597–1651). “Scotae pars septentrionalis” engraved 1636 (the print I have access to was published 1662). As opposed to Blaeu’s engraving, the Orkney Islands on Hondius’ map are in the same frame as the rest of Northern Scotland. Due to this, the scale is smaller, detail is reduced and fewer placenames are listed. As with Blaeu, the northern islands are misaligned and the island names end in Øy.

Modern maps

For modern reference I used the mapping system of the Ordinance Survey. This institution began in the nineteenth century, and set out to carefully map everything in the British Isles. I appreciate their commitment.

Ordinance Survey. Get-a-map™ ([http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/oswebsite/getamap/](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/oswebsite/getamap/)) ©2007. This is my primary source for modern spellings. This web-based application allows users to scroll about modern Ordinance Survey maps, at varying scales. The maps are extremely detailed for terrestrial features. They indicate topographical information, roads, and the locations of some buildings and other spots of historical interest. The maps are, unfortunately, somewhat less useful for determining names of water features between the islands. Also, the Get-a-map™ interface itself is very small, making one feel as though they are reading a map through a keyhole.

Placenames list

This list of placenames is generally organized first by “major” island, starting with the Orkney Mainland. Each major island heads its own section.
Following the entry for the main island are any islands, towns, parishes or other features in the area in alphabetical order.

**How to read each placename entry**

The modern name of the place appears first, if I can determine it, based upon the placename on the Ordinance Survey maps or in some other source, which will be indicated under “Notes”, below. If the attribution is questionable, a “?” appears after the name. If not known at all, the entry appears as unknown church, unknown town, etc. This is followed by a description of where in the islands the place is found.

16th C: This is the placename as listed on maps by Mercator, Ortelius or Speed. Text in *italics* indicate the spelling as it appears on the period map. Labels in [brackets] indicate the map (or maps) on which the preceding spelling appears.

17th C: This is the placename as listed on maps by Blaeu or Hondius. Text in *italics* indicate the spelling as it appears on the period map. Labels in [brackets] indicate the map (or maps) on which the preceding spelling appears. The Southern Orkney Islands appear twice on Blaeu’s map, once in an inset map, and also at the top of the main Scotland map. If spellings differ in these two places, I indicate first the spelling in the inset, then the spelling on the main sheet.

**Notes:** Under this label I place etymological information about the placename, discuss my logic in determining the modern placename, and admit any concerns I have about my accuracy.

**Abbreviations**

betw. between  
C Central  
E East or Eastern  
G Gaelic  
m-d modern-day  
N North or Northern  
ON Old Norse  
S South or Southern  
W West or Western

**The region of the Orkney Islands**

Orkney Islands Island chain. North of Scottish Mainland. **16th C:** *ORCADES Insulæ The Yles of Orknay [9], ORCADES INSVLÆ the isles of Orkney [11], The Yles of Orknay [14]. 17th C:** *ORCADES INSULÆ and Orcadium Insular um pars [1], ORCADES Insulæ The Yles*
of Orknay [7]. Notes: The name of the island chain is ancient with the spelling Orkas dated to 330 B.C., and refers to the Pictish tribe, also called the Ores [3, p. 267, s.n. Orkney]. Orka- might be a Norse genitive plural and Orkahaugr could be taken as the ‘howe of the Orks’ [8].

Mainland Orkney and vicinity

Mainland Orkney Island. Considered the “center” of the Orkney Islands. 16th C: Pomonia ye Mainland or S. Magnus yle [9], Maynlande [11], Pomonia [14]. 17th C: Pomonia Ins. hodie Mainland and Maynland [1], Pomonia [7]. Notes: Johnstone lists three possible (though doubtful) origins for Pomona, a name that is rarely seen today [3, pp. 276–77, s.n. Pomona]. S. Magnus yle refers to Magnus Erlendsson, first Earl of Orkney, martyred c. 1115. On Thomasso Poracci’s map (1572): Meilan.

Ayre, Bay of and Ayre, Loch of (St Mary’s) Village. SE Mainland. 16th C: Air [9, 14]. Notes: It appears that there is no longer a village of Ayre. Since the time of these maps, the town has become known as St Mary’s, after the nearby church, which is also listed on maps by Mercator and Speed. Water features in the area are still known by the name Ayre. See also: St Mary’s.


Birsay, Brough of Tidal islet. Off the W coast of Mainland, connected at low tide by Brough Sounds. 16th C: Birsa [9], Birza [14]. 17th C: Byrsa [1], Byrša [7]. Notes: Period maps draw Birsay as an islet with no indication of connection to the Mainland.

Breckan? Church and/or Village (Our Lady #1). NE Mainland. 16th C: Brencks [9], Orlady [11], Our Lady [14]. Notes: Based solely on the general location on pre-Pont maps and the unique annotation on Mercator’s map, I took a guess this might refer to modern-day Breckan. I am not, however, overly confident in that attribution.

Bring Deeps Channel between Mainland and Hoy. 16th C: S Margret roade [11].

Clumlie? Cumbla? Church. W Mainland (Sandwick area?). 16th C: S. Columban [9, 11, 14]. Notes: In [8, p. 15], Hugh Marwick associates St Columbia (Columban) with Clumlie, a place he describes as “near Sandwick”. The Ordinance Maps show Clumlie S of Sandwick, and Cumbla, W of Sandwick.
Copinsay Islet E of Mainland 16th C: Kobunsha [9], Kobunza [11, 14]. 17th C: Coupins Øy [1, 7]. Notes: Kolbein’s or Colvin’s isle [3, p. 139, s.n. Copinshay]. Thomaso Poracci’s map (1572): Cobonsay.


Firth, Bay of (and Grimblester) Town? Mainland, W of Kirkwall. 17th C: Fyrth [1]. Notes: Firth is a variant of fjord [3, p. 180, s.n. Firth]. Grimblester is situated on the Bay of Firth, which corresponds with the location on Blaeu’s map.

Foubister Village. E Mainland. 17th C: Fowbuster [1]. Notes: Bister is one of many derivations of ON bolstaðr, ‘a dwelling-place’ [3, p. 42]. Nothing to add for fou-


Graemsay? Islet. Off the SW coast of Mainland between Mainland and Burra, in the Clestrain Sound. 16th C: Grainza [9, 11], Grisay [14]. 17th C: Carestonholm and Careston holm [1] Notes: Blaeu’s map appears to label modern-day Graemsay. It seems reasonable that this may have been an older name and gave its name to the Clestrain Sound.

Kirkwall Town. Located on the isthmus midway across the Mainland. The capital of the Orkney Islands. 16th C: Kirkwall [9], Kirkwald [11], Kirkwal [14]. 17th C: Kirkwale and Kirkwall [1], Kirkewale [7]. Notes: From ON for ‘church on the bay’ [3, p. 230].

Lamb Holm Islet. Off the SE coast of Mainland between Mainland and Hoy. 16th C: Glowsholme [9], Glown shome [14]. 17th C: Labholm [1]. Notes: Holme is a borrowing of common ON word holmr ‘an island’ [3, p. 203, s.n. Holm].

Mull Head or Mull of Deerness Point at Extreme NE Mainland. 17th C: Mul of Deerness [1]. Notes: Mull is from G. ‘brow of a rock, cape’ [3, p. 259, s.n. Mull of Deerness or Moulhead]. Johnstone also guesses Deerness is from N. for ‘door-like’, describing a recess in the headland there [3, p. 154, s.n. Deerness].

Papley SW Mainland. 17th C: Papla [1], Papley [7]. Notes: Could not find on Ordinance Maps, though Johnstone mentions it. ‘Little island of the priest?’ [3, p. 269, s.nn. Papill, Papley].

Saint Dotto’s Church Church or Monastery. Near Kirkwall. Mercator places the church NE of Kirkwall, Ortelius NW. 16th C: *S. Dotto* [9, 11]. Notes: Saint Dotto’s church is said to exist today, but I could not find it on maps. It was named for a 9th Century abbot of a monastery in the Orkney Islands.

Saint Magnus Church Church. In Birsay, W Mainland. 16th C: *S. Magnus* [9, 14], *S. Magionis* [11]. Notes: Not to be confused with Saint Magnus’ Cathedral in Kirkwall. The ruins of Saint Magnus Church are situated near ruins of Earl’s Palace. Named for Magnus Erlendsson, Earl of Orkney, who ruled half of the islands, but was slain by his brother Haakon’s men [17].

Sandside Village. NE Mainland. 17th C: *Sandset* [1], *Sanzet* [7]. Notes: From similar names, it does seem that sand is cognate with the English word [3, p. 290].


St Mary’s. Town named after its church (Our Lady #2). SE Mainland. 16th C: *Our Lady* [9], *Our Lady* [14]. Notes: The town has since taken on the name of the church. See also: Ayre, Bay of & Ayre, Loch of.

Weyland Village. Originally NE of Kirkwall, now absorbed into the larger town. 17th C: *Wiland* [1]. Notes: ‘Land by the road(way)’? [3, p. 323, s.n. Weydale].

Unknown islet W of Gaïrsay on Mercator’s map, betw. Mainland and Gaïrsay on Ortelius’ map. 16th C: *Gersol* [9], *Gershol* [11]. Notes: Grass Holm is near Gaïrsay, though not particularly near the island indicated on either Mercator’s or Ortelius’ maps.

Unknown village On Gaïrsay. 17th C: *Lie* [7].

Unknown village S coast of Mainland. 16th C: *Linknes* [9, 14]. Notes: Unless a major error was made, this can’t be Modern day Linksness, as that town is on Hoy, not the Mainland. Judging by map location alone, this appears to refer to modern-day Midland Ness.

Unknown church (Our Lady #3). W Mainland. 16th C: *Our Lady vel S. Maria* [9], *Orlady* [11], *Our Lady* [14]. Notes: This is not to be confused with the other two ‘Our Lady’ churches listed on the Mainland on early maps.
Unknown church Stromness area, SW Mainland. 16th C: S. Brandao [9, 14], S. Brando [11]. Notes: Strictly judging by its location on the 16th-C maps, this church was near or in m-d Stromness.

Unknown church On Pre-Pont maps, this church is situated E of Kirkwall. 16th C: S. Niclas [9], S. Nicola [11], S Nicholas [14]. Notes: There are remains of a St Nicholas’s Church in Orphir, but that is far from the point indicated on the 16th-C maps.

Hoy and vicinity


Brabuster? Village. Western coast of Hoy. 17th C: Braburgh and Braburg [1], Brabrug [7].

Brims Village. S Hoy. 17th C: Brimms and Brims [1]. Notes: From the ON word for ‘surf’ [3, p. 115].

Bu Village. N Hoy (Just northwest of town of Hoy). 17th C: Bow [7]. Notes: Perhaps the ON word bu ‘farm, farm stock, cattle’ [3, p. 113, s.n. Bowhill]. Bu Hill overlooks the village.

Calf of Flotta Islet. Just off the N coast of Flotta. 16th C: Calf of Flatta [9], Calfa [11]. Notes: For origin of Flotta, see Flotta (island) below. Calf is ON cognate with the English word. Hence, the small island is the ‘calf’ of the larger [3, p. 121, s.n. Calf].

Cava? Islet. On Mercator’s map, located just W of Fara. 16th C: Rava [9]. Notes: Connection with modern-day Cava is based strictly on comparing relative locations of islets on Mercator’s maps and modern maps. I do not have a high degree of confidence in the connection.

Fara Islet. Off E Coast of Hoy. 16th C: Fara [9], Faro [11]. 17th C: Far(a) and Fara [1], Fara [7]. Notes: On Blaeu’s inset map the word is not legible, and appears almost like Farn. It seems that the islet has been uninhabited since the 1930s.


Hoy Town. N Hoy (island). 16th C: Hoy [9, 11, 14]. Notes: Town is named after the island. See also: Hoy (island) above.

Hoy Hills W Hoy. 16th C: The Hilles of Hoy Orcas Droment [9]. Notes: The Hoy Hills include Ward Hill, the highest point in the Orkney Islands.
Ore Farm (and Ore Bay) Village. NW Hoy. 17th C: Ore [7]. Notes: Perhaps from ON for ‘grey’ [3, p. 267, s.nn. Orr, Ore Water].

Rackwick Village. SW Hoy. 17th C: Rackwyk and Rakwyck [1]. Notes: From ON, rack ‘seaweed’, wick (or vic) ‘bay’ [3, p. 281].

Rysa Little? Islet. On Mercator’s map, it is between Hoy and Raua. 16th C: Danza [9]. Notes: Connection with modern-day Rysa Little is based strictly on comparing relative locations of islets on Mercator’s maps and Ordinance Survey maps. I do not have a high degree of confidence in the connection.

Switha Islet. E of Hoy. 17th C: Southa [1, 7]. Notes: Uninhabited (Wikipedia).

Unknown church S Hoy. 16th C: Owr Lady [9], Orlady [11], Our Lady [14].

Unknown village SE Hoy. 17th C: Snelster [1], Saelster [7]. Notes: While nearby to modern-day Saltness, I doubt any connection exists.

Unknown church N Hoy. 16th C: S. Peter [9, 11, 14].


South Ronaldsay and vicinity

South Ronaldsay Island. S of E-Mainland. 16th C: Soutrowassa insula [9], Soutroussa [11], Soutroassa Île [14]. 17th C: South Ranalds Øy [1], South Ranals Øy [7]. Notes: ‘Island of Ronald or Rognvald’. Note that S- and N-Ronaldsay derive from different names [3, p. 286, s.nn. Ronalds(h)ay, N. and S.].

Burray Island between Mainland and S Ronaldsay. Today it is part of a bridge system connecting the two major islands. 16th C: Barra [9, 14]. 17th C: Burra [1, 7]. Notes: Johnstone [3, p. 118, s.n. Burra] describes an island in Shetland. ON for ‘castle firth or bay’, from borg, ‘a fort’. I can only guess that perhaps this Burray shares etymology with the other.

Cara W coast of S-Ronaldsay. 17th C: Cara [1, 7]. [6] indicates that the surname Cara is dated from the 16th C and derives from the placename.

Hunda Islet. Off the W shore of Burray. 16th C: Hunder [9]. 17th C: Hunda [1].

Saint Margaret’s Hope Town. N S-Ronaldsay. 17th C: S Margarets hope [1]. Notes: Per [16], St Margaret’s Hope is where the ship of Margaret, Maid of Norway, went aground in a storm. Margaret was sole heir to the Scottish crown and was on her way to marry Prince
Edward of England. Unfortunately, she passed away here at the age of eight before being able to continue her journey.

**Saint Mary’s Church or The South Church** In Burwick, S.S-Ronaldsay. **16th C:** *Our Lady [9], Or/ady [11], Or. Lady [14]. Notes:* Per [5], locals refer to Saint Mary’s as “The South Church” as opposed to Saint Peter’s, “The North Church”.

**Saint Peter’s Church or The North Church** N.S-Ronaldsay. **16th C:** *S. Peter [9, 11, 14]. Notes:* Per [5], locals refer to Saint Peter’s as “The North Church” as opposed to Saint Mary’s, “The South Church”.

**Swona Islet.** SW of S-Ronaldsay. **16th C:** *Sewunas [9], Sownas [11], Sounas [14]. 17th C: Souna and Souna [1], Souna [7]. Notes:* From ON for ‘swineherd island’ [3, p. 305]. Uninhabited.

**Pentland Firth and vicinity**

**Pentland Firth** Channel separating the Orkney Islands from Caithness, to the S. **16th C:** *Pinthlande [9], Pithland Fyth [11], Pinthland firth [14]. 17th C: Pentland Fyrth [1], Pichtland Fyrth [7]. Notes:* Not a fjord at all. From ON ‘Picts’ land’, a rare reference to the earlier inhabitants of the islands [3, p. 43]. On Thomaso Poracci’s map (1572): *Pentlenser*.

**Pentland Skerries Chain of Islets.** S of S-Ronaldsay. **16th C:** *Pinthland Skerries [9], Petland Skijrres [11], Pinthland Skerrys [14]. 17th C: Pentland Skerryes [11], Pentland [7]. Notes:* See Pentland Firth. *Skerries* (sing. *skeir*) is a common Norse word for rocky inlets [3, p. 295, s.nn. Skeir, Skerries]. The Pentland Skerries are tiny, smaller than many other islets which are not listed on period maps, yet they appear on all the maps I have. This is likely because they are important as navigational landmarks.

**Island of Stroma** Island in the Pentland Firth. **16th C:** *Stroma [9, 11, 14]. Notes:* ‘Island in the stream/current’, referring to the swift current in the Pentland Firth [3, p. 304]. Administratively, Stroma is now part of Caithness, on the Scottish mainland [18].

**Unknown currents?** Jagged lines in the Pentland Firth seem to indicate currents. **16th C:** *The Boyer, The Heppers & The Swell [9], The bojær, The Heppers & The Swell [11].

**Rousay and vicinity**

**Rousay Island.** N of W-Mainland. **16th C:** *Rosa [9, 11, 14]. 17th C: Roos Øy and Rous Øy [1], Roous Øy [7]. Notes:* *Rousay* means ’Rolf’s isle’ [3, p. 287].
Egilsay Island. E of Rousay. 16th C: *Egelsey* [9], *Eglesey* [11]. 17th C: *Eglis Øy* [9, 7]. **Notes**: Johnstone says “Prob. not fr. G. *eaglais*, ‘church,’ but fr. a man *Egil*” [3, p. 171, s.n. Egilshay]. On the other hand, Hugh Marwick [8] states a case for the Celtic origin, due to the large church on the island and proximity to Kili Holm, which the author infers is from G *ceall* ‘cell’; a retreat for the priest to meditate in.

Rousay Sound Channel betw. Rousay and Egilsay. 16th C: *Rosa roade* [11]. **Notes**: Takes its name from the island. Here ‘roade’ refers to a navigable channel.

St Mary’s Kirk Near Westness, S Rousay 16th C: *Our Lady* [9], *Orlady* [11], *Our Lady* [14]. **Notes**: “The church probably dates back to the 1600s, though is thought to be on the site of a medieval church... dating back to around 1300” [16]. [15] indicates parts of St Mary’s Kirk have been repaired.


Unknown NW of Rousay? 16th C: *The belibreke of Rosa* [11]. **Notes**: It is unclear to me what location on Ortelius’ map this label refers to. A waterway or bay?

Unknown church W Rousay. 16th C: *S. Peter* [9, 11], *S Peter* [14].

Unknown village W Rousay. 17th C: *Burgh* [1], *Brug* [7]. **Notes**: Perhaps Westness area?

Unknown village N Rousay. 17th C: *Stamsgord* [1]. **Notes**: Perhaps Wasbister area? Or Stennisgorn?

Shapinsay and vicinity

Shapinsay Island. N of Mainland. 16th C: *Schapun* [9], *Shalpasa* [11], *Schapun* [14]. 17th C: *Siapins Øy* [1], *Siapins Oy* [7]. **Notes**: ‘Hjalpand’s isle’ [3, p. 293].

Lady Kirk SE Shapinsay. 16th C: *Our Lady* [9], *Orlady* [11]. **Notes**: Mentioned in [15], possibly from ca 1560? Now in ruins.

Sandgarth, Bay of? Town? S Shapinsay. 17th C: *Sands* [1, 7]. **Notes**: Connection with modern-day Bay of Sandgarth is questionable.

Unknown N Shapinsay? 17th C: *The Rowlings* [1]. **Notes**: The label appears just N of Shapinsay. It is not clear to me what location on Blæu’s map this label refers to.
Unknown church SW Shapinsay. 16th C: S. Peter [9, 11, 14]. Notes: Balfour Castle now occupies this area, though its construction began in 1782.

Stronsay and vicinity

Stronsay Island. N Orkney Islands. (NE of Mainland) 16th C: Stronza [9, 11]. 17th C: Stronsa [1], Streoms Øy [7]. Notes: Johnstone indicates uncertainty about the origin of the name. Might be from ON for ‘star-shaped island’, or perhaps of Gaelic origin [3, p. 304].

Auskerry Islet. S of Stronsay. 16th C: Ouis Kelle and Ouis Kell Kyrles [9], Ouiskelle and Owiyskylly Kyrles [11], Ouiskelle and Ouiskelle Kyrles [14]. 17th C: Oulkerrie [1], Ouskerrie [7]. Notes: From ON for ‘eastern rock’ [3, p. 295, s.n. Skeir, Skerries]. The earlier maps invariably show a group of islets, Ouis Kell Kyrles (e.g.), where Auskerry appears on modern maps, plus a larger islet, Ouiskelle (e.g.) further NE, where nothing appears on m-d maps.

Holland, Bay of Bay, S Stronsay. 16th C: Holandes Wyk [9, 11]. Notes: From ON ‘high land bay’ [3, p. 203, s.n. Holland; p. 324, s.n. Wick].

Holm of Huip? Islet. N. of Stronsay. 16th C: Sigleholm [9], Sigleholme [11]. 17th C: Sigle holm [1]. Notes: Connection to m-d Holm of Huip is based on location on maps relative to other islands.

Linga Holm Islet W of Stronsay in Linga Sound. 16th C: Lingholm [9, 14], Ling holme [14]. 17th C: Linga [1]. Notes: From ON for ‘heather isle’ [3, p. 239, s.n. Linga; p. 203, s.n. Holm].

Little Linga Islet. NW of Stronsay. 16th C: Lingalytel [9], Lingalittel [11]. Notes: Smaller islet than Linga Holm, above.

Papa Stronsay Islet. NE of Stronsay. 16th C: Papa [11]. 17th C: Papa [1]. Notes: Papa is ON for ‘priest’ [3, p. 269, s.n. Papa]. Locals call the island simply Papey (pronounced ‘pop-eye’\), but for clarity, the map name is Papa Stronsay (pronounced ‘papa’\) [8].

St Magnus Priory? Church. N Stronsay. 16th C: S. Magnus [9], Magnus [14]. Notes: There is a modern St Magnus’ Priory on Stronsay, opposite Papa Stronsay. Due to the very general coastline of Stronsay on Mercator’s and Speed’s maps, which do not even show Papa Stronsay as a separate island, it is impossible to be certain they are the same place.

Unknown church Central Stronsay. 16th C: S. Niclas [9], Nicolás [14]. 17th C: Nicolas K. [1] Notes: Blaeu rarely labels church locations, so this one must have been important.
Unknown church E Stronsay. 16th C: Soline [9], S. Oline [11], S. Olive [14].

Unknown islet NE of Stronsay. 16th C: Lesha [9, 14]. Notes: Nothing appears in the area indicated by Mercator and Speed.

Eday and vicinity

Eday Island. N Orkney Islands, N of Central Mainland. 16th C: Etha [9, 11, 14]. 17th C: Heth Øy or Eda [1], Heth Øy [7]. Notes: From ON for ‘isthmus isle’ [3, p. 169]. On Thomasso Poracci’s map (1572): Etoy.

Calf Eday Islet. NE of Eday. 16th C: Calf Etha [9, 14], Calfa [11]. 17th C: Calf of Eda [1], Calf [7]. Notes: This islet is the ‘calf’ of the larger [3, p. 121, s.n. Calf].

Calf Sound Channel separating Eday from Calf Eday. 16th C: The Sounde of Calfe [9, 14], The Sound of Calfe [11]. Notes: The sound takes its name from the nearby islet.

Faray Island NW of Eday. 16th C: Fara [9], Faro [11]. 17th C: Fara [1, 7]. Notes: Apparently uninhabited after the 1930s.

Green Holms? Islets S of Eday. 17th C: Stroem holms [1]. Notes: M-d Green Holms have approximately the correct size, shape and location to match Blaeu’s map.

Greentoft Village. E Eday. 17th C: Green tofts [1], Green Tostes? [7]. Notes: Illegible on Hondius’ map.


Red Holm Islet NW of Eday. 16th C: Redholme [9, 11]. 17th C: Red Holm [1]. Notes: holmr is ON ‘islet’ [3, p. 203, s.n. Holm]. Perhaps ‘red’ is the coloration?

Rusk Holm Islet. W of Faray. 17th C: Roost holm [1].

Saint Magnus Church On Stronsay. 16th C: S. Magnus [9], Magnus [14]. Notes: There is a modern St Magnus Priory on Stronsay, but I do not have a map of its location or any history of it.

Veness? Point at SE Eday. 17th C: Spur ness [1]. Notes: While Spur ness appears at the N point of Eday on Blaeu’s map, this is due to the incorrect orientation of the northern Orkney Islands. I chose Veness because it is the point “counterclockwise” from Greentoft.
Sanday and vicinity

**Sanday Island.** N Orkney Islands, NE of Stronsay.  **16th C:** Sandes [9, 11, 14].  **17th C:** Sand Øy [1, 7].  **Notes:** From ON and Danish, ‘sandy isle’ [3, p. 290, s.n. Sandaig]. On Thomaso Poracci’s map (1572): Sanday.

**Crosskirk?** Church/town S Sanday.  **16th C:** Croskirk [9, 14], Croskrick [11].  **Notes:** Could not find on Ordnance maps, but found a 19th-C. reference to Crosskirk on Sanday. The intuitive derivation of ‘cross church’ seems supported by Johnstone [3, p. 146, s.n. Cross; p. 227, s.n. Kirkaby].

**Fea Hill** Village? W. Sanday.  **17th C:** Fia [1].  **Notes:** G. [6, p. 24, s.n. Fea] gives a derivation for the word; “fin. ON ‘fia’, meaning ‘enemy’ or ‘fiend’…”

**Holm of Elsness and/or Els Ness** Islet S. of Sanday.  **16th C:** Halouys [9].  **17th C:** Elnes holm [1].

**Lady Village (and church)** C Sanday.  **16th C:** Owr Lady [9], Orladîj [11], Our Lady [14].  **17th C:** S. Mary [1], S. Marie [7].  **Notes:** 18th-C. “Lady Kirk” now stands in ruins near the village of “Lady” and may have been built over earlier church site. An unusual way for a town to take on the name of its church, but the explanation seems to fit.

**Saint Colm’s Church** Church. In Burness, NW Sanday.  **17th C:** S. Colms k. [1], S. Kolmsk [7].  **Notes:** The church no longer remains. On Hondius, Kolms k. is constricted into what appears to be a single word.

**Tressness, Bay of Bay,** S Sanday.  **16th C:** Trasohenes hauen [11].

**Unknown church?** E Sanday.  **16th C:** S. Augustin [9, 11], S Augustin [14].

**Unknown church** W Sanday.  **16th C:** S. Peter [9, 11], S Peter [14].

Westray and vicinity

**Westray Island.** Extreme NW Orkney Islands.  **16th C:** Pappa Westra [9, 14], Pappawestre [11].  **17th C:** Wester Øy [1, 7], also Westra [7].  **Notes:** From ON for ‘western isle’ [3, p. 323, s.n. Westray and Papa Westray]. On Thomaso Poracci’s map (1572): Vastray.

**Holm of Papa** Islet E of Papa Westray.  **16th C:** The Skyre of Pappa Westra [9], The Skýre of Pappawe stra [11].  **17th C:** Holm of Papa [1].  **Notes:** Perhaps skyre is from skeir, ‘a rock’. Thus ‘the rock off of Papa Westray’? (Based upon the etymology for Skyeburn [3, p. 297].)
Papa (Westray) Island NE of Westray. 16th C: Pappa [9, 14], Papa [11]. 17th C: Papa [1, 7]. Notes: ON for ‘priest’s isle (near western isle)’ [3, p. 323, s.nn. Westray, Papa Westray]. Locals call the island simply Papey (pronounced as ‘pop-eye’), but for clarity, the map name is Papa Westray (pronounced ‘papa’) [8].

North Ronaldsay and vicinity

North Ronaldsay Island. Extreme NE Orkney Islands. 16th C: North Ronche [9], Nort Ronhe and Ronaldsa [11]. 17th C: North Ronalds Øy [1], North Ronals Øy [7]. Notes: ‘Ringan’s island’ [3, p. 286, s.n. Ronalds(h)ay N. and S.]. N- and S- Ronaldsay derive from different personal names. Ortelius’ map lists both Nort Ronhe, with a coastline matching that of N-Ronaldsay and Ronaldsa which resembles ‘Fair Isle’, beyond N-Ronaldsay to NE.

Dennis Ness and Dennis Head NE N-Ronaldsay. 17th C: Dumnas Ness [1]. Notes: Ness of ‘din’, refers to the sound of the surf [3, p. 154]. Johnstone’s earliest dated spelling is from Blaeu.

Seal Skerry Islet N of N-Ronaldsay. 17th C: Selchs-Skery [1]. Notes: Perhaps ‘seal islet’? (Based upon [3, p. 293, s.nn. Sella y, Shellay or Shilley] and intuition.)

Twinyess Point at W N-Ronaldsay. 17th C: Tumgnes [1].

Unknown church On N Ronaldsay. 17th C: Sola kirk [7].

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References


[7] Hondius, Hendrik. “Scotae pars septentrionalis” engraved 1636 (the print I have access to was published 1662), http://www.nls.uk/maps/early/scotland.html.


A personal travel guide and photo gallery of the glorious Orkney in the Scottish Highlands, listing attractions, walks, accommodation, and heritage highlights. Eynhallow Church was used as a dwelling from the 16th century and was only discovered by accident. Eynhallow, Orkney, Highlands and Islands, Scotland. Heritage Rating: Nearest: Hotels - Self Catering - Bed and Breakfasts. Italian Chapel. 16th - 17th Century Maps. The awakening of interest in geography in Europe started with the need to find new trade routes to the Far East. This was very much inspired by the rediscovery of Ptolemy’s Geographia. The development of improved methods of surveying and invention of more precise instruments enabled large areas to be surveyed. Starting in Italy and Central Europe, map making and Atlas publication moved to Netherlands where Gerard Mercator produced his first map on the new projection in 1569 and Ortelius published the first modern atlas Theatrum Orbis Terrarum in 1570. Due to great interest in these publications, maps of superb quality were produced making this period the golden age of cartography. History Map of the World Map, 16th Century; illustrating Roman Christendom, Eastern Churches, Mohamedan (Dark Blue, conquered from Christendom), Spanish conquests in the New World, Portuguese discoveries. From The Public Schools Historical Atlas by C. Colbeck, 1905. Related Maps Map of the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries World Map 17th Century. More History. People in History.