

Oback



Nestled on the edge of the burn, lie the remains of the old house of Oback. This unassuming ruin is said to have been where the only Orcadian killed at the Battle of Summerdale died. The Battle of Summerdale was saga-like in its background, feuding members of the Sinclair family sought control of the Earldom of Orkney and matters came to a head on 19th May 1529 where the last pitched battle to take place in Orkney happened to the east of here, on the heathery ground on the far side of the public road. The Orkney branch of the Sinclairs were victorious and many Caithness men were killed. A story tells of one young lad who decided to dress himself up in 'Highland' clothes in order to escape through the Caithness men unheeded and so he headed home to Oback undetected. His mother, seeing what she thought was an enemy approaching the house, hid behind the door and when her son came in, she hit him over the head with a stone in a sock and killed him outright. It is said that as an act of love and penance she built a small stone chapel for her son close to her house.

The remains of a chapel, dedicated to St Mary, were still visible to the south of the house until the early decades of the twentieth century. Although the chapel origin story is convincing, it is also possible that the chapel pre-dates the sixteenth century and was originally a private chapel belonging to the farm of Skail, the large farm that you can see below the ruins of Oback. Skail is an indicator of a high-status medieval estate and means 'hall' in Orkney. It is associated with a gathering place, for people and produce, and therefore played a central role in saga society. This is an unusual location for a Skail, as it is inland; more often they are close to the shore near a good landing place. However, its location at the top of the valley that leads from Scapa Flow to the inner West Mainland means it is strategically placed to control access along this route. It is possible that Skail formed part of the Earls estate, as a place to collect food

renders and entertain the earl and his retinue as he made his official rounds throughout his earldom.