

Eynhallow

Eyn Helga – Holy Island



The small island of Eynhallow is located precariously between the Orkney Mainland and the island of Rousay. The island lies low amongst the wild tides of the sound where the full force of the Atlantic and North Sea tides meet, the consequence of which is often clearly visible to see. Two great masses of energy generate ranging white water commonly known as the roosts.

*Eyn-Hallow frank, Eyn-Hallow free,
Eyn-Hallow lies in the middle of the sea,
Wae a roaring roost on either side,
Eyn-Hallow lies in the middle of the tide.*

Despite the islands small stature it will dominate the early part of the walk, in one's mind as much as one's experience. The island is rich in history and interwoven in Orkney's folklore tradition.

It is perhaps most commonly associated with the Finfolk, a much feared 'sea-abiding community' well versed in sorcery and magic. Legend has it that the island was the last to be brought into the human domain – the Finfolk were allegedly driven from the unholy Hilda-land by Thorodale of Evie. Hilda-land represented people's belief in 'another' or parallel place, islands that appeared as quickly as they vanished – summer home to the Finfolk.

The island has a well preserved twelfth-century chapel and monastic buildings – thought to be the place where Sven Asleifarson, the powerful chieftain sent his son to be educated. 'Holy Island' is referenced only a few times in the Orkneyinga Saga, nonetheless, these references and other research suggest it was a significant location in Norse times and quite possibly the chapel followed an earlier monastic site of Celtic origin.

A small crofting community who were forced to leave when fever broke out, and were not allowed to return by the landlord inhabited the island until 1851. Today the island is used for grazing sheep and is an important sanctuary for nesting birds, in particular the Arctic Tern. The Orkney Heritage Society runs a public trip to the island once a year.

The islands relatively close proximity as we head in the direction of Costa Head makes it feel almost attainable, yet the ferocity of the tides and its detached situation – perched on the archipelagos very edge, provide it with a prevailing sense of isolation.