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Sandwick, known locally as the Easting, is an east-facing bay with a gently shelving, broad sandy beach on the Isle of Unst, Shetland. Sloping up from the bay is a hillside where you can see the substantial remains of Sandwick township, comprising the unroofed and collapsing walls of dwellings, barns, byres, and enclosures that housed and sustained a community of farmers and fishermen in the historic past.



I first visited Easting in 2009 with the Scotland's Rural Past project to undertake field survey training with Unst Archaeology group, and begin a school project with Uyeasound primary school. Our initial recce visit revealed an amazingly rich archaeological landscape, with the footings of older, perhaps Norse buildings underlying several of the farmsteads.

Elsewhere there were signs of prehistoric occupation, including a reconstructed Iron Age building, the original eroding into the sea and excavated by the local community together with the SCAPE trust, and the low sub-rectangular turf and boulder bank of a previously unrecorded

Neolithic dwelling. Clearly this fertile landscape had been valued as a place able to support a farming community over several thousand years.



A surprising piece of evidence for an historic farming economy could be seen in the **remains of a Norse farmstead** eroding out of the sand dunes down on the beach. Excavated in the late 1970's and occupied during the 13th – 14th centuries it shows the same basic layout as the historic farmsteads further up the hill; with a dwelling at one end of the building, and a byre at the other.

This building leaves no doubt as to which end was which. The entrance into the north end is cow-shaped! The walls at the foot of the door are narrow and the doorway gradually widens as it goes up, just as the width of a cow increases with its height from hooves to belly. This discovery finally solved the puzzling problem of the dimensions of excavated Norse byre entrances being too narrow for cattle to pass through.



It can sometimes be difficult to look at an archaeological site and imagine what it was and how people used it. This doorway's profile helped me make a mental picture of the Norse farmers of Sandwick and their cattle of long ago (as illustrated by my colleague Danny's useful impression).

