

# MIKE MIDDLETON (RCAHMS) – SHETLAND

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## The archaeology of Sumburgh, Shetland.



*The author in  
Levenwick c.1977.  
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Middleton*

I'm Mike Middleton and I manage two nationwide archaeological mapping projects. The [Historic Land-Use Assessment](#), is mapping signs of past land-use preserved within the modern landscape and the Canmore Mapping is focussing on the known extent of archaeological sites recorded in the RCAHMS [Canmore](#) online record of monuments.

I've chosen the archaeology of [Sumburgh](#) at the south end of mainland Shetland where I spent many happy hours, as a child, scrambling over the archaeological sites without really knowing what they were. Both my parents worked at the airport and being busy people, they were often at work when I finished school. So I would spend time out playing with my friends, on the beaches and land around the airport.

There were loads of great places to play. One of our favourites was the [abandoned WWII defences](#). Built quickly out of poured concrete onto sand, the buildings had no foundations and have subsided and partially collapsed over the years providing the perfect place for young boys to play war games.

If we were feeling more adventurous we would head down to watch the seals and sea birds at the bottom end of the Ness of Burgi. En route we would pass the [Ness of Burgi fort](#). Known as a blockhouse or gatehouse fort and built during the Iron Age, around 100BC, the fort has a rectangular gatehouse cutting off a narrow promontory. With its low, broch-like entrance and cells to each side it was an excellent playhouse.

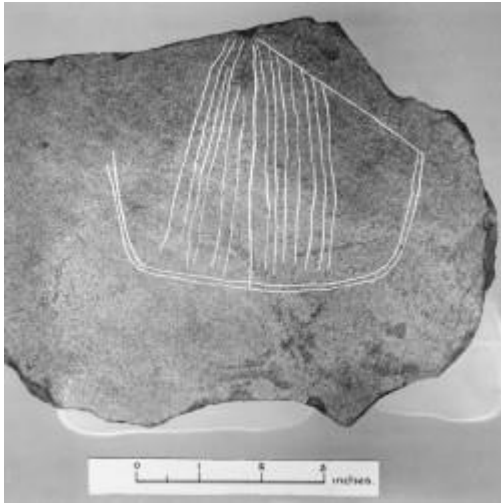


*The Ness of Burgi blockhouse from the north-west. Copyright RCAHMS (SC 342869).*

Most amazing to me now, as I had no idea it was there at the time, is the multi phase site of [Scatness](#). The site was excavated in the late 1990s and revealed evidence for Iron Age, Norse and Post-Medieval settlement. It is dominated by the remains of a [broch](#) and surrounding [wheelhouses](#). Both of these monument types are Iron Age drystone structures specific to Scotland. Brochs are hollow-walled and tower-like in form while wheelhouses incorporate a series of stone piers within the outer wall much like the spokes on the wheel of a bike. I still find it hard to believe that so much was under the ground I played on and invisible to me at the time. Equally amazing is the proximity of the Scatness site to the very similar and just as complex multi phase site of [Jarlshof](#).



*A view from inside the reconstructed wheelhouse at Scatness. Public contribution to Canmore, Copyright Mike Middleton*



*An image of a Viking ship incised into a piece of slate. The author's favourite find from Jarlshof.  
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Although as children we didn't know Scatness was there, we weren't short of brochs to play on because just opposite the end of one of the runways is **Brough Head broch** or Eastshore broch as I knew it as a kid. The site is partially eroded by the sea, cutting it in half, something of particular fascination to us children. Like Scatness and Jarlshof the broch is surrounded by unexcavated earth covered structures and abandoned 19<sup>th</sup>-century farm buildings. It is quite possible that if excavated this site could be as complex as Scatness and Jarlshof.



*Brough Head broch from the sea showing the two walls of the broch exposed. Public contribution to Canmore, Copyright Mike Middleton*

Sumburgh has an incredibly rich archaeological resource. I look back with fondness and frustration at my youth playing on these monuments. I feel lucky that I have had the chance to

grow up in such a rich archaeological environment while disappointed I didn't understand what they were at the time. However, the sites of Sumburgh also provide a snapshot of the big issues facing our heritage today. The hastily built WWII defences were constructed as temporary structures. Made from concrete and often in poor repair many of us don't realise their historical significance. These factors mean that our wartime sites are one of the most rapidly diminishing archaeological resources in Scotland. The Brough Head broch, Jarlshof and the Ness of Burgi Fort are all suffering the effects of coastal erosion, a threat facing thousands of sites worldwide and those maintaining the sites at Scatness and Jarlshof, have to balance the needs of conservation with the thousands of tourists who wish to visit these wonderful sites. What the archaeology of Sumburgh illustrates is it that not every site can be saved. It is just a matter of time before sites like Brough Head are lost to the sea and there just isn't the resource to save all the threatened sites in Scotland. However, we can record these monuments and make this information available so we, or others in the future, can try and understand them better. We can't all excavate sites but we can all take a photograph and draw a plan. We don't need to excavate every site to understand it. By taking photographs or drawing plans we can all record vital information. You can be part of this process by visiting sites, helping to record them and then uploading your research using the [MyCanmore](#) public contribution tool. We need your help to record our heritage. We can only do it together!

This is what I've chosen for Day of Archaeology, but why not tell us your favourite archaeological sites in Scotland on Twitter using [#MyArchaeology](#).