At the end of July, I had a very special holiday, with some of my family, in Orkney, the cluster of small, wind-swept islands (Fig. 1) that stand bravely between the Atlantic and the North Sea off the extreme northeast corner of Scotland. I had always wanted to visit Orkney because my great-grandmother, Isabella Allan, was born on the tiny island of Stronsay in 1843. By any standards, these islands have an extraordinary human history, stretching from Neolithic times, some 5,000 years ago to the two great wars of the 20th century.

Orkney is made up of about 70 islands (depending on what size of islet you count as an island). Three of the largest, Mainland, Hoy and South Ronaldsay, enclose a large protected anchorage, Scapa Flow (Fig. 2), which played a pivotal role in both world wars. Sixteen are inhabited by a total population of 21,500. Because of the frequent high winds, there are hardly any trees, but much of the land is gently rolling hills and lush grass, dotted with sturdy stone farmhouses, with large numbers of cattle and sheep. There are many wind turbines, some of them enormous, though smaller ones provide near-continuous low-cost, green power for individual farms. One island, Flotta, is a terminal for oil from the North Sea.

Surveys of social attitudes have shown that the inhabitants of Orkney are the happiest people in Britain. Any preconception one might have of Orcadians clinging to life on the feather-edge of Europe is manifestly wrong. A high-speed catamaran (Fig. 2) whisks you across the Pentland Firth, the stretch of water between mainland Scotland and Orkney, much feared by mariners in the days of sail because of its powerful currents and contrary winds. Roll-on–roll-off ferries scurry between the islands, on time, manned by competent and cheerful crews, efficient but informal. There are flights to several mainland destinations from the capital Kirkwall, and the six most northerly islands are linked by regular services using short-take-off Islander aircraft. The flight from the island of Westray to its smaller neighbour, Papa Westray, is the shortest scheduled flight in the world, taking nearly 2 minutes!

On Papa Westray, at a place called Knap of Howar, there are two stone-built houses, with curved ends and low doors but without roofs, partly buried in wind-blown sand. They are Neolithic, probably a farmstead. Radiocarbon dating shows that they were occupied from 5,700 to 4,800 BP, the oldest North European dwellings still standing and pre-dating the Egyptian Pyramids. Neolithic buildings and stone circles abound in Orkney. The most famous buildings are at Skara Brae (Fig. 3), on the western edge of Mainland. It is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Europe’s most complete Neolithic village. Skara Brae was occupied from 5,180 to 4,500 BP and came to light in 1850, when a violent storm, which caused more than 200 deaths in Scotland, stripped away soil and sand dunes revealing a village of eight houses.

The islands of Orkney are built almost entirely of Middle and Upper Devonian sandstones and mudstones (the ‘Old Red Sandstone’), formed by the erosion of the Appalachian–Caledonian orogen when Britain was on the edge of Laurussia, a few hundred kilometres north-east of Newfoundland. Today, many parts of the islands end abruptly in steep cliffs (Fig. 4). The pronounced bedding and jointing of the mudstones would have provided ideal building stones for Neolithic builders,
The Devonian of Orkney is celebrated for its fossil fish and, on the island of Burray, there is a marvellous museum, run by the local community, with exhibits of exquisite fish fossils, as well as rocks and minerals and an excellent illustrated account of geological principles and plate tectonics.

But Orkney has a tragic side. Because of its position, it had a critical role in both World Wars, for both maritime and airborne action. Scapa Flow (Fig. 2) provided a protected anchorage that became the main base for the British Home Fleet, joined later, in both wars, by ships from the United States. Gun emplacements and lookout towers still dot the countryside. During the First World War, 100,000 military personnel were based in Orkney; 60,000 in the Second World War. Twice in world history that calm, peaceful view from our holiday cottage (Fig. 2) would have taken in great fleets of warships. From here, in May 1916, the British Grand Fleet set out to engage the German High Seas Fleet in what the British call the Battle of Jutland and Germans call the Battle of the Skaggerak. Losses, of both ships and men, were worse for the British, but the admirals of both fleets learned the futility of trials of fire-power between great battleships.

After the Armistice in November 1918, 74 ships of the German High Seas Fleet would have been visible on the far side of the Flow (Fig. 2). They were escorted there while Germany and the Allies haggled about what should be done with them. The German fleet, was lying on four-day-old copies of the London Times for news about what was going on, was determined that his ships should not fall into the wrong hands. On Midsummer Day, 1919, he gave the order that the fleet should be scuttled. Fifty-two fighting ships were sunk, the rest were beached.

The superstructures of some of the larger ships were visible above the water and others were near enough to the surface to be a danger to shipping. That Scapa Flow was returned to its present state was largely due to the entrepreneurial daring and engineering skill of one Ernest Cox, from the English Midlands, who bought the wrecks from the Admiralty with the intention of raising as many as possible. Starting in 1924, he and his team (many of them Orcadians) set-to with gusto, raising ten of the smaller destroyers in a few months. Cox then turned his attention to the biggest battle-cruiser in the fleet, the Hindenburg. Raising a ship of this size had never been attempted before, and Cox introduced new techniques that have been widely applied subsequently. The smaller ships had been raised using a floating dock but this was not feasible for the mighty Hindenburg. Cox decided to pump the water from the hull to make it buoyant, but this required sealing any holes with heavy steel plates, a feat performed by divers working in the dark and being bothered by whales that played around the ship. In 1930, they succeeded in raising her. Until very recently, this was the largest ship ever salvaged.

The Second World War, at sea, was dominated by the submarine. The British Home Fleet, including six battleships and an aircraft carrier, were sent to Scapa Flow in August 1939, prior to the outbreak of hostilities on the 3rd of September. The main, south-western approaches to the Flow were well defended, but less attention had been paid to the narrow points of entry between the small islands to the East (Fig. 1). The navy was relying on ‘blockships’ sunk beneath the channels to prevent the entry of enemy submarines. However, at midnight on the 13th of October, in an extremely daring raid, the German submarine U-47 was able to slip into the Flow through Kirk Sound near the village of St Mary’s (Fig. 5), her captain recording in his log that the Northern Lights were providing an eerie glow from the sky. Loose inside the Flow, U-47 torpedoed the battleship Royal Oak, which sank in 8 minutes with the loss of 834 lives.

In response, Winston Churchill ordered the construction of four barriers, made of enormous concrete blocks (Fig. 5), between a chain of five islands (Fig. 1). They are still known as ‘Churchill Barriers’ but now support a busy main road, used by thousands of tourists, that links a ferry terminal near our cottage to Kirkwall. They carry official signs bearing the words ‘Drivers cross at their own risk’, a reminder that the weather in Orkney can be very, very wild.

I found my Orkney holiday a moving experience. An immensely long human history, great-grandmother Isabella’s birthplace on the tiny island of Stronsay, beautiful, agreeable and peaceful today, but scarred forever by two terrible wars.

2 Information about Orkney’s wartime history was taken from Scapa: Britain’s Famous Wartime Naval Base, by James Miller, published in 2001 by Birlinn, Edinburgh.