

# Orkney Local Tides

- by Geordie Costie.

Compiled locally as a “Guide” to mariners and potential visitors to the islands of Orkney

This rough guide has been submitted by a local man with a lifetime of experience navigating the waters around Orkney in conjunction with Orkney Marinas Ltd., but is meant as a supplementary guide only and should be used in conjunction with other official publications

## Geordie Costie.

Geordie Costie is a son of Westray who has taken his living from the sea since leaving school .

Beginning his sea career on his father's yole he progressed to larger craft on which he fished around the coast of Orkney and beyond. His expertise and experience gained him contracts such as working with cable laying boats all around the country.

Semi retired?  
Geordie is now a board member of Orkney Marinas Ltd. and also buys and sells shell fish for his own company.



With his father's yole restored and equipped as an inshore creel boat Geordie is still on the sea taking great pleasure in fishing the local shores again.

## Introduction

As any almanac will tell you the main tidal stream on the flood runs east and the ebb runs west around these isles with many deviations and anomalies amongst the isles.

Through the main channels, Pentland Firth, Westray Firth and North Ronaldsay Firth the tide changes approximately one hour after Kirkwall. Off shore to the north of Orkney you can add maybe another hour whilst inshore it would be the same or sooner than Kirkwall.

When approaching Orkney from the east it is desirable to approach on the ebb, especially if the wind is from anywhere in the easterly quadrant likewise when approach from the west the sea conditions can be quite turbulent in the mouths of the various firths and sounds if the wind and tide are against each other especially if swell is also involved. At the springs these area's should be avoided in adverse weather when you have wind over tide bearing in mind that the tide runs in excess of 8 knots at certain places and times.

It would take a great deal of time to explain all the twists and turns of the tides amongst these islands and one would still probably get it wrong as some places are different at neaps as opposed to spring tides,

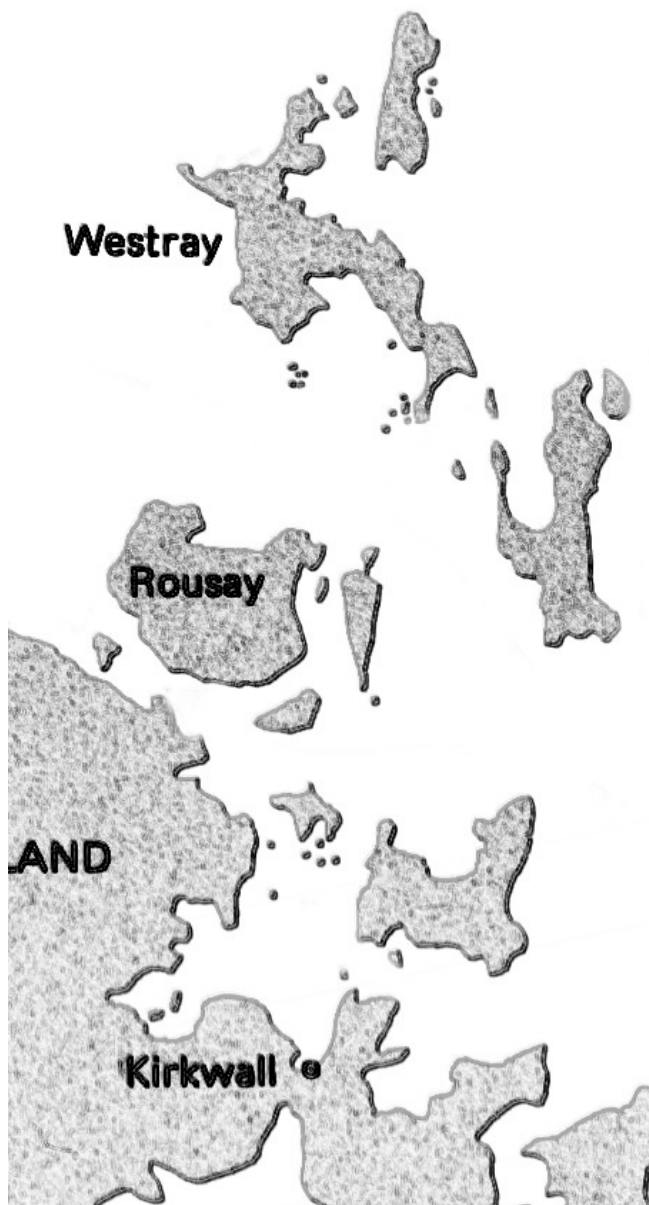
One fact, worth bearing in mind especially for slow moving craft, is that, if there is a fast flowing tide across or past a headland there is usually a back eddy tide inshore on the lee side which can help you along quite a lot.



## Kirkwall to Westray

The quickest journey time from Kirkwall to Pierowall is on the ebb, leaving Kirkwall to cross the Westray Firth on the last of the ebb as by the time the tide is running N.E through Fersness and Weatherness sounds. It makes little difference to the journey times when leaving Kirkwall whether one goes out through Vasa or the Bouyed channel nearer Gairsay, Vasa probably best on the ebb, Bouyed best on the flood. When crossing the Westray Firth if there is any westerly type weather it is advisable to keep well over to the Green Holmes and across to Seal Skerry on the west side of Eday. In westerly conditions, the further west one goes the worse the conditions are

with a very rough edge of tide running from Seal Skerry to the SW corner of Rusk Holm and NW to Rull Noost off Wart Holm especially during the last 2 hours of the ebb. Best avoided. If conditions are not adverse let the tide carry you to the west of Rusk Holm and NE to Weatherness, this is the quickest route. Fersness or Weatherness sounds can be used with the deeper water in Fersness. The tide in both places tends to run east for 4 hours and west for 8 hours. If sailing from Kirkwall during flood tide your journey time will be somewhat longer. If you go out through the Bouyed channel then steer for the Grand buoy off the south end of Egilsay. Keep in the back eddy that runs north along the east side of Egilsay right up to the Kili Holm. At the corner of the Kili Holm you will meet a strong tide. If the weather is good you can crab across the Westray Firth by steering for Wart Holm then the point of Huro to pass well west of Rusk Holm. Other wise you can let the flood tide carry you close by the skerry on the SW side of Rusk Holm. If this is during the last part of the flood the tide will be running west through Fersness and Weatherness and there for against you from the south end of Rusk Holm. The tide is negligible once you are north of Weatherness.



## Westray to Kirkwall

The quickest journey is to leave Westray so that the last of the flood takes you into Kirkwall Bay. If the weather is o.k. and you do not go too early the tide should be going west through Weatherness and Fersness. Unless the wind is strong there should be no problem crossing the Westray Firth on the flood. There can be a bit of a roost during strong SE wind and flood tide running SE from Kili Holm. If the weather is suitable and you go west of Rusk Holm give Rusk Holm a good berth and let the flood help you down the middle towards the Galt Buoy. Do not go too near the Egilsay shore as there will be a strong eddy running north (very handy if you are going out against the flood). If you come down the west side of Pharay or out through Fersness hold up for the SW corner of Rusk Holm before standing out across the firth.

When going from Westray to Kirkwall during ebbing water after passing through either Weatherness or Fersness keep down along the west side of Eday to Seal Skerry here you will meet a strong ebb tide. If you can crab across to the Muckle Green Holm you will get some benefit from an eddy until you again come into a strong tide at the SW corner of the little Green Holm this one will help a bit as you hold up toward the Galt buoy. If the tide carries you west to between the Green Holms and Egilsay you will have a strong tide against you for much longer than if you use the eddy close to the Green Holms. When proceeding towards Kirkwall along the west side of Shapinsay it is advantageous to keep well inshore in the bays where you will find small eddies and only meeting the full strength of the tides against you on the corners of Saltness, Vasa and Stromberry. If you can get your times right of course you can depart to cross the Westray Firth near slack water which would possibly be best of all. The tides turn very prompt at streams but at neaps can drag on for maybe 45 mins longer. Also if the tides are making and bad weather is imminent the flood can come in a bit early.

A passage can also be made though the sounds of either side of the holm of Scockness, between Rousay and Egilsay but the tides are strong here and local knowledge should be sought.

Journey time at 8 knts between Pierowall and Kirkwall is about 3 hours.

## Kirkwall to Sanday, Stronsay and Eday

When sailing from Kirkwall to Sanday, Stronsay and Eday the best time of tide to leave Kirkwall is 1 to 2 hours before low water in Kirkwall going out thorough Vasa round the Galt buoy and if early on in the tide hold a course for the Ness of Ork to get advantage of the eddy. From the ness hold across for the Eday Gruna buoy off the south end of Eday. If you are a bit later on the tide near slack water can go direct from the Galt buoy to the Eday Gruna. In both cases when the Eday buoy is reached the tide will be running E or NE past the buoy and thorough the Keld and Spurness Sound. This tide starts to run E or NE one hour before low water in Kirkwall and only runs in this direction for 3 to 4 hours before turning round and running W for 8 to 9 hours similar to Weatherness and Fersness. After passing through Spurness Sound there is very little tide to contend with. The N going tide runs strong by the end of the Loth pier in Sanday.

If the wind is strong from the W and you want a more sheltered route leave Kirkwall about 1 hour before high water go down the String past Helliar Holm round Hacknes and up the East side of Shapinsay making use of the back eddy. Cross the Stronsay Firth at slack water towards the south skerry where you will meat the tide against you. Leaving Stronsay 4 hours after high water in Kirkwall you can go the same route but keeping well out side the Baas of Linton to avoid the back eddy going N along the east side of Shapinsay If you get your times right there should be ebb in the String by the time you get there.



When going from Sanday, Stronsay or Eday to Kirkwall if you leave about High water in Kirkwall or maybe 1 hour before you will carry the tide with you as far as the Galt buoy. From there to Kirkwall you would have the tide against you but as previously said but if you hold well in-shore along the bays in the west side of Shapinsay you can dodge quite a bit of tide. During times of strong S or SE wind and sea it is not recommended to cross east of the Green Holms or the Stronsay Firth on the flood as you can encounter some very nasty conditions.

## Sanday, Stronsay or Eday to Westray

When sailing from Sanday, Stronsay or Eday to Westray obviously this is better done on the ebb tide which will carry you through Calf Sound. This is the recommended route and very picturesque. Lashy sound is best avoided with spring tides running in excess of 9 knots and a very bad roost on the ebb (which runs N) if there is any wind or swell from a N or NW direction.

There is also a bit of a roost in these conditions between the Red and Grey Heads but this can be mostly avoided by crossing over just at the start of the roost to go between the Red head and the roost. It is a bit shallow near low water to go to close to the Red Head before the roost but once abeam of the roost there is plenty water. As you can see by your chart there is rock directly North of Red Head with deep water all around it. If there is a roost the sea will be braking on this. Once again there is little tide to contend with between the Red Head and Pierowall.

The tide in Calf Sound turns approximately the same time as Kirkwall with Lashey sound most of an hour later.

When sailing from Westray to any of the easterly islands the most advantages time to enter Calf Sound may be one hour after low water in Kirkwall. The tide will help you through Calf Sound and Spurness sound or if you are aquant, the keld. Apart from low water, boats with less then 8 ft of draft can go through here keeping much nearer the Sanday side maybe 25/30% from Spurness. There can be a slight roost SE from Calf Sound on the flood with strong S or SE wind.

Journey time between Westray and Sanday or Stronsay at 8 knts is about 2 hours 20 mins and Eday 2 hours.



## North Ronaldsay

The tide is slack in the North Ronaldsay Firth approximately 1 hour after Kirkwall. If approaching up the east side of Orkney there can be quite a tide roost of Start Point and the east end of the firth especially at springs and easterly weather. You will find a good eddy in Scuthie Bay both on the flood and ebb.

Like wise the west end of the firth can be very turbulent during westerly weather and ebb tide.

Unless the weather is good and the tide not strong going round the north end of North Ronaldsay is not recommended. Depending on the time of the tide there are several roosts some of which run miles out to sea with tides running at up to 8 knts off the headlands. If you are passing North Ronaldsay on a passage give it a berth of a few miles.

Going alongside the pier at Nouster is not recommended apart from short periods of good weather. Even if conditions are good alongside do not leave your boat unattended as conditions can deteriorate rapidly when the tide turns. Anchoring in the bay off the pier is not very good either. The best anchorage is close inshore in Linklet Bay during W or NW wind.

**N Ronaldsay**





## Going West from Westray

If leaving Westray to go west about to Stromness or Cape Wrath or approaching from the same direction unless you have a draft of more than 12 feet and it is low water springs you can go through Papa Sound. This can save a lot of time and rough water going round Mull head which once again has tides of up to 8 knts on springs, the tide changes in Papa Sound about the same time as Kirkwall and the Mull head about 1 hour later. There are strong eddys on both sides of Mull Head, Papa Westray especially on the east side during the flood creating a dangerous "boer" where the flood and the back eddy meet. An area to be given a wide berth during spring tides and any adverse weather.

If inward bound through Papa Sound keep in the middle until you are just in past Aikerness Holm then hold up for about a cable of Ouseness, doing the reverse when outward bound.

Passage time to Stromness is 4 1/2 hours at 8 knots. If you leave Pierowall with the first ebb in Papa Sound by the time you get to Hoy Sound the flood will help you into Stromness. There is not much tide between Marwick Head and the Black Crag. The harbour master at Pierowall is very helpful with advise on Papa Sound. The tide turns in Hoy Sound about 40 mins before Kirkwall.

If you leave Stromness for Westray maybe 2 hours before low water you will pick up the flood tide about Marwick Head and carry it all the way to Pierowall.



## Orkney Mainland West

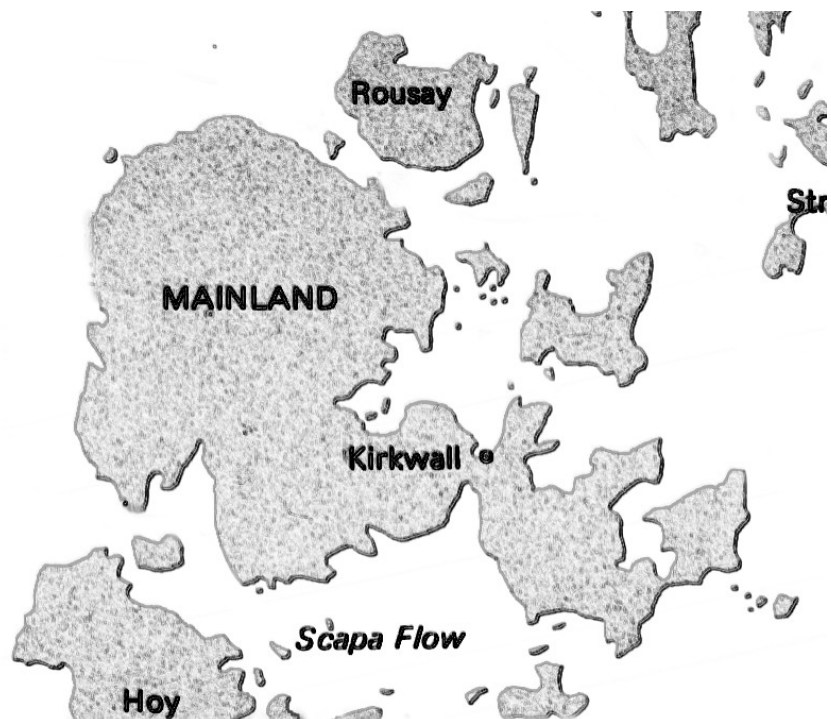
Going west about from Kirkwall to Stromness will take about 3 1/2 hours at 8 knts. Leaving Stromness for Kirkwall is about the same as stated for Stromness to Westray. During any westerly weather there is quite a roost out of Hoy Sound on the ebb. Apart from when rounding the Kirk rocks it is possible to stay inshore of this tide run. When rounding Bragga Skerry on the north side there is plenty of room between the roost and the shore until you get to the Kirk rocks. Inward bound against the ebb there is a strong tide against you from the Kirk Rocks until you get into the harbour entrance. This tide is strongest when abeam of the Ness Beacon where it can reach 7 knts or maybe more. En route from Stromness to Kirkwall. Eynhallow Sound is best approached on the flood. The deepest water is between Rousay and Eynhallow but the most straight forward channel is between Eynhallow and the Orkney Mainland, Just keep to the middle. Between Gairsay and the Holm of Rendall is a shallow patch. Unless your boat has more then 6ft of draft and it is low water springs this should not create a problem. To keep clear of this patch keep over towards the Holm of Rendall and the Beacon on the skerry. When past the beacon steer for the Linga Buoy.

The tide in Eynhallow Sound turns about the same time as Kirkwall.

When going in the opposite direction going out through Eynhallow on the ebb time your departure from Kirkwall so that you arrive at Hoy Sound at the first flood for the quickest journey.

The last half of the ebb tide in Eynhallow Sound is one of the stronger. Personally with a boat doing 9 knts I have been unable to cut this tide at the top of the springs several times.

Once again with west or northerly weather there is bad tide run on the ebb here known as the "Burger Roost". If there is not to much swell you can keep out of the worst of the roost by keeping to the mainland side of the channel.



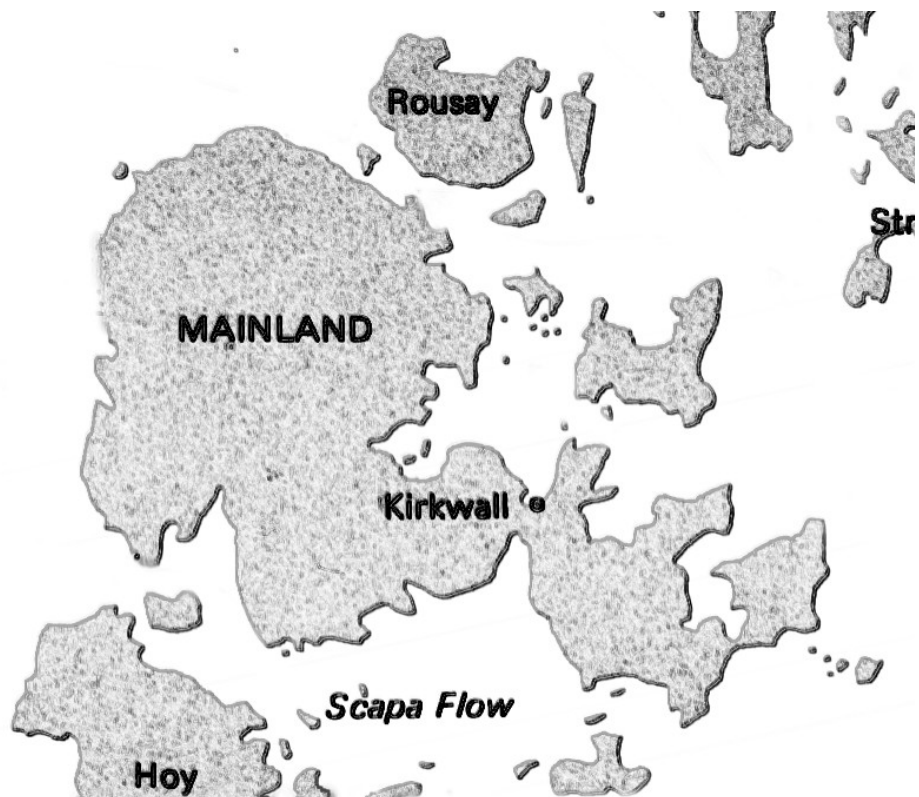
## Orkney Mainland East

If the weather is such that you do not want to go west about between Stromness and Kirkwall you have the option of going east about. 5 1/2 hours at 8 knts.

If you depart Kirkwall on the flood to reach the South end of South Ronaldsay at slack water you will pick up the ebb as you go either through Hoxa Sound or up past Cantick Head and Lyness to Stromness. For the most water when going through the pass of Copinsay keep about 30/40% of the Black Holm side of the channel. As you approach the old head the tide will be running west. If you are a bit early this tide will still be running west up to Brough Ness. If the weather is good you can go outside of Lothar Skerry but some tide lumps can be avoided by going inside of the Lothar. Keep mid channel between the Lothar and Broughness and well over towards a rock that has the remains of a wooden pole on it when passing out the north end of the channel. The Lothar lies shallow for about 30 % across the north channel.

Once the flood tide is well established in Hoy Sound maybe one hour after low water in Kirkwall you should leave Stromness for Kirkwall this tide will take you down to Broughness. NOTE this tide is over 9 knts off the SW corner of the Lothar Skerry. Inshore from Broughness and round the Old head the tide will likely be against you being quite strong on the old head "the liddle eddy". In good conditions this can be avoided by holding well out between South Ronaldsay and the Pentland Skerries before turning NE for Copinsay.

Once again if the timing is right you should pick up the ebb tide at the pass of Copinsay to help you right up the String to Kirkwall. Once clear of the old head there is not a lot of tide till you reach Copinsay



## Westray to Shetland

If you depart Pierowall about 2 1/2 hours before low water in Kirkwall at 8 knts you will carry the tide all the way to Sumburgh. After rounding Sumburgh the tide will be against you as the tide on the east side of the south end of Shetland flows mainly from the NE.

In poorer weather the best route from Westray to Shetland is to Scalloway. Once you are clear of Orkney this route keeps you to the west of the stronger tide and therefor less turbulence.

Notes :-