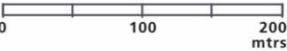
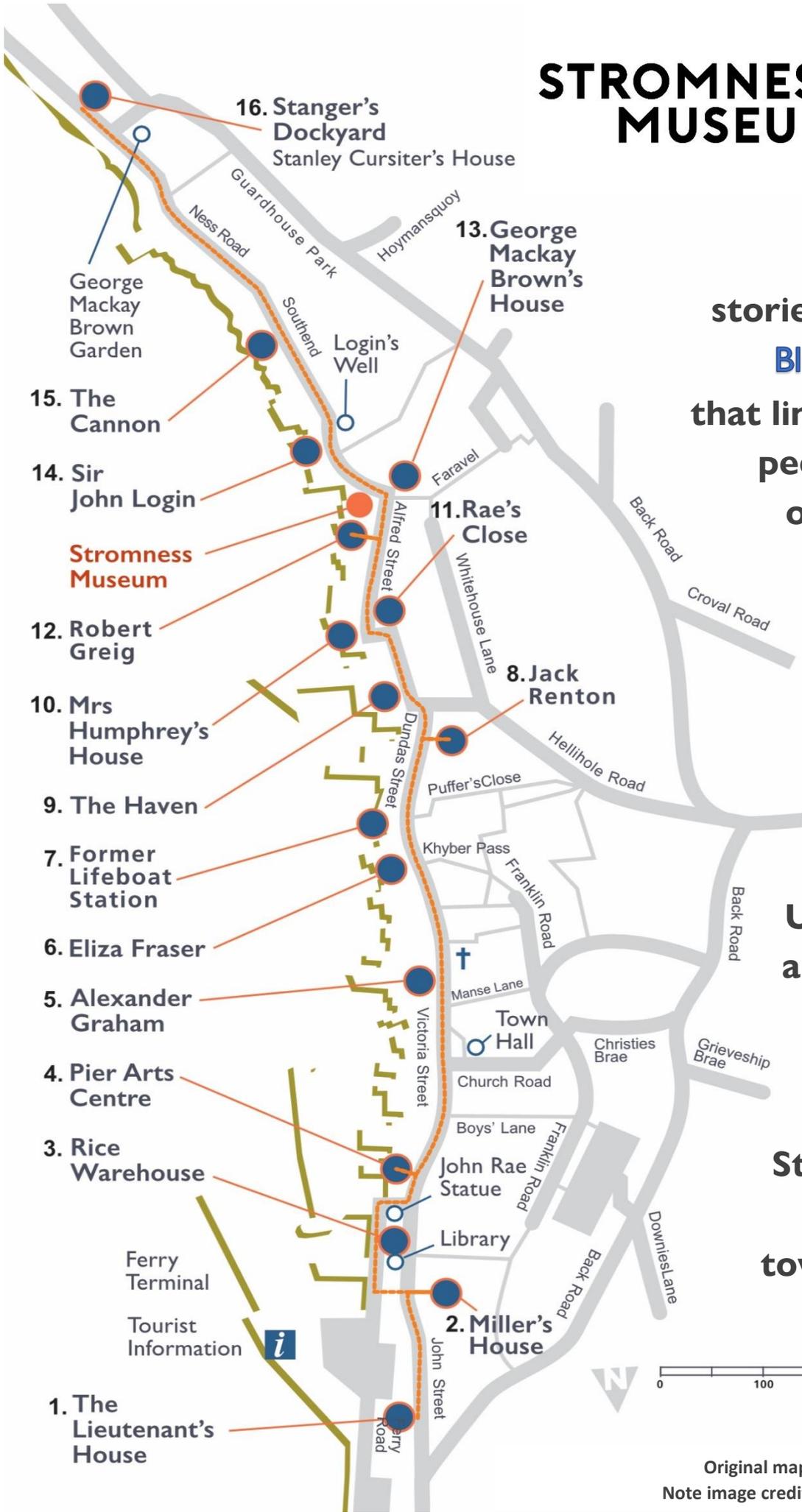


# STROMNESS MUSEUM



Discover the stories behind the **Blue Plaque Trail** that link places and people through objects in our collection

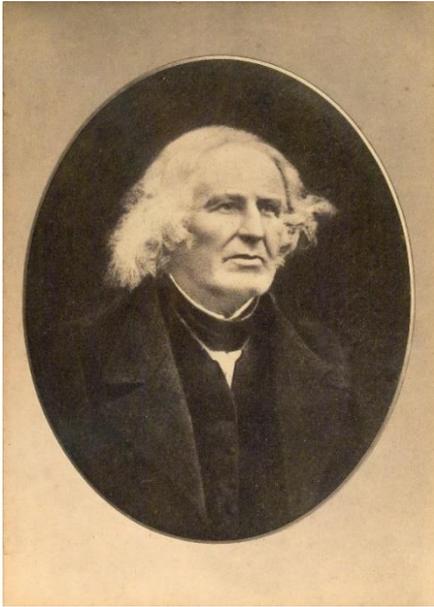
Use this guide and follow the trail through the historic streets of Stromness and explore the town's heritage



Original map designed by Iain Ashman  
 Note image credit: SM=Stromness Museum

## Number 1: The Lieutenant's House

The first stop on our walk is this large house with walled garden, also known as 'The Speddings' after a chemist who once lived here.



Lieut. James Robertson RN  
(Orkney Library & Archive)

Lieutenant James Robertson RN (Royal Navy) built this house after retiring from a naval career. He began at the age of 23 as an Able-Bodied Seaman aboard HMS Lapwing in Nova Scotia. Following a period in the Mediterranean and after serving on seven different vessels, he became Lieutenant in 1815 of HMS Paulina.

Local tradition says that James also served as Acting Lieutenant at the Battle of Plattsburg in America in 1812, however local historian Ray Fereday discovered this to be incorrect.

James settled back in Stromness and retired on half pay. He married Miss Ann Spence of Pow and they had ten children, several of whom did not survive childhood.



Ship's Log from HMS Paulina, written by Lieut. James Robertson RN (Orkney Library & Archive)

The shore in Stromness used to lie directly below this house. The land where the Ferry Road now is has been reclaimed from the sea.

## Number 2: Miller's House – continue along John Street for 165 m and look to your right, up a close just before the British Legion is stop number 2

Lieutenant Joseph Miller RN was another distinguished naval officer from Stromness. He served as a Sailing Master on board HMS Cyane in the Mediterranean during the Napoleonic war and was highly commended for his skill in navigation of inshore waters.

His family originated from this building, which is the oldest datable house in Stromness. Have a look at the ornately carved stone above the lintel.

It shows the Miller and Nisbet family coats of arms together, signifying a marriage.

The Miller coat of arms is a cross surrounded by four hearts. The cross moline represents the millstone, a reference to the origin of the name Miller.

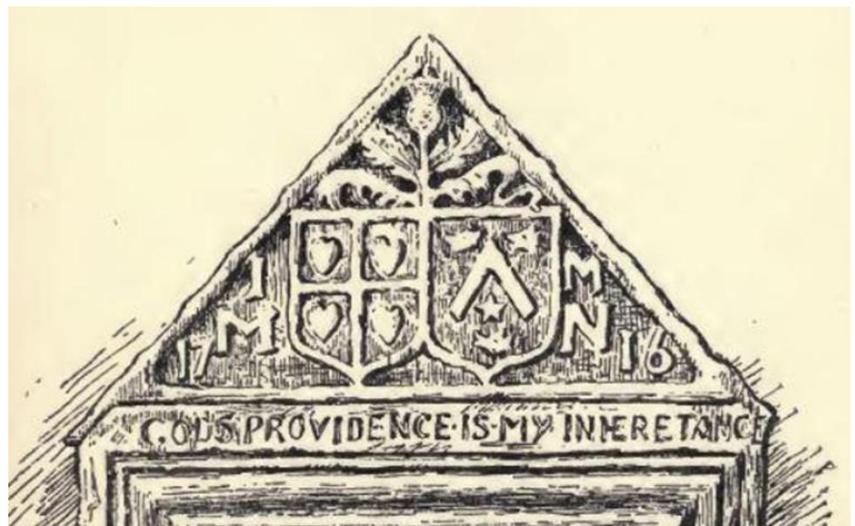


Illustration by A.M. Traill in the book 'Armorial of Orkney' by H. L. Norton Smith, 1902. On this illustration you can clearly see that the plant at the top of the lintel stone was originally a thistle, which through repairs has not been faithfully represented.

The Nisbet coat of arms can also be seen at the house of Howan in Egilsay. It depicts three boar's heads, a chevron and a star. The star indicates that this Nisbet family had perhaps a younger brother as the head of the household. The chevron signifies protection.

**Number 3: Warehouse – walk directly cross the street towards the harbour front, turn right and continue for 30 m, you will find this plaque on a building to your right**

This large warehouse building was built in the 1760's by James Gordon. During the Seven Years war Britain was in conflict with France over foreign territories, so it was too dangerous for merchant ships to use the English Channel. Instead, ships carrying rice from America used Stromness to land their cargoes.

This use for the building was short-lived, as the war ended, and the rice ships returned to using the Isle of Wight as their landing port. The building project bankrupted James Gordon.

The building has been used to store many other trade goods over the years, such as grain and coal. It was refurbished in 2015 and now houses the Library, Police desk and Customer Information for Orkney Islands Council.

As you walk along south along the harbour front, you'll pass the statue of Arctic explorer Dr John Rae. A few steps on and you'll be at the historic heart of Stromness, the Pier Head. Take a look at the fountain, with a plaque dedicated to Alexander Graham, who we will find out more about later on.



Painting of the Warehouse in the 1950's by Stanley Cursiter © estate of Stanley Cursiter.  
Photo: Fife Cultural Trust, on behalf of Fife Council

**Number 4: Hudson's Bay Company – turn left at the fountain, walk 35 m and on your left is the Pier Arts Centre. The plaque can be found on the pier at the back of the building**

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was set up in 1670 to trade furs of the wild animals living around Hudson's Bay in Canada. The Company had an agent based in Orkney to recruit men. Edward Clouston was one such agent and this building was his house.

Isobel Finlayson was the wife of an HBC Chief Factor and in 1840 she travelled with her husband to Red River, via Stromness. She describes been entertained by Mr Clouston at this house

*"The tables literally groaned under the good things that were placed upon them: the evening never closed until the national and inspiring glass of whisky punch had been passed around, when many a joke was uttered and many a song sung, under the effect of its potent and cheering influence"*



Hudson's Bay Company Flag in Stromness Museum (Photo: Iain Ashman)



John Aim Shearer, bought the building in 1872, to house his business, which endured nearly 100 years. Shearer owned four trading schooners, which transported goods up and down the East Coast of Scotland.

Now-a-days this building houses the Pier Arts Centre collection, established by Margaret Gardiner in 1979. Please check their website for up-to-date opening times [www.pierartscentre.com](http://www.pierartscentre.com)

Above is one of John Aim Shearer's schooners Maggie. The others were named: Janet, Mary Ann and Minnie, three of them named after his daughters. They could regularly be seen discharging their goods at the pier on the seaward side of this building (Photo: Rebecca Marr © Stromness Museum )

**Number 5: Alexander Graham – follow the trail for 230 m along the street to Graham Place, his plaque can be seen on the front of a stone-built house to your left**

Alexander Graham lived here in 1700's and 'Graham Place' is named after him. He is famed for leading a legal battle on behalf of the town of Stromness against the City & Royal Burgh of Kirkwall. The Stromness merchants (including Graham) believed they were unfairly paying tax to Kirkwall, and in 1742 they took a stand and refused to pay. This led to a 15-year legal dispute, which Graham dedicated many years of his life to, and for which he shouldered a large financial burden.

"Graham could sometimes be observed pacing back and fore on his pier, tight-lipped, his right palm receiving regular blows from his left fist."  
(Bryce Wilson, Stromness: A History).



Alexander Graham



Graham Place in the 1920's  
(Stromness Museum collection)

Graham's hard work paid off and the matter was settled in his favour in 1756, when the Court of Session declared that 'the said village should be free therefrom, in all time coming'. However, due to the spiralling legal costs, Graham became bankrupt and was imprisoned in Kirkwall tolbooth for his debts.

Graham could be rightly proud of his success, which paved the way for Stromness to become a Burgh of Barony in 1817 and gain control of its own affairs once and for all.

**Number 6: Eliza Fraser's House – continue for 80 m, look up to your left for this plaque**



Portrait sketch of Eliza Fraser  
(Wikimedia Commons)

Shipwreck survivor Eliza Fraser lived here, before embarking on a life-changing voyage in 1835 with her husband Captain James Fraser. She left her children in Stromness under the care of the parish minister and set sail to Australia. The Frasers' ship was wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef and they spent two months at sea in a smaller boat, before landing on an island, K'gari, currently named Fraser Island.

Eliza's account of her time on the island differs greatly from the account by the Aboriginal people of the island, the Butchulla. Eliza believed she was treated cruelly, being forced to fetch firewood and food. However, this was the Butchulla's way of ensuring the shipwreck survivors contributed to the community. Eliza believed the ointment being rubbed into her skin the ultimate insult, where in fact it was a Butchulla treatment for her terrible sunburn.

Capt. Fraser, already in poor health, died during his stay on the island and Eliza was rescued by an Irish convict and was taken to Sydney. Eliza attempted to support herself financially by embellishing her story and becoming somewhat of a 'celebrity' shipwreck survivor whilst in Sydney and on her return to Britain.

She certainly succeeded in becoming well known, as her story was published in the newspapers of the time and subsequently inspired a novel, a big budget film and a painting by Sydney Nolan. However, in recent years a campaign has been established to change the island's name from Fraser Island to K'gari, its Butchulla name, which means 'Paradise'.



Eliza Fraser remarried and returned to Orkney with her new husband, Captain Alexander Greene. He donated several items from his home (New Zealand) to Stromness Museum – including Maori fish hooks (Photo: Rebecca Marr ©SM)

## Number 7: The Former Lifeboat Station – can be seen 50 m on your left just outside the Red Shed



The Naming Ceremony of the lifeboat J.J.K.S.W in 1928 (Stromness Museum collection)

The Stromness Lifeboat was established after the disastrous shipwreck of the 'Albion' on New Year's Day 1866. In the absence of a lifeboat, Graemsay fishermen and the Royal Mail, a paddle steamer from Stromness, launched to rescue the ship's emigrant passengers. Eleven people drowned, including Graemsay's Joseph Mowat, who was part of the rescue effort.

This tragedy prompted Stromness Lifeboat station to be founded.

The first boathouse and slip were sited at the Point of Ness, but were abandoned in favour of this location, with a new wooden slipway, completed in 1901.



A breeches buoy, lifesaving device on display in Stromness Museum (Photo: Rebecca Marr ©SM)

The first boat was called the 'Saltaire', powered by sail and oar and manned by a volunteer crew (mainly fishermen). There have been seven lifeboats serving Stromness since.

When you walk further along this trail to the house of Robert Greig, you will learn more about one of the Stromness Lifeboats 'The Good Shepherd' and her crew.

## Number 8: Jack Renton's House – walk on for 55 m, this plaque can be found up a close on your right just before you reach Hellihole

John (Jack) Renton was born in this house in 1848. As a child he loved to climb the rigging of vessels moored in the harbour, which was the beginning of an extraordinary life at sea. Whilst in San Francisco he was 'shanghaied' (drugged) and found himself aboard the guano trade ship 'Reynard'. Along with three others, Renton escaped on an open boat, which drifted across the Pacific, landing on the island of Malaita (Solomon Islands).

Renton became a castaway ultimately living there for nearly eight years from 1868 to 1875. Renton was taken in by Chief Kabou of Sulufou and earned his place as a fully integrated member of their community. He learned the local language and customs and received training as a warrior, taking part in raids on other villages.

Jack escaped aboard a blackbirding (labour recruiting) ship, eventually arriving back in Orkney. However, his spell in the Solomon Islands had changed him forever and he only stayed in Stromness for six months. He made his way back to the Pacific to work for the Australian Government, recruiting Pacific islanders for labour, but was killed by inhabitants of the island of Aoba in 1878.



Jack Renton as a boy with his parents (Orkney Library and Archive)

Renton was mourned by Chief Kabou and his people, whose descendants still remember Renton in Malaita today.



Opposite are spears from the Soloman Isles taken back by David Renton Baikie, nephew of Jack Renton (Photo: Rebecca Marr ©SM)

The Stromness Museum has a number of objects on display relating to Jack Renton's story including a pair of tortoiseshell earrings, boar tusks, arrows and a club

## Number 9: The Haven – can be found across the road, 40 m on your left



*Lady Head*, the last HBC ship to call at Stromness in 1891 (Stromness Museum collection)

Orkney has a long history with the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) which played a vital role in the development of Stromness and its harbour.

From the early 1700`s, ships from the HBC began calling into Stromness to gather provisions and young seamen before sailing across the Atlantic.

By the late 18th century, three quarters of the men employed by the HBC came from Orkney and in 1791, they appointed David Geddes, a local merchant, as their agent in Stromness. Originally built by Geddes, *The Haven* served as the HBC`s recruiting headquarters for many years.

Passing through several hands, *The Haven* was purchased in 1937 by the Northern Lighthouse Board and became home to the manager of the adjacent Lighthouse Depot.

The Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB) established a base in Stromness to supply provisions for the many northern lighthouses and navigations buoys. In 1893, a purpose-built depot with a pier and sheds was erected and the first lighthouse tender *Pole Star* was stationed here. On Ness Road, accommodation for the lighthouse keepers and their families was also built.

For over a century, many local men were employed at the depot and crewed a succession of *Pole Star* tenders. The depot closed in 2004 following the automation of lighthouses. Now based in Oban, the NLB tenders continue to play a vital role in maritime safety, and still frequently call into Stromness.



Plaque from the Stromness depot with the NLB motto 'IN SALUTEM OMNIUM' which means 'For the Safety of All' (Photo: Rebecca Marr © SM)

## Number 10: Mrs Humphrey`s House is 60 m from here just round the corner on your left

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, whaling ships from the East coast of Britain would call into Stromness to take on fresh provisions before heading out to the Arctic. Each year, scores of whaling ships would berth in the harbour and hundreds of local men were taken on as crew.



Whaling was a risky business. Ships were often trapped in and sometimes crushed by the Arctic sea ice. Many men died or returned suffering from scurvy and frostbite.

In 1836 - 1837, Mrs Humphrey`s house was converted into a makeshift hospital to care for sailors who had been ice-bound all winter.

With a decline in the whale population and demand for whale products, the last whaling crew sailed from Stromness in 1870, although a few Dundee whalers continued to call in here until the early 20th century.

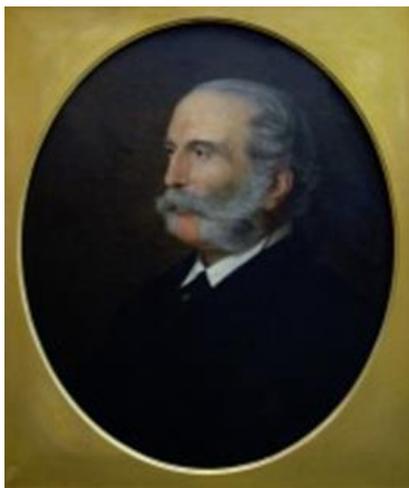
On the left is a selection of hand harpoons which can be seen in the museums Whaling Gallery. There are also some lovely examples of scrimshaw work (Photo: Rebecca Marr ©Stromness Museum)



Scrimshaw depicting scene of a whaling incident (Photo: Rebecca Marr ©SM)

Scrimshaw is an artform where images are carved into a whale`s tooth or bone. A mixture of chalk and ink is rubbed into the lines to make the drawing stand out. It was a pastime practised by many seafaring men.

## Number 11: Dr John Rae – this plaque is 20 m across the street on the right



Dr John Rae (Photo: Rebecca Marr©SM)

Rae's Close was named in honour of Dr John Rae (1813-1893), one of the most successful Arctic explorers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Rae was born and raised at the Hall of Clestrain, Orphir where he enjoyed the outdoor life fishing, sailing, and shooting, all useful skills for the future Arctic explorer and surveyor.

In 1833, after qualifying as a surgeon in Edinburgh, Rae returned to Orkney and signed on with the Hudson Bay Company, sailing to Canada as a ship's surgeon.

For many years, Rae worked to the HBC in the Canadian Arctic. During his time there, he learned the essential methods of Arctic survival and travel from the native Inuit.

Rae went on to travel vast unexplored areas of the Arctic, covering extraordinary distances on foot or by small boat and mapped 1,756 miles of uncharted Arctic coastline.

In 1854, he made two important discoveries; the last link in the Northwest Passage, a navigable sea route that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, now known as *Rae Strait* and the tragic fate of Franklin's expedition.

Dr John Rae died in London in 1893 and is buried in the graveyard of St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall. On his death, Rae's widow gave the Stromness Museum a painting of Rae along with his shotgun and the octant he used to survey with.



Pair of snowshoes  
(Photo: Rebecca Marr ©SM)

## Number 12: Robert Greig's house - walk along the street for 85 m before turning left. Situated 25 m down the pier is where you will find this plaque



Lifeboat *Good Shepherd* and crew (SM collection)

On the morning of 11<sup>th</sup> December 1907, the Stromness Lifeboat *Good Shepherd* was launched to aid the stricken steam-trawler *Shakespeare* which had run aground in very heavy seas off Breckness.

Under perilous conditions, Coxswain Robert Greig together with his courageous crew saved the lives of three men who were clinging to the foremast and funnel of the wrecked vessel. The local Life Saving Brigade rescued a further three men who were on the mizzen mast.

For his outstanding conduct in the rescue, Coxswain Robert Greig was awarded the Silver Medal of the R.N.L.I.

In 1891, the *Good Shepherd* replaced Orkney's first lifeboat the *Saltire* and was a gift from the Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds. It was a 42 ft; self-righting open vessel powered by sail and oar and required a crew of 15 men to operate it.

In service for 18 years, the *Good Shepherd* was succeeded in 1909 with the station's first motorised lifeboat the *John A. Hay*.

Over its long and prestigious history, the Stromness Lifeboat and its brave volunteers have continued their sterling service saving numerous lives in many dramatic rescues.



Robert Greig (left) and the crew of the *John A. Hay*  
(Stromness Museum collection)

## Number 13: George Mackay Brown is 30 metres on your left



George Mackay Brown  
(Photo: Gunnie Moberg)

A familiar figure in Stromness, George could often be seen sitting on the bench at the pier head or enjoying a pint in the local pub.

Regarded as one of Scotland's finest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his works drew on the rich history and culture of Orkney as well as his hometown and its people.

George Mackay Brown received widespread critical, public, and official recognition. He was awarded an OBE in 1974 and made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1977, in addition to gaining several honorary degrees.

On his death in 1996, he left almost fifty publications, a collection that ranges through poetry, fiction, history, journalism, and drama.

George Mackay Brown was one of the first tenants in Mayburn Court. The council built these houses in the 1960's on the former site of the Stromness Distillery which was in operation between 1817 – 1928.

The distillery used the fresh clear waters of the Mayburn in its whisky production which still flow today just past the museum.



Stromness Distillery  
(Photo: Orkney Library and Archives)

## Number 14: Login`s Inn is 60 m on your right

Sir John Spencer Login (1809-1863) was born and raised in Stromness, the eldest son of John Login, a ship agent and inn keeper, and Margret Spence.

Login studied medicine in Edinburgh and was employed by the East India Company as a surgeon and physician in India. Following the British conquest of the Punjab in 1849, Login was appointed guardian to the 10-year-old Maharaja Duleep Singh who remained under the care of the Login family until 1858.



Sir John Franklin (Wikimedia Commons)



Maharaja Duleep Singh (Wikimedia Commons)

They travelled from Lahore to England in 1854 where Duleep Singh was introduced to the British court and developed a close relationship with Queen Victoria and her family. In the same year, Login was knighted for his services by the Queen.

Sir John Login died suddenly in Felixstowe and a tombstone, erected by Duleep Singh, was engraved with words chosen by Queen Victoria, which read 'In memory of the just is blessed'.

## Login`s Well

Across from the former inn, is its namesake, Login`s Well. Fresh water was essential for ships embarking on, or returning from, long voyages across the Atlantic. Many vessels called into Stromness for their supply and next to the well is an engraved stone plaque with some of the notable ships which used it.



**Number 15: The Cannon – walk up the brae for 90 m and on the left you will see the cannon**



For over two centuries, *'The Cannon'* has stood overlooking the harbour. Silent now, it was once used to announce the arrival of the Hudson Bay Company ships.

During the Anglo-American War in 1813, the American privateer *Scourge* captured the Hull brig *Liberty*.

A prize crew manned the ship, and it is assumed the *Liberty* now served as an American Privateer. However, damage to the vessel forced them to seek assistance in Stromness but became stuck on a sandbank and the crew had to surrender.

The cannon of *Liberty* was taken ashore and placed here to defend Stromness but was only ever fired to welcome the HBC ships.

Privateering was sanctioned by all nations from the earliest times until the 19th century.

Privateers were armed ships owned and crewed by private individuals that were authorized by governments for use in war, especially in the capture of merchant shipping.

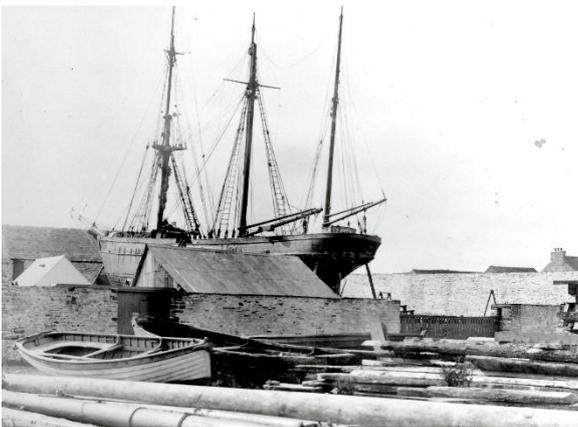
Seamen placed on board a captured ship were called a prize crew. They would sail the ship and its cargo to a port where they were sold, and a percentage paid to the privateers.



(Image: worldhistory.us)

A brig was a two-masted sailing ship, lightly armed and much prized for its exceptional handling and sailing qualities.

**Number 16: Stanger`s Dockyard/ Stanley Cursiter`s house – the last stop on the trail is 400 m along the Ness Road. Continue on the road following the shoreline and you will find it on your right**



Stanger`s yard in 1909 (Stromness Museum collection)

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Stromness became a major port for ship building and repair. John Stanger established the town`s largest shipyard at Ness and in 1836 installed Morton`s patent slip suitable for receiving vessels up to 500 tons.

It was here in 1856, Orkney`s first steamship was built: the *Royal Mail* which provided a regular mail service between Stromness and Scrabster.

Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Stanger family continued to build and repair boats for various customers including shipping merchants, the herring industry, and the Navy.

In 1924 following the death of F. W Stanger the business closed. After WW2 the yard and buildings were converted into a house and garden by artist Stanley Cursiter, R.S.A.

Stanley Cursiter (1887-1976) was Director of the National Galleries of Scotland from 1930- 1948, and a leading figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century Scottish art. He was born in Kirkwall and came home to paint every summer, moving between high society Edinburgh and local life in Orkney.

Appointed his Majesty`s Limner in Scotland in 1948, Cursiter became the official portrait painter for the Royal family.



Cursiter painting at Yesnaby ,Sandwick. c1960`s  
(Photo: W H Hourston /SM collection)