

Brochs: Background information for teachers

Broch is the name given to large, round, dry stone towers that are to be found only in Scotland. Over 500 are known but most today are just grass grown tumbled masses of stone that often look like natural hillocks. Very few are to be found in lowland Scotland, more in the Hebrides and very large numbers in north-east Scotland: Caithness, Sutherland, Orkney and Shetland. That seems to be the area where this unique architecture developed from strong circular houses. By 100 BC, there were over 120 brochs in Orkney.

The fact that their entrance passageways were small and had a guardroom just behind the door, coupled with the complete absence of windows, leaves no doubt that brochs were defensive. All had an extremely thick wall at the base that tapered as it got higher. This reduced the tower's weight, as did the hollow between the twin walls that was used for a stairway to the top. Because of this, brochs could be built to often remarkable height. Not all were as tall as the 13 m high broch at [Mousa](#) in Shetland, however. To judge from the amount of collapsed material around them some were probably only half that height.

The interior was essentially that of a house. A central hearth, a well and stone-built cupboards survive in the [Broch of Gurness](#) in Orkney (Slide 9). Partition walls were built of wood that has rotted away. Upper wooden floors were supported on ledges built into the wall. Doors to these floors lead off the stairs. Today these doorways open into thin air. Openings in the inner walls also acted as windows giving light to the stairway between the two walls.

The objects that the broch owners used were very simple and so have not been featured in the Archaeologist's Fact File. They were being built from 100 BC–100 AD.

Although they were essentially defensive, these remarkable great towers must also, like later castles, have declared their owner's status. Perhaps they built higher and higher to outdo neighbouring communities.

Further reading

Ritchie, J.N.G. 1998. *Brochs of Scotland*. Princes Risborough: Shire Archaeology

Ritchie, A. 1988. *Scotland BC: An introduction to the prehistoric houses, tombs, ceremonial monuments and fortifications in the care of the Secretary of State for Scotland*. Edinburgh: H.M.S.O



The Prehistoric Society is a registered charity (no. 1000567) and company limited by guarantee (no. 2532446). Registered Office: University College London, Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY. Date updated: 9/2017.