



The GEORGE MACKAY BROWN TRAIL Stromness Orkney

George Mackay Brown

was one of Scotland's greatest writers of the twentieth century. Perhaps best known as a poet and novelist, he also wrote plays and short stories, and worked as a journalist. His subject was Orkney, its people, legends and history. He was renowned for his *'astonishing clarity and sureness of imagery'*.

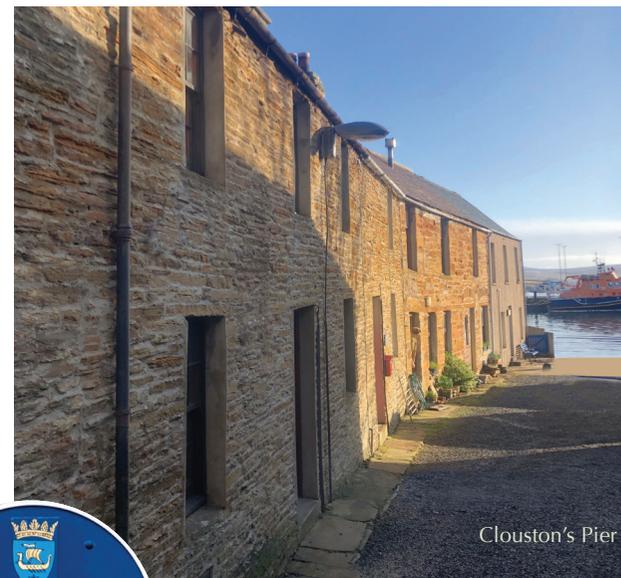
If ever there was a writer associated with a particular place, it is George Mackay Brown. He was born in Stromness and lived here all his life, seldom leaving the town he loved so much and which shaped his work. Take this trail to visit places in Stromness that influenced his writing every day.

The whole trail will take two to three hours to complete. If you have less time, perhaps an hour or so, skip the walk out to Warebeth Cemetery (**Site 10**) or the climb up Brinkie's Brae (**Site 14**).

Many houses in Stromness do not display numbers. Where no number or name is displayed, houses are identified in the text by a feature.

Check out a blog about this trail at: orkney.com/gmb-trail

Note: All quotations are from *George Mackay Brown: the Life* by Maggie Fergusson, published by John Murray, 2006.



Clouston's Pier



Mayburn Court

George Mackay Brown

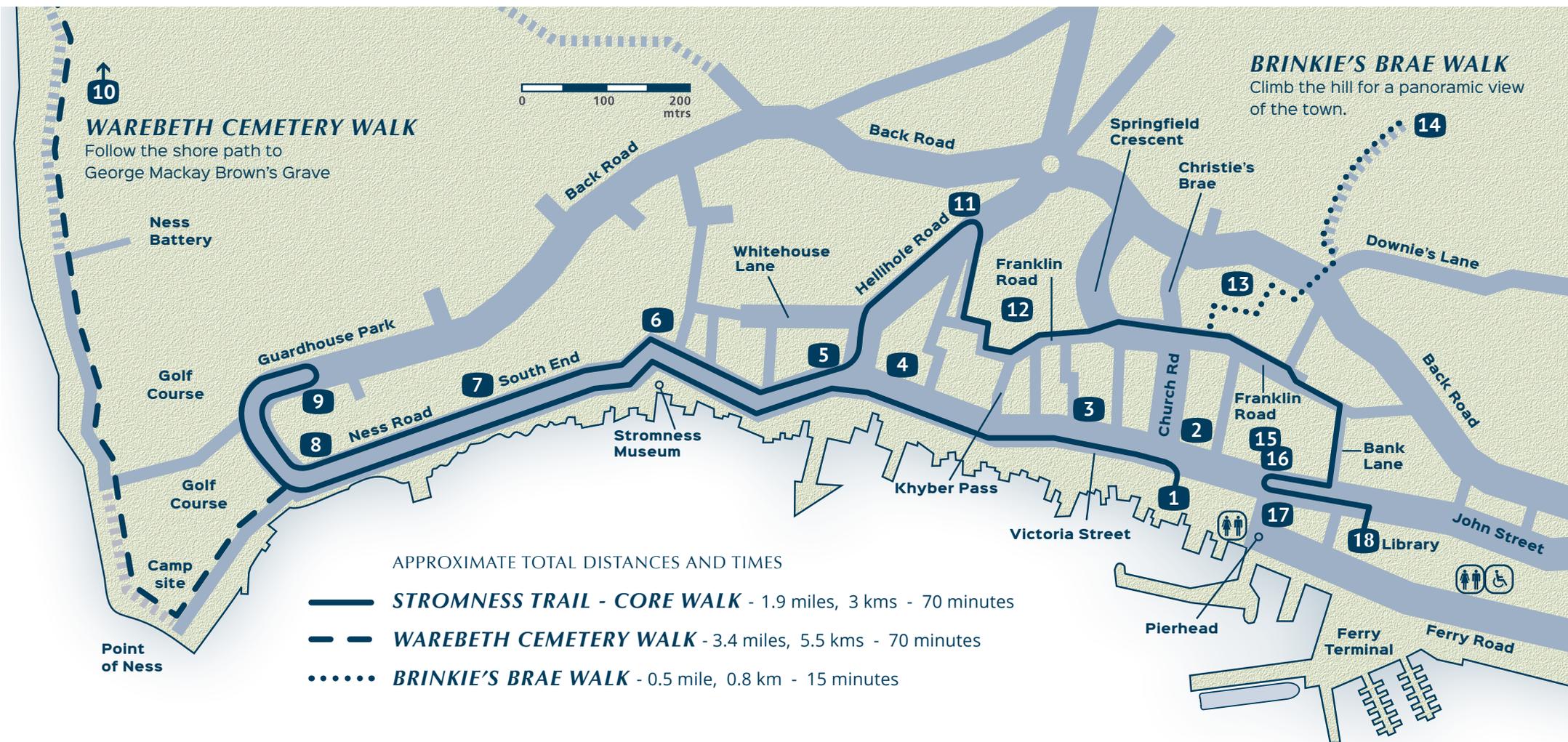
Produced by the **Orkney Arts Society** in association with **Stromness Museum** and with the support of **The George Mackay Brown Fellowship**.



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GMB portrait by Freddie Schley, courtesy Orkney Museums & Heritage. Photos: Iain Ashman. The Orkney Arts Society is a registered Scottish charity No. SC0 04819.



SITE 1 Start at No. 80 Victoria Street (Clouston's Pier), located on the left-hand side as you approach from the Pierhead. The entrance is round the corner, one building on from the Orca Guest House. George Mackay Brown (GMB) was born here on 17 October 1921.

SITE 2 Immediately opposite, at 69-73 Victoria Street, is the former Commercial Hotel.

John Brown, GMB's father, worked here part-time as a tailor in the shop of Peter Esson - at the bottom of Church Road. Esson was a tailor, librarian, kirk elder and veteran of the Great War. *'Open until eight o'clock in the evening for the farmers, the shop was a sort of unofficial club where a particular group of Stromness men exchanged news and commentary, and tales about local folk reaching back as far as the early nineteenth century'*.

SITE 3 Continue down Victoria Street until you reach Graham Place. Stromness Books and Prints, No. 3 Graham Place, is on your right. The bookshop was founded in 1968 by Charles Senior, confidant of GMB and fellow poet from his days as a student in Edinburgh.

SITE 4 Continue down the street 700 yards past Khyber Pass. No. 3 Melvin Place is just before

Hellihole Road, the second in a row of three cottages, on your right next to No. 1. GMB's parents moved here in 1928, 'a dark house with a drain running under the flagstone floor' after the landlady of 80 Victoria Street took against Mhairi Brown, GMB's mother.

SITE 5 The old Post Office is at the bottom of Hellihole Road on the corner with Alfred Street. It is the building with the 'Museum 200 M' sign on the side. John Brown, GMB's father, worked here as a postman.

SITE 6 Continue along Alfred Street until you reach the Stromness Museum on your left. No. 3 *Mayburn Court* is across the road, marked with a blue plaque. GMB moved here after his mother's death. The Council flat, which he later bought, is on the site of a former distillery. He lived here from 1968 until his own death, on 13 April 1996, in the Balfour Hospital, Kirkwall.

SITE 7 Continue along the street (South End, which later becomes Ness Road). *Hopedale*, No. 9 *Ness Road* is on your right, overlooking the sea, the home of Archie and Elizabeth Bevan. Archie attended school with GMB and was a lifelong friend.

SITE 8 Continue along Ness Road to the *George Mackay Brown Memorial Garden*. It contains an

art and poetry installation, *Travellers*, by artist Orla Stevens and writer Gabrielle Barnby. It was commissioned in 2021 by Orkney Islands Council to celebrate the centenary of the birth of GMB.

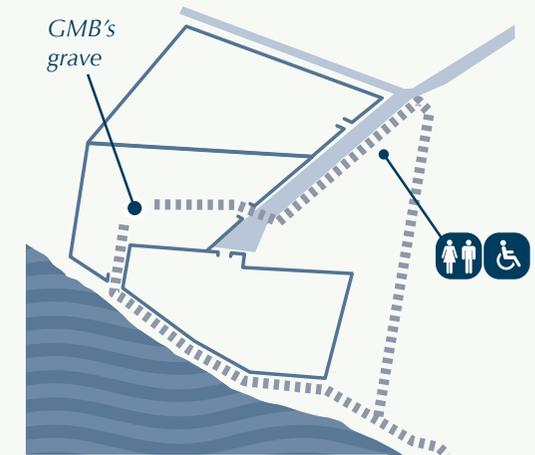
SITE 9 Follow the road round the corner. Originally named No. 6 Well Park, it is now No. 27 *Guardhouse Park*, the last but one dwelling in the second terrace block on your right. In 1934, GMB's family moved here, a Council house in rather better condition than Melvin Place. GMB lived here with his mother (with periods away in hospital or for study) until just after her death in 1967.

Visitors who would like a longer walk can continue along the shore to visit GMB's grave (**Site 10**). If not please continue the trail towards **Site 11**.

WAREBETH CEMETERY WALK

SITE 10 Carry on straight into and through the Campsite. Follow the scenic shore path for about 2 miles to *Warebeth Cemetery* where you will find the grave of GMB. Beside him lie his parents: John Brown, who died in 1940 and his mother Mary (Mhairi), who died in 1967. GMB's resting place is in the middle part of the cemetery, marked by a solitary piece of sandstone among the verticals of marble.

This section will take about 70 minutes to complete.



SITE 11 Return the way you came until you reach **Site 5** at the bottom of Hellihole Road. Walk up Hellihole Road (quite a steep climb) past Whitehouse Lane. **Site 11** is the large private building to your left at the top of the road, formerly *The Braes Hotel*. GMB used to take visitors here such as the American poet, novelist and academic Jay Parini.

SITE 12 Turn around and take the side road on your left, opposite **Site 11** (Franklin Road), across from the red light. Franklin Road is narrow, barely wide enough for traffic. Follow the street as it winds down and round past houses. *Thistlebank, No. 17 Franklin Road* is on the left, above the road and reached by a path that climbs upwards past a terrace of houses. It was formerly the home of Ian MacInnes, artist and later headmaster of Stromness Academy. One of GMB's closest friends, he entered Stromness Academy at the same time. He illustrated GMB's first collection of poetry, *The Storm and Other Poems*, published in 1954.

SITE 13 Carry on past Springfield Crescent, crossing Christie's Brae and rejoining Franklin Road, straight ahead. *The Old Academy* is ahead and above you on your left, between Franklin Road and Back Road. It now houses, among others, the European Marine Energy Centre, part of the Orkney Research and Innovation Campus. Shortly before his fifth birthday in 1926, GMB was sent to Stromness Academy, the '*huge grey unimaginitive*

building'. He wrote, '*Of all the dolorous noises I have heard on this earth that bell of Stromness Academy takes some beating.*'

Visitors who would like a longer walk can continue up to the top of Brinkie's Brae (**Site 14**).

If not, please continue the trail to **Site 15**.

Warning: the hill is steep and the path is not suitable for those with mobility issues.

•• **BRINKIE'S BRAE WALK** •••••

SITE 14 Take the steps on your left and walk up through the car park and buildings of the Old Academy, taking the access road that emerges on the Back Road. Cross over onto Downie's Lane. Take the waymarked footpath immediately on your left and follow it up to the stone seat on Brinkie's Brae. At the age of eight or nine GMB wrote his first poem in praise of Stromness, sitting on the top of Brinkie's Brae.

Allow about 15 minutes for this section.

Retrace your path back downhill and through the European Marine Energy Centre to rejoin Franklin Road.

SITES 15 and 16 Turn left on Franklin Road, passing the Orkney Research and Innovation Campus (Rendall Building) on your right. Turn right down Bank Lane (steep) immediately past the Rendall Building. Turn right at the bottom. **Sites 15 and 16** are on your right. **Site 15**, *The Stromness Hotel*, is where GMB's mother Mhairi Mackay worked as a waitress and chambermaid when she first arrived in Stromness, before she was married. Also GMB met the poet Edwin Muir and wife Willa here in 1951. It was to prove to be a turning point in GMB's career. Muir became a mentor, and as an established influential figure on the international literary scene, he was instrumental in launching GMB's career and reputation beyond Orkney. **Site 16** (to the right of the main hotel entrance) was the Flattie Bar. Until 1947, Stromness was a 'dry' town. In 1945 GMB began a campaign in the Orkney Herald for the introduction of a few pubs in Stromness '*for the benefit of the male population*'. When the bar reopened after 27 years, GMB was one of the first customers.

SITE 17 The Pierhead, the social centre of Stromness, is in front of you. GMB used to spend time at the Pierhead picking up local gossip.

SITE 18 Retrace your steps 100 yards. Stromness Library in the Warehouse Buildings is in front of you on the right-hand side of the street. The library has on display several portraits of GMB. The George Mackay Brown Room includes approximately 100 books from GMB's personal library.