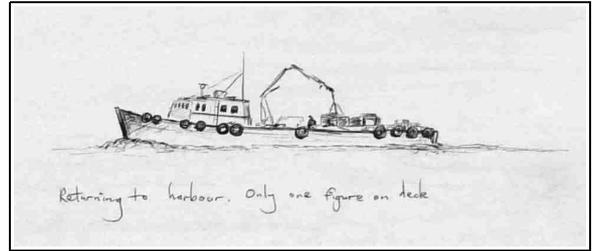


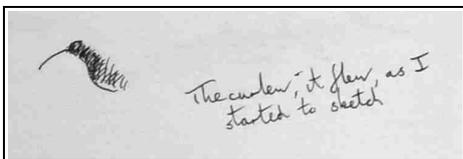
A September Trip to Orkney

In May 2008 I was awarded the *Alexander Graham Munro Travel Award* by the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour, having had my miniature painting, *A Walk at St Abbs*, named “best artwork by an artist under 30” at their Annual Exhibition. I hadn't known I was eligible! The award enabled me to travel to Orkney, with future plans to go further afield to Norway. The following paragraphs record some of my Orkney experiences.



Day one - The trip started in Linlithgow one Tuesday morning early, an electrically lit cycle to the station, Jennifer and I not yet used to the feel of panniers on a bike. It ended in Stromness thirteen hours later, now dark again. I like the long journey, and trains are wonderful to travel on, offering countless glimpses of tantalising landscapes. On the ferry, as it darkened, lighthouses began to twinkle. Travelling by land, not flying, leaves a real sense of how much distance we've covered.

Day two – The friendly Hamnavoe Hostel, Stromness, overlooking the harbour edge. How nice to wake early and see Orkney daylight for the first time. Across the bay a large farmhouse was silhouetted by the bright rising sun, silver water below. We explored the town - one main, wiggling, cobbled street - then walked onwards along the coast. Sat awhile sketching waves and the hills of Hoy. Most days these hills could be seen in the distance, a dark and imposing backdrop, ever present. In late afternoon sun I sketched in the harbour. Flocks of Starlings were wheeling through the air amongst the jumble of rooftops, flowing in and out of the few largest trees.



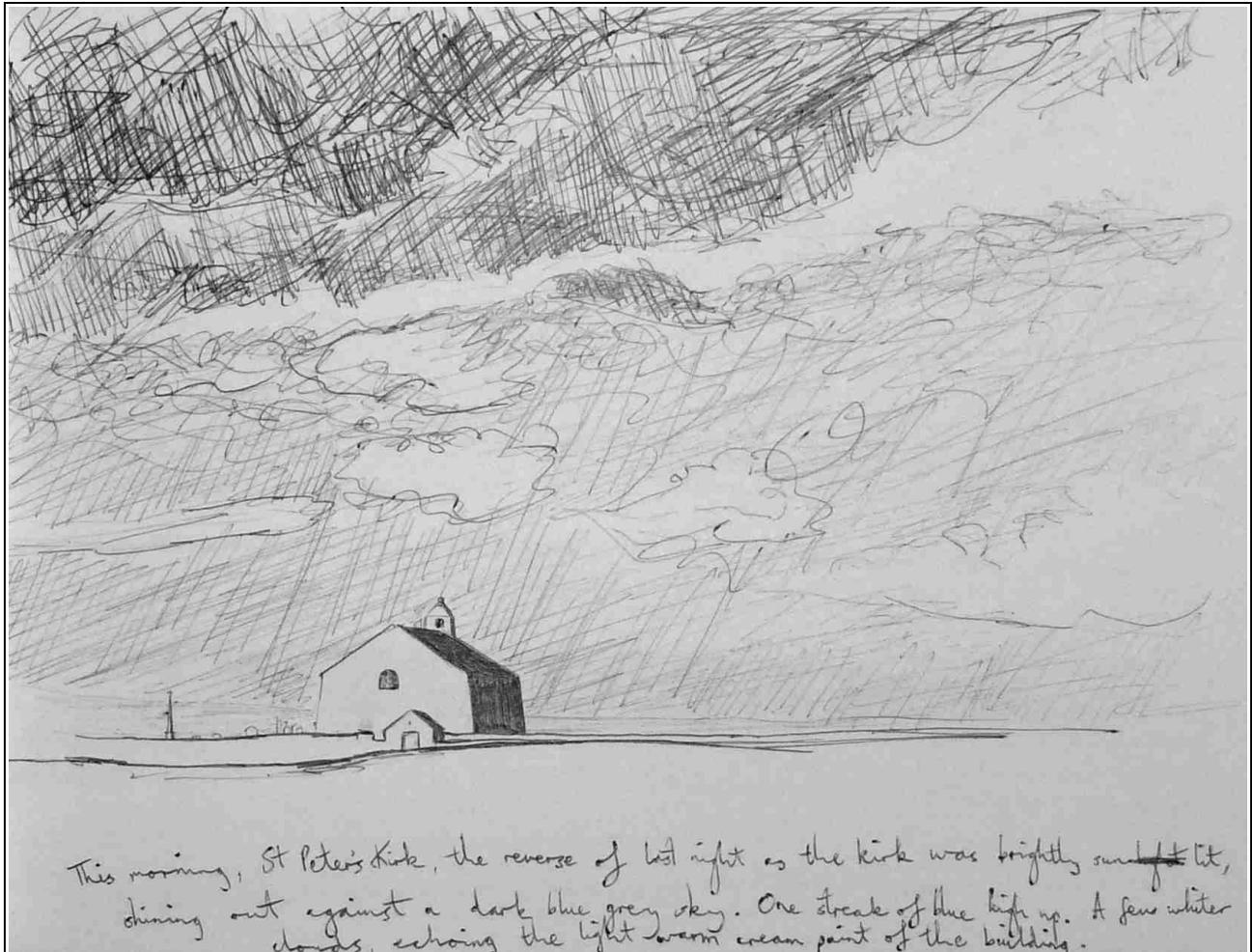
Day three – To Kirkwall by bus. As with trains, a great way to get the general 'feel' of a landscape. St Magnus Cathedral looked strikingly beautiful in red and yellow stone. Rooks and crows circled its spire, squabbling for top spot on the golden cockerel weather vane. Broke the return journey to draw at the Stones of Stenness, views across lochs to the Ring of Brodgar stone circle. A lazy-looking seal balanced on a rock. Curlew waded the shallows, probing for shellfish and Lugworms.



Gannets Diving, St John's Head, detail. acrylic on board

Day four – A day of blue sky and bright sun, sometimes *too* hot. Foot ferry to Hoy then onwards by bike. We stopped at a massive flat-topped boulder on the valley floor, an angular cell hollowed out inside, carved as many as 5,500 years ago - The Dwarfie Stane. It may have been a tomb. Two musicians came up, sang inside, testing its resonance. A trickle of water nearby and the occasional crow called, cackled, but little other sound. Reaching Rackwick Bay we locked bikes behind the hostel wall then walked the couple of miles of cliff and moor to the 'Old Man.' At the cliff edge, looking down and across to the famous sea-stack, Fulmars were all around, gliding close, seeming curious. The sea was dark, the cliffs shone in reds, oranges, yellows, grey-greens. Jennifer saw two hares on our walk back. I lagged behind, so much to draw.

Day five – A smooth and relaxing cycle took us to our self-catering cottage on Netherstove Farm. What open views across fields to the Bay of Skaill and distant low hills. We stocked up with Orkney produce in the local shop - breads and bakings from Kirkwall, tomatoes from Birsay, Sandwich eggs. Then a short walk to the shore with Lapwings and Starlings and Golden Plover in the fields.



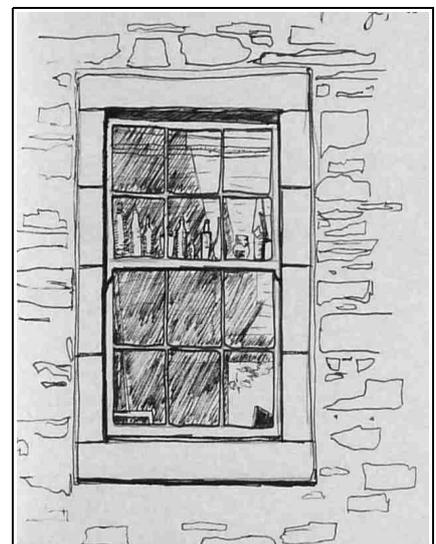
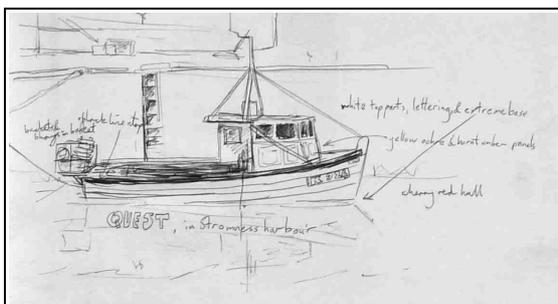
Day six – We cycled to the Brough of Birsay, 7 or 8 miles. At low tide only is this small island accessible by foot, by a stone causeway surrounded by rock pools and sea urchin sand. Several hours passed on the island with so much to see. The remains of Pictish settlements, and of Norse. A slow walk around the island perimeter, stopping often to admire the sea crashing below us. Rabbit cities, tumbling cliffs, and birds: gulls; skuas; a Wheatear; Rock Doves in their natural habitat, seeming much less scruffy than in Princes Street Gardens. All around us were grasses sculpted by ferocious gales to resemble waves. On the cycle back a Short-eared Owl flew beside us, hunting in the dusk.

Day seven – A truly wild day so didn't venture far. Some of the biggest waves I've seen were surging in from the Atlantic, smashing up and over the cliffs above the Hole O' Row. But seals and Eiders don't seem to mind. To Skara Brae and working on my sketchbook in the visitor centre cafe. A warming hot chocolate then a second visit to the rather grand Skaill House. A very relaxing hour passed in the old library study. I drew the port-hole window, and the other, and the landscapes beyond. Out of one window are the wild dunes and sea, out of the other – a manicured stately-home garden. Books floor to ceiling and a clock ticking gently. A peaceful feeling, of safety and of home.

Day eight – On the radio the BBC forecast (of which I'm normally a fan) said, “...less windy as the day progresses...” So we took the risk and cycled to Maeshowe Neolithic chambered tomb and the Ring of Brodgar. “Less windy” turned out to be *hugely more windy* and having been blown off bikes several times we'd no choice but to phone for help. A very generous lift home in the pick-up truck of Ann and Tony, the Netherstove farmers. In late afternoon the rain stopped. We walked down to the bay and watched the waves pouring in. Thousands of little jellyfish were washed up on the sand.



Days nine and ten – Returned to Stromness. A further afternoon and morning to enjoy in such a lovely town, exploring winding backstreets and admiring the interesting collections people display in their windows. I visited the local museum, an excellent place of artefacts from seagoing days, from times of lighthouse keeping. Along the coast a little to examine fossilised ripples in rocks. A flock of ten Whooper Swans struggled against the wind, headed towards Hoy. Two Black Guillemot sheltered in the harbour wearing white and black winter plumage. I'd never seen these before. We caught the evening ferry to Scrabster and I stayed on deck the whole time, dizzy from the rocking and being blasted by the wind. Black storm clouds engulfed Hoy as the sun slowly set.



Day eleven – The train took us home. Many hours to watch the landscape, ever changing, and to work on my sketchbook.