New projects brighten island industry

ANYONE who thinks of Orkney as a sleepy rural community with a way of life akin to that of mainland counties 30 years ago, could hardly be more mistaken.

True, there are weak spots: the telephone system is not all it should be, and some 2000 Orcadians are without electricity. There are also thoroughly contemporary worries, like the possible effect of the Common Market on inshore fishing, and the slow but inexorable decline of the Orkney population—from 32,000 a century ago to 17,100 today.

On the other hand it can be fairly said that Orkney has successfully preserved those worthwhile aspects of a way of life which are now the envy of summer visitors from the South, and a main reason for the current boom in the tourist trade.

Alongside that, Orkney's industrial scene — everything from farming to craftwork—is stirring as seldom before in its history, with one or two highly significant innovations in hand and one or two more in the offing.

An eloquent enthusiast for what is happening is Orkney's Development Officer, Robert Strachan, who divides his time between his office in Kirkwall and the locations of existing or projected enterprises on any and every one of the islands which are his concern.

"One of the upsetting factors for anyone involved in development here is the apparent disadvantage you are at before you start. The cost of bringing in raw materials is so high.

"Nevertheless, a firm previously based in Hampshire have been impressed by the reasons we gave them for coming to Orkney, and with the aid offered by the Highland Board."

This is a firm making boats with fibreglass hulls, and they have taken over a hangar at the old naval airfield at Hatson, on the edge of Kirkwall.

"For the first time in the United Kingdom we're going to have these GRP — glass reinforced plastic — boats built to comply with the standards and specifications laid down by the White Fish Authority, which means that they will attract a grant."

There is also confidence that prejudice amongst some fishermen will be overcome — "we are pointing out that GRP means a big saving in the high cost of repair and maintenance of conventional fishing boats." As it is, the firm, already in initial production, expect a sizeable demand from customers in other countries.

The production of conventional boats — one of Orkney's oldest occupations — is thriving as a result of a demand from far beyond the islands. The yard at Stromness employs 25 men and has had customers in the South of England.

New boats have been built

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Robin and Antony Duncan, the boatbuilders of Burray.