

## Calum Mor's House, Hirta, St Kilda

### Conservation Statement



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v21 (Final)

## Abstract

This research document supports and informs the future management of Calum Mor's House for the period of the next Management Agreement (to 2016) and beyond.

First noted by Sands in the 1870s, the building was then associated with a story of a strong man, a character given the name Calum in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first photograph dates from 1896 and the first plan from 1927, and a number of surveys and descriptions undertaken through the years result in a comprehensive record. Large scale conservation works were undertaken in 1957 and 1973 and it is likely that smaller repairs have been made throughout the period since re-occupation. Long thought of as prehistoric by enthusiastic commentators, the building is certainly pre-improvement and it could well be some form of permanent or temporary accommodation from the late medieval period. Roofed in a distinctive style and relatively unaltered, it is a building of national importance. The best comparisons for the structure lie in the shieling architecture of the Outer Hebrides, buildings that the later medieval Gaelic community of St Kilda would have been well aware of.

After describing the building in detail, including a thorough analysis of previous descriptions and comparative material, there follows an assessment of significance. In an attempt to clarify the importance of the building in an international context, this is set out according to the broad criteria set out in the Burra Charter and Scottish Historic Environment Policy, accepting of course that much lies in the eye of the beholder and that study, examination and, in this case, context, adds greatly to the importance the building. In turn, there is a description of the 'issues' that challenge the successful management of the building, and a suggested series of action points.

Finally, a vision is set forth. The patina of this incredible and authentic survivor stands testament to the sturdiness and longevity of the island's historic occupants, and our efforts should be focussed on its sustainable long-term management. Let us hope that we are able to provide a sustainable legacy for the building, while improving access, and furthering our understanding.

## Acknowledgements

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The text, layout, field photographs and new illustrations are by G Geddes. The full report was edited by A Gannon with the significance section edited by R Turner. The project was managed by G Geddes with input from J Sherriff. Thanks are also due to RCAHMS investigators S Halliday, A Welfare, A Hale, and designer A Burns. RCAHMS photographs from 1983—6 were taken by J Keggie, and S Wallace took those from 2007—9. RCAHMS survey drawings were produced by G Stell, I Parker, A Leith, S Scott, M Harman, A Gannon, and G Brown.

A number of RCAHMS drawings and photographs from 1983—6 were scanned and made available online as part of the project, including illustrative material from the 1988 RCAHMS publication. Where these are used as illustrations, they are referred to by their unique RCAHMS archive number eg SC XXXXXX. The spelling of place names, including Calum Mor's House, is taken from current Ordnance Survey raster mapping.

The images taken by the author during the field visit in November 2010 have not been catalogued and archived by RCAHMS. These are numbered individually (with the RCAHMS project code (1148) as a prefix), and copies will be provided on CD, they will be retained with the project archive on CD and memory stick. Hyperlinks to Canmore descriptions for sites mentioned in the text are highlighted in blue. By pressing 'ctrl' and clicking on the link, the web page will open up if your computer is connected to the internet.

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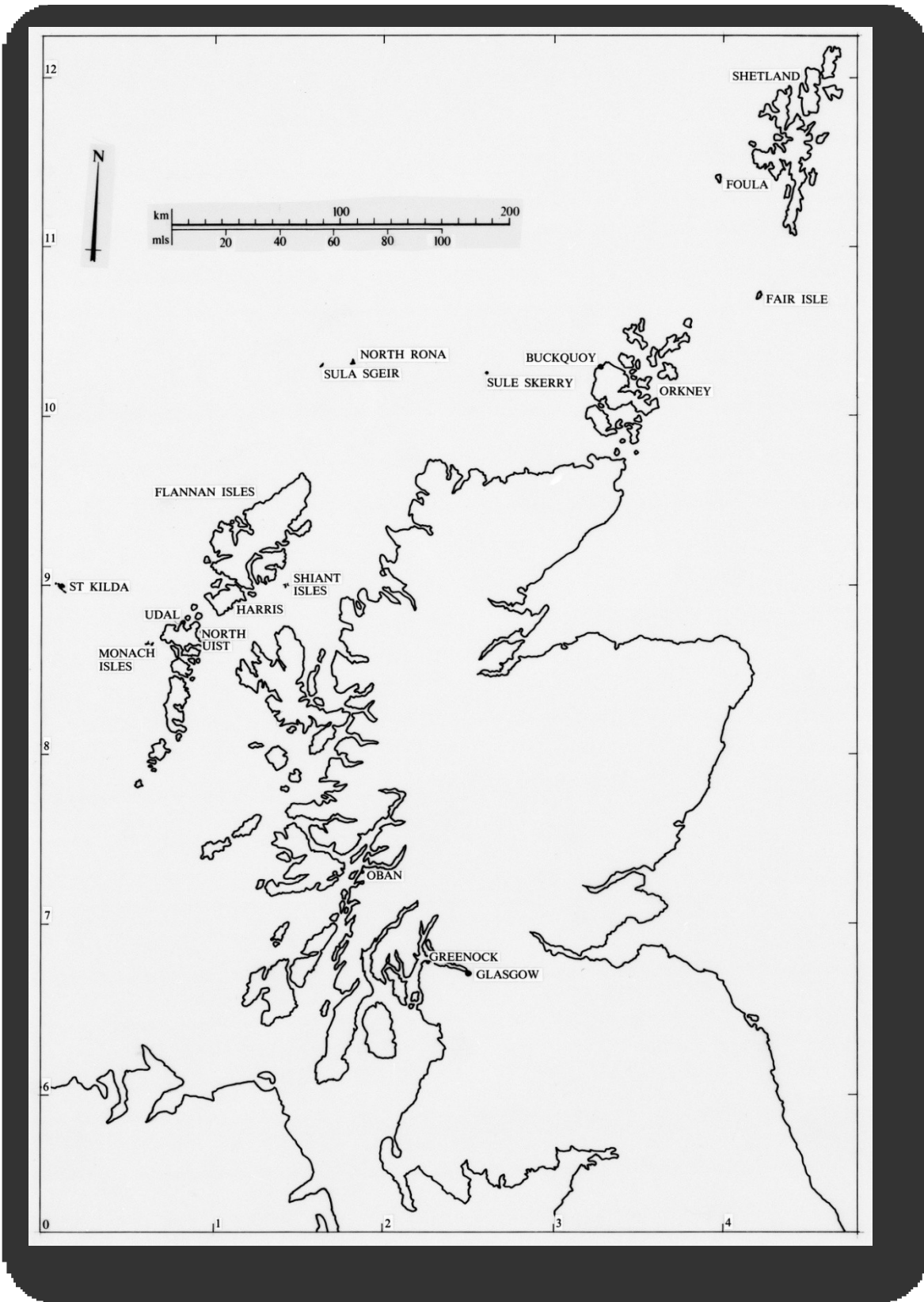


Figure 1 Scotland showing St Kilda and other comparable sites and islands, taken from RCAHMS (1988).

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## Introduction

The remote and spectacular islands of the St Kilda group lie sixty-four kilometres W of North Uist in the Outer Hebrides, and represent one of the most distant outposts of historical human settlement in Europe. The group includes four main islands; Hirta/Hiort (pronounced Heersht), the main focus of settlement, Dun, Soay and Boreray. Hirta, though precipitous and rocky throughout, has two principal focuses of archaeological sites, one in Village Bay, a crescentic SE facing area which has been cultivated and occupied off and on since prehistory, and one in Gleann Mór, a deep u-shaped valley on the N side of the island.

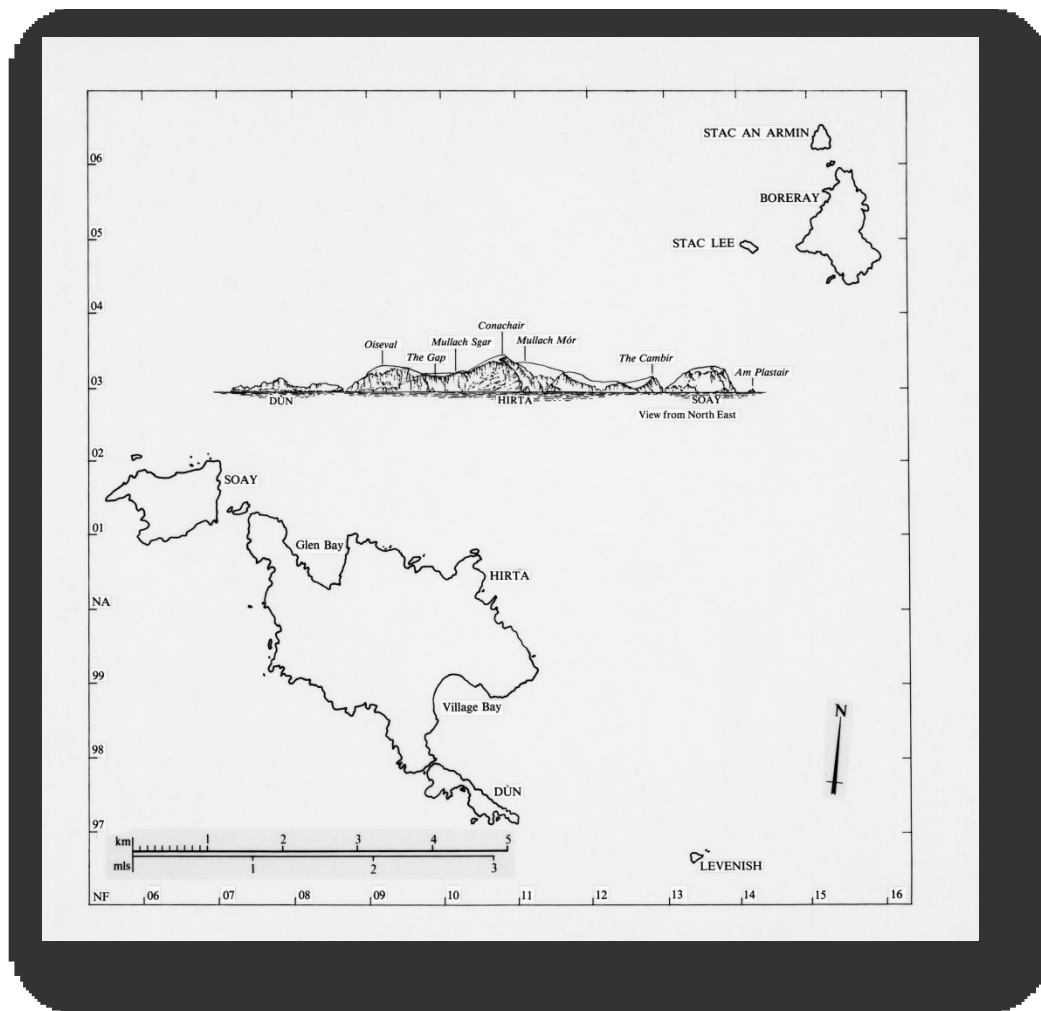


Figure 2 St Kilda archipelago, taken from RCAHMS (1988).

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Calum Mor's House, also known as 'Cleit' or Structure 57, is a semi-subterranean turf-covered stone hut situated within the fields of St Kilda's Improvement period crofting township, owned by the National Trust for Scotland (hereafter referred to as the Trust). Almost certainly pre-dating 1800, the building may be one of a handful of dwellings that have survived from the medieval period and, both locally and nationally, it is of great significance.



Lying at the cusp of our knowledge of St Kilda's prehistoric past<sup>1</sup>, its place within the St Kilda story is certainly unique, but unclear.



*Figure 3 View of Calum Mor's House, taken from the ENE in May 2008.*

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The building consists of a single roofed cell, with evidence of one or possibly two additional adjoining cells that may have formed an early (ie pre—1800) multi-celled building. It lies within a complex and multi-period field system, with which it has stratigraphic relationships that can only be demonstrated by excavation. It is noted in the Canmore database (formerly known as the National Monuments Record of Scotland) as NF 19 NW 21.13 – classified as a hut and a cellular building. The equivalent record in the Sites and Monuments Record of Western Isles Council is ID 822.

Calum Mor's House lies within the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Village Bay which encompasses much of the landscape below the skyline from Oisebhal in the N to Ruabhal in the S<sup>3</sup>. It is sited within a National Nature Reserve (NNR), a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Geological Conservation Review Site, a National Scenic Area, a Special Area of Conservation and a Special Protection Area - natural heritage designations that apply to the whole archipelago. St Kilda was inscribed on the World Heritage List for its natural heritage in 1986, and this was

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed historical records begin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

enhanced to include cultural aspects in 2005. At that time, it was one of only 25 sites with dual status in the world. It is worth noting that the enhancement of the inscription was agreed with reference to the completeness of the fossilised 19th century settlement and agricultural remains, the spectacular landscape setting adapted by people through millennia, the perceived remoteness of the islands, the vivid human story, and the wealth of documentary evidence (Scottish Executive 2003, 12). Calum Mor's House received specific mention in both the original and the revised nomination documents (Ancrum 1985, 11; Scottish Executive 2003, 78; Trust and Scottish Executive 2005, 30-31), where it is singled out for its aesthetic qualities, its mythological associations and its potential age.

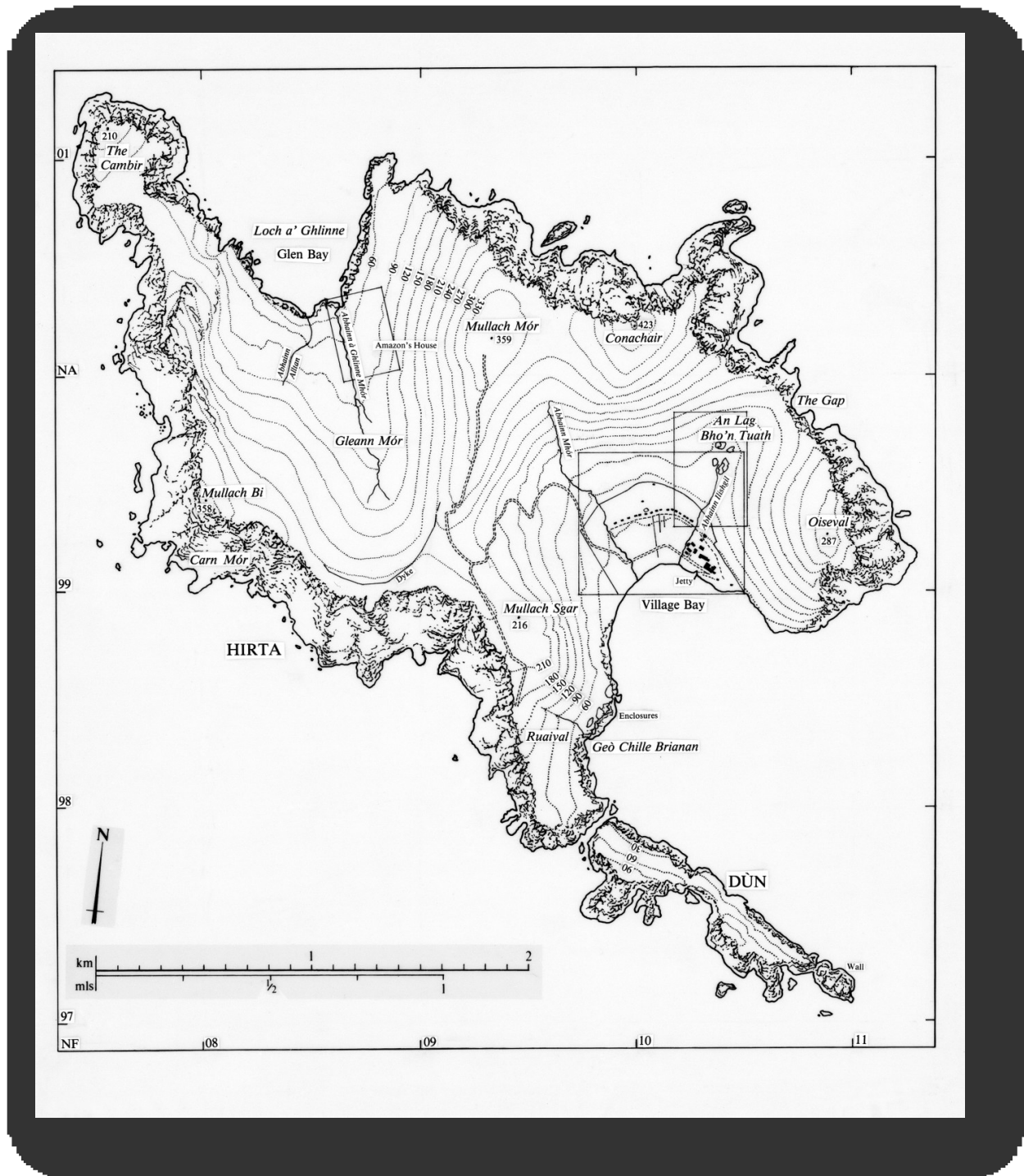


Figure 4 Hirta and Dun: physical features and outlying structures (RCAHMS 1988). The boxes show the areas that were planned by RCAHMS in the 1980s. SC 1225646 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

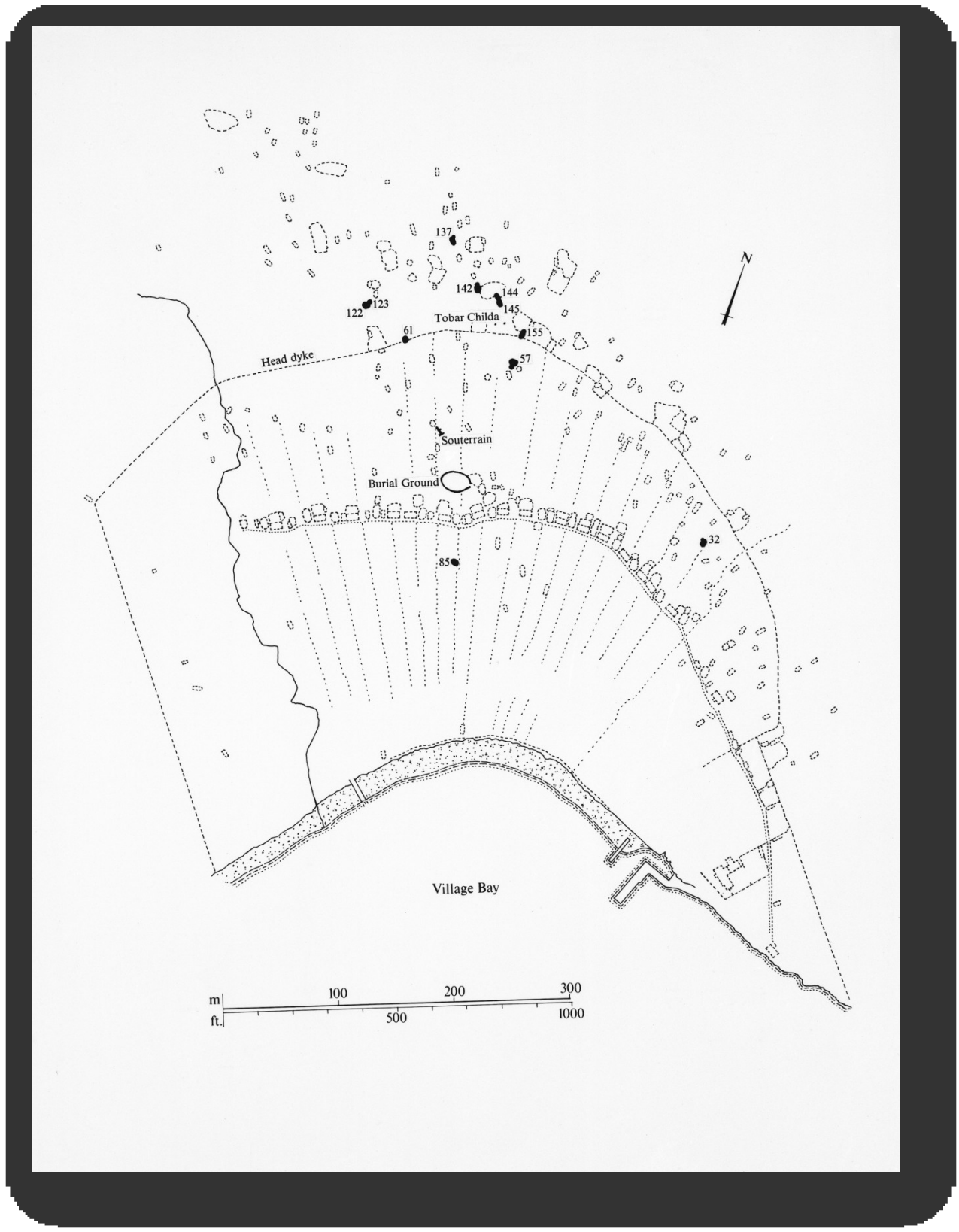
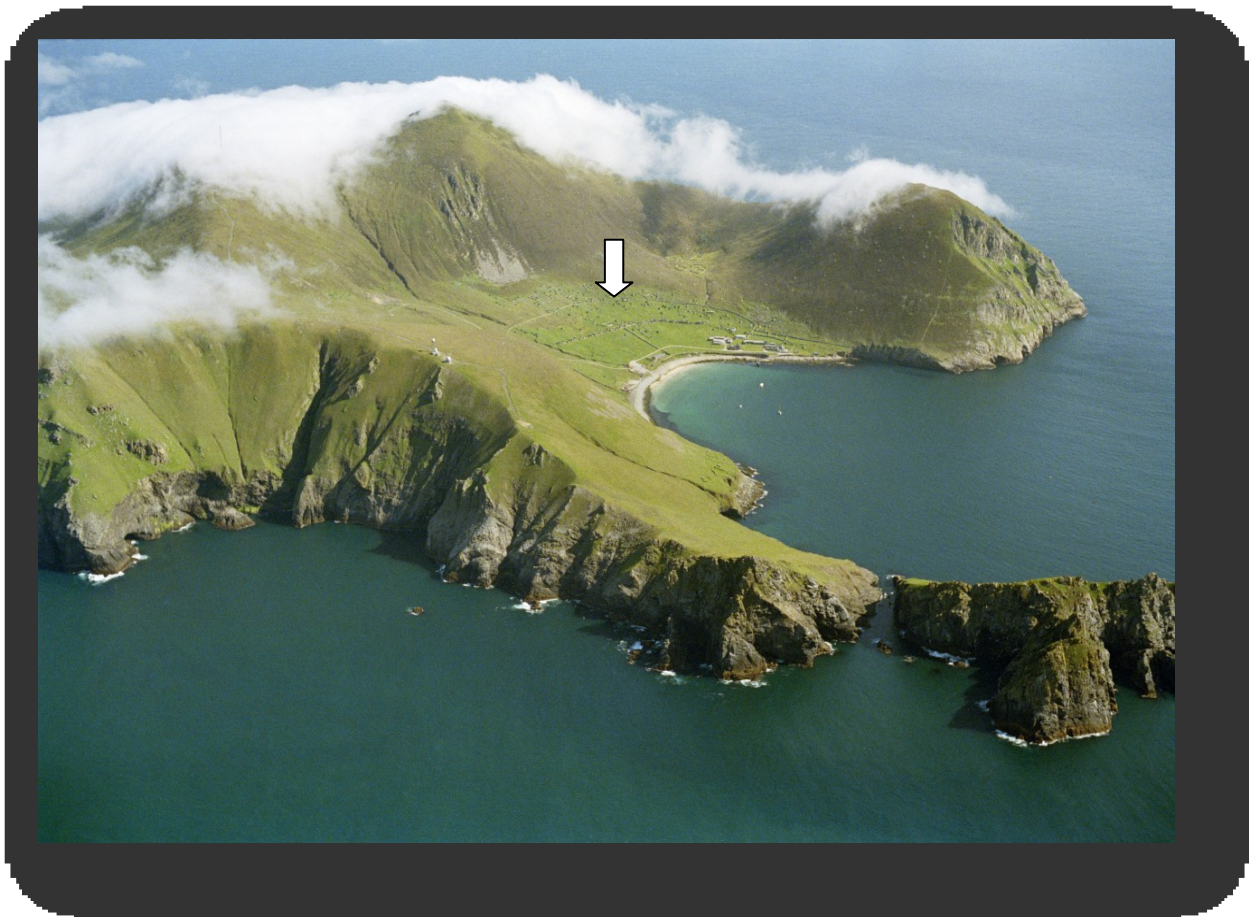


Figure 5 Village; distribution plan of early structures, taken from RCAHMS (1988). Calum Mor's House is annotated '57'. SC 1218097 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk





*Figure 6 A general oblique view of the main island of St Kilda, Hirta, in 1995.*

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The archipelago was bequeathed by the 5<sup>th</sup> Marquis of Bute to the Trust after his death in August 1956 and finally accepted in 1957<sup>4</sup>. Immediately thereafter a lease was agreed with the Ministry of Defence for the establishment of a military radar station on Hirta as part of the Hebrides Missile Test Range. Between 1957 and 2003 the NNR was managed by the Nature Conservancy (NC) and its successor bodies, while the Trust, advised by the Ministry of Works and subsequently Historic Scotland, managed the upstanding structures in Village Bay; the Trust and HS have had a formal Management Agreement since 1996, with new versions issued on a quinquennial basis. Since 2003 the Trust has managed all aspects of the care of St Kilda, in partnership with the MoD, Scottish Natural Heritage, Historic Scotland and Western Isles Council. St Kilda is an inalienable property of the Trust, the largest conservation charity caring for the natural and cultural heritage in Scotland.

The Trust has been through a period of great change over the last decade, perhaps brought on by the difficulty in matching aspirations with budgets, and there have been effects on both staffing and funding. St Kilda has not been missed – the loss of the full-time regional archaeologist, the loss of the then head of archaeology and the rapid turnover within the St Kilda Archaeologist post are all concerns – but it has also been buffered from the effects, in part due to its status as a World Heritage Site, and in part due to its immense popularity amongst volunteers, researchers and tourists. Having said that, the vision and actions suggested here rely heavily on the will and capacity of the Trust in the future.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bute 1936 for an interesting insight into his views on conservation  
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Figure 7 Digital image of 1995 vertical aerial photograph, taken from the N, with the position of Calum Mor's House indicated.

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This Conservation Statement was prepared in response to both perceived severe threats to the building, including flooding, and the need to adhere to conservation best practice. An aspiration to complete a Conservation Statement for the building is set out in the draft Management Plan for 2011-2016 (Trust 2010, 55).

This process of management is 'theory laden' but it is reasonable to say that St Kilda, among all the heritage assets of Scotland, forms a topic that is usually explored from a theoretically naive standpoint. Archaeology too, as a discipline, is still practised in an ostensibly a-theoretical vacuum, despite the inclusion of theory in undergraduate degrees and the publication of accessible guides. We have found it difficult to transmit this self-consciousness to our fieldwork and funding decisions.

More recently however, Fleming (2005) and others (eg Lawson 2007) have begun to challenge some of the theoretical assumptions concerning the islands, but the extent to which our archaeological and conservation decisions are based on deeply rooted bias is rarely explored. In a discussion of the history of management of a blackhouse, Fraser (2000) has demonstrated how manipulative, complex and argumentative debates can become, and how fruitless inactivity can be. But to this author at least, it seems clear that we must focus on long term 'sustainability', which, more often than not, requires a cautious and resource efficient approach, erring towards minimal intervention.

# Understanding the place

## *Detail description*

### Location

Calum Mor's House is located inside the head dyke, within the infield croft land associated with a house (now known as no. 9). This holding, created in the 1830s, was occupied in turn by Malcolm MacDonald (1819-90), his son Neil (1839-1917), and his grandson John (1872-1932) (Lawson 1993). It is marked on Sharbau's plan (c1860) as belonging to 'Mrs Malcolm MacDonald (Betty Scott)'.

Immediately to the SE and SW stand a planticrue, and a cleit<sup>5</sup> (no. 58), both of which are later in date, and it is possible that some of the stone used to build these structures was taken from the ruinous cells of Calum Mor's House. There are field banks running off to the NE and NW, and both *appear* to overlie the building, and may therefore post-date it. These field banks do not share the same construction type, and although they do demarcate a raised field, they are probably not of the same date. The 'field' or garden plot that they contain is significantly higher than both the open ground to the S and the current (or earlier) floor levels of Calum Mor's House<sup>6</sup>, perhaps due to the deliberate build-up of a raised bed, or to the movement downhill of cultivated soils. The date of these field banks is open to interpretation, as it is quite clear that Mackenzie's Improvements of the 1830s and 1840s did not result in the complete removal of the previous field systems in this area. The position and character of these banks indicates an early date (pre-1800) and helps to suggest an early date for Calum Mor's House.

Calum Mor's House is situated at the foot of Conachair, midway round the crescentic bay. Lying just east of a small stream, it is in an area with many natural springs that have moved over time. Efforts have been made in the past to control this drainage, and the wet ground is a result of both natural and anthropogenic factors.

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<sup>5</sup> A drystone building used for storage. The term, as applied to buildings, is unique to St Kilda, but it is very common as a place name in the Western Isles, and many of the hills and valleys with that element are dotted with drystone shieling huts. The word can mean quill, feather, down, covering of feathers, rocky eminence, ridge or reef of rocks, snow flake etc – see 'dwelly' online dictionary, and other Gaelic dictionaries.

<sup>6</sup> At least some of the water flooding CMH is directly draining through from this higher ground at the N.



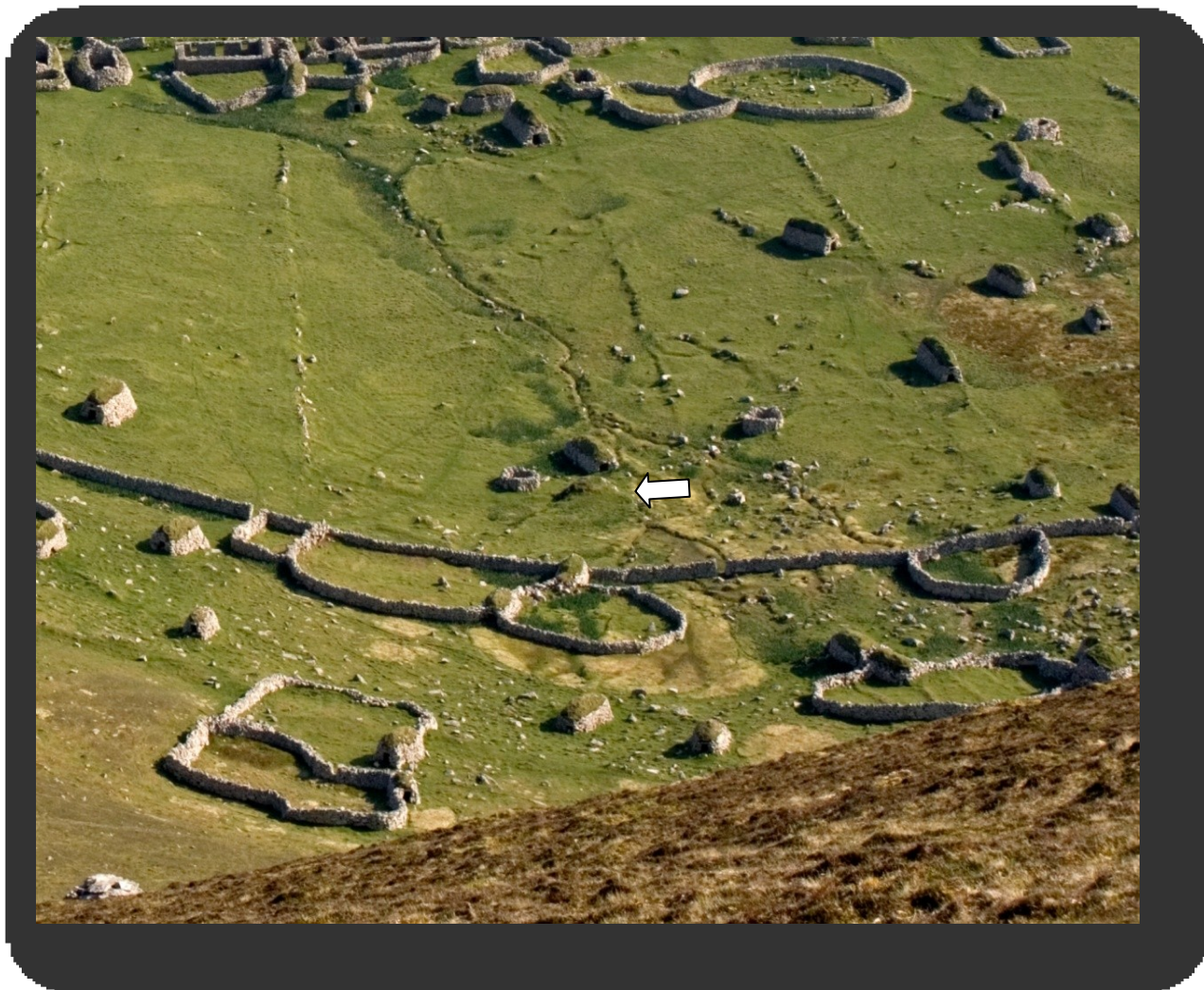


Figure 8 The immediate surroundings of Calum Mor's House (indicated).

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### Plan and floor

Calum Mor's House comprises a single oval hut, with an entrance to the E. It measures 4.57m from E to W by 2.85m transversely within walls up to 1m thick. The footings of a smaller second cell can be clearly seen on the S side of the mound and the lintel over an entrance passage to it is visible within the building. The existence of what appears to be another lintel further W, combined with a depression in the grass outside, may indicate the position of a third cell. Another depression and an arc of stone, at the SE of the building, may perhaps indicate another, fourth, cell, but this is conjectural. A mound just outside the entrance to the building, shown on the RCAHMS plan, is probably the spoil from excavation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The original floor level is difficult to ascertain, though the height of the passage lintels suggests it was significantly lower than it is now. It is likely that the volunteers of 1957 simply dug through an original earthen floor without noticing it, although it is not beyond the realms of possibility that it could be beyond the depth they reached, 2ft 6in or 0.76m. The natural water table may have changed significantly over the centuries, perhaps flooding the original floor levels; it could even explain the eventual abandonment of the building. Mackay (1957) talks about uncovering part of a slab floor, but this floor level may not be original. The ground level outside the building to the

N has clearly been raised, and that to the E may also have been raised leading to the semi-subterranean nature of the building. Cottam describes clearing out the building and ‘flooring’ it, in 1973 (see Appendix 5), and it is now covered with a rough layer of stone (too many to be fallen pinning stones). The floor was flooded at the time of survey (Nov 2011) to a depth of about 10cm.

## Walls

### Interior

The walls of the building are constructed of undressed stone without mortar and individual stones measure up to 1.22m in width by 0.41m in height – larger than in the majority of other buildings in St Kilda. Where the width is larger than the height, the stones have been laid longitudinally, though probably with their longest dimension set into the wall. Both large and smaller stones are used in the lower and upper courses and there are occasional pinning stones which appear to be original, though there is no evidence for a lot of pinning or any internal finish. The loss of any pinning stones reflects the movement of the structure as well as their structural redundancy. The S arc of walling includes a lot of slightly smaller stone, which may in part reflect the fact that this is not the base of the original wall. The specific choice of larger stones most probably reflects an aspiration for permanence, rather than monumentality. It is beyond the scope of this report to tackle the question of monumentality in St Kilda, but it seems likely that, although outwardly monumental structures are unknown, inward looking architectural monumentality may have been important in providing a sense of place, permanence and solidity.

The walls are half-coursed (some attempt has been made to lay courses), and corbelled<sup>7</sup> up to ceiling level. There are three courses at the entrance and five courses at the maximum height of the building. The corbelling is fairly crude, mainly due to the mixed sizes and shapes of stone used, and each course projects from the last by as much as 20cm. This projection is facilitated by both the dimensions of the stones used in the wall – each projects up to 20cm into the thickness of the wall – and the overlying weight of the roof stones and the turf and stone cap.

The W end of the building is in a rougher build than the remainder, and this reflects the rebuilding work of 1973, which affected both the external and internal faces.

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<sup>7</sup> An individual *corbel* is a common feature in many buildings. It is simply a projecting block (in stone, timber etc) which supports a super incumbent load such as an arch, beam, or a roof truss. *Corbelling*, which is more commonly found in vernacular buildings, is successive courses of corbels forming a pseudo-vault or supporting a load (Curl 1999). Each corbel acts as a cantilever, so that the dimensions of the corbel, the position and amount of load from above, and the counteracting load within the thickness of the wall are all crucial.

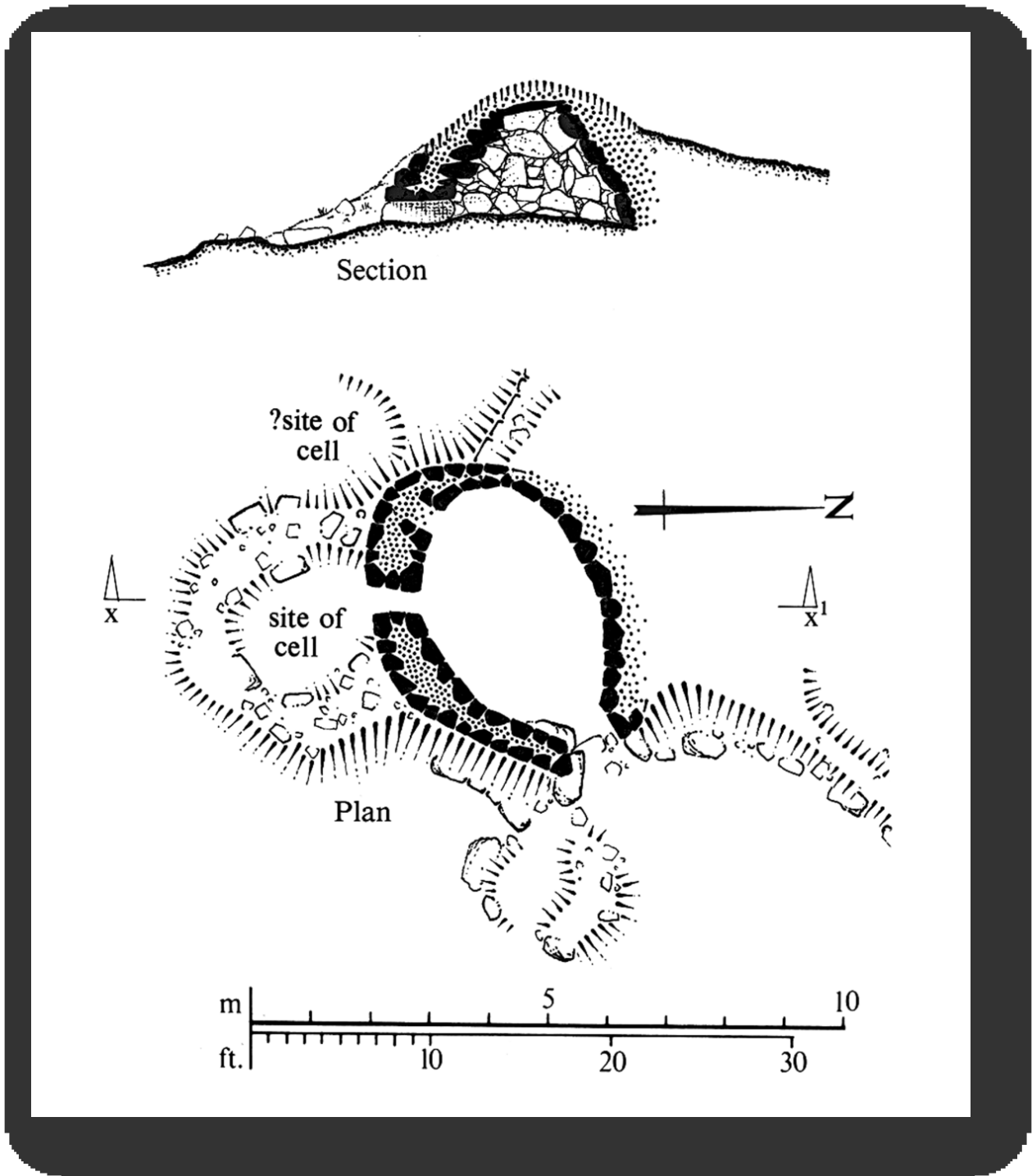


Figure 9 Inked RCAHMS plan and section of Calum Mor's House, taken from RCAHMS (1988).

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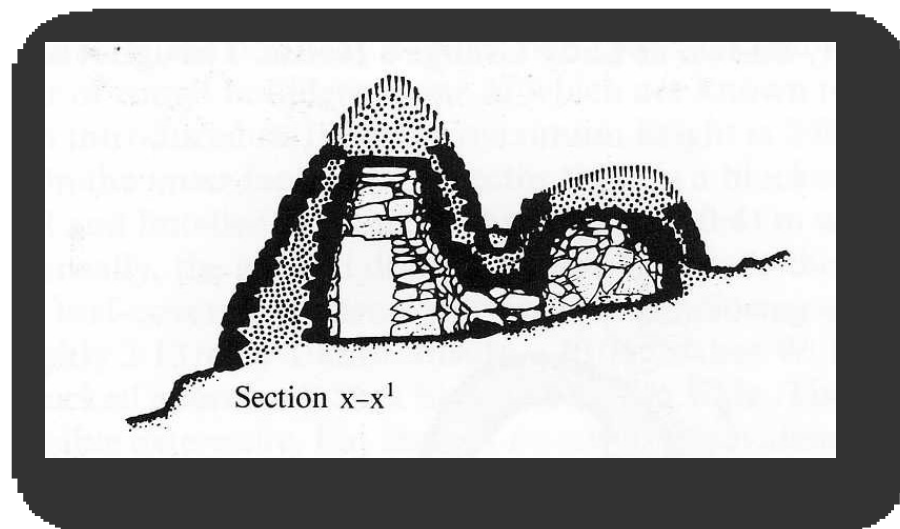
## Exterior

Much of the exterior of the building has been altered due to the encroachment of the field above, the impact of the down taking and robbing of stonework from the cells that were attached to the S, and the maintenance of the turf cap.

As is obvious from a rapid survey, very few of the internal wall face stones project all the way through the building, and the majority of the outer facing stones are small and randomly placed. The principal function of the exterior of the building is to provide a weight at the outside of the corbelled arch (a counteracting force keeping it in place) and to waterproof the structure – it is important that the weight on the exterior of the building stays the same over time. The exterior of the building does not appear to have had a ‘skin’ of stone, but it may be that this has been removed and remodelled when the roofing over the external cells was taken down. At the N side, much of the exterior wall face is covered by the accumulated field soils which are now causing a significant stress against the wall.

## Roofing

In most drystone buildings on St Kilda, the walls are corbelled until they reach a height where single slabs can cover the roof spreading from side to side, transverse to the length of the building. This leads both to very narrow buildings, where they are low and roofed by single slabs, but also to quite tall buildings where the width at ground level necessitates a great height. Cleit 122 and the adjoined cell 123 provide a good example of different types of roofing. In cleit 122, the walls are slowly corbelled to a high point, and then it is roofed with transverse slabs – ie the roof slabs are at right angles to the main axis of the building. In the adjacent cell 123, which is probably earlier, the roofing is off a different form that reflects a more circular plan, the use of larger stone, and a different pattern of roof slabs.



*Figure 10 Section through Cleit 122 (left) and 123, taken from RCAHMS (1988)*

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The pattern of roofing used in Calum Mor’s House, that of both longitudinal and transverse slabs, formally alternated at right angles, is not one seen anywhere else on St Kilda, and it leads to a distinctive stepped profile from the doorway to the centre of the roof, except at the W end where the walling has been rebuilt, both in 1973



and probably earlier. This is only visible in the N–S section, rather than the E–W section recorded by RCAHMS in the 1980s.

There *are* other examples on St Kilda where the roofing slabs are laid at an angle other than perpendicular to the alignment of the building. This often forms a series of interlocking triangular slabs, rather than rectangles, but these examples do not display the same regularity, do not have the same stepped profile, and do not use such massive slabs. The roofing of the cells in Gleann Mór is also less regular, and there are only a few longitudinal slabs positioned haphazardly, while the shielings that have been recorded in SW Lewis by Elspeth Logan (see RCAHMS MS 6286) tend to close to a much smaller and sub-circular hole, which can then be covered by one or two slabs.

The turf cap is up to 30cm thick on the top of the roof, but much thinner in places. It is clear from the historic photographs that the roof has been at least partially re-turfed since the evacuation of the island in 1930. The ‘whole of the exterior of the structure’ was re-turfed in the summer of 1973 (Cottam 1973, 2).



*Figure 11 Taken looking up at the ceiling from the E, this image shows the highest part of the roof, formed by a combination of longitudinal and transverse slabs. Separated by the yellow line, the western end of the roof is formed by the continuation of corbelling from the end wall. 1148-355*



*Figure 12 The whiter and small stones on the left and right have been introduced, probably since 1950. The smaller stones along the right hand side at floor level have also been introduced. Notice also the lintel at the doorway, and the way the roof lintels step up, alternating longitudinal and transverse slabs. 1148-349*



*Figure 13 Two photos of the roofing slabs of the [Amazon's House](#). In general, though irregular, they are laid 'across' the building, though three in the lower are laid 'along' the building, in this case, supported edge on edge. 1148-110 (top) and 99 (below).*





#### Use

The photographs and accounts of Calum Mor's House from after 1870 seem to suggest that it had already been abandoned. However, the condition of the turf roof captured by Kearton's photograph in 1896, suggests that it had been maintained in the last 50 years, and certainly since after Mackenzie's improvements around 1830. The implication is that the building was probably used as a store, and perhaps also that it was relatively dry inside. The attribution of the building to a 'Calum Mór' may reflect the fact that it was built before the smallpox epidemic, when there was probably a break in some traditions. The name simply means 'Big Malcolm' and there are many examples of stories and historical references that feature people with this name. Although it may be possible to identify Calum with the man that survived the smallpox epidemic on Hirta, when others were away on Boreray (Harman 1997, 233), the balance of evidence suggests that the building is almost certainly earlier than 18<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Is it a cleit?

Calum Mor's House shows very few of the traits of a typical cleit, and was only included in the structure number system for logistical and management reasons. The system, originated by naturalists JM Boyd and PA Jewell in the early 1960s (RCAHMS 1988, ix), applied to both cleits and cleit-like structures, sometimes causing confusion. It is oval in plan (with the long side across the slope), semi-subterranean, and completely turf covered. The position and orientation of the entrance is also unlike a cleit, and the technique of roofing is different. In addition, it had more than one internal space, and it has a stratigraphic relationship with a pre-Improvement field system that suggests it is earlier than many cleits. Nevertheless, it may have been used for storage in the later 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly if it was still dry internally at that time, and it may therefore have been thought of as a cleit for part of its life, despite not allowing the wind to pass through, a feature that is sometimes thought of as definitive.

#### Is it a hut?

There is a possibility that Calum Mor's House is a hut ie a permanent roofed structure that is designed to be used and maintained on a temporary basis. It is certainly comparable in plan form, size and character to huts associated

with shieling grounds and used for shelter and as dairies. It is also comparable with huts used as bothies ie shelters for people engaged in a form of work, in this context usually hunting seabirds. There are many other examples of both bothies and shielings in the Western Isles, including on Hirta and the other islands of St Kilda. Hunters huts survive on Sula Sgeir ([HW63SW 3](#)), Boreray ([NA10SE 1](#)), Soay ([NA00SE 8](#)), and the Flannan Isles ([NA74NW 3](#)), and, in general terms, these can be seen as a specific adaptation of the shieling huts found more commonly in Lewis and Harris, as they share a number of traits in size, build and shape.

Another way of thinking about the building as a hut was prompted by Fleming who suggested, cautiously of course, the possibility that buildings such as Calum Mor's House may have provided seasonal accommodation for visitors to a permanent settlement, as opposed to accommodation for seasonal visitors to an uninhabited island (2005, 71).

Prompted by this suggestion, it is worth considering whether the evidence that St Kilda was always occupied by a permanent population is convincing. A few anecdotes help support the proposition that there may have been a number of periods when permanent settlement was abandoned. For example, the application of the well-known story of the 'severed hand' (Harman 1997, 231) may suggest that the islands were empty at one stage (though surely not without an 'owner'), and the smallpox epidemic in 1727 may have resulted in a temporary abandonment, however short, and must certainly have resulted in great changes in the use, construction and maintenance of buildings.

Is it an early 'house'?

Historical references (Martin 1999, 242) tell us that the houses on Hirta in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century were roofed with timber and thatch, so it is probably safe to assume that any corbelled house like Calum Mor's House would have to be earlier – early 17<sup>th</sup> century at least.

The presence of more than one cell is crucial to the interpretation of Calum Mor's House as a house. The larger cell may have been a living space and the subsidiary cells for sleeping. This arrangement is also common in shielings, buildings of the Pictish period thought to be houses, as well as simple blackhouses. However, there is certainly no space for cattle, which appear to have been lodged with the people in both the blackhouses of the 1830s and the preceding thatched buildings of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Harman 1997, 144-5). Although small cattle were present on the island in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is unclear how many an earlier community had. It seems unlikely that if they did have cattle, they were over-wintered outside (they weren't in the historic periods we have information for), and so one would expect some form of separate byre, for which there is no evidence.

The recovery of pottery by Mackay in 1959 supports an argument that the building was used for cooking and eating, but does not demonstrate it.

## Summary of previous descriptions (see Appendix 1)

The building was first described by Sands in the 1870s, and it seems likely that it was not seen as particularly unusual or old until this time. The legend surrounding its construction by a strong man is alluded to in this earliest description, although the attribution of the building to an individual, Calum Mór, appears to be an earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, with much of the detail coming from AA Macgregor who only visited Hirta for a short time in 1930. The story may be related to a widespread conviction among the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century islanders that their forebears had been very strong, and this in turn may reflect the impact of the smallpox epidemic on the community, and its effect on cultural continuity.

Kearton's 1896 photograph is the earliest known detailed shot, although general views from the preceding decades often include the building in the background. Williamson's notes and plan of 1957 provided the first detailed description, and his was the first attempt to understand the building as part of a group of structures in Village Bay that may be survivors from an earlier village. The more detailed notes and drawings undertaken by RCAHMS and published in 1988 are still the most balanced account, and the measured survey has now been updated with the scans of the building produced by the University of Birmingham. Conservation works were undertaken by volunteers in the 1959 and 1973 (see Appendix 4 and 5) and both had an impact on the integrity of the building, although in general it is surprising how similar it looks now to the photographs taken before 1957.

The building continues to be of interest to the public and is often noted in popular texts. That being said, there has never been a consideration of it in the St Kilda Mail, and even the most recent descriptions include some suggestions and assumptions that are difficult to justify, particularly a misunderstanding of its probable date, which, reading between the lines of accounts ranging from 1697 to the present day, is most likely to be c1600.

## Summary of comparative sites (see also Appendix 2)

It is important to emphasise that, in the Western Isles at least, there is no correlation between the complexity (and simplicity) of a building, and its age. Nor is there a simple growth in complexity over time to an apogee (whether Maes Howe, Carloway, or Skara Brae etc) and then a slow decline; many of the models of change presented by early writers tackling St Kilda do not stand rigorous analysis as they are based on these assumptions. The picture of drystone architecture, its development and change is more nuanced, while, at the same time, we *can* look at continuity and change over very long periods (eg Geddes 2010). A more detailed look at comparisons in Appendix 2 includes examples from the Pictish and post-medieval periods and a brief look at the results of some larger regional programmes of research.

There are a host of drystone corbelled buildings in Britain and Ireland that date from the Neolithic through to the 19th century. Funerary, ecclesiastical, and domestic buildings have all been constructed and roofed in this way and little can be gleaned in either date or function from the construction type alone. There are some parallels, in overall plan and number of cells, to Calum Mor's House in buildings of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD, although the typical cellular Pictish building includes the use of vertical slabs in the lowest courses, and the plans are not more, or less, similar than other comparators. It is frankly difficult, if not impossible, to believe that any structure built over 1,000 years ago could have survived in Village Bay, when there is so much other evidence for cleit reconstruction and building change, in addition to what happened in the Improvement period. If the building had very strong mythological or, particularly, religious links (as at the Garvellachs, Na h-Eileanan Flannach, North Rona, Sula Sgeir, and other locations in the Western and Northern Isles), there is undoubtedly a possibility that it could survive with some alteration. But, in this case, where the earliest record of the attached story is late 19<sup>th</sup> century and there is no evidence for a Christian affiliation, can we really justify an assertion of great age?

For a more simple parallel at least for 'architecture', we need look no further than Lewis and Harris, some of the closest islands to St Kilda, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though generally ignored by authors describing St Kilda, by far the most similar structures can be found amongst the shieling traditions of the Western Isles, and some of the best preserved and recorded examples of these survive in the remote hinterland of the parish of Uig. Many of the buildings here are of a similar plan, have a similar entrance, a similar height, and have a fully turfed and corbelled roof. In terms of date, some of the upstanding shielings in Lewis could be medieval, though, by their very nature, they needed some maintenance and repair if they were to provide shelter in later centuries. Cellular shielings were certainly being built and constructed into the 20<sup>th</sup> century – one crucial factor being that they were remote and temporary accommodation – so it was not worth carrying timbers in. Only a detailed study would establish whether roof types reflect chronology, location or another less obvious factor.

We must accept, therefore, that an explanation of the date and function of Calum Mor's House is not to be found simply by looking elsewhere at NW Scottish models, but instead by gaining a better understanding of the specific history and archaeology of St Kilda, which is *particularly* remote and has a *particular* economy. The two most likely explanations are that it was either a permanently occupied domestic house or a temporary hut, probably built before 1650. There are no parallels that I know of for the former, and the later requires comparisons with Hebridean shielings used into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and bothies on other islands where seabird hunting is well known. A temporary hut is more likely to date to before 1500, when historical sources become extremely poor.

# Assessment of significance

## Introduction

This assessment of significance is designed to help clarify decision-making with regard to Calum Mor's House. It includes reference to the existing and over-arching statements of significance for the archipelago in the Management Plan and the nomination documents, as well as a short critique of these. The methodology is based primarily on a summation of the recommendations included in Scottish Historic Environment Policy (SHEP) (Historic Scotland 2009b), with reference to the broad guidance of the Burra Charter. Following a discussion of the context and methodology, the assessment is presented as a) a table, b) a short general statement, and c) a more detailed analysis.

## The context

The overarching statement of outstanding universal value in the St Kilda World Heritage Site Management Plan (National Trust for Scotland 2010) draws on the assessments made by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and on the nomination documents put forward by the UK government. It includes a number of statements that present a specific view of St Kilda's importance, and this extract gives a sense and flavour of the approach:

St Kilda represents subsistence economies everywhere – living in harmony with nature, until external pressures led to decline and, in 1930, the evacuation of the islands. The poignancy of the archipelago's history, and the remarkable fossilised landscape, its outstanding and spectacular natural beauty and heritage, its isolation and remoteness, leave one in awe of nature and of the people that once lived in this spectacular and remarkable place

National Trust for Scotland 2010, 16

The more detailed documents used for the revised nomination in 2004 were based on a thorough comparative analysis of the significance of St Kilda, and they included these more specific assertions:

A unique combination of special qualities work together to give St Kilda its universal cultural value. Most important of these qualities are:

- The completeness of the fossilised 19<sup>th</sup>-century settlement and agricultural remains.
- The spectacular landscape setting adapted by people through the millennia
- The perceived remoteness of the islands
- The vivid story of human endeavour – evidence of millennia of sustainable use, largely based on the use of bird resources, followed by declining viability, principally due to external influences – on small islands in an extreme climate
- And the wealth of documentary evidence from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the time of the abandonment, which provides the means to appreciate and understand the other main qualities

Trust and Scottish Executive 2004, 9

The views expressed in these official documents have been phrased with a specific purpose in mind — sometimes to achieve a certain aim or to provide a unifying theme to aid discussions about the management of change. They are not beyond a critical assessment and much of the emotive language used can serve to distract us from a clearer and more balanced view. It is certainly the case that St Kilda inspires an awe of nature and the people but recent academic work by Fleming (2005), much of which was undertaken at about the same time that the management level consensus was developed, has served to challenge our understanding of St Kilda's importance. His thesis is designed to challenge our understanding of St Kilda's history which consistently presents a simplified

story. Arguing that St Kilda should not be studied in isolation from the Western Isles, he demonstrated that it was, and is, part of a wider socio-cultural and economic system. This work has yet to be fully absorbed by the contemporary communities that engage with St Kilda, and much of the dialogue of management is still imbued with fundamental assumptions about value. Because of this, the changes that happened in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century St Kilda tend to be presented as processes that happened **to** the community, rather than processes with which they were actively engaged.

The issue can be further understood by looking at three other ideas that consistently affect St Kilda's management, and more importantly, drive much of the informal discussion of St Kilda by professional and enthusiast, both in and out of print.

- Teleology (assuming a set course)
  - the evacuation of the island is seen as an inevitable consequence of negative external pressure
- Reductionism
  - The historic community is portrayed as sustainable, idyllic and unique
- Simplicity
  - Change is seen as something that happens principally in the modern era

With this thinking in mind, the qualitative and subjective assessment of significance used here follows that developed by Kerr (1996, 19) and adopted by the Heritage Lottery Fund (2004) and Historic Scotland (2000). Detailed guidance is taken from SHEP, which was developed after wide consultation by Historic Scotland. As with any cultural heritage resource management exercise, the subject becomes dynamic and changeable during the process. Intrinsic values do not change over time (eg the layout of a building) but associative significances in particular (eg with characters and events whether contemporary or past) can develop during the process of research and discussion.

### Methodology

A table of significance has been developed using the overarching and detailed guidance provided by SHEP 2009, but combining it with an assessment of the *level* of importance (whether negligible, some, considerable or exceptional) and the *scale* of the importance (whether local, national or international). Following on from this, a general statement of significance provides a summary of the principal components laid out in the table, while a description text goes into a little more detail on each topic.

Value theme	Value type	Subject	Level	Scale
<b>Intrinsic</b>	Interest and research potential	Settlement in pre-Improvement period, houses as a reflection and driver of people's lives	Exceptional	National
	Condition	Well preserved corbelled and turfed chamber	Exceptional	National
	Age	Whole structure	Considerable	National
	Story of physical changes	Reduction in size, roof alteration, 20th century changes	Some	Local
	Story of functional changes	Change from house to store to attraction	Some	Local
	Architectural interest	Cellular form, roofing technique	Some	Local
<b>Contextual</b>	Rarity	Possible 18th cent drystone house	Exceptional	National
	Group value	Part of a group of pre-Improvement cellular buildings	Considerable	National

	Landscape and setting	Dramatic and relatively unspoilt setting	Considerable	National
<b>Associative</b>	Importance to the nation's consciousness	With St Kilda as a group World Heritage Site	Considerable	National
	Aesthetics	Tangible and unspoilt sense of age	Considerable	Local
	Importance to groups of people	Archaeological community, past St Kildan communities, visitors	Considerable	Local
	Historic, social and cultural influences	A product of the relationship of St Kilda's community to the wider area	Considerable	Local
	Importance to individuals	Archaeologists, artists, islanders	Some	Local
	Close historical associations	Historical associations from 1875 onwards	Some	Local



### *General statement of significance*

Calum Mor's House holds a unique place in St Kilda's built heritage. It is of great interest to academic and enthusiast alike as it has great potential to introduce the latter to some of the more complex and significant aspects of St Kilda's past, while also offering the possibility to answer a number of key academic questions with regard to the pre-Improvement period on the island. It is an extremely rare if not unique example of a corbelled pre-Improvement permanent or temporary home that reflects an unusual vernacular tradition which does not survive within improved crofting townships in other parts of the Hebrides or further afield. Despite changes in use and alterations, it is in remarkably good condition and the roofed cell and plan form appear to be unchanged over a number of centuries. The folk stories that describe the construction of the building by a strong man, first recorded in 1875, can tell us much about the attitude of the St Kildans to their own past, as well as their relationships with visitors through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## Key elements of significance

### Intrinsic

There is a great deal of **public interest** in St Kilda, and Calum Mor's House in particular attracts attention because of its age and the stories of Big Calum. The **research value** of the building extends beyond the fabric itself, which can be explored with others in the group of early cellular buildings, to questions about the dynamic changes in the island, and the ways in which the survival and story of building reflects stories about St Kilda's population, in the past and today.

Calum Mor's House is less altered than the other pre-Improvement structures on St Kilda (which have been largely rebuilt, and completely re-roofed), and it consequently retains a relatively rare patina — a combination of textures, colours and impressions that contribute to a sense of authenticity and age (see Bell 1997, 31). The good **condition** of the monument is surprising: still standing and roofed despite its simple construction materials and external influences. Although the island is dotted with buildings, the majority of which are difficult to date, Calum Mor's House certainly dates to the pre-Improvement period, before 1800, and it may date to the later medieval, an impressive **age** for a simple vernacular dwelling.

The fact that the building was probably abandoned completely by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that it demonstrates a **narrative of changes in function** — house to store to heritage asset — reflects the dynamic history of St Kilda and the complex relation of the built environment with internal and external influences. The story of physical change also reflects changes in the use of the building, and is something that may be teased out further with research.

The building is of great **architectural interest** since it is a very rare and early survivor of a drystone corbelled dwelling which may not survive elsewhere in Scotland. The techniques of building and roofing are rarely seen in a building within a settlement and it is extremely rare for them to survive in such close proximity to Improvement period crofts. A careful excavation of this building, or of another in the group, would have much to tell us about the design, function and materials that were.

### Contextual

Calum Mor's House sits within a wider **landscape setting** which has impacted in the function, design and survival of the building and with which it is intrinsically linked. The re-development of St Kilda during the 1950s and 1960s has resulted in changes that affect but do not undermine the importance of this landscape setting. It is a subtle feature, easily missed by the visitor and non-specialist, and difficult to spot from many of the viewpoints over Village Bay. Only if one knows where it is can you pick it out amongst the more prominent stony features. That said, when one *is* aware of the age and history, it becomes more noticeable and emblematic: it is literally and figuratively connected with the land, and gives us a powerful sense of longevity.

It is one of only a handful of standing buildings in the Village Bay that date to the pre-Improvement period, and is therefore a **rare** survival. Both the turf cap and the method of roof construction are particular and individual elements of the monument. A circumspect judgement suggests it may be unusual if not unique in a Scottish context as an early drystone house dating from the later medieval period.

Calum Mor's House is the best preserved of a group of buildings in Village Bay that provide evidence for an earlier phase of cellular buildings that may be relicts of medieval settlements. This **group value** both provides an important basis for greater understanding and future research, as well as emphasising that nothing in St Kilda stands in isolation. Even the buildings and areas that have been drawn out as important to accidents of survival and naming must be seen as part of a pattern of change.

### Associative

St Kilda has an iconic place in the **national consciousness**, something that has grown over time and become particularly prevalent through recent media and the inscription of the island group on the World Heritage list. As

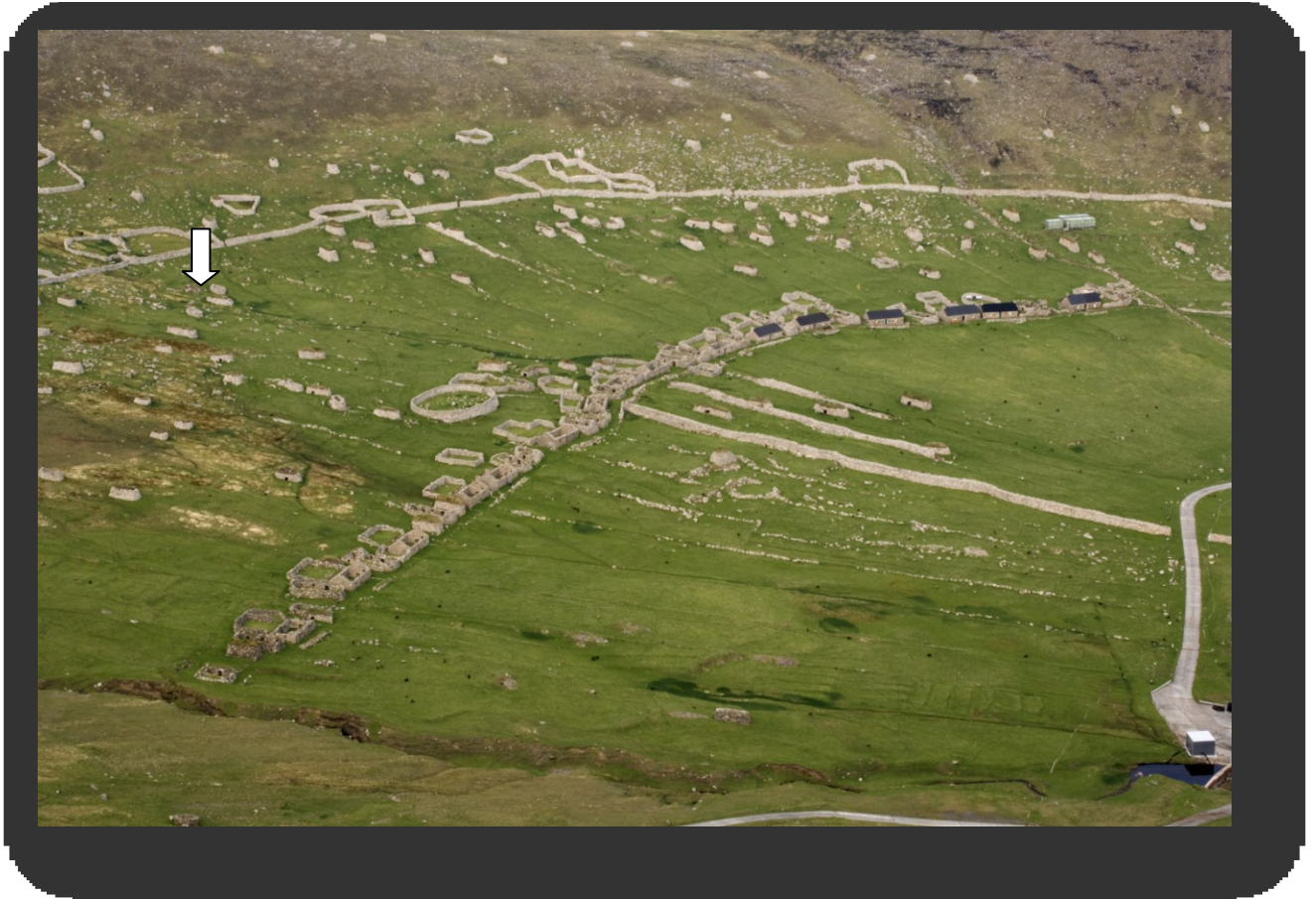
noted above, this status and recognition is the product of a host of factors, and it cannot be tied securely to many of the individual monuments. Having said that, each and every one plays a part in the overall affect, and Calum Mor's House has a strong part to play given its age, condition and aesthetic.

Calum Mor's House may pre-date both the resettlement of St Kilda after the smallpox epidemic of 1727, and the sweep of Improvements undertaken under Neil Mackenzie's ministry from 1830 to 1844. Through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> periods, it may have been — and to some extent still is — valued as a talisman of this older race and it is perhaps this connection in their thinking that led to the story of Calum Mór, an ancient (though not necessarily older) and stronger person, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This value, though perceived by a historic community, can still have currency and it is possible that it will be embellished in the future. The idea of Calum Mor's House as a **symbol of cultural 'resilience'** has considerable resonance with modern communities and their attitude and reading of St Kilda, its history and people. The story of the building as the house of a 'strong man' is first recorded in 1875, relatively late in comparison to some of the other named monuments. It does not appear to be recorded as 'Calum Mor's House' until Mathieson's visit in 1927 and the most detailed published account of the story is by A A Macgregor who visited at the time of the evacuation in 1930.

Island visitors and 'Kildaphiles' alike are often attracted by an **atmosphere** that pervades some of the remote and previously occupied parts of the country (and further afield). This essence or atmosphere is hard to pin down, but it comes from a unique mixture of sense of place combined with the particular attitude of the observer. A key ingredient, abandonment, lends itself to a uniquely tangible quality and raises the feeling of 'them and us', 'now and then'. In Village Bay, this 'sense of place' can often be hard to access – the sound of the generators, the visual impact of the military base, and the bustle of a summer's day, can all affect it. But the area around Calum Mor's House, the back of the village and the older structures in that area do contribute to a stronger atmosphere, one that has attracted Maureen Kerr amongst others, who has captured Calum Mor's House in her paintings. Calum Mor's House has an ambience that **helps visitors connect with and consider change over time.**

The building's **aesthetics** are striking. In common with many buildings on the island its construction includes massive blocks, an exemplar of drystone building on St Kilda. As with many early buildings, the act of stooping through the entrance lends grandeur to what is essentially a humble building and the blocky and massive masonry lends itself to our concept of a stalwart and tough people. The rare roof structure itself may now be unique in Hirta.

The textures and colours of the older stone and turf are noticeable and appreciable elements of the appeal of the building. The roughness of the interior and the flooded floor mirror the history of the island and of its historic community. The rough and simple aesthetic of the building, a grassy lump rising up from the surrounding land, appeals to the modern visitor, almost as if it is an object of art, and is **evocative** of and reinforces the idea of an ancient and archaic past.



*Figure 14 General view of Village Bay in 2008, with Calum Mor's House indicated.*

*DP 044796 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)*



*Figure 15 Sketch of Calum Mor's House © Maureen Kerr.*



## Issues and vulnerabilities

### *Lack of 'knowledge'*

One could argue that a crucial issue concerning Calum Mor's House is that we cannot demonstrate clearly what it is, other than it *probably* was a house, *probably* dating to before 1800. This affects not only our appreciation of the building, and a genuine assessment of its significance (without reaching out to 'group value'), but it also affects our ability to manage it confidently and actively. But we do know that it is of great significance, not only because of the statutory web it sits within, but also because of demonstrable and notable features. By following good conservation practice, we hope to sustain or increase significance and we may be in the unusual position where the pursuit of knowledge is not an adequate justification. In his 2010 Rhind lectures, Professor Martin Carver argued that the *raison d'être* of archaeology was the pursuit of knowledge through good project design, and that we had fallen into a unfortunate trap, where 'preservation in situ' was increasingly viewed as the preferred option. In the case of a standing building with national significance, we do not need an invasive programme of work, but we do need to pursue knowledge and plan our work carefully and with minimal intervention.

### *Stability*

The building appears to be structurally stable, with little or no significant movement noted over the last few years. There has been movement in the past and the W end was partially rebuilt in the 1970s, and possible before. The building may have slumped slightly to the downhill or S, and the N wall (which has its back to earth) has bowed slightly into the interior (contra Watt 2010). It gains much stability from the method of build, the enormous weight of the roofing slabs, the consolidating mass of earth, and the turf cap all helping to hold it together.

There is little evidence for the original scale or character of small pinning stones, though many authors feel sure they were there (Mackay 1957, Watt 2010). Any introduction of pinning would have to be done extremely carefully and introducing more than a handful, in specific places, would probably be folly, and difficult to justify, as it would affect the patina and stability of the structure.

Despite the fact that the building appears to be stable, a complex drystone structure is difficult to model or predict, since one is not dealing with a solid structure of known characteristics (eg concrete, mortared brick). It is wise to think of the building as acting in 'punctuated equilibrium'; it may be stable for long periods of time, but then suffer sudden changes. Arguing that stability over ten or twenty recent years demonstrates long term stability is clearly erroneous and there are many examples – the gable of North Rona's chapel being one – where sudden collapse causes great damage. It is difficult to predict and monitor movement in this type of structure, and it may therefore be sensible to limit access to the building, with the use of slim wires across the entrance. The approach to structural monitoring needs to be multi-faceted. Ideally, a total station theodolite, with a sub-millimetre control network, would be used to measure the movement of specific points on the structure regularly, perhaps every five years. In practice, annual monitoring using historic photographs is likely to pick up even slight changes in the fabric and it is very unlikely that the whole building will slump or rotate as a unit, without releasing some smaller stones which would be noted. Traditional crack monitors could be added over certain joints, although their usefulness should be discussed with the Trust building surveyor and HS architect.

### *Flooding*

Significant concern has been expressed by HS and the Trust over the flooding of the floor of the building. There are a number of possible issues; that it could be damaging archaeological deposits, that it could be undermining the building, that it is a new occurrence (indicative of unmanaged change), that it indicates a 'fault' (in roofing or drainage), and that it reflects badly on those managing the building.

In very general terms, water-logging is usually seen as a benefit to archaeological deposits since it prevents aerobic degradation, but this very much depends on the site taphonomy (formation processes)<sup>8</sup>. In this case, the floor deposits may have gone through periods of dryness and wetness through time – note that trenches dug in the interior in 1957 became water-logged – and this may have caused some damage already. Importantly, the rough stone flooring means that the deeper archaeological deposits are not disturbed by sheep or people in muddy conditions.

If there was a significant movement of running water under the foundations of the building, there could be an undermining action over time. In general, however, the water appears to be relatively still, and the direct ingress through the N wall (from the ground beyond) does not appear to be a contributing factor to the bulging in this face.



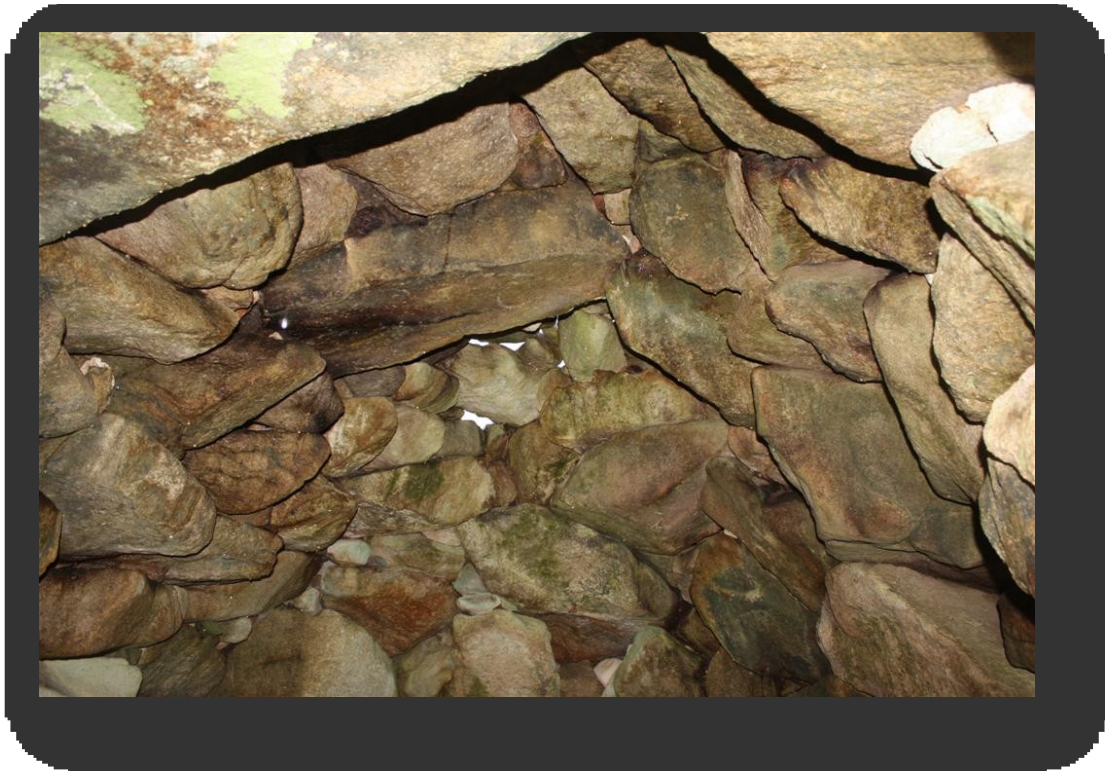
*Figure 16 The brown silt fan at the bottom left of this picture shows where water is coming through the N wall from the ground beyond.*

Archaeologists familiar with the building have suggested that the flooding is a relatively recent occurrence. I offer two notes in this regard: firstly, the evidence from Mackay's report of 1957 suggests that the 2'6" deep trenches dug in the floor become flooded, so the water table has been relatively close (we cannot be sure how close) since at least that date; secondly, the natural drainage around the building has perhaps changed significantly since, let's say, 1900, and the artificial drainage has also been altered (see Cottam 1973). A brief survey of the channels above and to either side of the building suggests that the natural springs, where water breaches the surface, change their position over time, and that new channels are formed. The head dyke (built around 1835) has affected water flow, directing water along its foundation course. Significant efforts have also been made to clear out, straighten, and add banks to either side of the main stream, probably in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1973, a work party dug a new ditch to help drain the building.

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<sup>8</sup> Repeating wetting and drying will increase degradation.

Flooding does not have to indicate a problem, and, in this case I would argue that it simply indicates change in the use of the building, and change in the natural drainage around it. In addition, there *is* direct water ingress through the roof, since the vegetation is thin (due to grazing pressure), and this could be mediated by the addition of some carefully placed and monitored turfs. One blessing of the waterlogged interior is that it discourages the use of the building by animals – because of this, it is one of the few buildings on Hirta that does not harbour significant depths of deposit comprising sheep carcasses and dung.



*Figure 17 Daylight is visible through holes in the turf covering which also allow rain in.*

In terms of public perception, it can be damaging to be seen to be ‘mismanaging’ heritage assets, particularly in high profile cases. Calum Mor’s House is not of a status where the flooding, and a perception that it is ‘bad’, will reflect too strongly. Any promotional literature can explain the positive aspects of the flooding – that it can help protect certain items and deposits, and prevents the sheep from using the building.

### **Roofing**

The turf cap and surroundings of Calum Mor’s House are periodically over grazed, both in absolute terms, and in relative terms, compared with periods prior to the evacuation. A glance at the historic photographs of Hirta, indicates that the vegetation is significantly shorter than it once was, in some cases reduced by over 50%, and this situation is confirmed by the small areas of the island that are currently protected from grazing by mesh pyramids. Crucially, the vegetative mat over the building itself helps tie it together and helps waterproof it, while the mat over the wider area prevents rapid run-off, slowing and absorbing rain water.

It seems likely that increased grazing will contribute to flooding, increased run-off, increased erosion, pressure on turf capping (where accessible) etc. Much longer vegetation can still be seen in the summer on the sheep-free island of Dun, and the vegetation is also noticeably longer on North Rona, where the sheep population has been managed until much more recently. Historical references to sheep populations are difficult to verify but they vary from 1100 to 600. All of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century accounts of sheep population are below 700 (Harman 1997,



191) and Sands records only 300 sheep on Hirta in 1875 (1876, 63). These of course were not pure Soay sheep, but a Scottish Blackface cross with different behavioural traits, and they were managed and kept out of the infield area prior to harvest. The population of the modern Soay flock, introduced in 1931, has grown continually reaching as high as 1783 (Small 1979), and up to 1300 in 1985 (Clutton-Brock et al 1991), and 2000 most recently (Trust 2010, 120). It is interesting to quote the management plan with reference to sheep populations:

These factors allow the population to pass through the winter at a level close to carrying capacity, to increase by as much as 50% during the summer, and thus enter the next winter at a level substantially higher than the island can support.

The National Trust for Scotland 2010 (draft for consultation), 120

It is important, however, to recognise that overgrazing can lead to species change rather than biodiversity loss, and that the impact of heavy grazing is complex. Overgrazing can be defined in terms of ecosystem capacity – in which case an unmanaged natural population could not, by definition, overgraze. Another view however, more along the lines of an ecosystem services approach, would see overgrazing as a level where other ecosystem services, such as cultural sites, are affected, particularly when they are finite resources.

The direct physical impact of the grazing sheep (noted as poaching by Watt 2010) may vary, though it can only have a negative effect on both the turf cap and the stability of the building. A lower population would not necessarily result in less poaching, as it would depend on the use of certain areas by the sheep flock. Critically, despite the potential to define over grazing in different ways, the ecological management of St Kilda should be holistic and must involve heritage issues – at the moment it does not.

### *Intervention*

Like many historic structures, one of the greatest threats to Calum Mor's House can come from us. St Kilda since 1950, seen at first as a reserve of nature, and now as an iconic cultural symbol, has seen no shortage of invasive works. The military base, of undoubted strategic historic value, had a powerful impact on the island's environment, affecting many of its principal natural and cultural heritage assets. Furthermore, vandals, collectors and well-meaning volunteers 'cleared' and 'tidied' much of what was left after the evacuation. The concept of 'patina'<sup>9</sup> — where untidiness, rotting wood and metal, mud, and tatty roofs add value — has become an anathema, yet it is exactly this that gives one a sense of place, of time, and of history. Rebuilding, though careful, goes on apace, yet iconic buildings (such as the cleit at the end of the world) and original historic turf roofs, fall down around us due to specific difficulties over safety and methodology. Allied to this is a mismatch between our management of archaeological sites, and our management of architectural sites, in terms of recording, materials and the philosophy of our conservation approach.

Conservation works in Britain are commonly driven, not by the need of the building, but by the need of a community, or the availability of people's energy, funds and time. We must surely, therefore, be extremely cautious in our interventions, doing the minimum to retain significance while retaining the authenticity that might so easily be lost.

### *Setting*

The 'setting' of Calum Mor's House is crucial to its significance. It does not exist in isolation, but sits (and was built) within a multi period landscape which contributes to how it is experienced, understood, and appreciated (HS 2009a). The original setting was presumably within a landscape for which the predominant use was as a resource

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<sup>9</sup> ie a combination of textures, colours and impressions that give a sense of authenticity and age.

base – whether for arable, pastoral or seabird farming, seasonal or permanent, a landscape that would have been full of people working, of cattle, sheep, and horses, and rich in the sights and smells of a rural society . It now sits in a landscape which is primarily dormant – nobody has tilled the soil for 80 years – and is used mainly to site military operations, and to provide amenity value to visitors and residents. Now, St Kilda is a landscape that provides a backdrop to activity. It is not ‘inhabited’.

Although it happened more than 50 years ago, it is important to recognise that the setting of the building has been affected by the post-1957 military occupation. Most particularly, the aural impact of the power station and the visual impact of the quarry and the military base itself (the radars themselves are nearly 1km away, and 180m higher) have made an impact on Calum Mor’s House. This must not be seen as a precedent for further impact as the sensitivity of the receptors (the natural and cultural heritage assets) remains high, and future visual and aural impacts should be addressed on a case by case basis.



*Figure 18 Calum Mor’s House is barely noticeable just beyond the head dyke. Affecting it’s setting since 1957, there are the military base, fuel tank and landing areas spread out along the coast.*

SC 1218083 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)



*Figure 19 The same view in 1886 is dominated by the brightness of the zinc roofs.*

SC 1218065 © Courtesy of RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)

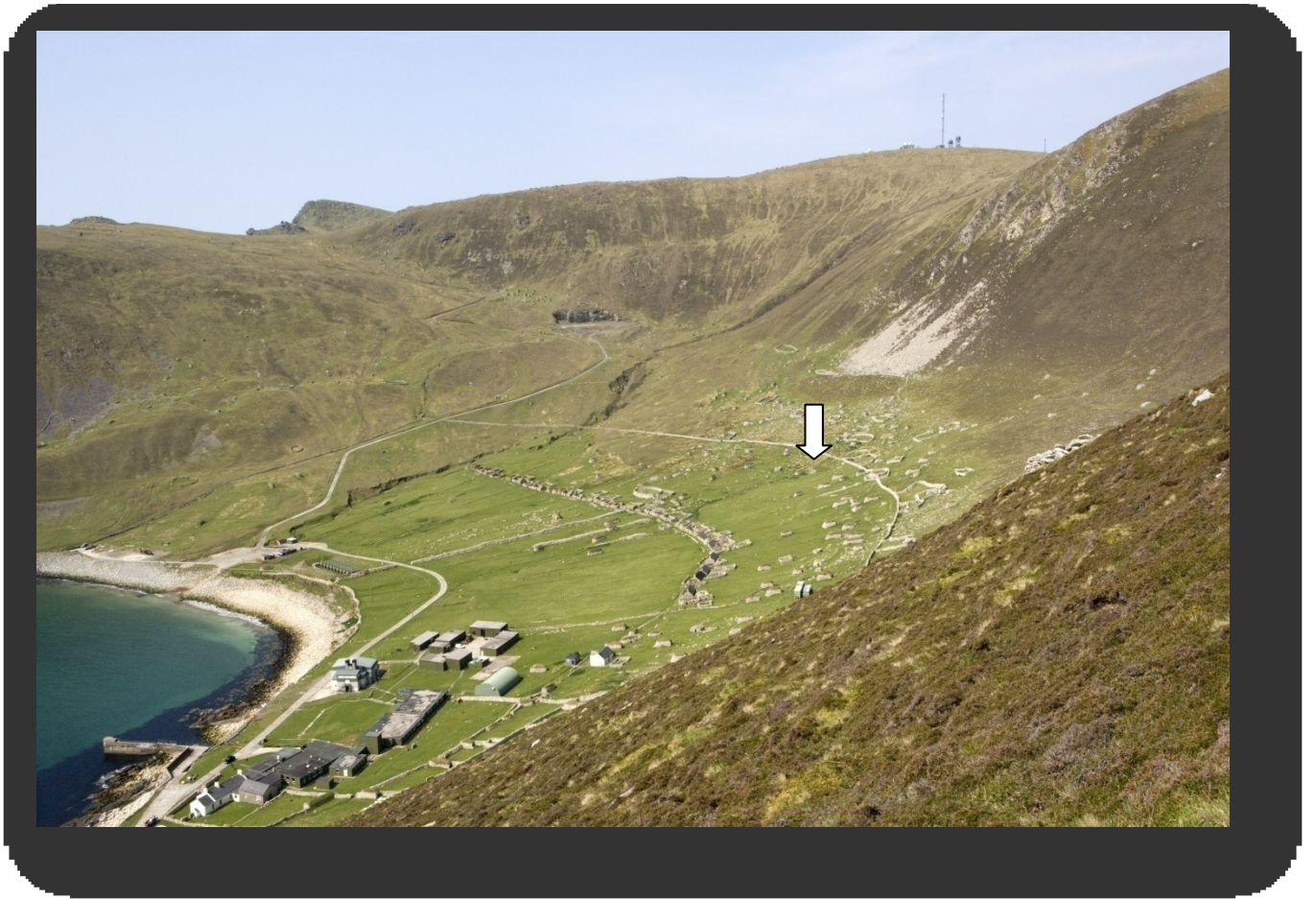


Figure 20 The setting of Calum Mor's House in Village Bay, taken from the E in 2008. DP044799 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)

## Actions

Some of the issues and vulnerabilities outlined in the previous section require rapid solutions, while others demand a more nuanced and incremental approach. The actions outlined below, when put into practice, should respect the guidance on principles set out by Historic Scotland in *The Conservation of Architectural Ancient Monuments* (2001), which is broadly reflective of international policy and thinking concerning appropriate invasive works. Some of the general principles are repeated here in a summarised form:

- Conservation should be aimed at the lowest level of intervention that is consistent with achieving the monument's stability
- All works of conservation should be as reversible as is consistent with ensuring the monument's continued stability
- All phases deserve respect and conservation
- Conserving monuments calls on highly specialised skills
- In general, it is less damaging and less expensive to carry out regular small-scale works
- All forms of restoration, as opposed to conservation, should be avoided

## Research

Calum Mor's House is not an isolated structure. Our understanding of the position and character of the settlements on Hirta prior to 1830 is currently limited and we know little about the medieval period and earlier. It is important that we have the courage and confidence, and this is what it comes down to, to undertake research. The questions we have to ask are interesting and important, the subject is fascinating, and we now have the expertise, the technical skills and the *raison d'être* – the pursuit of knowledge through the testing of ideas, and the improved management that will occur as a result.

It is not wise to advocate research on Calum Mor's House itself (it has unique historical associations, and we have little reason to believe that the below-ground deposits will be much more informative than in other buildings). Instead, we can look for answers to questions about the archaeology of the village through other buildings.

- a) Structures with attached cells
  - a. Undertake an excavation of one of the ruinous cells attached to a less significant structure in Village Bay – eg Cleit 142
- b) House platforms in Village Bay
  - a. Undertake excavation of one of the 'house platforms' originally identified by RCAHMS (1988) and interpreted by Fleming (2003; 2005, 132).

After the results of these excavations have been disseminated, we can consider, if necessary, a small programme of work in Calum Mor's House itself. This twofold process — evaluative excavation in a less significant structure followed by the informed interventions at more significant structures — could be rolled out as a sensible model for conservation.

## Turfing

There is a good argument for the active maintenance of the turf roof. We need to undertake small scale re-turfing of areas where there is daylight penetrating the building or where there is water penetration (notable in heavy rain). Turfs should be cut individually to fit, from similar vegetation types as close to the building as possible, as per the current agreement with HS. The edges of individual turfs should be chamfered, to minimise their impact. They should be laid early in the season in wet weather and, if there is very dry weather, they should be watered, and monitored weekly.



It would be beneficial to protect the building from year-round grazing, particularly but not exclusively after re-turfing works. This may be possible through short-term localised fencing, through the use of ultra-sonar deterrents, or through the re-establishment of the head dyke, although the last would require significant works across the Village Bay.

### *Drainage*

Firstly, we can try to accept that the drainage problem is not as bad as it seems, and it is difficult to address without digging new ditches. Repairing the roof will help, as will clearing out and deepening the new and old water courses that surround it. Longer vegetation would also make a difference, but this is an issue that would need to be addressed on a large scale, in communication with other interested parties. Excavation for the purposes of drainage cannot be justified.

### *Promotion*

Although often mentioned, Calum Mor's House does not receive a great deal of detailed attention. In part, this may be due to the ambiguous information with regard to its age, but it is time we were more confident in our assertion that it is certainly pre-Improvement and probably earlier, and certainly of great interest and significance. We can also assert the unusual character of the stone and turf roof, and draw attention to the rarity of the structure in Scotland. The questions over use can be made exciting rather than stultifying, as it is fascinating to think of it as a house, a bothy, or an early store.

A wide range of digital material is available for Calum Mor's House, particularly on the website of RCAHMS where a number of images have been added as part of this project (<http://www.rcahms.gov.uk/>), but also through websites open to the public such as flickr. An information sheet, published on the Trust's St Kilda website would be relatively cheap to produce, but could make an important contribution to awareness. Small articles in popular magazines should also be considered, and would be a natural adjunct to this project. Finally, an academic paper publishing a re-assessment of the evidence for earlier settlements in Village Bay would be an important contribution to the debate.

## Vision

The draft Management Plan for St Kilda includes a vision statement and a set of guiding principles for the coming thirty years, from which the vision concerning an individual monument should directly flow:

St Kilda is the most highly designated property in the care of the Trust and is one of only 27 mixed World Heritage Sites (WHS) in the world, making it of outstanding heritage significance.

The long term Vision is for St Kilda to continue as a site of outstanding heritage significance for its natural terrestrial and marine heritage and for its relict cultural landscape. This will be achieved through an integrated approach to conservation of all cultural and natural features; through sensitive public access and interpretation.

The archipelago should benefit from the highest conservation standards and from the fullest protection afforded by the designations in order to safeguard its features from potential threats. It will benefit from a collaborative approach by key stakeholders to achieve sympathetic, integrated management of all elements of the archipelago. The experience for both the virtual and actual visitor should be unrivalled, with St Kilda established as a model for conservation, environmental education and informed interpretation.

This Vision will be underpinned by a management structure and resources that will deliver integrated conservation advice and management; support on-site staffing needs; liaison with visitors, stakeholders and the local community and support a collaborative approach between the Trust, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Historic Scotland (HS), Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and its agents.

National Trust for Scotland 2010, 46

Although a vision that is inspiring is valuable, we should pause when setting forth our long term aims to accept the severe difficulties that the Trust, and the economy of much of the western world, have had, as well as the distinct possibility that the MoD will pull out of St Kilda within ten years, far less thirty.

The ultimate aim has to be that, in thirty years' time, Calum Mor's House will look almost exactly the same, perhaps benefiting from a reduced impact of the MoD base. The vegetation that covers it and surrounds it will be a little longer. Our understanding of the building will have improved, after a programme of archaeological works looking at the cells, foundations and platforms of the pre-Improvement village. Many more visitors to the internet and the island will become aware of this interesting building, and its place in St Kilda's story and the story of the Western Isles.

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## Appendix 1 Previous descriptions

### 1830-1900

The earliest historical sources do not mention Calum Mor's House individually and it is only in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that we begin to discover relevant material. Neil Mackenzie's notes from the 1830s are an important source of evidence, and one that has often been misinterpreted by subsequent authors. In an extract quoted here, he describes abandoned houses around the time he moved to St Kilda, in 1830<sup>10</sup>. Crucially, these are *not* houses that were occupied at that time (see Mackenzie 1911, 21; RCAHMS 1988, 44 for continued use of houses from this period):

Of their most ancient houses several still remain entire. They are circular or nearly so, and roughly built. The walls are six or seven feet thick, with spaces for beds left in them. These bed spaces are roofed with long slabs, and the entrance from the interior is about three feet by two feet. The walls are not arched, but contracted gradually by the overlapping of stones to nearly a point. The entrance door is about three feet by two and a half feet. The outside is covered with earth and rubbish and appears like a green hillock. In some places they are almost entirely underground. The furniture of these homes, so far as I can ascertain from tradition and what still remains, was, a quern; a hollow stone for a lamp called *clach shoilse*, which was filled with oil, and a cinder of peat was the wick; a vessel made of badly-burned clay called *cragan*, which was used for a pot; a water pitcher; a dish to drink out of; and a rope made of hide. The houses which they occupied when I came to the island were larger and more oval shaped.

Mackenzie 1911, 18-19

We should note here that although aspects of this description fit well with Calum Mor's House and other cellular buildings in the village, others do not: the walls of Calum Mor's House, where they can be measured, are less than half that thickness, and the adjoining cells are not now 'in the walls'. But one explanation for this apparent discrepancy sees the original multi-celled building covered by a larger turf/stone mound. In that case, the walls would appear thicker, and the bed spaces would appear to be 'in the wall'.

In Sands' *Out of This World; or, Life on St Kilda*, written after a visit in 1875, long after the majority of the bay area had been 'improved', he describes:

an old cellar said to have been built by one man in a single day. It is built of huge stones, some of them too ponderous to be lifted by any two men of these degenerate times. The people refer to this cellar as proof of the superior strength of their ancestors

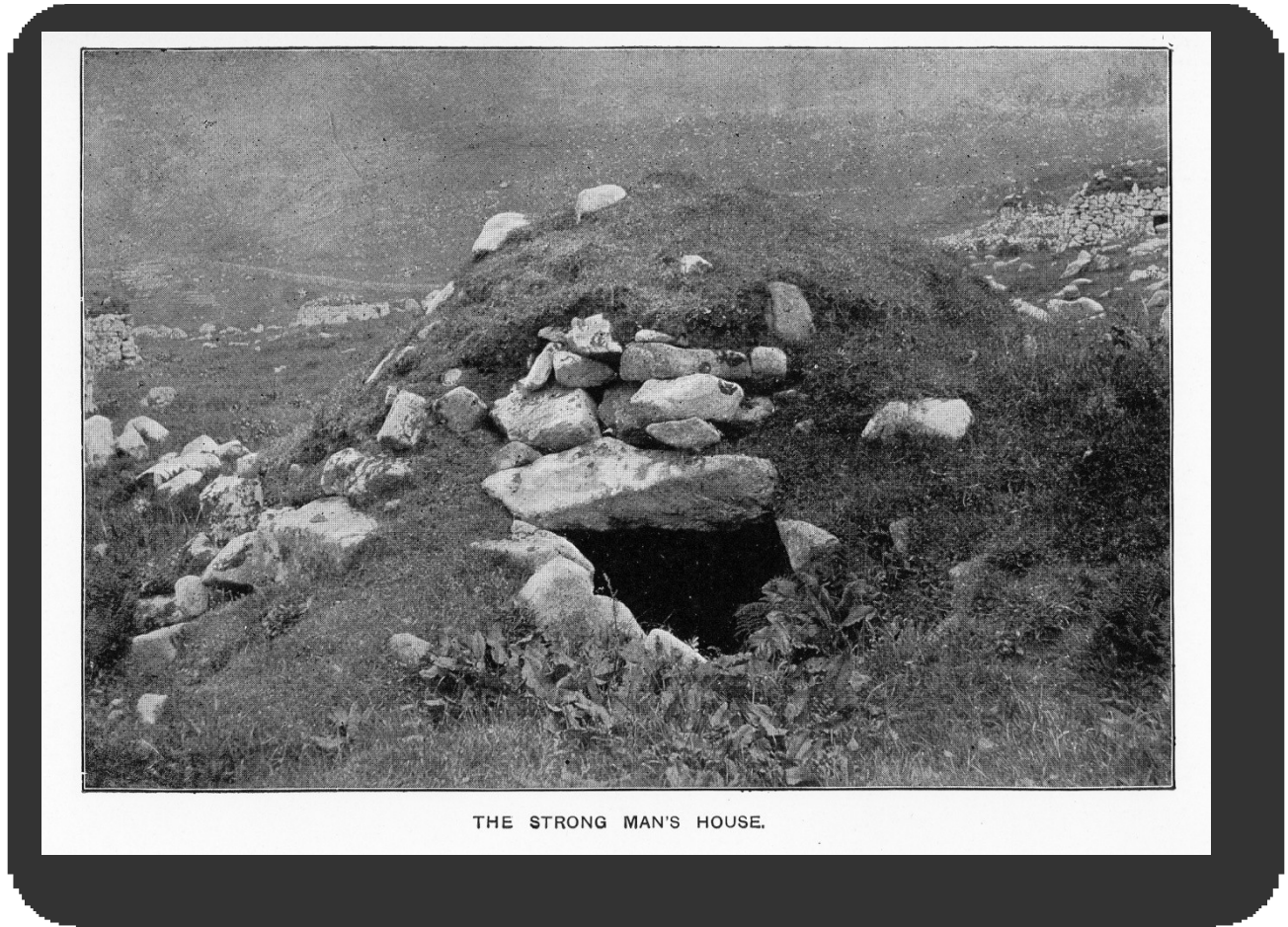
Sands 1876, 35

Calum Mor's House is also mentioned by Seton (1878, 308; 2000, 225-6), though his description owes its entirety to Sands, and it was not until twenty years later, in 1896, that Cherry Kearton took what is probably the earliest photograph, first published the following year, when visiting the island with his brother Richard.

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<sup>10</sup> SSPCK papers provide this accurate date (J Harden pers comm.)





*Figure 21 Kearton's photograph of Calum Mor's House, taken in June 1896 (Kearton 1899, 83).*

There is a long-running sense from the 19<sup>th</sup> century St Kildans that they perceived an earlier and stronger race in the island: Mackenzie (1911) makes much of this in his memoirs of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, describing how he had to demonstrate that it was tools and lateral thinking, rather than brute strength, that allowed the movement of larger stones. This separation of the contemporary community from structures of the past came not only from time but also from events such as the smallpox epidemic in 1727, which must have impacted heavily on folk memory.

### 1901-1956

The first paper to explicitly describe the archaeological monuments of the island was that by John Mathieson (1854-1945), who visited the island with geologist Alexander Murray Cockburn (d.1959), in 1927. Mathieson was a noted surveyor who spent five months in St Kilda in 1927 in order to produce the first accurate 6-inch map of the island, with an inset of the village at 25-inch to the mile (published by the Ordnance Survey). Taking time out from the measured survey and geological fieldwork, Mathieson produced a concise synthesis of archaeological information, illustrated by simple plans, as well as undertaking some excavation in the souterrain.

The next building in order of age in the village [after the souterrain] is *Calum Mor's* (Big Calum) house, standing 350 feet N of the graveyard and close to the small stream that issues from *Tobar Childa* (Kilda's Well). It is built on the beehive pattern and with huge blocks of stone, some of them weighing half a ton. Inside it measures 14 feet long by 7 feet broad and is half underground.

Mathieson 1928, 126

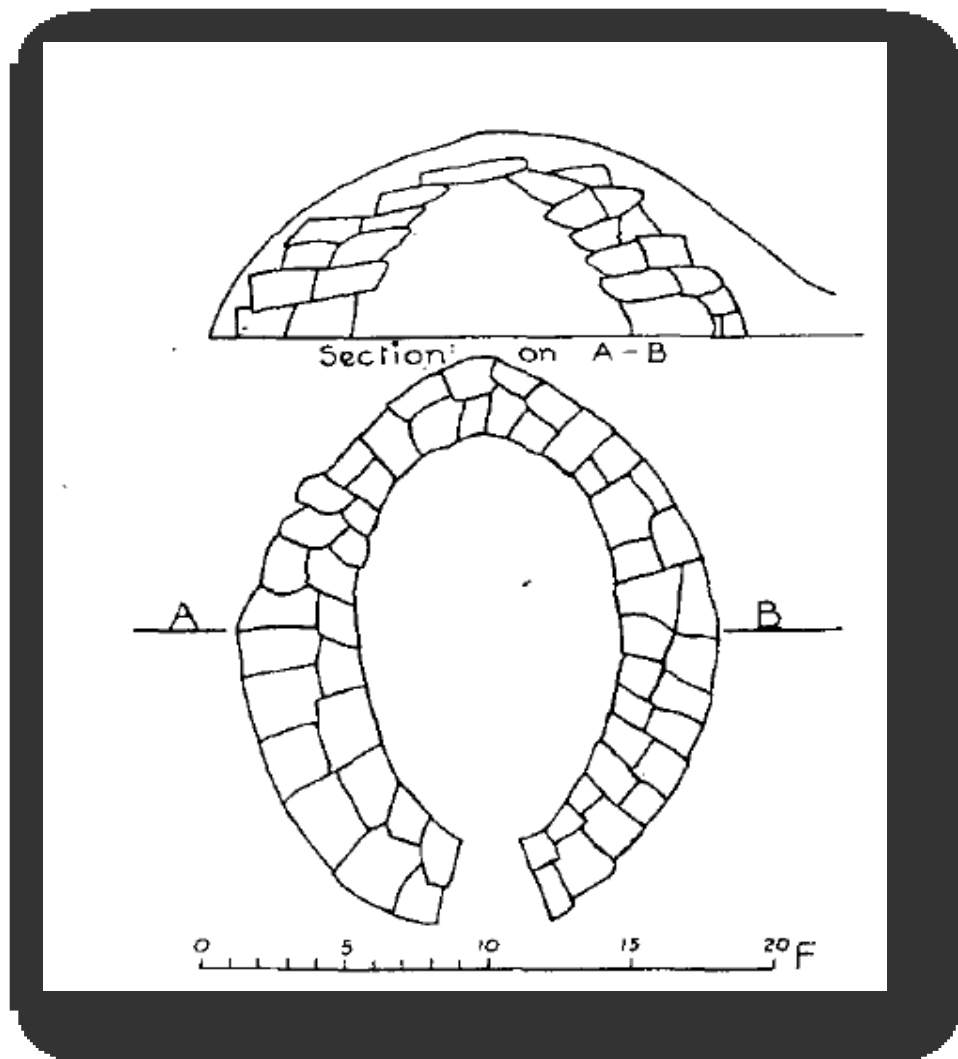


Figure 22 Mathieson's basic plan and section, published in 1928.



*Figure 23 Photograph taken from the E in 1927 (Mathieson 1928).*

Only a few years later, the famous writer and photographer Alisdair Alpin Macgregor (1899-1970) described the building in more poetic terms, and added some uncorroborated detail to the story surrounding it:

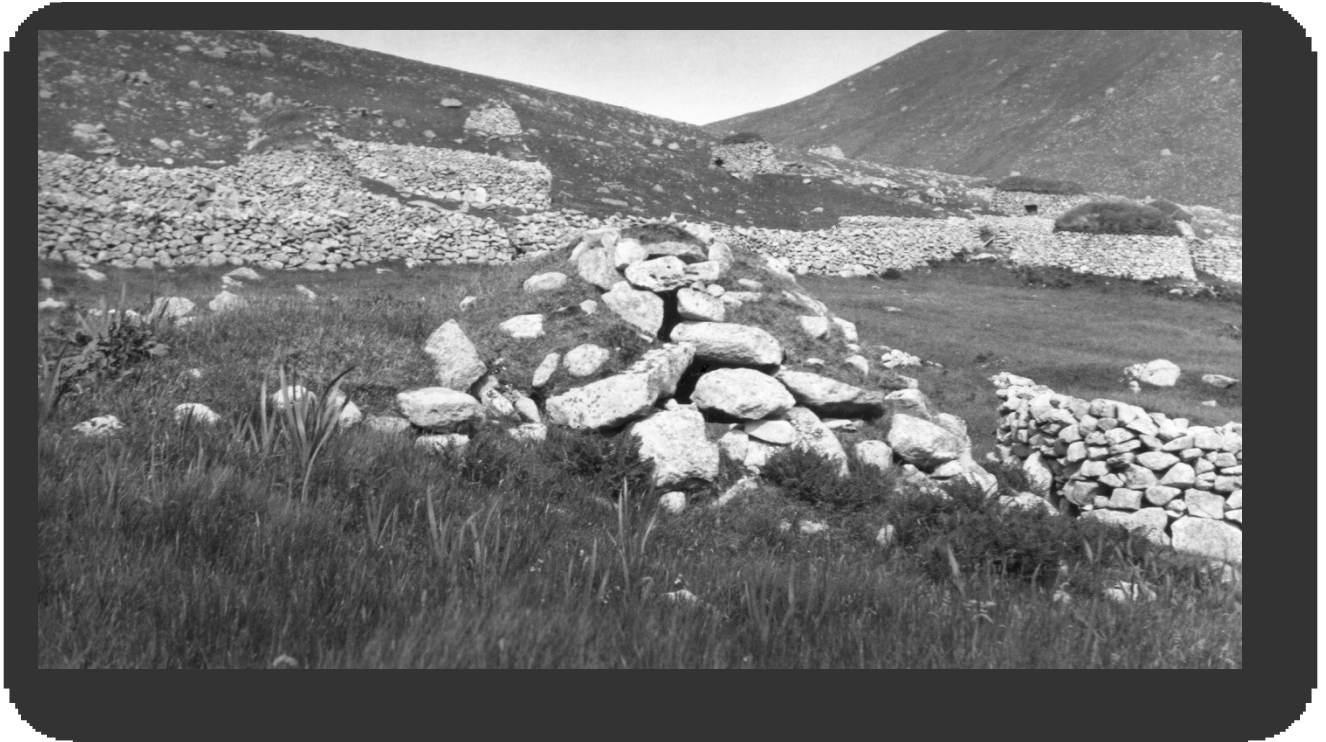
Among the iris plants behind the village, and situated close to the Faeries' 'Brugh', is the House of Calum mor, or Big Malcolm. Calum, a lame man, built this house in return for services of a friend who went to Boreray with a fowling expedition, and while there attended a 'rueing'<sup>11</sup> of his sheep. When the men of Hirta returned from Boreray, they discovered this semi-underground domicile complete with a turf covering, and ready for immediate occupation – all in a single day, they say!

MacGregor 1931, 198

A photograph by geologist Cockburn was published in the same volume, and it shows the W side of the exterior of the building in detail. As well as highlighting the length of the vegetation, the photograph shows numerous gaps in the masonry in this area, of which more below.

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<sup>11</sup> Plucking  
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*Figure 24 A M Cockburn's photograph, taken from the SW in August 1930.*

SC 1224325 © Macgregor, AA. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)

Robert Atkinson visited St Kilda in 1938, 1947, 1948 and 1953, and travelled widely in the Western and Northern Isles, leading to his highly regarded book 'Island Going', first published in 1949. His photographic collection includes a number of images of Calum Mor's House, although he did not produce a written description or analysis, and touches little on archaeology in his writing.



*Figure 25 Robert Atkinson's photograph of Calum Mor's House in 1953.*

*Print held at RCAHMS (H 85168 PO). © School of Scottish Studies (S1035)*



## 1957-1970

Although the Marquis of Bute had been in negotiations with Nicholson<sup>12</sup>, director of the Nature Conservancy, about NC plans to acquire the islands as a National Nature Reserve, a scheme for the Hebridean Guided Missile Range was also being mooted, with a reconnaissance undertaken in the summer of 1956 (Burrill 1958; Williamson and Boyd 1960, ii). The death of the Marquis that August, and his decision to leave the Trust the option to own St Kilda outright, brought on a flurry of events. The summer of 1957 witnessed a survey of the island by staff from Edinburgh University, D R Macgregor of the Geography department and Dr I Whitaker of the School of Scottish Studies. The results of this project were intended to be published in two papers, although only Macgregor's was eventually published in 1960. Although Dr Ian Whitaker is meant to have undertaken 'measured drawings of all the buildings within the village wall', these have never been published. This School of Scottish Studies project was financed by the Russell Trust 'on behalf of the National Trust for Scotland'.

Prior to this, an important decision was taken in the choice of the two men who would act in the interests of the Conservancy and, informally, the Trust: Kenneth Williamson (1914-77) and J Morton Boyd (1925-1988). Williamson was at that time director of the Fair Isle Bird Observatory, originally set up by George Waterston who had purchased Fair Isle in 1947. Waterston sold the island to the National Trust for Scotland in 1954, and among the Trustees of the Observatory was EM Nicholson of the NC, who persuaded Williamson to take up the challenge. Boyd, eleven years younger, had recently been employed as Hebrides Regional Officer for the NC. In his preface to their book of 1960, Nicholson described how the pair went on to conduct 'one of the most thorough surveys of a small oceanic island', again, in 1957 (Williamson and Boyd 1960, 12-3).

Given the backgrounds of Williamson and Boyd in ornithology and zoology, they succeeded in providing the first detailed and published descriptions and plans of many of the structures of the island, both in the village area, and in Gleann Mor, and Williamson clearly became fascinated by the origin of the 'village' and the enigmatic remains of Gleann Mór. In an unpublished report by Williamson on the 'Medieval Village at St Kilda', he noted that

'K' – the 'Calum Mor House' is the most ancient, and its general similarity with the mound-dwelling in Gleann Mor called the 'Amazon's House' is striking. It is constructed of larger stones than the Amazon's House, remarkably well corbelled considering their rough shape and immense size, and is almost oval in form and completely covered with turf on the northern side.

Williamson 1957, 3

In an attached list, he went into further detail:

This appears to be much the oldest of all the medieval houses, consisting of big stones magnificently corbelled to create an oval structure, the N side of which is still covered by the original mound. The internal dimensions are about 15' by 9'. Big lintels in the W and S-W cover passages which afforded access to beehive chambers: the foundations of the S-W one can be clearly made out, with internal dimensions of 8' by 6', and a wall-thickness approaching 3'. The highest part of the ceiling, which used cross-slabs as well as long lintels, is at 7'6", but across the middle a massive lintel brings the clearance down to 6' 3". The entry to the S-west chamber is 2' wide and passes under a huge 3' by 2' lintel now only a little above ground level. The W lintel is 1'6" off the ground level and covers a passage now blocked with stones. The S-E facing entrance is about 4' high and 2' wide. Mathieson (1928) gives a notice of this house, and Kearton (1899), p.83, an excellent photograph.

Williamson c1957, 9

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Max Nicholson (1904-2003), joint founder of World Wildlife Fund.

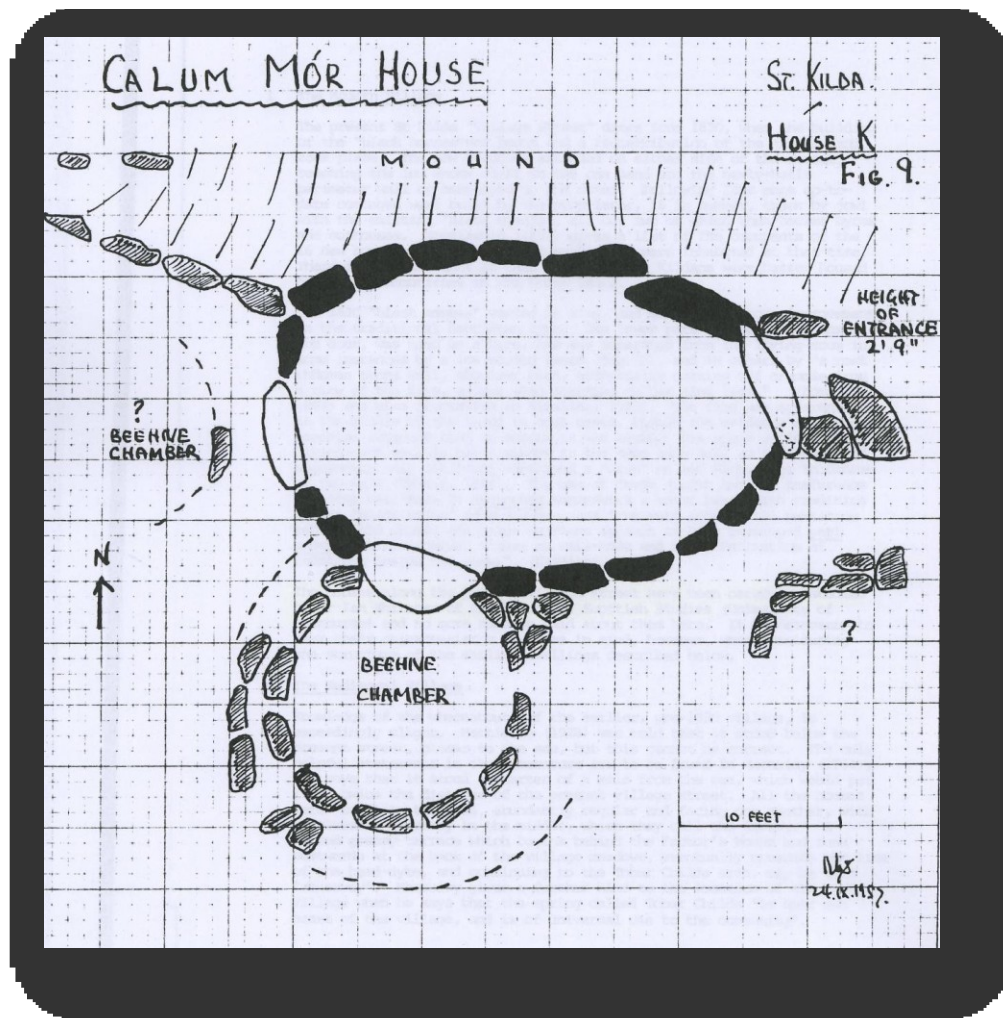


Figure 26 Plan attached to Williamson's report. Dated to 24 September 1957. © National Trust for Scotland.

Published version in Williamson and Boyd 1960, 59.

Williamson went on to publish his ideas on the medieval village in popular magazines (1958; 1960) and in more detailed books (Williamson and Boyd 1960; 1963). His analysis was the first to note the presence of adjacent cells attached to Calum Mor's House and the first to highlight the presence of both transverse as well as longitudinal roofing slabs. Although aspects of his analysis are now dated, many of his original arguments are still sound and his work is as important a contribution to the documentation of St Kilda as many writers, before or since.

In tandem to these research and monitoring projects, however, was an active policy of conservation works, undertaken by volunteers. In 1958, two Trust work parties (led by ornithologist George Waterston (1911-1980) and Trust Master of Works Alex Warwick) and one Joint Schools expedition (organised by a P Witherington) visited St Kilda in the summer. Some of Waterston's group assisted Professor O'Dell<sup>13</sup>, the acting NC Warden, in a small archaeological excavation in Gleann Mór (Trust Yearbook 1958), but there is no evidence of what excavations they undertook in Village Bay. Despite the implication in the Revised Nomination (Trust/Scottish Executive 2003, 27) that conservation work has always been undertaken with due regard to authenticity and integrity, much of the early work of the 1950s and 1960s was little better than the slow decay and occasional theft of the 1930s and

<sup>13</sup> Professor Andrew Charles O'Dell (1909-1966) was first Professor of Geography at Aberdeen University from 1951 until his death, and most well known in archaeological circles for excavations at St Ninian's Isle, Shetland (Antiquity 33, Obituary in Trans of Inst Brit Geog 42 (1967), 189-192).

1940s. A letter from Boyd to Warwick on 12 September 1958, referring to the results of the work parties, notes that 'one sees a very distinct improvement in the tidiness of the old houses and the amenity value of the picturesque bay is not unduly spoiled by the camp' (Trust Archive JD/1472/3).

Dr James A Mackay<sup>14</sup>, a renowned writer and philatelist, was stationed on St Kilda as Education Officer in 1959, during his national service. Later acting as commanding officer, Mackay was a member of the army contingent intermittently from 1959-61, recording his experiences in *Soldiering on St Kilda* (2002). In 1959 he produced a detailed report which includes some fascinating details not recorded anywhere else (Appendix 4). The report was forwarded to the NC by Colonel Cooper and W J Eggeling, the Conservation Officer, clearly admired the standard of Mackay's work (see Trust archive). Since he reported directly to his military superiors in the first instance, it is unclear why and for whom Mackay was acting, although his somewhat critical comments may have led to a moratorium on excavations by work parties for at least a short time.

Mackay describes that he:

Began a preliminary excavation of the entrance to the main building and have cleared the silt and rubble from it, exposing the first few steps and the first few feet of flooring inside. In the process of doing so, I have found several pieces of pottery in reddish clay, not unlike drainage piping but much rougher in texture, which are being forwarded to the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow for identification and dating<sup>15</sup>.

Mackay 1959

In addition, he noted that 'Mr Alan Aitken of the Trust party led by Mrs Irene Waterston (Mrs George Waterston) dug two holes in the middle of the floor in an attempt to determine the true nature of the floor, but in my opinion he has dug too deeply, since he dug out several paving stones and went to a depth of 2' 6" (!) without achieving anything beyond causing water to fill them in.'

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<sup>14</sup> Obituaries (Anon 2007; Holman 2007, Taylor 2007)

<sup>15</sup> In response to an email early in 2011, Dr Sally-Anne Coupar, Curator of Archaeology at the Hunterian, confirmed that they have no pottery from St Kilda in their collection, and suggested that it may have been returned after dating.

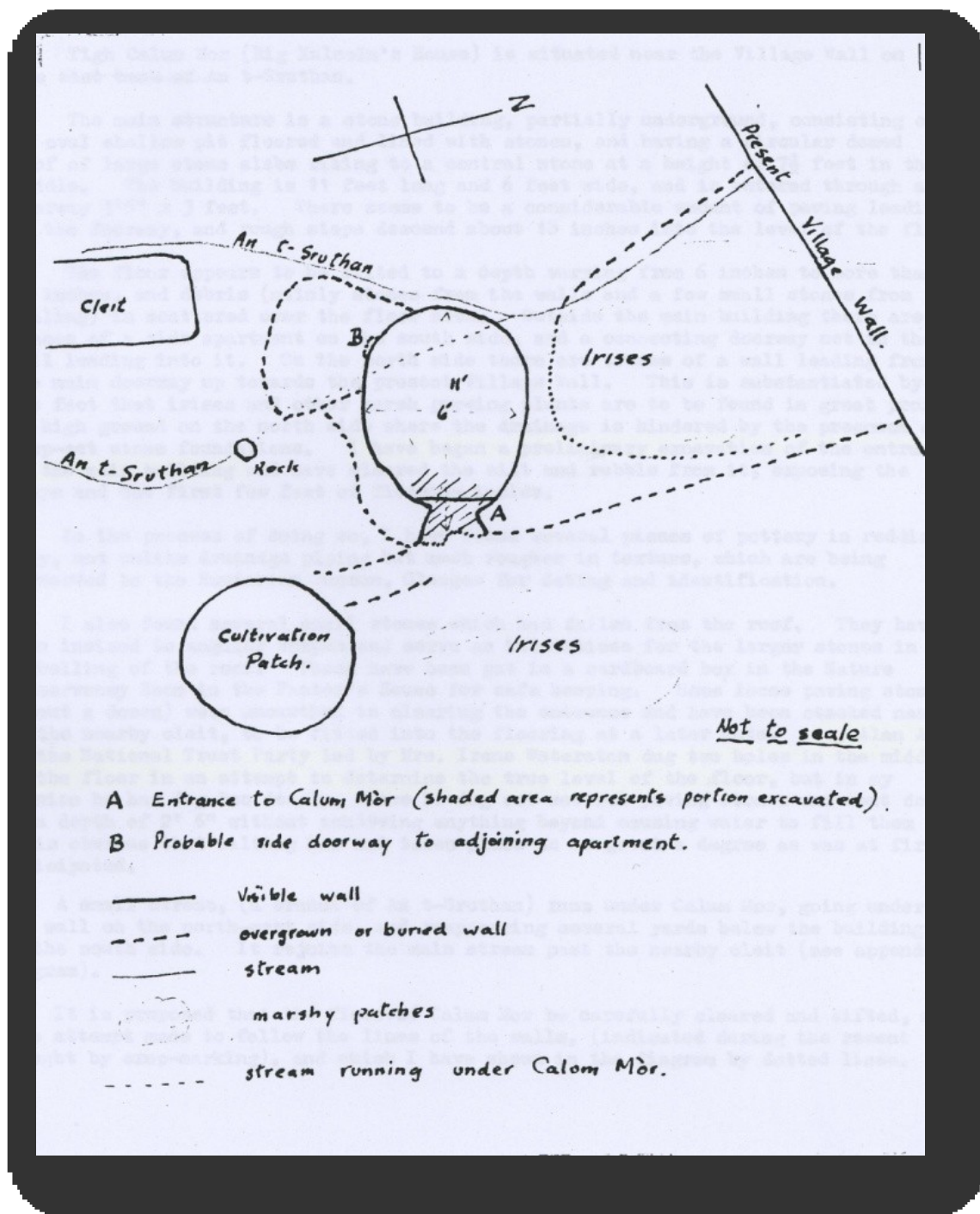


Figure 27 Mackay's plan of the building and its immediate environs, c1959. © National Trust for Scotland

Since 1958, the Trust has continued to provide the opportunity for working visits to the island by conservation volunteers. These work parties have undertaken an enormous amount over the years, including major restoration projects and small scale excavations, and it is highly unlikely that Calum Mor's House has escaped their attention. Unfortunately, the recording of this work was limited until the Trust employed a full time archaeologist in the early 1990s, and record photography only began on a strict basis at that stage.

In 1963, the monuments of Village Bay were first scheduled by Historic Scotland's predecessor and it is likely that this process involved additional site visits and recording, although neither J Raven nor S Watt of HS have uncovered any relevant material.



In April 1966, Beverly Roy Stallwood<sup>16</sup> wrote a summary account for the OS Archaeology Division, based on an assessment of Mathieson (1928) and Williamson and Boyd (1960):

Calum Mór House, built on a beehive pattern, is partially underground and according to Mathieson, is 14 x 7ft inside. Williamson considers it to be much the oldest of the medieval hovels of the old (17<sup>th</sup> c) village. It is constructed of large un-hewn blocks, remarkably well-corbelled given their rough form and immense size. It consists of a large oval room with passages at ground level, leading to what appear to have been beehive chambers (doubtless 'bedrooms') on the W and S sides.

OS 495 card

Following this, in 1967, the Ordnance Survey's Archaeology Division reached St Kilda, and J L Davidson made small scale plans, took photographs and added notes to many of the well known archaeological sites, as well as adding quite a number of new sites. The Davidson manuscript referred to by Cottam (1979) and others is probably simply the draft of his site descriptions, and these are now visible both on the original OS 495 cards and in Canmore.

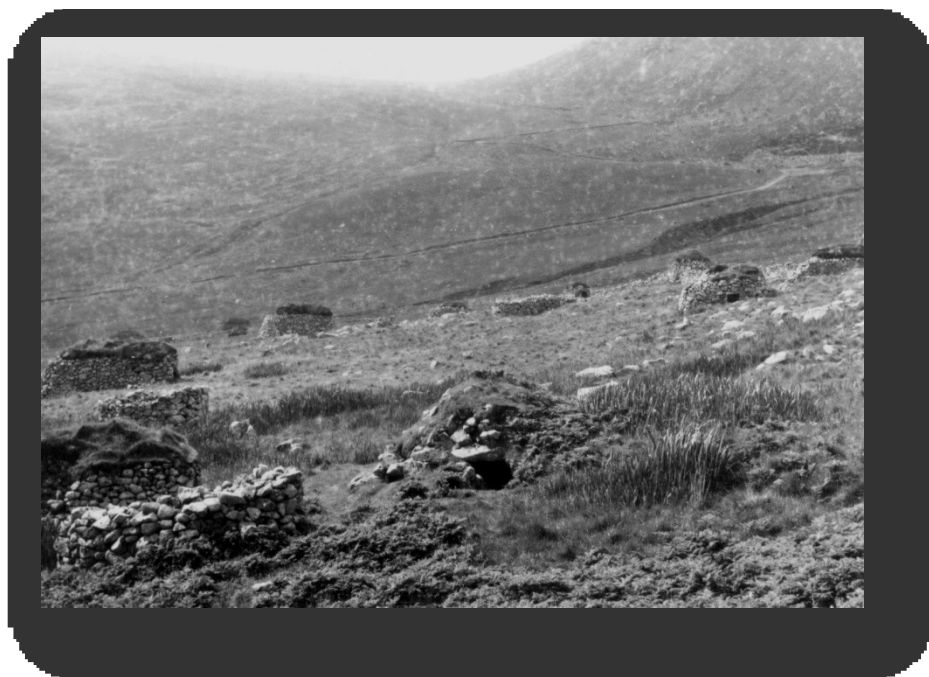


Figure 28 Attached to one of the OS 495 record cards for Calum Mor's House, this photo was taken by J L Davidson of the OS Archaeology Division in August 1967.

SC 1225648 © RCAHMS (Ordnance Survey Collection). Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)

### **1970 to present**

During 1973 and 1974, Michael Barry Cottam<sup>17</sup>, a graduate of St Andrews, undertook five weeks of survey over two years (1973; 1974). Cottam, then a geographer at Dundee University undertook a comprehensive survey of the 'boat shaped settings' of Village Bay and the gathering folds and cells of Gleann Mór. His report in July 1973 included a description of conservation work undertaken at Calum Mor's House in response to flooding and the possibility of collapse. This work, probably undertaken by a work party monitored by Cottam, included:

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<sup>16</sup> The identity of the B.R.S. noted on the OS 495 card was confirmed by Ian Fleming, formerly of the OS Archaeology Division, with the help of P McKeague (RCAHMS).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Barry Cottam, M.A. (HONS.) (St. Andrews) was elected FSA in 1968, resigning his fellowship in 1977-8. He appears to have joined the Geography Department at Dundee in 1971, and was still there in 1981. Further information on the context of this study is likely to be held in the Trust archive.



- Repairs to the external W wall
- Redirecting the stream to the NW
- Cleaning up the interior
- Removal of stagnant water and mud
- Flooring the interior with rubble and small stone
- Plugging all remaining gaps in the wall
- Re-turfing the whole of the exterior

The report (see Appendix 2) includes before and after photographs, and it is clear from a comparison of the second of Cottam's photographs that little had changed in the W elevation since Cockburn's shot of 1927. An image taken in 1976 by Anna Hanlon captures the building a few years later, and is held at the Royal Scottish Geographical Society<sup>18</sup>.

The synthesis of Cottam's work, published in 1979, reiterated his thesis of development which identified Chysauster as the most likely comparator for the structures in Gleann Mor. This paragraph sums up some of his conclusions about architectural development,

The medieval hovels, consisting of a corbelled chamber with one or more beehive cells attached, are clearly reminiscent of the chambered mounds of Gleann Mor. The Calum Mór House, for example, might well be regarded as a degenerate form of chambered mound. More effort seems to have been put into cleits than dwellings during the latter part of the medieval period. Thus it would seem that the vernacular architecture of St Kilda probably reached its zenith during the early medieval period, now illustrated by the Gleann Mór settlement, and the Amazon's House in particular. From that time, it degenerated progressively being retained longest in the construction of cleits, but even there, by the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the art of corbelling had been virtually lost.

Cottam 1979, 61

Mary Harman's fieldwork, which began in 1977, included a comprehensive survey of the many of the buildings of the island and, after teaming up with RCAHMS in the mid 1980s, she went on to plan the majority of more complex structures on the island using a plane table and alidade. Her comprehensive volume *An Isle Called Hirta* presents a synthesis of her own archaeological fieldwork and historical research, illustrated with measured plans, which include Calum Mor's House..

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.rsgs.org/cgi\\_bin/ifa\\_item1.pl?item=35462](http://www.rsgs.org/cgi_bin/ifa_item1.pl?item=35462)

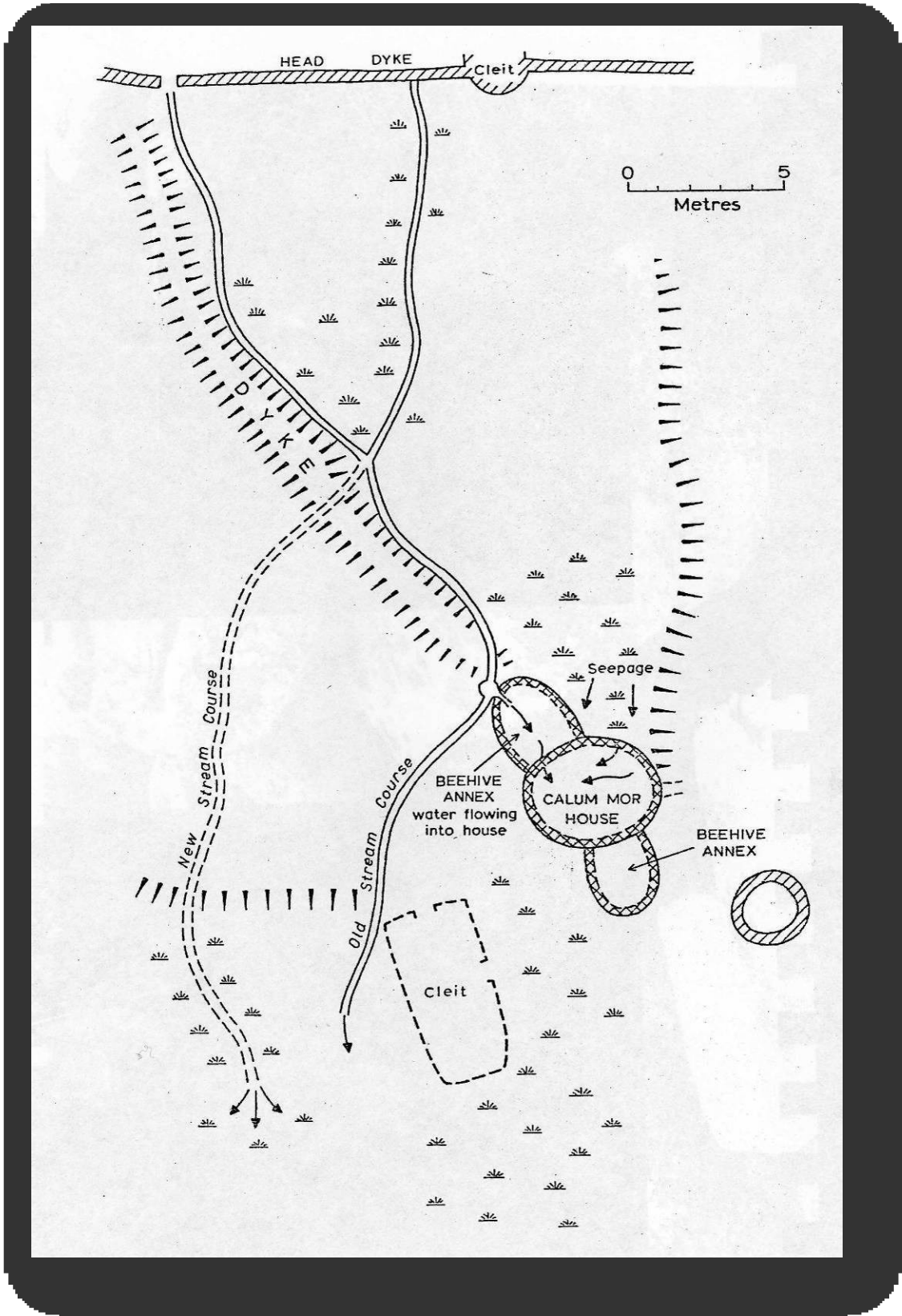


Figure 29 Plan of drainage works undertaken (Cottam 1973, Fig 1).

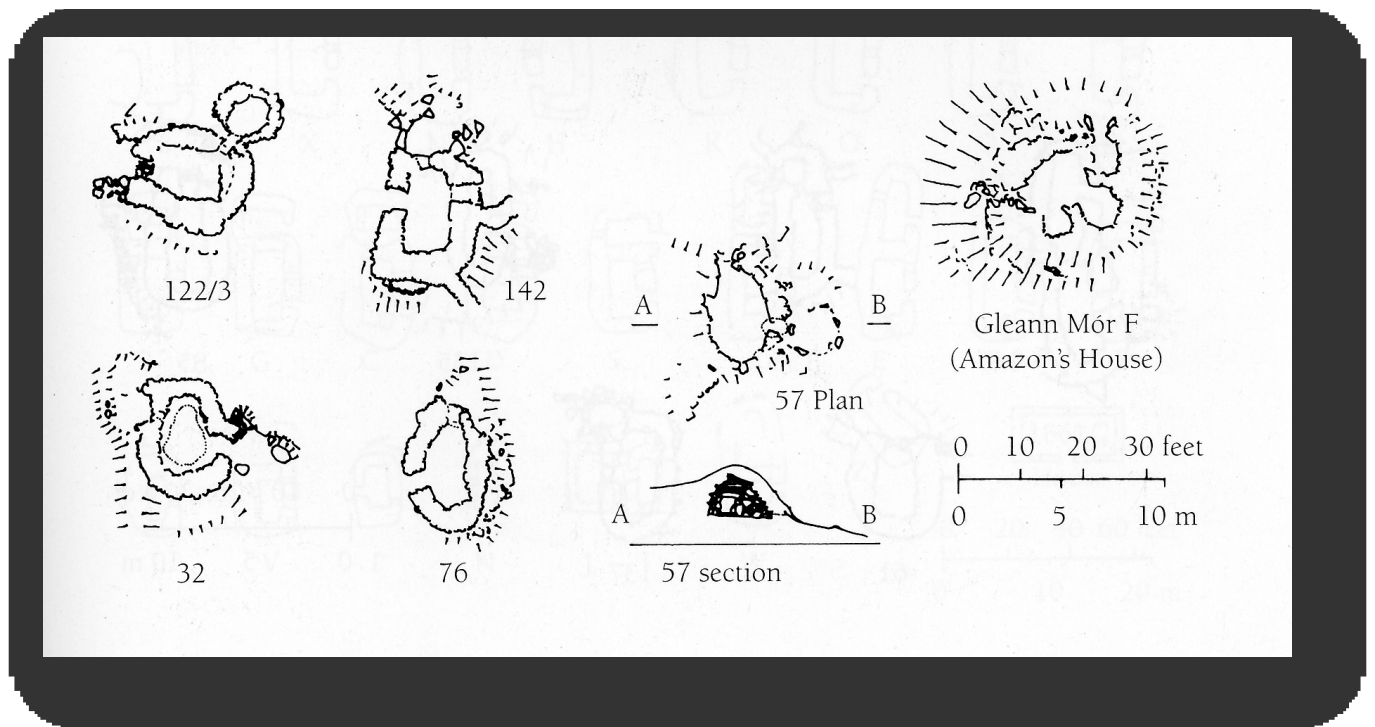


Figure 30 Mary Harman's plans of Calum Mor's House (57) and comparative buildings.

The Commission's survey of the Western Isles, published in 1928, included only a brief mention of St Kilda, in the form of a communication from Captain Patrick Grant. Although they had managed to visit islands as far away as North Rona in 1924, it was probably the weather and logistics that defeated them. The inclusion of St Kilda on the World Heritage List in 1986 provided a stimulus to 'pay tribute to the considerable importance and interest of St Kilda' (RCAHMS 1988, vii). The project involved an unusual team up of Commission staff with Mary Harman, whose experience of field survey on the island was unsurpassed and, although following many of the conventions established at RCAHMS, the volume also included some of her findings. This survey remains the most authoritative, clear and well-illustrated publication describing the archaeological and architectural monuments, and the section repeated here is both accurate and succinct, but for the historical notes.

Externally, the building appears as a turf-covered mound with an eroded crown 0.91m above ground level on the N and 2.75m on the S. The entrance, which faces E, has two steps (about 0.61m) down from the exterior, and to the S of it there is a short arc of walling of unknown purpose.

Internally, the building measures 4.57m from E to W by 2.85m transversely. The walls are corbelled in a continuous curve, the inner faces of some of the largest stones measuring as much as 1.22m by 0.41m. At the crown of the roof a single stone has a clear span of 0.91m, and nearer the doorway a lower slab spans 1.12m. Above a floor of rough boulders, some of which are known to have been introduced in 1974, the maximum height is 2.08m.

On the inner face of the S sector there is a blocked low-level and lintelled aperture 0.31m high and 0.41m wide. Externally, the ground drops by about 0.53m to the 'floor' of a turf-covered sub-circular foundation enclosing an area roughly 2.13m by 1.88m. Inside, a little further W, there is a blocked aperture 0.56m high and 0.51m wide. The lintel is visible externally, but there is no surviving evidence of an original cell.

The Reverend Neil Mackenzie stated that only one of the earlier houses, occupied by a widow, was left when the village was rebuilt in the 1830s. Since this structure lies within the area probably covered by the older village, it is

possible that it is the house in question, although the house-types in use immediately before the Mackenzie rebuilding were thatched, not stone-roofed.

Calum Mor's House was not referred to by that name before the 1860s, even by writers with an interest in antiquities.

RCAHMS 1988, 44

Two notes must be made with respect to this description: first, Mackenzie is clear that the houses occupied on his arrival, and before the rebuilding of the village, were thatched. He is equally clear that the abandoned houses of his period (c1830) were stone-roofed, and it is therefore not reasonable to suggest that this building may be the one 'occupied by a widow'. Secondly, the earliest reference to the building is probably that of Sands in the 1870s, and it is not referred to by name until many years later.

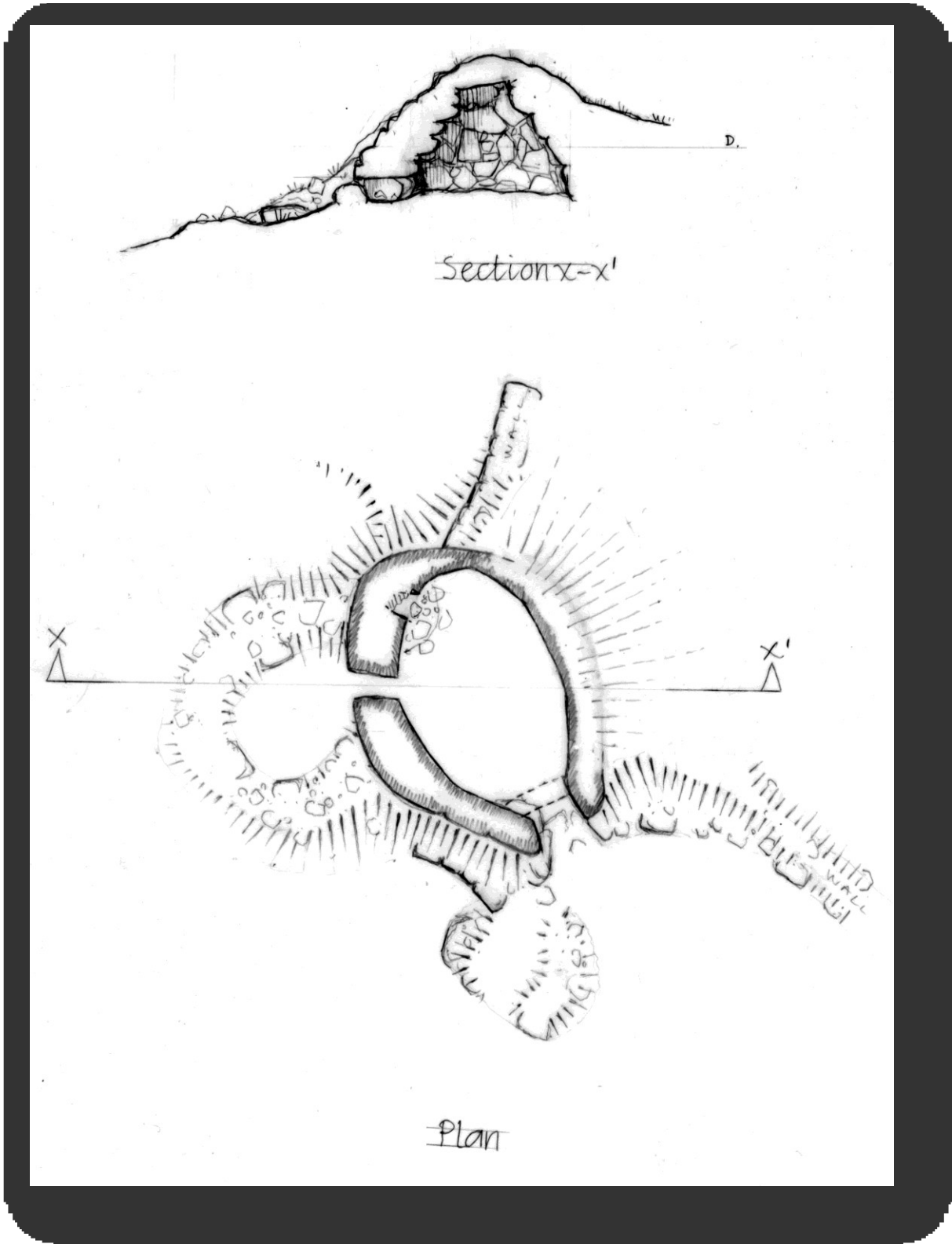


Figure 31 RCAHMS field survey plan of Calum Mor's House in pencil. DC 10836 © RCAHMS (scan not catalogued).



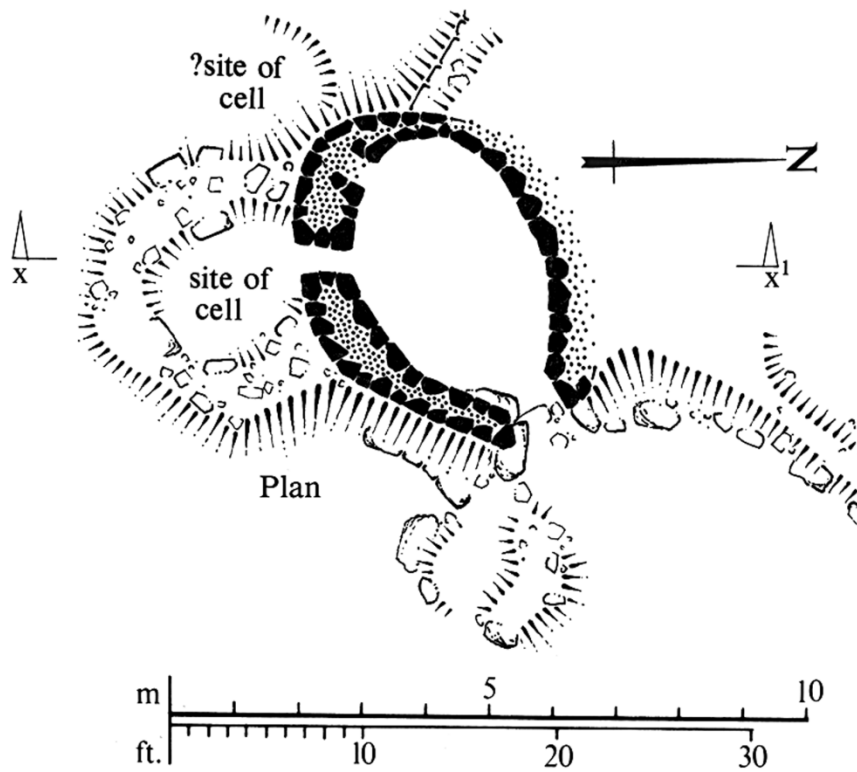
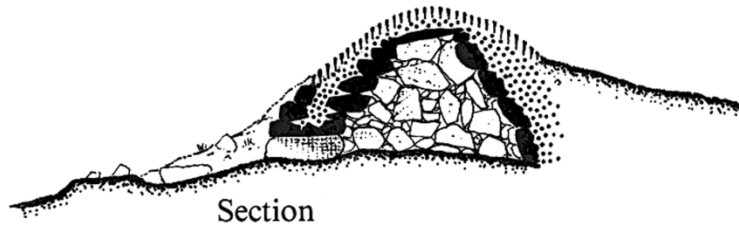


Figure 32 Inked plan of Calum Mor's House, March 1986. SC 416665 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)

As an interesting indicator of public perception, we can look at one typical account chosen from the many popular books of the 1990s, written by an author who had published some very detailed ethnographic studies of St Kilda in the 1980s (Quine 1982; 1988).

Calum Mor's House may date back to around AD600. It is oval in shape, and measures 4 x 3m and over 2m in height. The immense size of the stones has led to the story that it was built by a strong man, Big Calum, who had not been permitted to go to Boreray with the fowlers. To demonstrate his frustration and strength he used massive stone to build his house in one day.

Quine 1995, 55

This description, despite the erroneous date, may be more representative of the popular understanding than the more nuanced descriptions in the revised Nomination and the Draft Management Plan:

All but one of the pre-Improvement houses are said to have been removed when the village was re-planned in the 1830s, but a few other traces may also survive within cleitean. Calum Mor's House – a 'beehive' type structure but with external turf insulation giving a mound like appearance – may well be the sole survivor

Trust and Scottish Executive 2003, 77-78

Of the 'medieval' or later houses, only one, Calum Mor's House — a 'beehive' type structure but with external turf insulation giving a mound-like appearance — is thought to have survived, the others being largely removed when the village was rebuilt in the 1830s. A few remnants of other medieval houses may have been incorporated within the later cleits, as indicated by their size, profile and the existence of additional cells. The poor survival of medieval structures is no doubt due to the re-use of stones for dyke and cleit building, but also, as Mackenzie (1911, 20-21) records, when new houses were built, old ones were usually removed. Outlying areas of cultivation and enclosure of this period can be found at Ruabhal, while some structures at Gleann Mor may have been re-used and new ones built as shielings.

Trust 2010, 134-5

### *Lasert scanning*

During the summer of 2007, Calum Mor's House was laser-scanned by staff from the University of Birmingham. The data has been processed as a short fly through movie, and as a series of views taken from each survey station, which can be explored through a web browser.

The dataset provides the most accurate and 'objective' survey of the building to date, and, through further processing, it would be possible for a specialist to produce very accurate plans, stone by stone elevations, roof plans, and a number of section views. As long as the accuracy of the survey can be verified (ie the relative accuracy between different survey stations), there should be no need to re-survey the building.

## Appendix 2 Comparative sites and recent surveys

### *Introduction*

Recent syntheses of the archaeology of the Western Isles make it clear that despite a long history of excavation and survey, we are still relatively unsure about the nature of secular settlement through much of prehistory, and into the medieval period (Armit 1996, Harding 2004). Particularly when looking at the less well off in society, we struggle to find coherent patterns of settlement in both the Iron Age, and in the Medieval, and many of our models are based on a handful of excavated examples. Nevertheless, the individual hut (or hut circle) has long precedents, with Hebridean examples from the Bronze Age that include some that are quite small, comparable in size to Calum Mor's House (Armit 1996, 104). But if we look for examples of 'cellular' buildings, where the hut has other cells attached, we find the earliest in the first millennium AD — the Pictish cellular building being a well-known concept to students of Scottish archaeology (Armit 1996, 168) — with examples evolving from more elaborate buildings that differentiate between central and peripheral spaces, such as brochs, wheelhouses and other complex roundhouses.

There are, of course, many ecclesiastical examples of single and multi celled corbelled buildings, in Ireland, Scotland and further afield, but it is perhaps better to see the evolution of domestic and ritual buildings as parallel, rather than directly connected. Certainly the examples of early historic monastic corbelled structures in Scotland, including those at the Eileach an Naoimh on the Garvellachs ([NM60NW 1](#)) and North Rona ([HW83SW 1](#)), are built in a different and more accomplished style. Across the Irish Sea, Champneys, writing about Irish ecclesiastical antiquities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century noted the profusion of beehive structures in Ireland, near Fahan and Dunbeg in particular (1910, 10-11; see also Henry 1957), although a detailed comparison with Irish examples is out-with the scope of this paper. Many early writers confused the 'beehive' cells of monastic origin with the corbelled huts associated with secular activities, particularly shieling, but we can be clear about the distinction despite the use of the technique of corbelling.

A rather different opportunity for comparisons lies in the architectural traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Western Isles. These have often been avoided in modern archaeological literature, mainly due to a fear of being overly deterministic or simplistic in modelling change, and also to avoid the unfortunate pejorative tone of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century academics (see Curwen 1938 for example). Another reason though, is that the study of folklore, folk tradition and 19<sup>th</sup> century history and archaeology lies at the cusp of many disciplines, somewhere that the polymaths of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Captain Thomas, were happier to go than the 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> century specialists.

Crucially, it is this later architectural tradition, most common in the surviving shielings of Lewis and Harris that offers the best comparisons for many St Kildan structures. Shielings, and particularly those that are stone-roofed, buck the dominant trend around the end of the first millennium AD which sees a move to rectangular buildings, rather than circular, and it appears that they were being constructed and used from at least the medieval period (and probably earlier) until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A summary of this section is found in the main body of this report at page 24. The following text includes examples from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and an indication of the results of some of the larger fieldwork projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Early 'beehive' study and the post-medieval hut as a comparison*

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a flurry of interest in 'beehive cells' in Scotland, one that has not been repeated in the 150 years since. The ecclesiologist T S Muir visited St Kilda in 1858 and, after corresponding with F W L Thomas in 1860, he published a description. That same year, Thomas presented a paper to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland where he explored the 'beehive-houses' of Lewis and Harris, noting that these summer abodes would be familiar to the 'student of Irish antiquities', but could still be found roofed and in use as summer shelters. He notes that 'from all I can learn these dwellings only now exist in St Kilda, Borrera (Borera, St Kilda), the Flannan Isles, the parish of Uig in Lewis, and a few in Harris' (Thomas 1860, 135; Muir and Thomas 1860, 227).

Some of Thomas's published examples are striking in their similarity to Calum Mor's House (Figure 33Figure 34Figure 36), and the undergraduate work undertaken in 1995 by Elspeth Logan has helped to track down the location of many of these buildings, providing a modern record<sup>19</sup> (Figs Figure 35, Figure 37).



Figure 33 'Both' at Larach Tigh Dhubhastail c1859

© Gaidheil Alba / National Museums of Scotland. Licensor [www.scran.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk)

<sup>19</sup> A manuscript of notes and plans, and a collection of photographs, is held at RCAHMS (MS 6286).

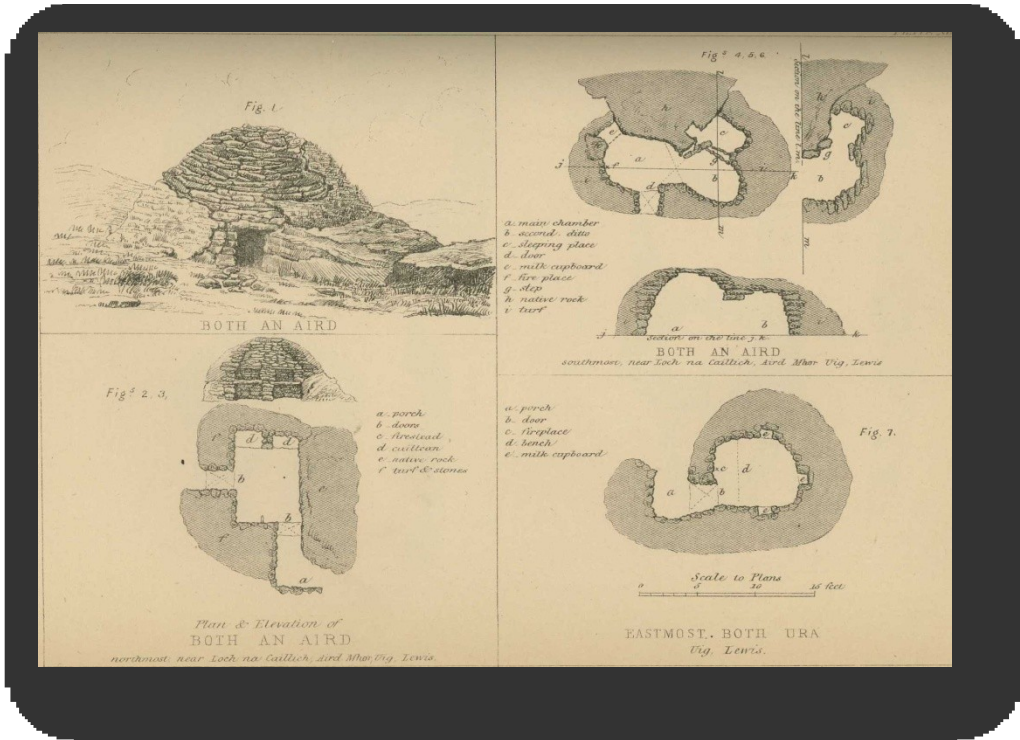


Figure 34 Sketches and plans of shielings, at Both an Aird [NB01NE 13](#) (Thomas 1860, plate xiii).

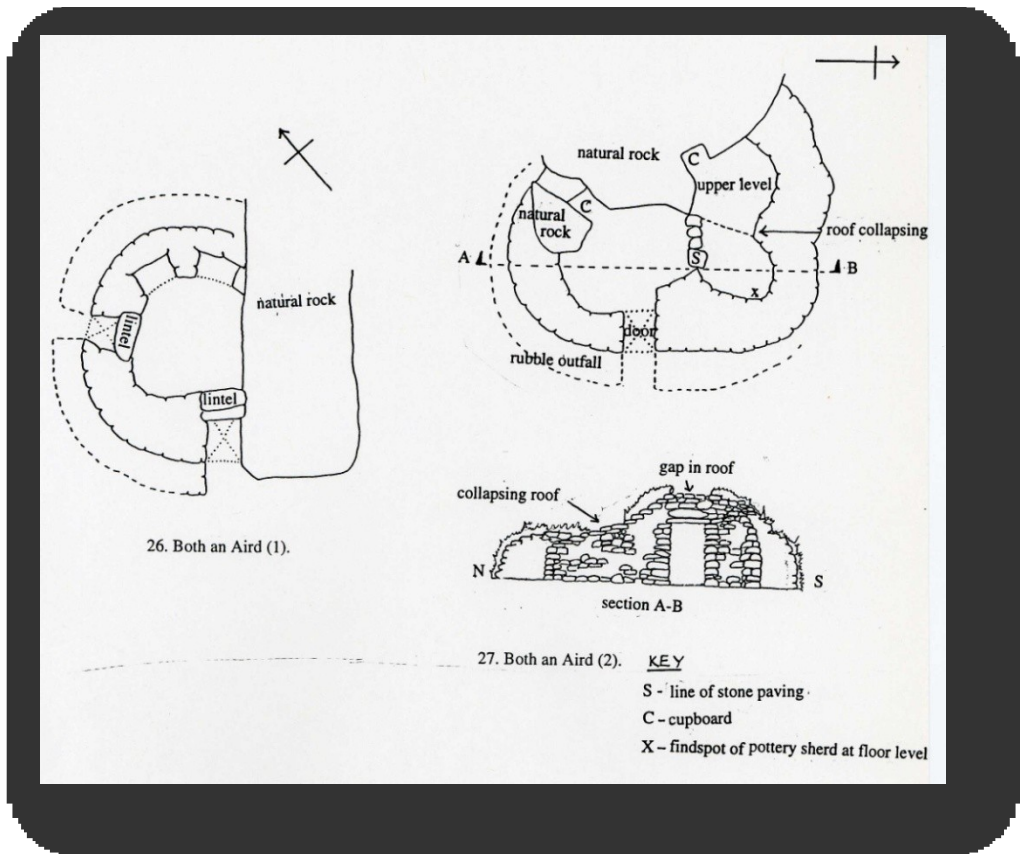
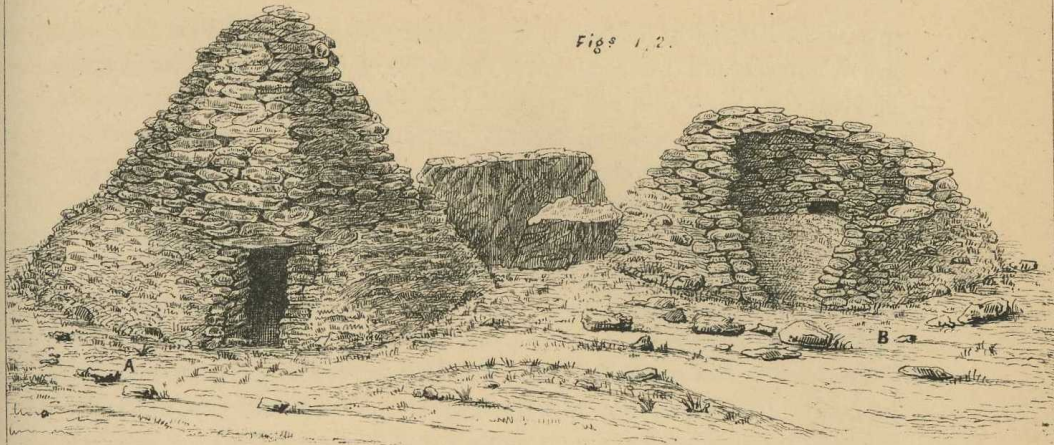


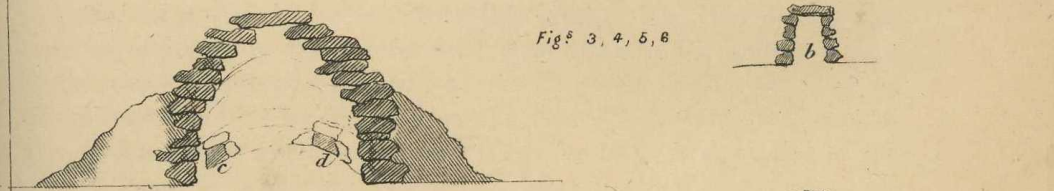
Figure 35 Logan's survey drawings of shielings at Both an Aird, Lewis. RCAHMS MS 6286 © E J Logan



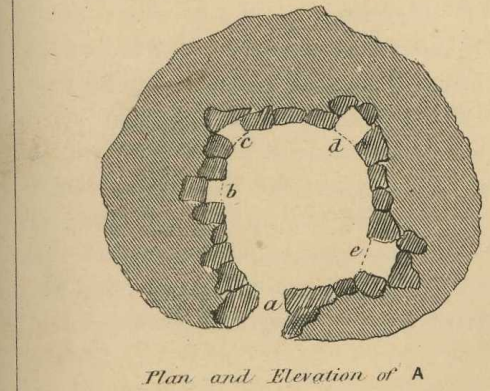
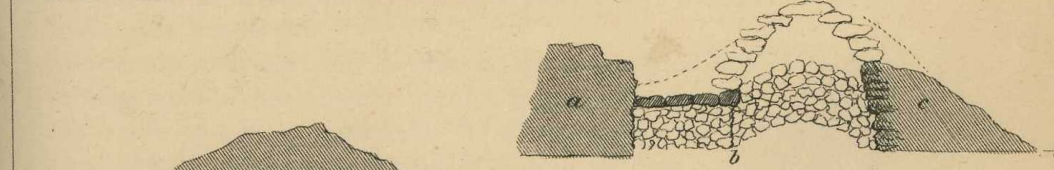


Figs 1, 2.

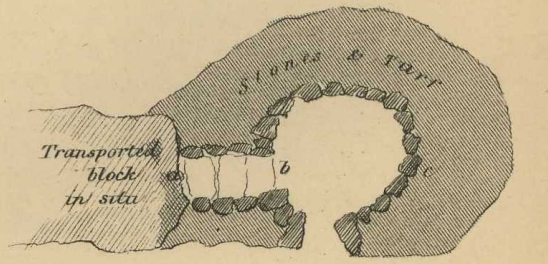
BEEHIVE-HOUSES (BOTHAN) MEAHBAG, FOREST OF HARRIS



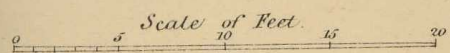
Figs 3, 4, 5, 6



Plan and Elevation of A



Plan and Elevation of B



W. & A. E. Johnston, Edinburgh

Figure 36 Shieling huts at 'Meahbag' Harris, probably [NB10NW 1](#) (Thomas 1860, Plate X).



*Figure 37 Logan's photograph of a shieling hut at Fidigidh Eachdrach. H 98708 PO © Elspeth J Logan.*



*Figure 38 Shieling huts in Uig, Lewis © Scottish Life Archive. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk*





Figure 39 A 2010 photograph at 'Morsgail' shielings [NB11NW 1](#) © [David Dimmock](#).

In 1904 W Mackay Mackenzie, Secretary of RCAHMS (1913-35), published a detailed paper on 'beehive houses' and other archaic structures found in Lewis. Though many are now difficult to locate, his examples were found N of Loch Langabhat and NE of Loch Reisor, and some of the place names he uses are recognisable – Tom Ni Bharabhais, Coltraiseal Mor, Loch a'Sguair etc. A few sites can be equated with Canmore records, at [Airigh a'Sguir](#); [Gearraidh Coiregerod](#)<sup>20</sup>; [Cnoc Dubh](#)<sup>21</sup>. The latter was noted by Thomas in 1860 and again by Mackenzie in 1904. Now restored, a photograph of 1937 shows it in a dilapidated state (Scran 000-000-602-061-C). Another scheduled shieling site, [Both A'Chlair Bhig](#), is located over 8km from the road at Aird a'Mhulaidh. Although none of the structures are roofed, they are described as beehive cells.

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<sup>20</sup> Loch Coire Geurad, shielings at Gearraidh Coire Geurad

<sup>21</sup> Gearraidh h-Aibhne = Thomas's Cnoc Dubh, Ceann Thulabhig

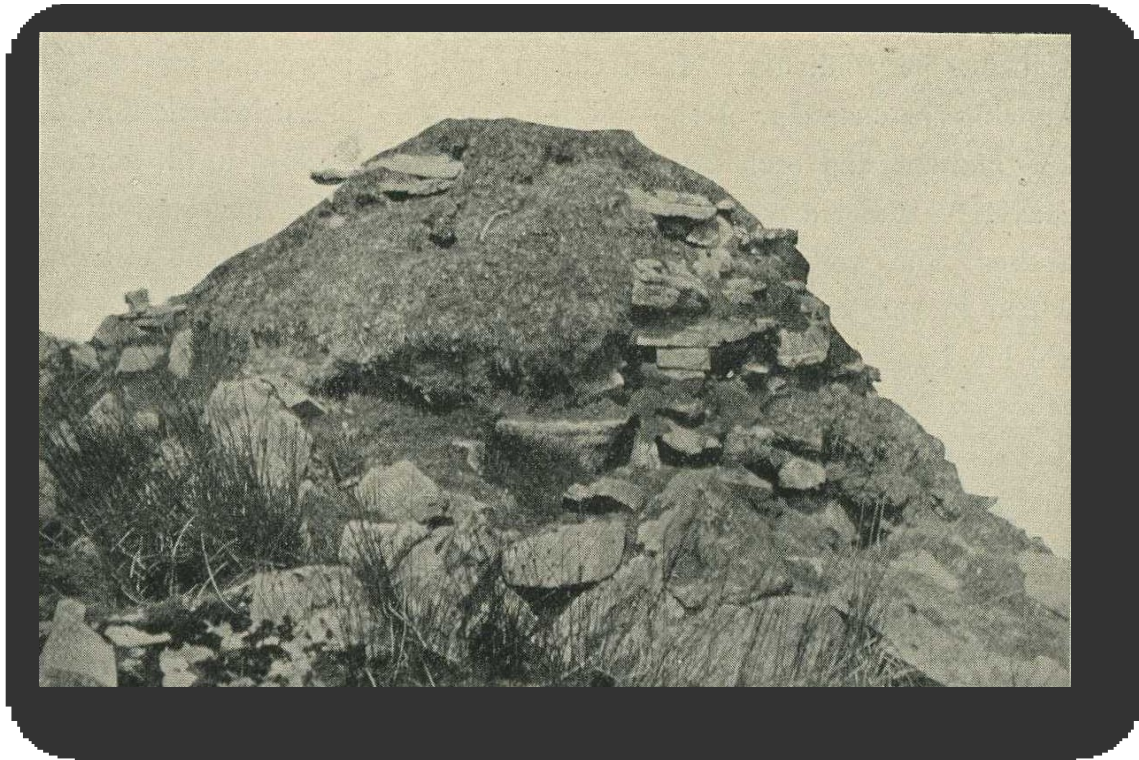


Figure 40 First noted on the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map of 1854 (Ross-shire (Lewis), Sheet 30), but described in detail by W M Mackenzie in 1904, this shieling hut at Airigh a'Sguir is probably still roofed, and was scheduled by Historic Scotland in 1992 ([NB12SE 1](#)).

### ***Excavation and surveys in the Hebrides – are there comparisons to be found?***

There have been many landscape surveys and excavations undertaken in the Hebrides since the evacuation of St Kilda in 1930, and it is useful to look at the results and conclusions of a few salient examples as they demonstrate the difficulty in finding direct parallels for structures found on St Kilda, and help us to clarify where and when useful comparisons can be made.

#### **RCAHMS**

The work of RCAHMS included an inventory of the Outer Hebrides, published in 1928, and the broad description of 'beehive shielings' is a useful introduction to this type of corbelled hut, of which Calum Mor's house may be an example.

By beehive shielings we mean the small, circular, dry-stone buildings roofed with overlapping slabs so arranged as to form what is known as a 'false arch'. As a form of construction this type of arch is archaic; it was used for roofing the cells of brochs and also for early Christian buildings. But it does not follow that the few examples which still exist are of any great antiquity. Originally the roof was protected by an outer covering of turf, the disappearance of which tends to be followed by a rapid disintegration of the main fabric. Until recent times, examples existed in remote corners of Lewis, while others have been recorded in the Forest of Harris. Probably most of them have long ago been reduced to shapeless heaps of stone, but one in a good state of preservation is still to be seen at Garynahine [Probably Cnoc Dubh, [NB23SW 9](#)]. They generally stood in small clusters on the old-time *airigh* or summer pasture, each separate shieling being known simply as *bothan* or *both*, a hut. On the average they had an interior diameter of from 7 to 8 feet and were 7 to 8 feet high in the inside, with one or two recesses in the wall. As late as 1900 a group in Morsgail Forest, Lewis survived in fairly good condition. There the individual huts communicated with each other internally, and the largest was of exceptional size, having an interior diameter of 12 feet and a height of 11 feet on the inside. No beehive shielings are to be found in North or South Uist or in

Barra. Martin apparently referred to examples in Skye when he speaks of 'little stone houses capable of only one person and round in form' [Martin and Munro 1999, 100].

RCAHMS 1928, xli

Some smaller RCAHMS surveys of the last twenty years provide a handful of comparisons. During the Waternish survey in Skye, RCAHMS (1993) recorded three 'multi-celled structures', some with surviving corbelled stone roofs at [Allt na Smuide](#). Noted as shielings, these may provide a good comparison with some of the structures on St Kilda, though neither detailed drawings, nor photographs, are available (Piers Dixon pers comm). It is important to note that their interpretation as shielings owes much to their location – in rough high ground suited to seasonal pasture.

More recently, fieldwork in North Rona by RCAHMS led to the production of a new survey of the island's main settlement, which includes a medieval chapel and an Early Historic oratory. North Rona is a tempting comparison, since it is perhaps the only island in Scotland that has rich density of archaeological monuments, and that is, perhaps, even more remote than St Kilda. Our interest in the oratory is that it provides an example of an ancient and apparently authentic structure that *has* survived relatively intact for millennia. Putting the differences in architecture to one side, I would argue that it is the religious association of the building, coupled with the lack of development on Rona after 1700, that has contributed to its survival.

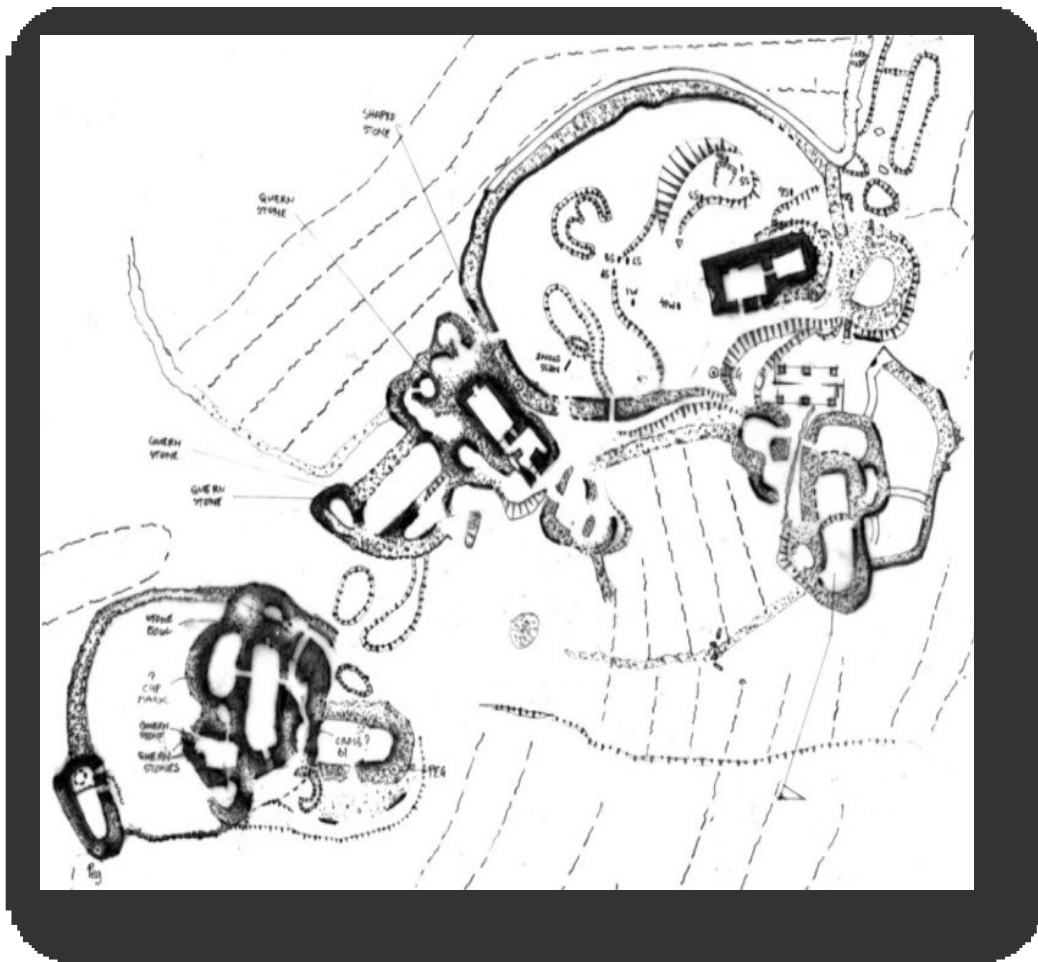


Figure 41 Plan of the settlement ([HW83SW 8](#)) and church ([HW83SW 1](#)) of North Rona, surveyed at 1:500 in July 2009. © RCAHMS (not catalogued at this date).



The plan of the settlement itself demonstrates that there were three farmsteads, one of which was used into the 19<sup>th</sup> century but the other two were probably abandoned about 1700. Each farmstead incorporates later (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century) blackhouses within and on top of earlier buildings which include cellular elements. The earliest of these may be 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD, though this can only be demonstrated through excavation. The fundamental conclusion from any study of this settlement is that corbelled cellular drystone forms have a currency that extends from the later 1<sup>st</sup> millennium to well into the medieval, and at North Rona in particular, buildings of vastly different age may be used simultaneously and combined into very complex multi-period constructions.

## SEARCH

The Sheffield Environmental and Archaeological Research Campaign in the Hebrides (SEARCH) involved the thorough survey of a large part of the southern Western Isles, including Barra and the islands further south (Branigan and Foster 1995; Branigan and Foster 2000; Branigan 2005). Part of this corpus of work has been criticised (eg Harden 2011; Halliday pers comm) for mistakes in location, classification and interpretation (see, for example, the misidentification of chambered cairns on Berneray, or peat stack stances on Mingulay) but it still provides the reader with an indication of the density of sites, their plan form, and a corpus of published radio carbon dates.

A handful of illustrated buildings published by the SEARCH campaign are comparable in plan form to Calum Mor's House (eg B69, G26, and L15), and there is some evidence in Barra for medieval and later multi-cellular buildings that may or may not be shielings (Branigan and Foster 1995, 43-5; 182-3; 204). Of most interest to anyone looking at St Kilda's built heritage are the complex settlement mounds (MY345, MY 346) noted on Mingulay, which may be comparable with some of the Gleann Mor structures (Alex Hale pers comm), though there is considerable disagreement about this. The relevance of the SEARCH work is clear: the survey of large areas of the southern Outer Hebrides has not revealed easy comparisons for the cellular structures on St Kilda, the few that exists are ruinous and perhaps earlier, and it helps to strengthen the argument that the nearer islands, Lewis and Harris, are a better place to look.

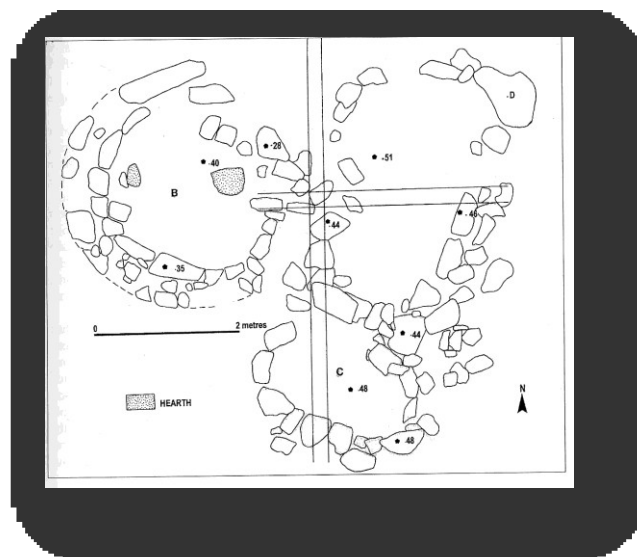


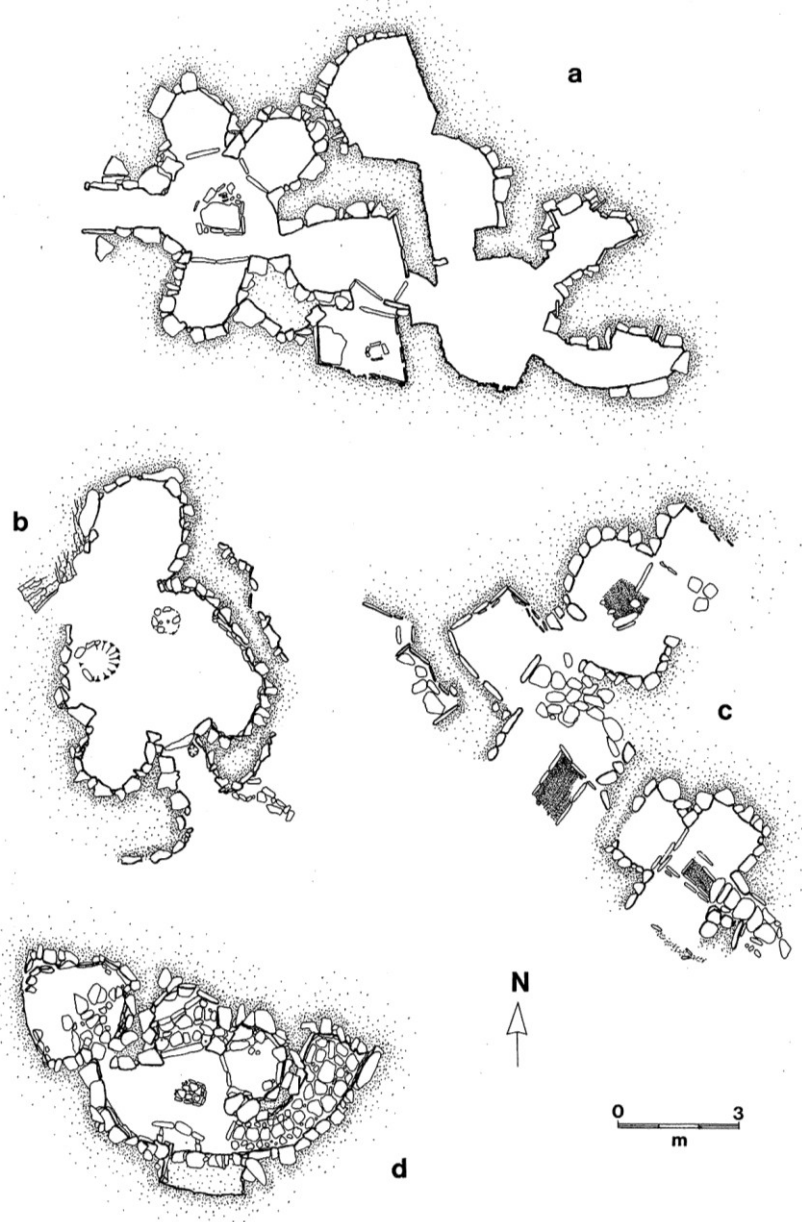
Figure 42 Possible small cellular medieval shieling huts at Site L15 (Branigan 2005, 45)



### Edinburgh University and Iain Crawford at the Udal

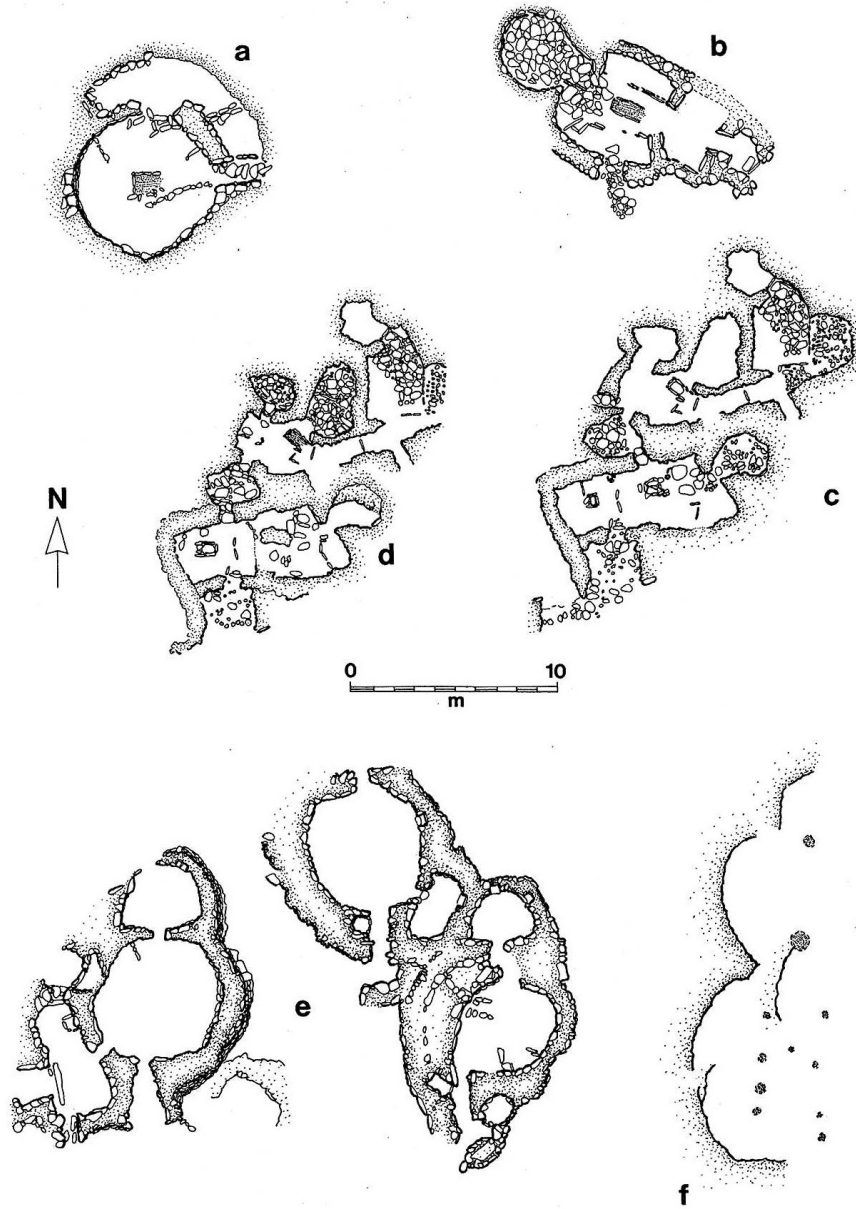
In addition to the landscape scale projects that have been undertaken, there are two excavations in particular that provide evidence for the settlement of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD. Excavations by Edinburgh University researchers within the broch of Beirgh between 1985 and 1995 produced complex and detailed evidence for a series of structures constructed in the first millennium AD (Harding and Gilmour 2000). For us, both the cellular and the figure-of-eight phases are interesting, and these may present one of the better analogies for the cellular structures of Gleann Mór, although they may have a relevance to those in Village Bay. Other projects of the 'Edinburgh school' at Guinersso (NB03NW 6) and also at Bostadh (NB14SW 2.00) discovered buildings which appear to fit in with a first millennium AD date. At the latter, one of the most clear examples of a Pictish figure-of-eight house was discovered, while the cellular building at Guinersso sits well with many of the example on Hirta (S Gilmour pers comm).

**Figure 21:** 'Shamrock' cellular structures in Scotland: a) Gurness, Orkney (after Hedges, 1987i), b) Eilean Olabhat, North Uist (after Armit, 1996), c) Buckquoy Buildings 5 and 6, Orkney (after Ritchie, 1977), d) Loch na Beirgh Phase 6, Lewis (author).



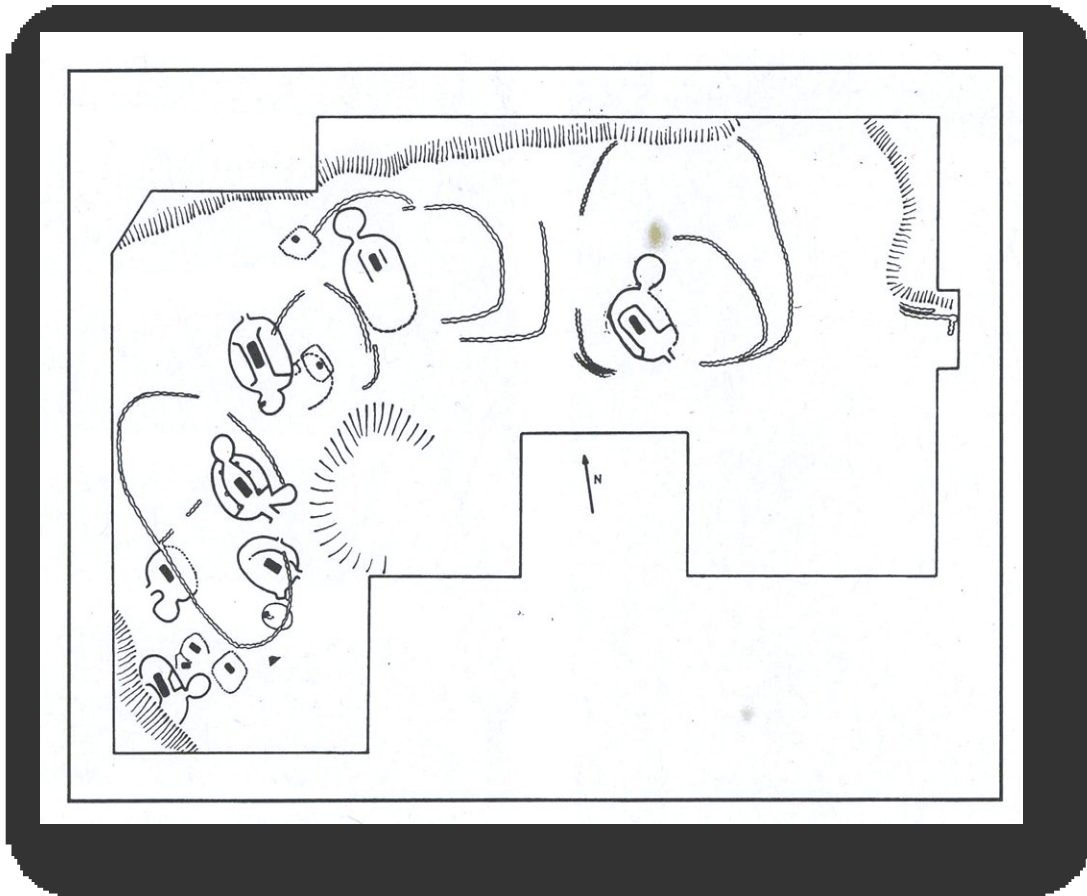
*Figure 43 'Shamrock' cellular structures in Scotland (Gilmour 2000, 396)*

**Figure 22:** 'Figure-of-eight' cellular structures in Scotland: a) Loch na Beirgh Phase 1, Lewis (author), b) Buckquoy Building 4, Orkney (after Ritchie, 1977), c) Howe Phase 8, Orkney (after Ballin Smith, 1994), d) Howe Phase 8, Orkney (after Ballin Smith, 1994), e) Bostadh Beach, Lewis (after Burgess and Neighbour, 1996), f) Brough of Birsay, Orkney (after Hunter, 1986).



*Figure 44 Figure of eight cellular structures (Gilmour 2000, 397)*

Crawford's excavations at the Udal are perhaps the most well known and valuable long term area excavation of a multi-period settlement site in the Western Isles. Despite the fact that they have yet to be published in full, the interim reports and occasional summary papers give us a broad outline of development (Crawford 1964—1986; Crawford and Switsur 1977; Crawford 1996). Of most interest to us are the buildings dated to the mid-first millennium, which again conform to the cellular or figure of eight plan, and those of the medieval period. Examples are reproduced here, and it is clear to this author at least, that no buildings found on St Kilda easily fit with the examples excavated at the Udal. It is also worth remarking that, despite her involvement as a site supervisor at the Udal over many years in the 1970s, Mary Harman has never drawn a comparison between the buildings excavated at the Udal, and those that survive on St Kilda.



*Figure 45 A plan of the pre-Norse settlement at the Udal (Crawford 1996, 89), part of which appeared the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> interim report (Crawford 1972, 1973). Although some of the structures are comparable in both their size and their cellular form, they do not provide a close enough model for St Kilda's built heritage without excavated evidence.*

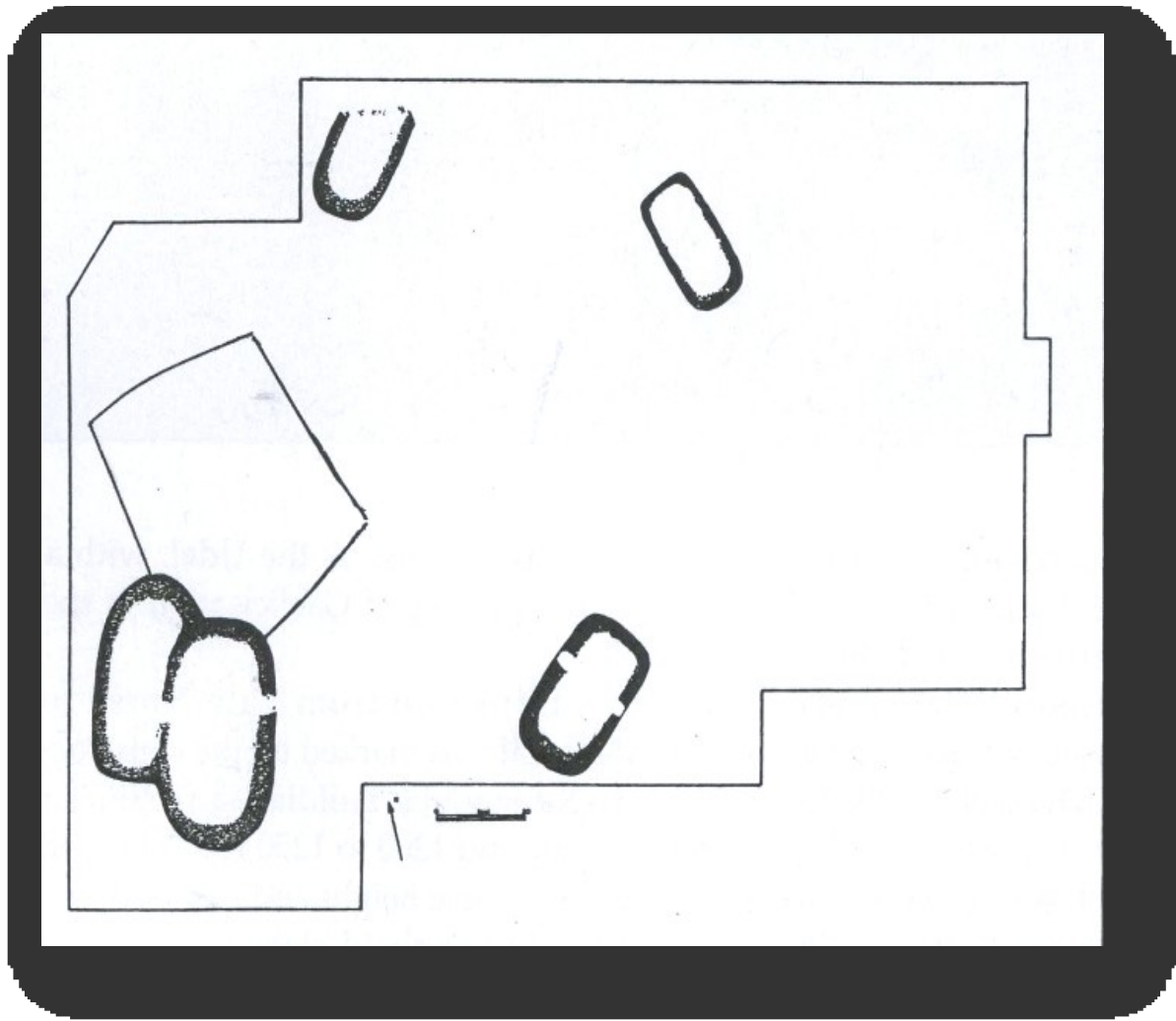


Figure 46 Medieval buildings at the Udal (Crawford 1996). Scale is 20ft.

### Comparisons on St Kilda

The built heritage of St Kilda includes well over 1000 undated drystone structures, the huge majority of which are built in drystone without timber. Of these, the most similar structures to Calum Mor's House are a group of seven buildings within Village Bay which retain evidence for secondary cells, in addition to a main chamber: Structures 32, 76, 122/123, 137, 142, 144/145, and 155 (see Appendix 3). There is a relatively clear grouping of five of these structures near the Tobar Childa well, and this may, or may not, represent an earlier focus of settlement (Figure 47).



Figure 47 The seven buildings with attached cells in Village Bay. © RCAHMS. AP background © Next Perspectives.

Perhaps the most similar of these is Structure 32, which lies over 220m to the ESE of Calum Mor's House and this group of five. Although later roofed with timber and thatch, its lower courses betray an earlier history, with evidence of perhaps two additional cells, and presumably corbelled cells. The dimensions of the main 'room' are comparable with Calum Mor's House (3.8m by 2.4m, as opposed to 4.6m by 2.9m) and the building is also situated at the upper limit of the cultivated and cleared ground, but within the later head dyke.

All of this group of seven have been rebuilt and reroofed and they do not retain a complete turf covering – only a turf 'cap' in the style of a typical cleit. The evidence for cells is usually in the form of footings outside the building, but they are occasionally discernible in both the inner and outer walls, as changes in the line of the wall, reflecting a concave or convex form in plan, and the character of the stonework. Although similarities exist, the survival of a full turf cover as well as the character of the roofing slabs suggests that Calum Mor's House is far less altered than the others.

Some authors, though not most, have seen Calum Mor's House as a related structure to the Amazon's House and cellular buildings of Gleann Mór. Broadly speaking, they *are* both part of a tradition of drystone build and corbelling, but they exhibit quite a number of key differences. Firstly, their location is very different – Village Bay and Gleann Mór are distinctive in aspect and vegetation, and the archaeological evidence suggests they have been used in very different ways over the millennia of St Kilda's settlement history. In addition, the character of the stonework is slightly different. Both the roofing and the walling within Calum Mor's House is built with more



massive stones than the majority of structures in the glen, including those that are still roofed, and this may reflect differences in date and function, as well as differences in the source of stone. Finally, the plan forms are quite different — in particular the main cell in Calum Mor's House is much larger than that of the Amazon's House.

## Appendix 3 Comparative plans from Village Bay

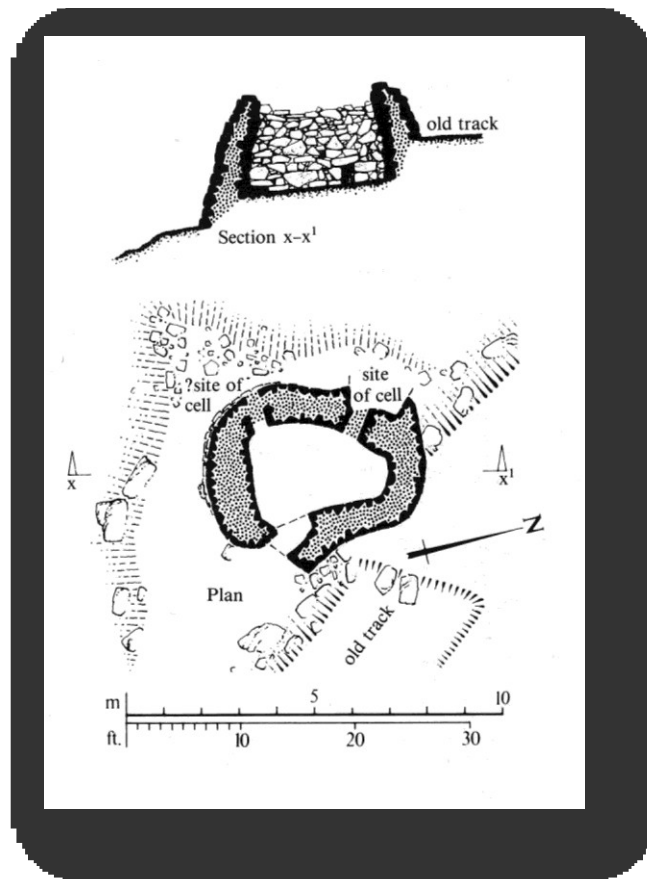


Figure 48 Plan and sectional elevation of Structure 32 (RCAHMS 1988, 43). Inked drawing DC 10802 © RCAHMS

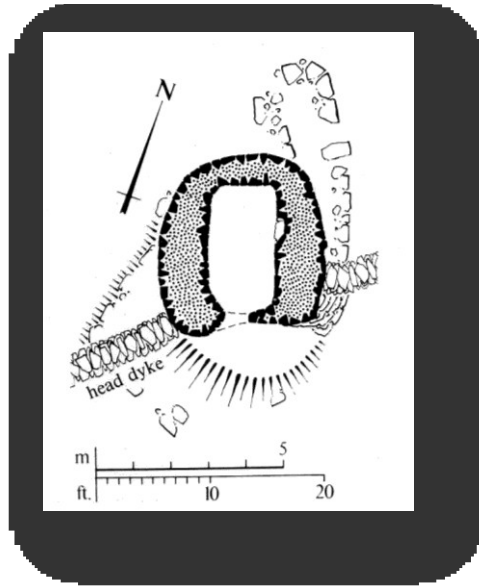


Figure 49 Plan of Structure 61 (RCAHMS 1988). Inking drawing DC 10804 © RCAHMS

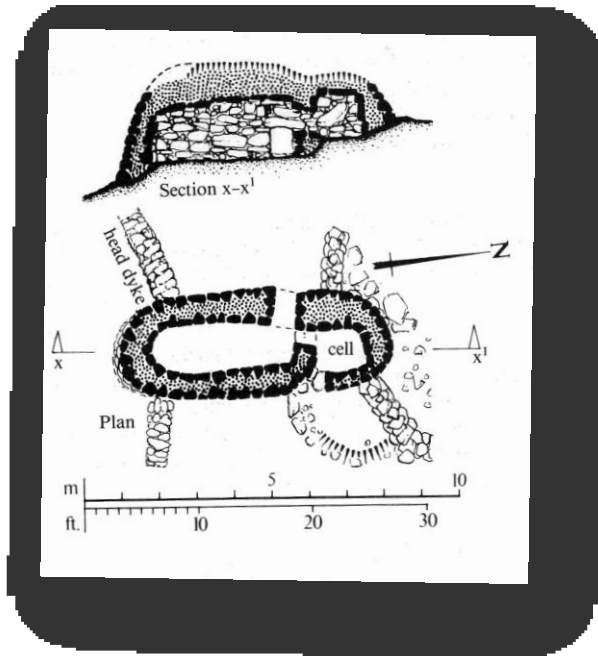


Figure 50 Plan and sectional elevation of Structure 155 (RCAHMS 1988). Inking drawing DC 10812 © RCAHMS

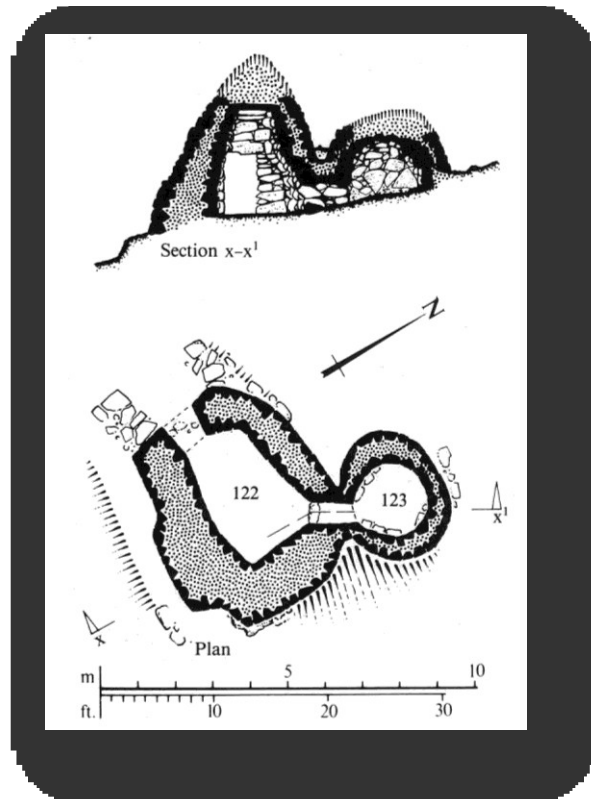


Figure 51 Plan and sectional elevation of Structure 122 and 123 (RCAHMS). Inked drawing DP 082864 © RCAHMS

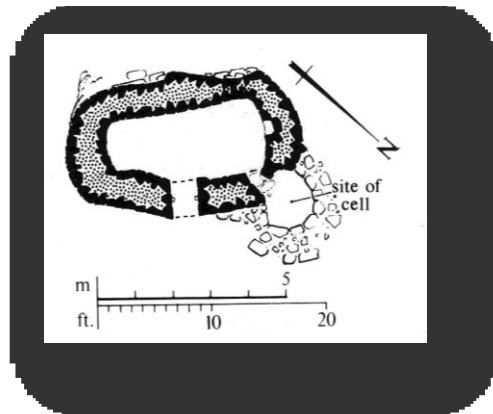


Figure 52 Plan of Structure 137 (RCAHMS 1988). Inked drawing DC 10809 © RCAHMS.

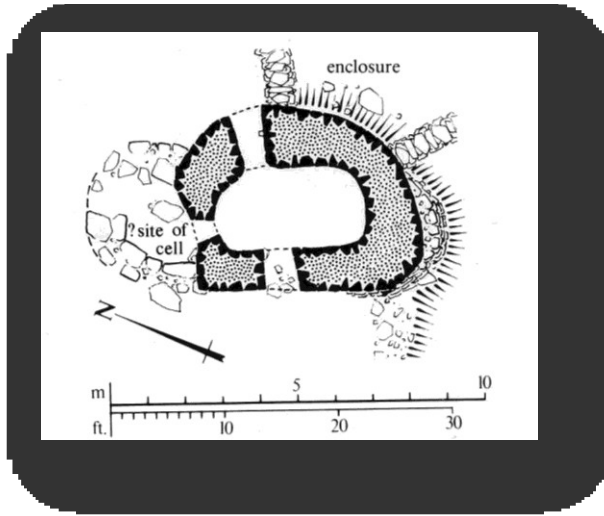


Figure 53 Plan of Structure 142 (RCAHMS 1988). Inked drawing DC 10810 © RCAHMS

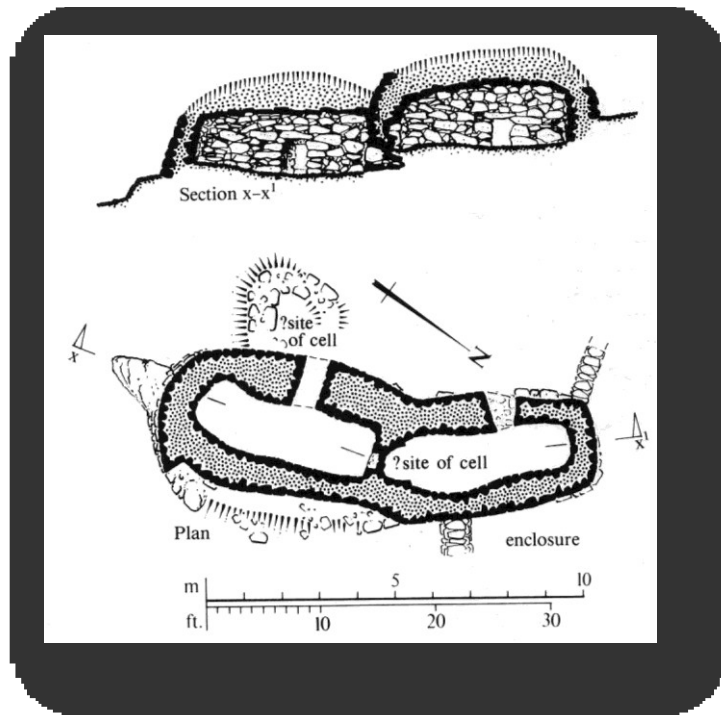


Figure 54 Plan and sectional elevation of Structure 144-5 (RCAHMS 1988). Inked drawing DC 10811 © RCAHMS.

## Appendix 4 Mackay's Report, 1959

### REPORT ON TIGH CALUM MOR, ST. KILDA (1959)

J. A. Mackay.

Tigh Calum Mor (Big Malcolm's House) is situated near the Village Wall on the east bank of An t-Sruthan.

The main structure is a stone building, partially underground, consisting of an oval shallow pit floored and lined with stones, and having a circular domed roof of large stone slabs rising to a central stone at a height of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  feet in the middle. The building is 11 feet long and 6 feet wide, and is entered through a doorway  $3'6"$  x 3 feet. There seems to be a considerable amount of paving leading to the doorway, and rough steps descend about 18 inches into the level of the floor.

The floor appears to be silted to a depth varying from 6 inches to more than 12 inches, and debris (mainly stones from the walls and a few small stones from the ceiling) is scattered over the floor area. Outside the main building there are traces of a side apartment on the south side, and a connecting doorway set in the wall leading into it. On the north side there are traces of a wall leading from the main doorway up towards the present Village Wall. This is substantiated by the fact that irises and other marsh growing plants are to be found in great profusion on high ground on the north side where the drainage is hindered by the presence of deep-set stone foundations. I have begun a preliminary excavation of the entrance to the main building and have cleared the silt and rubble from it, exposing the steps and the first few feet of flooring inside.

In the process of doing so, I have found several pieces of pottery in reddish clay, not unlike drainage piping but much rougher in texture, which are being forwarded to the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow for dating and identification.

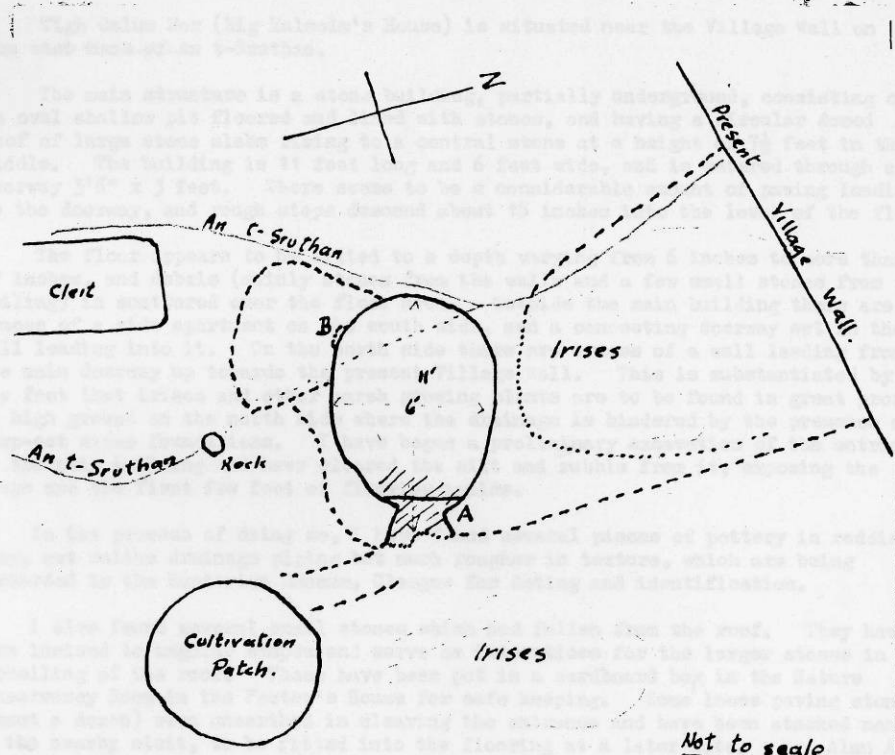
I also found several small stones which had fallen from the roof. They have been incised to angular shapes and serve as interstices for the larger stones in the corbelling of the roof. These have been put in a cardboard box in the Nature Conservancy Room in the Factor's House for safe keeping. Some loose paving stones (about a dozen) were unearthed in clearing the entrance and have been stacked neatly in the nearby cleit, to be fitted into the flooring at a later date. Mr. Alan Aitken of the National Trust Party led by Mrs. Irene Waterston dug two holes in the middle of the floor in an attempt to determine the true level of the floor, but in my opinion he has dug too deeply, since he dug out several paving stones and went down to a depth of  $2' 6"$  without achieving anything beyond causing water to fill them in. It is obvious that silting has not taken place to as great a degree as was at first anticipated.

A small stream, (a branch of An t-Sruthan) runs under Calum Mor, going under the wall on the north-west side, and reappearing several yards below the building on the south side. It rejoins the main stream past the nearby cleit (see appended diagram).

It is proposed that the floor of Calum Mor be carefully cleared and sifted, and some attempt made to follow the lines of the walls, (indicated during the recent drought by crop-marking), and which I have shown in the diagram by dotted lines.



J. A. GEDDES



Not to scale

A Entrance to Calum Mör (shaded area represents portion excavated).

B Probable side doorway to adjoining apartment.

- Visible wall
- - - overgrown or buried wall
- stream
- marshy patches
- - - stream running under Calum Mör.

## Appendix 5 Cottam's Report, 1973

-1-

NF 19 NW 2

NF 1006 9948

The Colum Mor House has been planned by Williamson (1960). It is constructed of large unhewn stone blocks and is well corbelled considering their size and shape. Williamson says that it consists of a large oval room 4m x 2m, with passages at ground level, leading to what appears to have been beehive chambers. The evidence of this latter remark was found to be lacking and no indication of ground level passages was apparent. It may be that material has built up in recent years to conceal these passages but this is not likely.

The condition of the Colum Mor House at the time of the visit in July was bad and seemed to be deteriorating. Much of the exterior turf cover had disappeared (Plates 1 and 2) and inside, although the corbelling was still well preserved there had been a fair amount of boulder fall from the roof and walls particularly on the west and south sides. At the west end it was completely open in several places and only one large stone was holding up the entire west end. This was very delicately poised and abutted on to another stone by a mere hairsbreadth (Plates 3 and 5). The structure was obviously in a dangerous condition and in imminent danger of collapse. The interior of the structure was several centimetres deep in mud and water which was seeping into the structure at the north west end (Plates 6 and 7).

Because of the imminent danger of structural collapse it was decided to undertake some immediate restoration. There were two major problems to tackle, first the repairs to the structure itself, and

secondly to attempt to reduce the flow of water into the structure which was undermining the foundations.

The repairs to the walls were difficult due to the danger of exerting too much pressure on the existing structure, but the wall was repaired with large boulders which were wedged fairly securely into position (Plates 4 and 8).

The problem of water seepage necessitated diverting a stream which was flowing into the structure (Fig. 1). A new stream course was cut and the flow directed around to the west of the Colum Mor House. The interior was then cleaned up as far as possible. Much of the mud and stagnant water was removed and in places the original paved floor of the house was exhumed. It was not considered wise to attempt to expose the original floor as this would have necessitated weakening the wall foundations. The interior was floored with rubble and small stone to provide a dry surface, and all remaining gaps in the wall were plugged (Plates 9, 10, and 11). Lastly, the whole of the exterior of the structure was re-turfed.

It was not possible to assess how successful the work had been in reducing the flow of the water into the structure. This will only be possible after a further visit. It should be stressed, however, that this problem must be controlled to ensure the long term survival of the structure and if the condition has deteriorated since, it may be advisable to attempt a proper drainage scheme. The structural repairs ought to prove satisfactory for the foreseeable future provided

that the turf cover is maintained. This ought to be checked annually and turf replaced if necessary. It ought to be stressed also that visitors to the island be dissuaded from climbing on top of structures like this. It serves no useful purpose and can only cause unnecessary structural damage. Fencing and gates are not considered desirable on any monuments as it would ruin the harmony of the natural landscape.

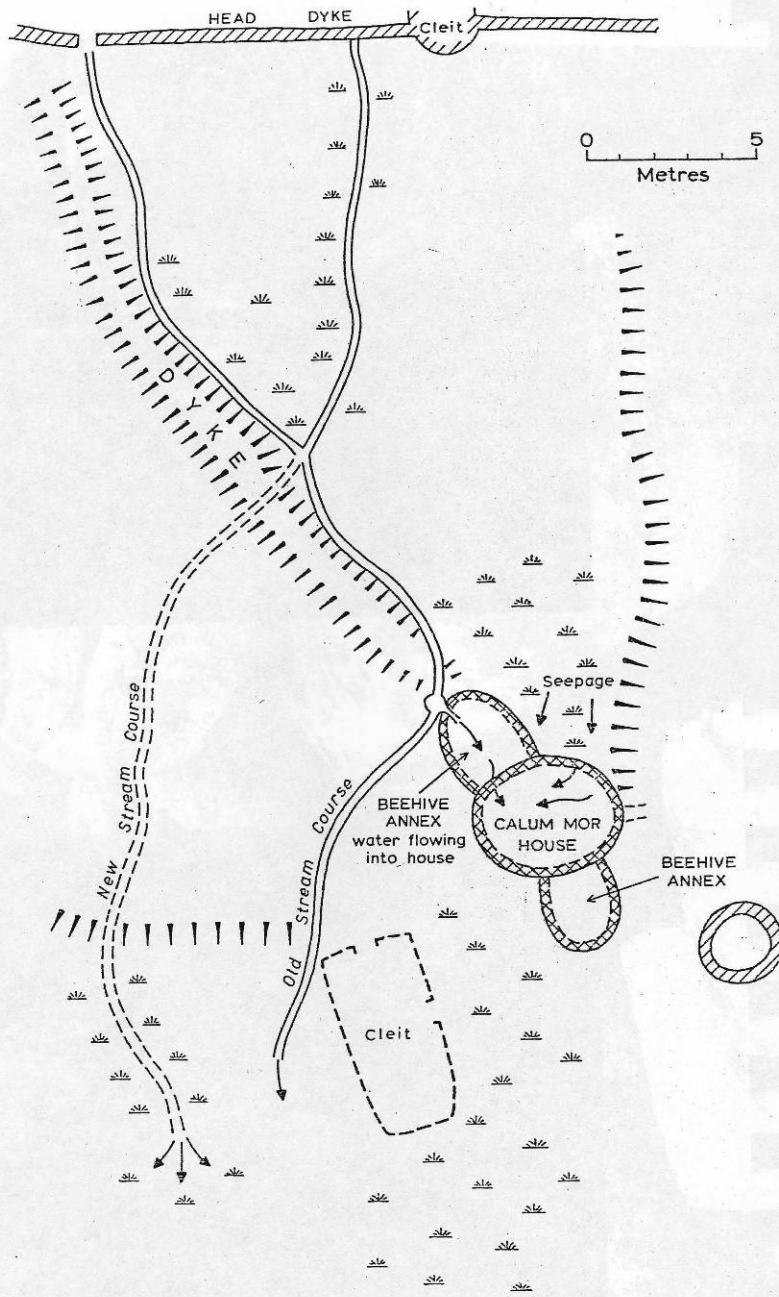
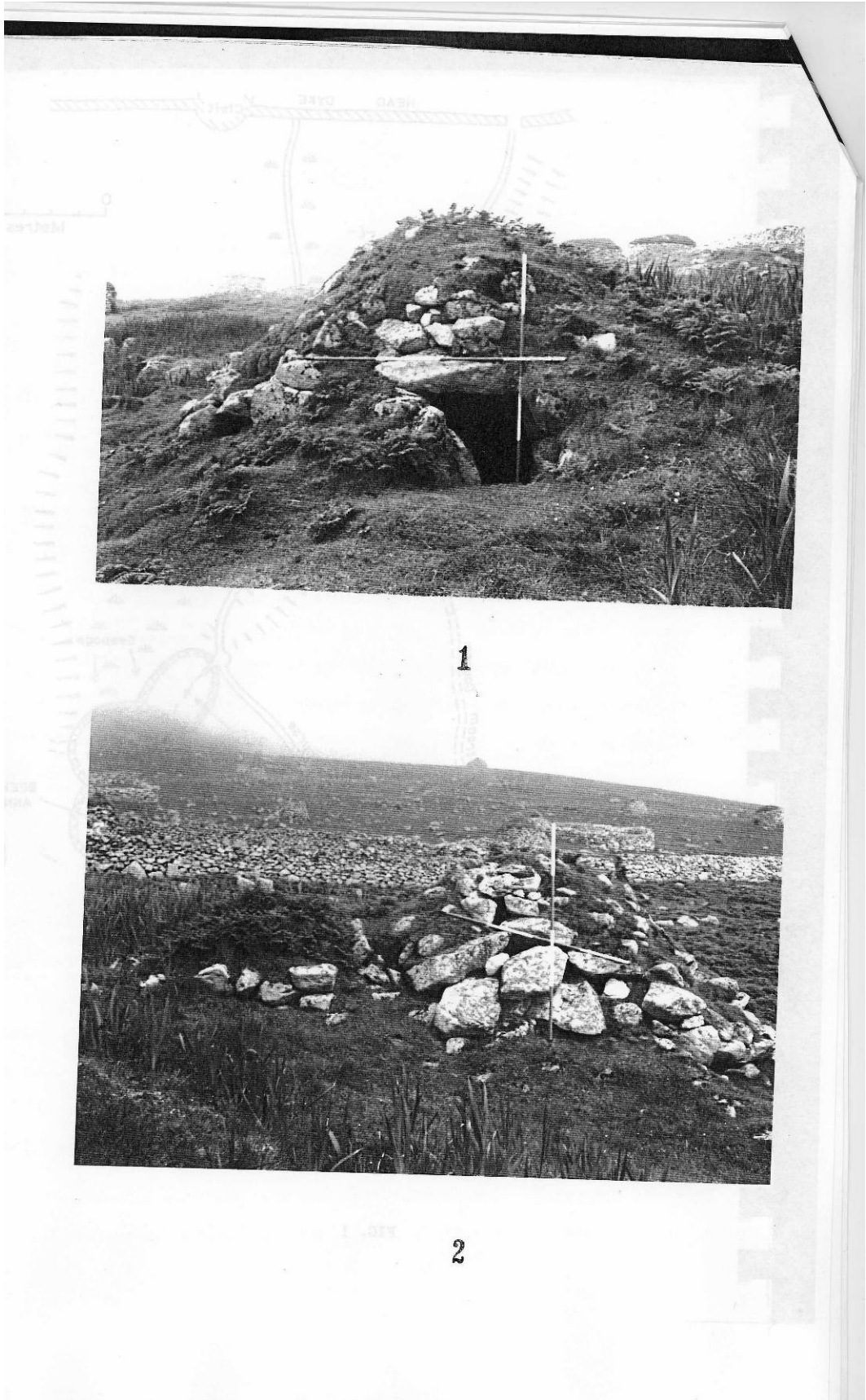
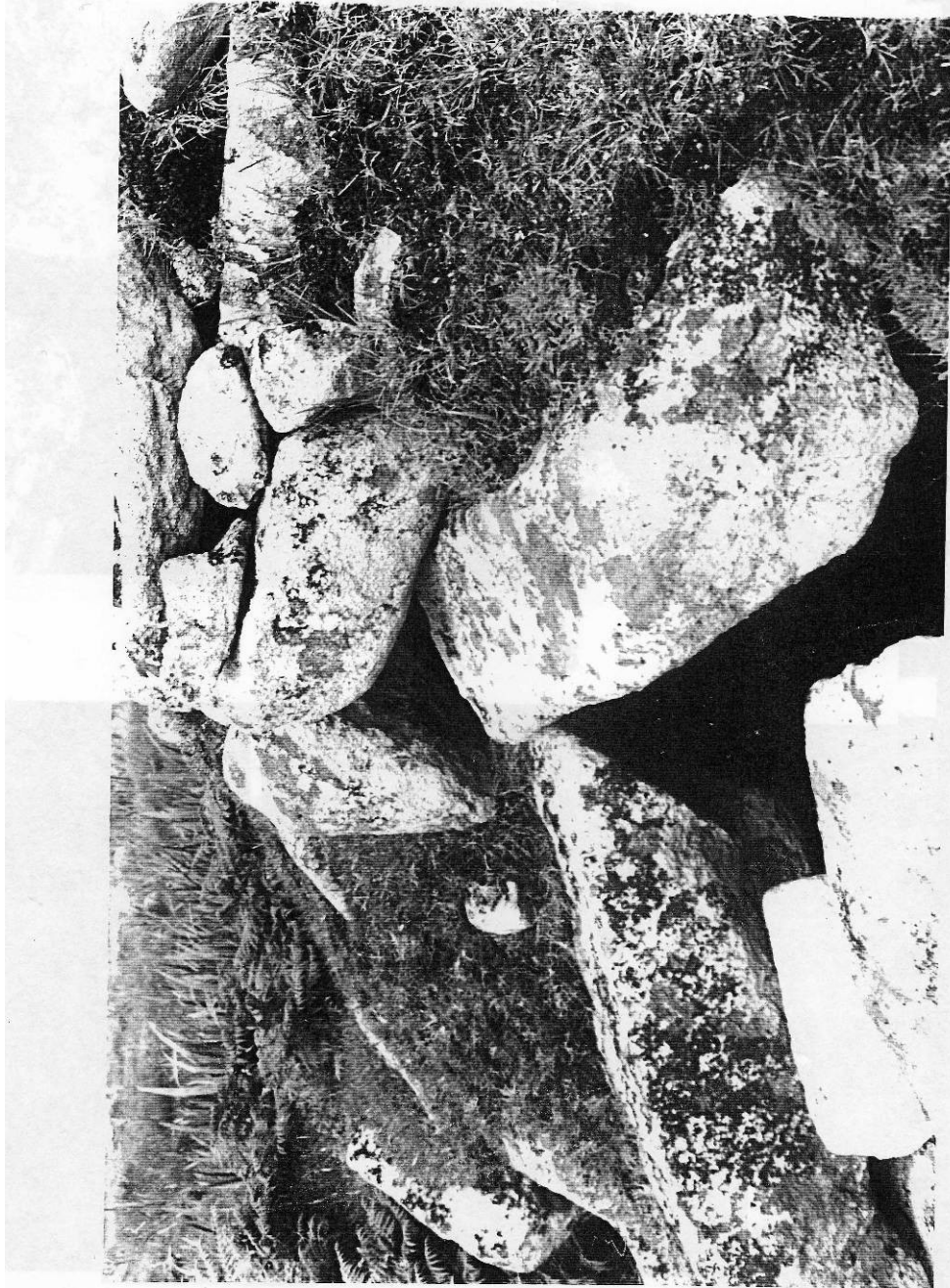


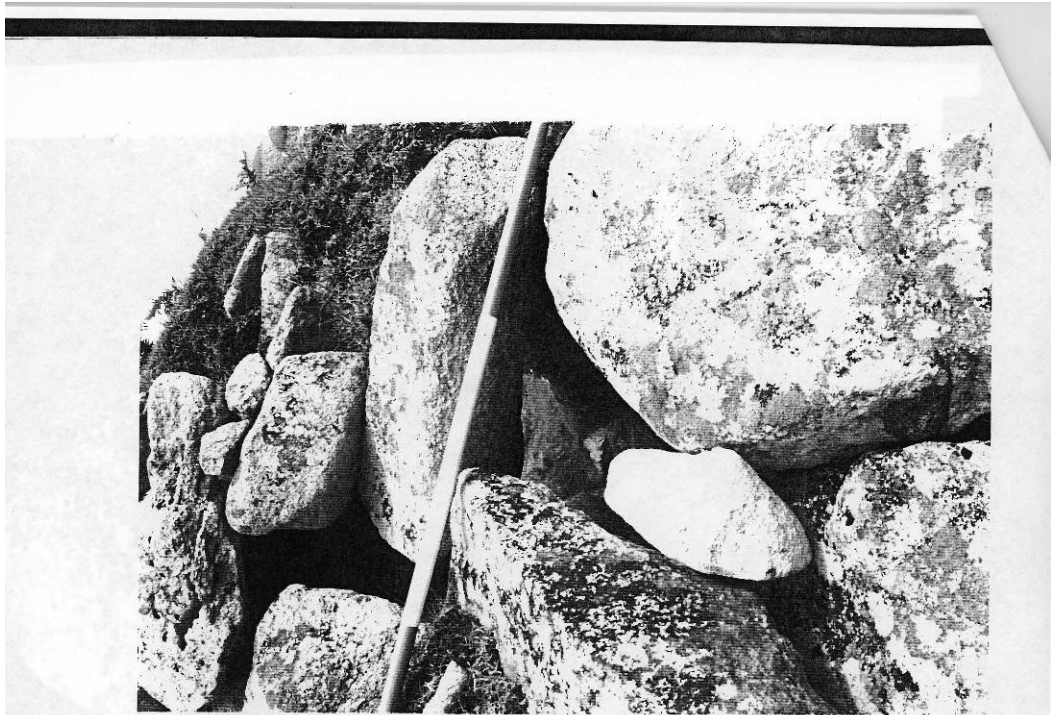
FIG. 1



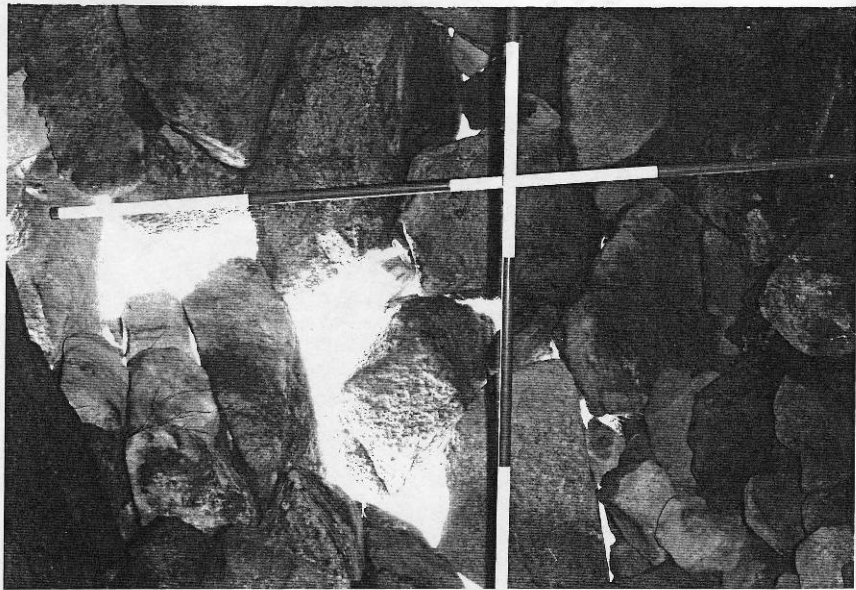




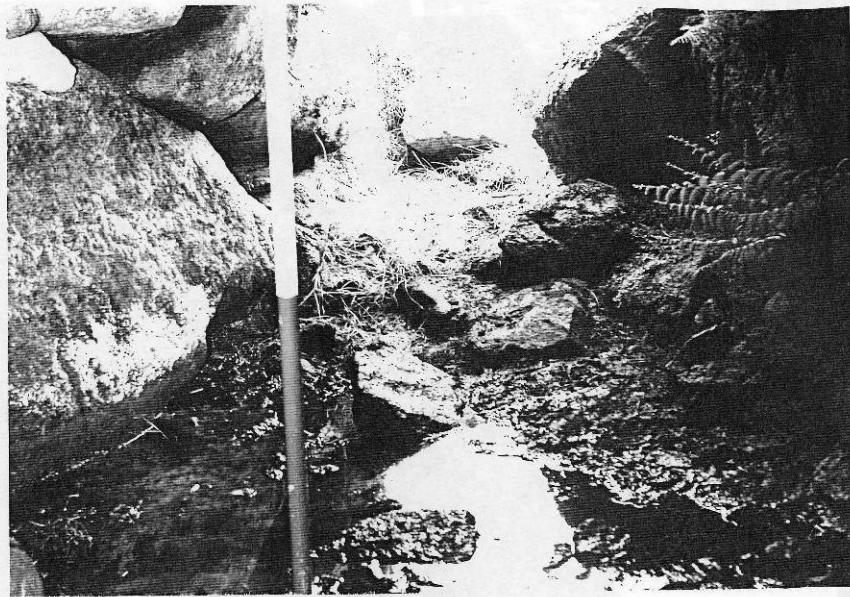
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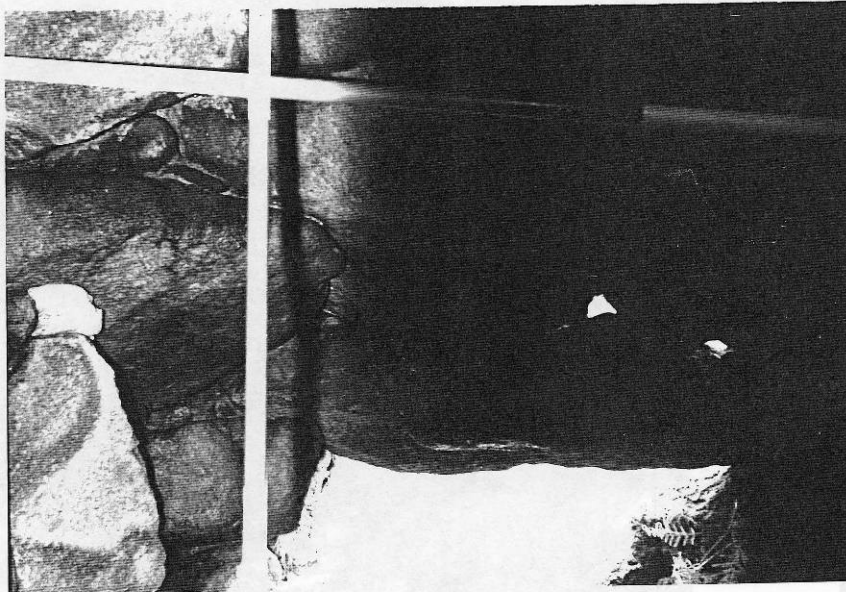
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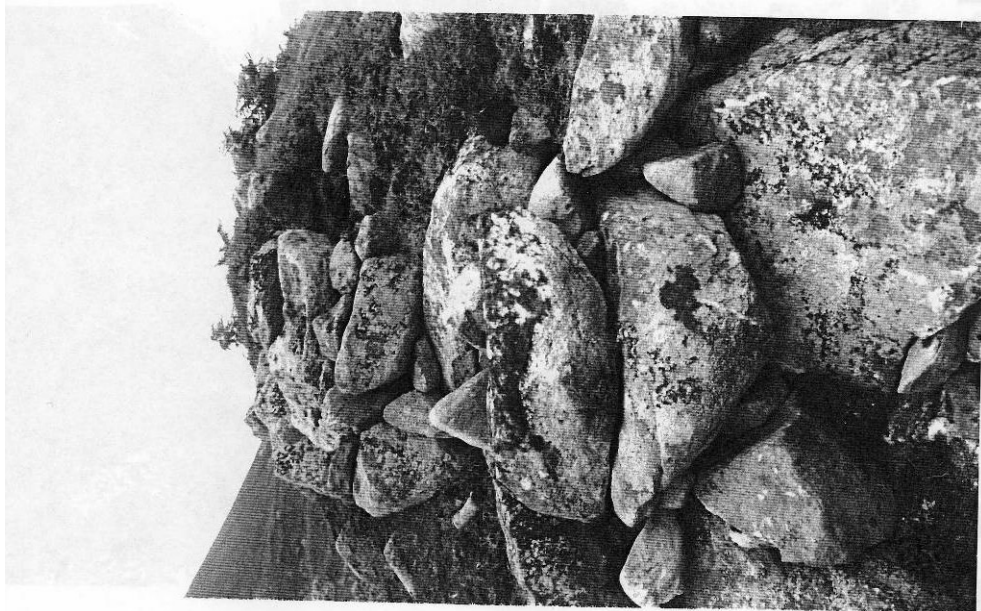
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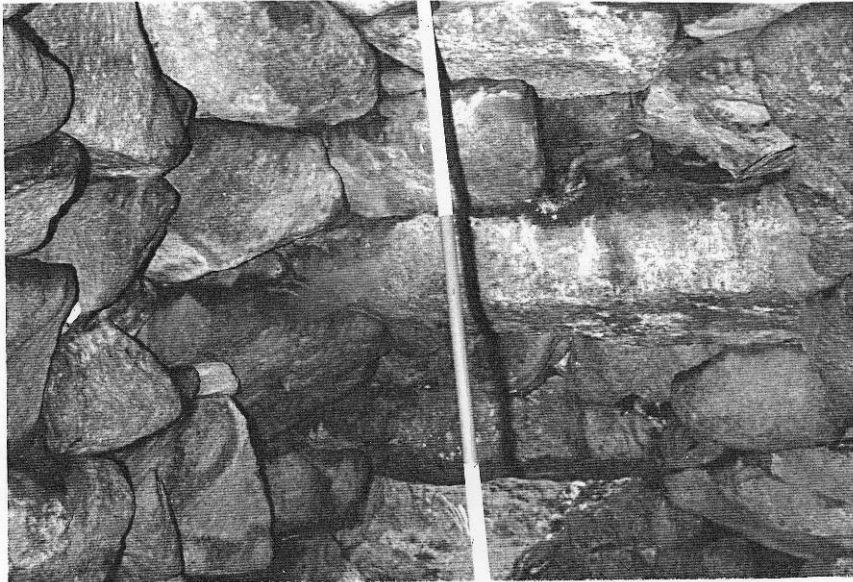


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