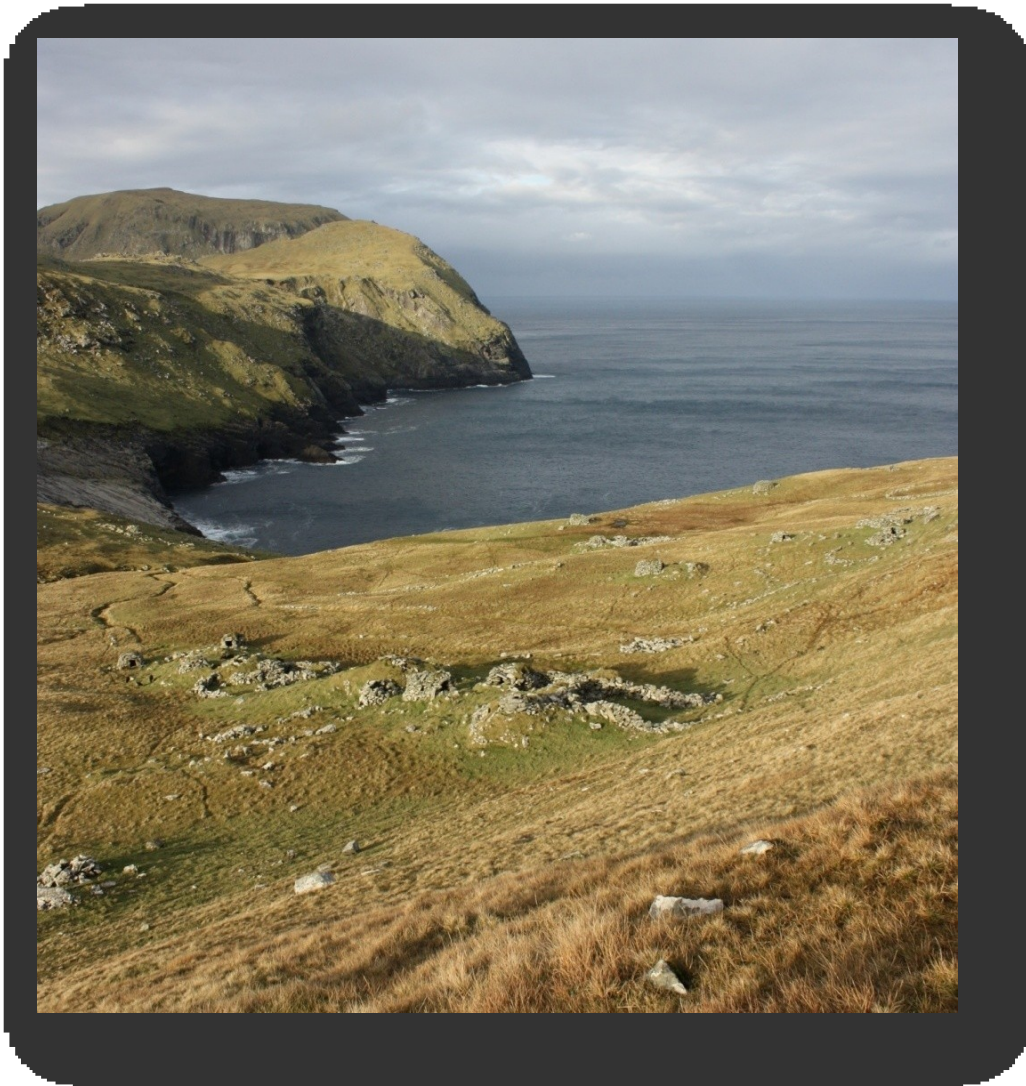


The Amazon's House, Hirta, St Kilda

A Conservation Statement



G Geddes

December 2011

v13 (Final)

Abstract

This document supports and informs the future management of the Amazon's House in Gleann Mór for at the period of the next Management Agreement (2011-16) and beyond.

Described in thorough detail by Martin Martin in 1695, the Amazon's House has always encompassed a mixture of the enigmatic with the vernacular. Functioning then as a shieling hut, it was also associated with local Gaelic stories of a female warrior, an idea that was translated to Classical Amazonian mythology for Martin's contemporary audience. The first plan was published after the ecclesiologist TS Muir's 1858 visit, and no photographs have been identified before that taken by the noted surveyor John Mathieson during his survey of the island with A M Cockburn in 1927 (early photographs of Gleann Mor requiring a little too much effort). The Amazon's House has survived an excavation by Muir, as well that of the geographer Professor AC O'Dell one hundred years later, though records are lacking in both cases. The pioneering studies of St Kilda undertaken in the 1950s by the ornithologist Kenneth Williamson and the geographer Donald MacGregor are crucial in setting the scene for an understanding of the building as 'prehistoric', a theory expanded on by the Ordnance Survey in the 1960s and Barry Cottam in the 1970s, and fundamental to how the building has been conceived and managed since St Kilda became a World Heritage Site. More recent efforts by RCAHMS (1988), Harman (1997) and Fleming (2005) have tended to set the building within a wider geographical context.

As well as reiterating in full these previous descriptions and others, this report puts forward a re-analysis of the Amazon's House, and the surrounding archaeological landscape of Gleann Mor, attempting to place them more squarely within its geographical and cultural context. The most direct links are with the shieling building traditions of the Western Isles, and a fuller discussion is included in the complimentary Conservation Statement for Calum Mor's House. The archaeology and cultural history Gleann itself reflects centuries of use for grazing, hunting and storage by St Kilda's hunter-farmer community, as well as the concept of a 'wild' and untouched landscape favoured by commentators.

An assessment of significance interprets the Amazon's House according to the broad criteria set out in Scottish Historic Environment Policy. The significance of the building is exceptional and relates in particular to the fact that it is probably from c1600 or earlier, it is a very rare example of a dateable and early cellular hut, and it lies with a complex and significant pastoral landscape. The issues that are affecting the Amazon's House are discussed in detail, and illustrated with plans and photographs. Actions are indicated, beginning with both a programme of stone and turf repairs, and a research programme carried out in the glen as a whole.

Finally, a vision is set forth. The Amazon's House has survived for many generations (from at least c1600), witnessing the abandonment of the shieling tradition and the changing use of the glen, as well its eventual abandonment with the rest of the island in 1930. Despite stone robbing, amateurish attempts at excavation, and the nibbles of a multitude of hungry sheep, 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 conservation.

Editorial notes

This report was produced by G Geddes of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) as part of a discrete work package (Project 1148) undertaken for S Bain, Western Isles Property Manager at the National Trust for Scotland (the Trust).

The text, layout, field photographs and new illustrations are by G Geddes, and the report was edited by A Gannon. Thanks are also due to RCAHMS investigators S Halliday, A Welfare, A Hale, and designer A Burns. RCAHMS photographs from the 1983—6 project taken by J Keggie and those from 2007—9 were taken by S Wallace. 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 (prefix DC) and photographs (prefix B) from 1983—6 were scanned and made available online as part of the project, including illustrative material from the original St Kilda publication (RCAHMS 1988). Where these are used as illustrations, they are referred to by the unique archive number of the scanned image eg SC XXXXXX. Recent digital photos from RCAHMS collection are referred to by their unique 'DP' number. The spelling of place names is taken from current Ordnance Survey raster mapping.

The images taken by the author during the field visit in November 2010 are too numerous to be usefully catalogued and archived by RCAHMS. These are numbered individually (with the RCAHMS project code (1148) as a prefix), and copies were provided to the Trust on compact disc; they will be retained as part of the project archive, on compact disc and memory stick. Hyperlinks to Canmore site descriptions in the text are highlighted in blue. By pressing 'ctrl' and clicking in the link, the web page will open up, provided your computer is connected to the internet.

Drafts were issued to and commented on by J Harden, S Bain, J Raven (Historic Scotland) and A Gannon (RCAHMS). R Turner (RCAHMS) made an important contribution to the development of the section on significance. Thanks are due to A Tricker, J Stone, G Cavers, J Raven and S Watt (HS), S Gilmour (Soc Ant Scot), C Withers, C Macauley (School of Scottish Studies), I Whitaker, the Department of Geography at Edinburgh University, and the Department of Geography at Dundee.

The image on the front cover was taken by the author in November 2010 (1148-141).

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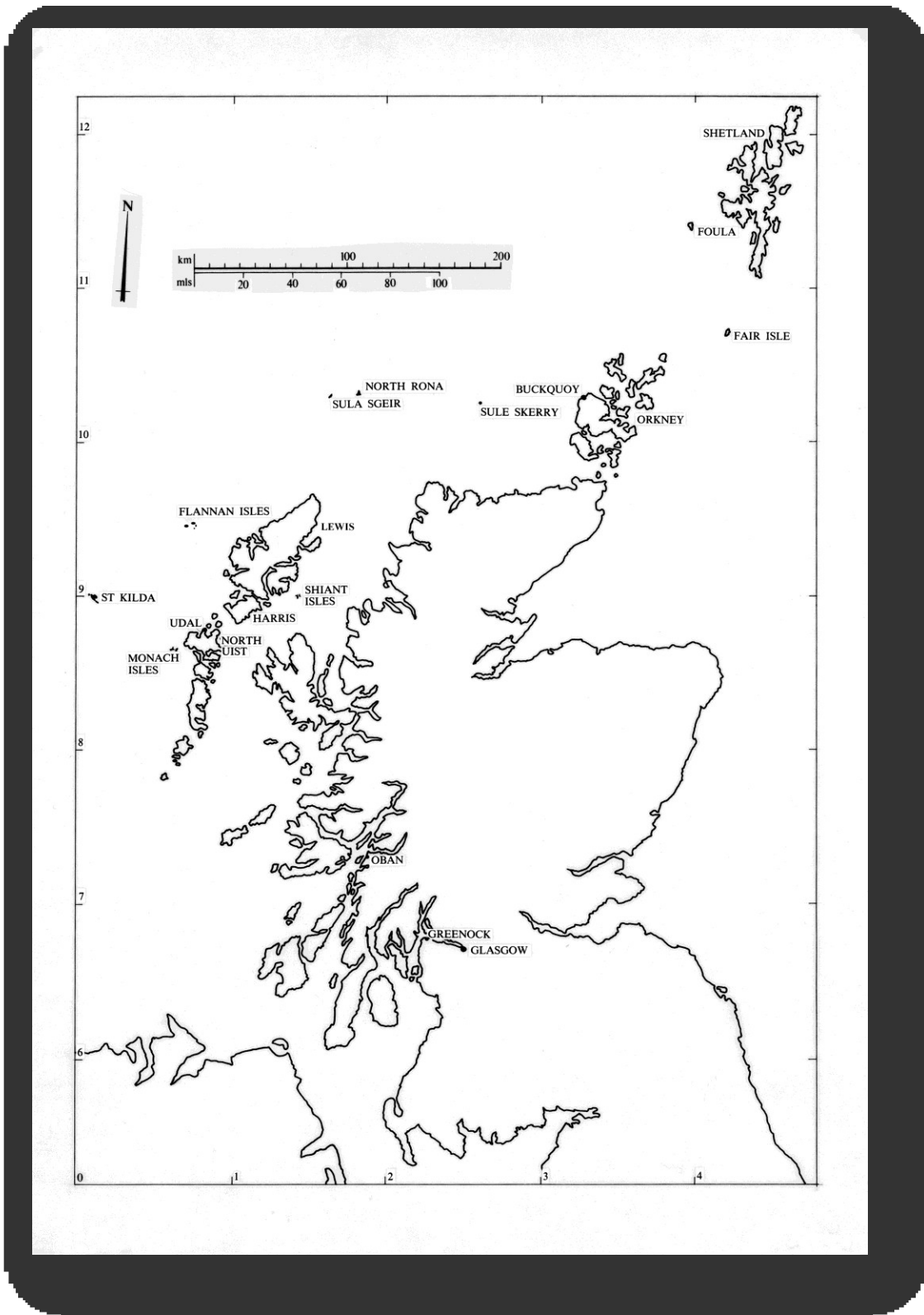


Figure 1 Scotland showing St Kilda and other islands and sites. SC 1225644 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

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 (Figure 1). The group includes four main islands: Hirta (pronounced Heersht), the main focus of settlement; Dun, Soay and Boreray (Figure 2). Though precipitous and rocky throughout, Hirta has two principal areas where archaeological sites appear in a high density; one surrounds Village Bay, in a crescentic SE slope which has been cultivated and occupied on and off since prehistory; the other is in Gleann Mór, a deep U-shaped valley on the N side of the island, traditionally the summer pasture ground (Figure 3). The islands are owned by the National Trust for Scotland – hereafter referred to as the Trust.

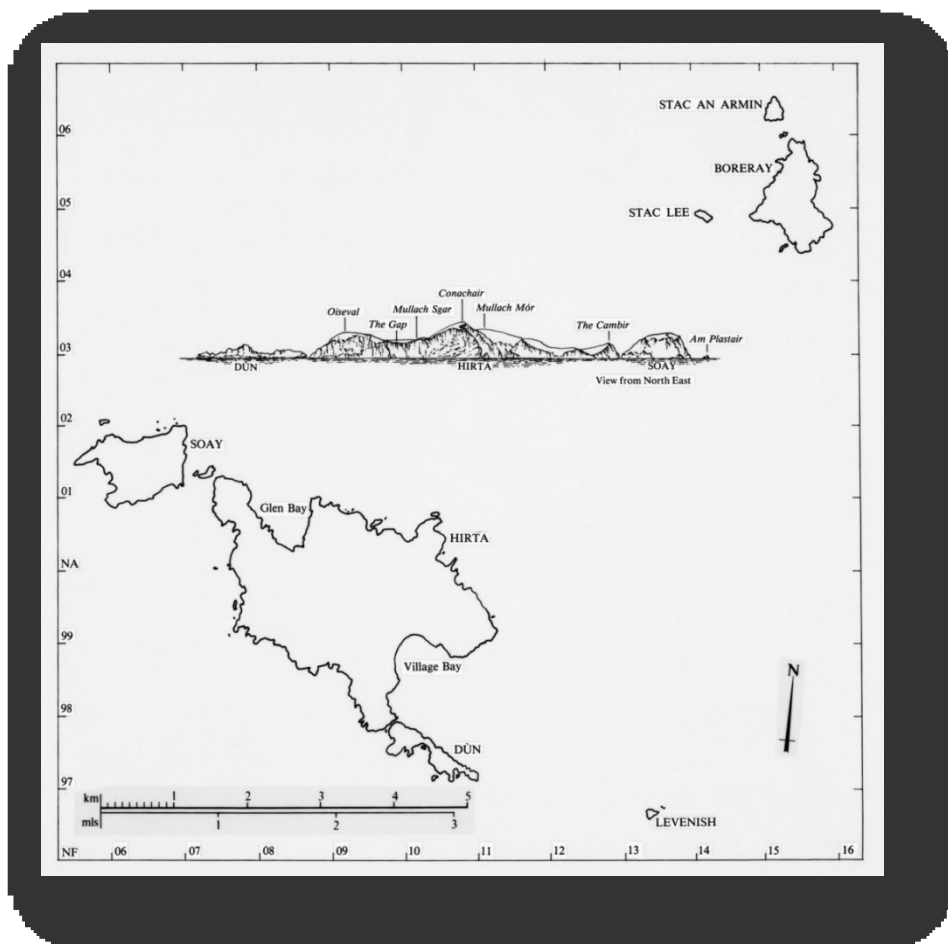


Figure 2 The St Kilda archipelago, from RCAHMS (1988). SC 1225645 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

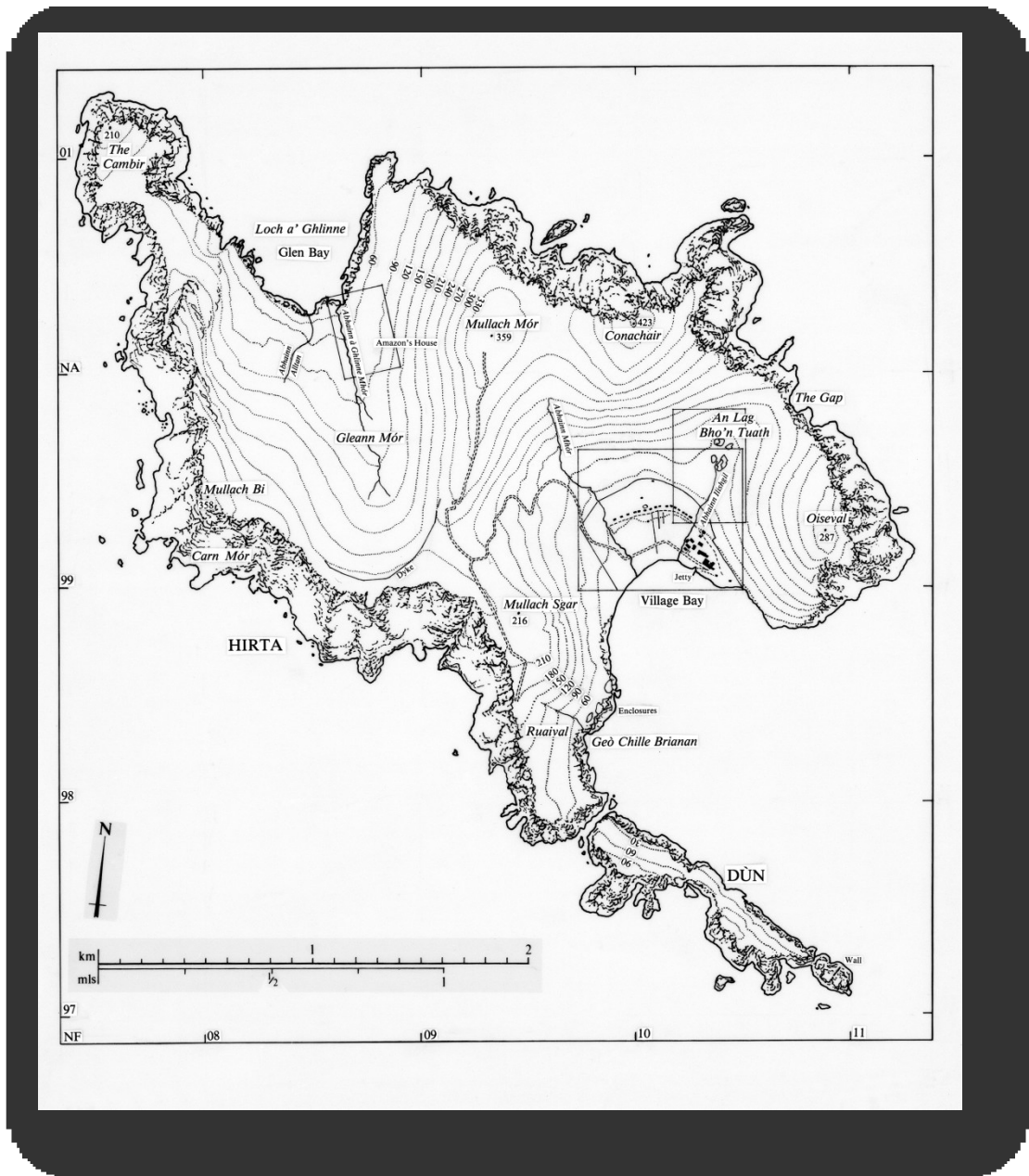


Figure 3 Hirta and Dun: physical features and outlying structures SC 1225646© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

The Amazon's House, known as 'Structure F', is one element within a complex and multi period group of remains that is located on the E side of Gleann Mòr, the north glen of St Kilda. It is about a 45 minute walk from Village Bay. The complex structures of Gleann Mòr (Structures A—T, see Appendix 1) have been described as gathering folds, shielings, and perhaps even prehistoric settlements, and they feature in documentary records from the 17th century (Figure 4). Popular and academic discussions of the archaeological landscape of Gleann Mòr are relatively few and far between, but the Amazon's House is a central feature in all, achieving the status of an icon within an iconic landscape (Figure 5).

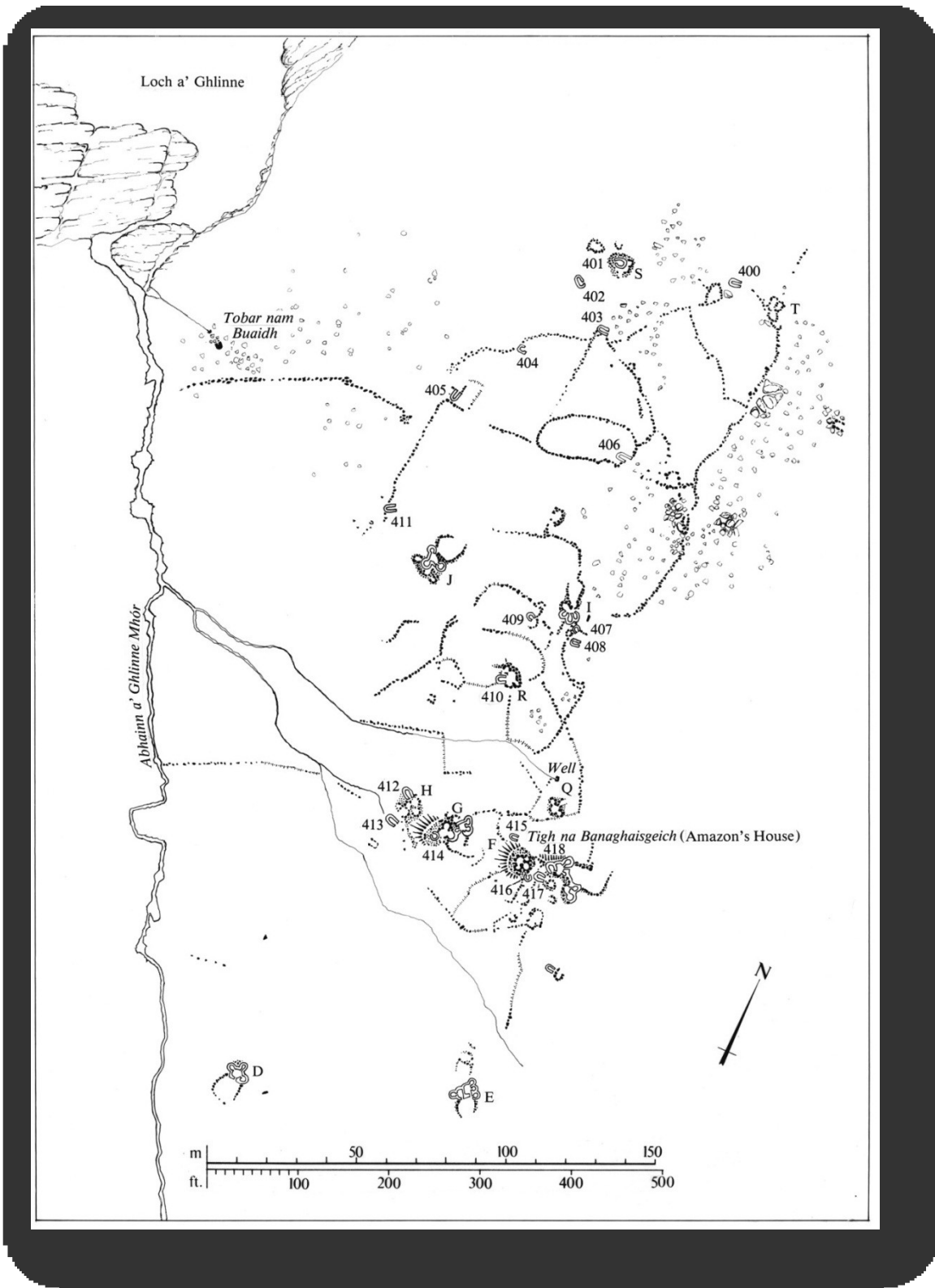


Figure 4 The archaeological remains on the E side of Gleann Mór, from RCAHMS (1988).

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The Amazon's House lies within the Scheduled Ancient Monument identified as 'St Kilda, Gleann Mór, settlement', which encompasses a large area of the lower slopes of the glen, with structures diverse in period and function (Figure 6). It is also 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. In addition to these UK distinctions, St Kilda was inscribed on the World Heritage List for its natural heritage in 1986, and this was 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 this accolade was awarded 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).

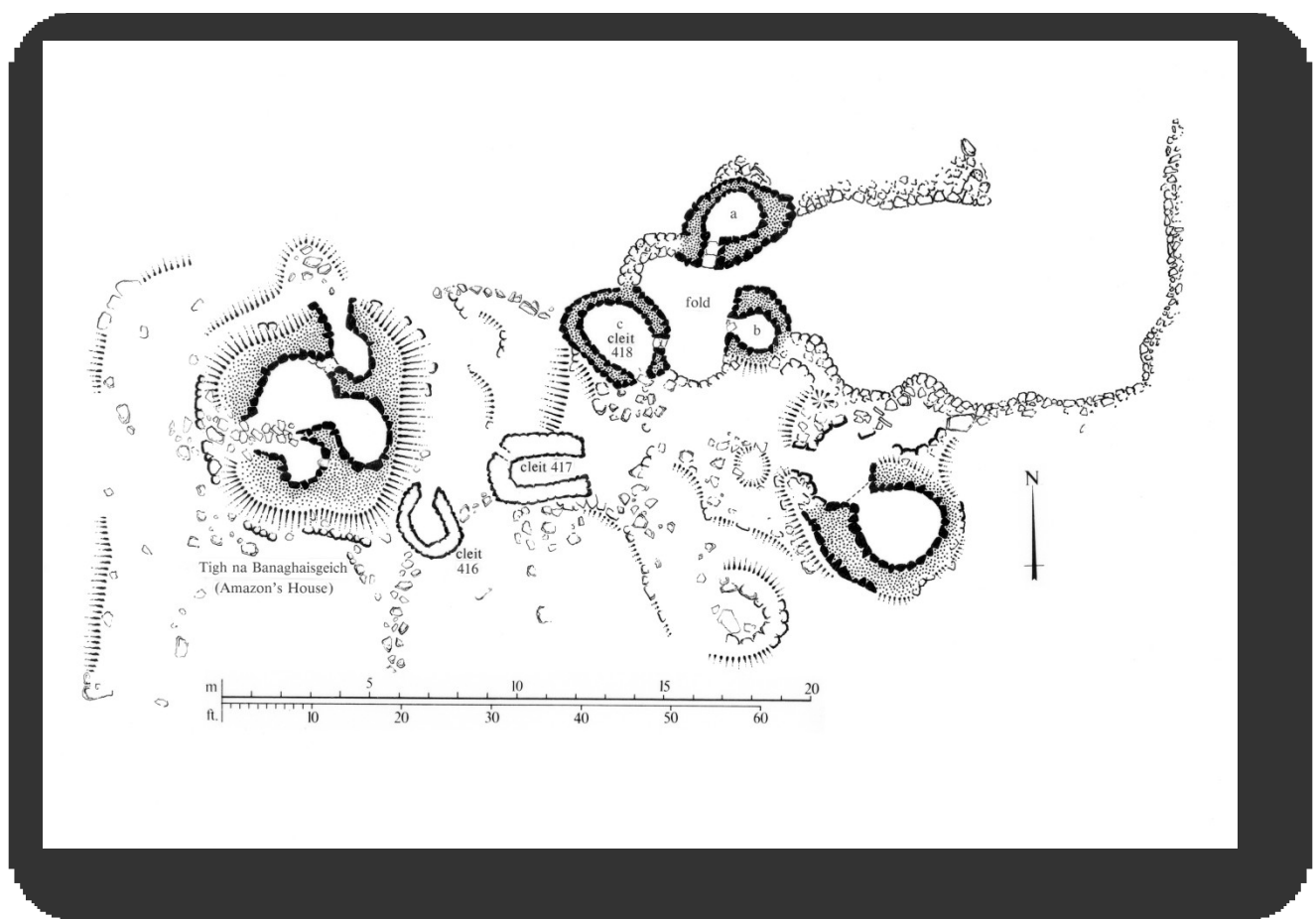


Figure 5 Plan of the Amazon's House group, from RCAHMS (1988). SC1218092 © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

The Amazon's House merited specific mention in both the original and the revised World Heritage nomination documents, and was considered an important part of the island's archaeological landscape. In the original document, an illustration is captioned 'Neolithic House' while the cellular structures of Gleann Mór are described in the text as 'complexes of small chambers reminiscent of Iron Age settlements in the north and west of Scotland' (Ancrum 1985, 8, 11). The revised nomination noted that the structures could be Iron Age suggesting that they may 'hundreds or even thousands of years old'

(Scottish Executive 2003, 76, 78, 82-3). The more detailed comparative analysis, published in support of the revised nomination, postulated a date of 200AD for the structures, and compared them implicitly with the settlement of North Rona (Trust and Scottish Executive 2005, 9: 20).

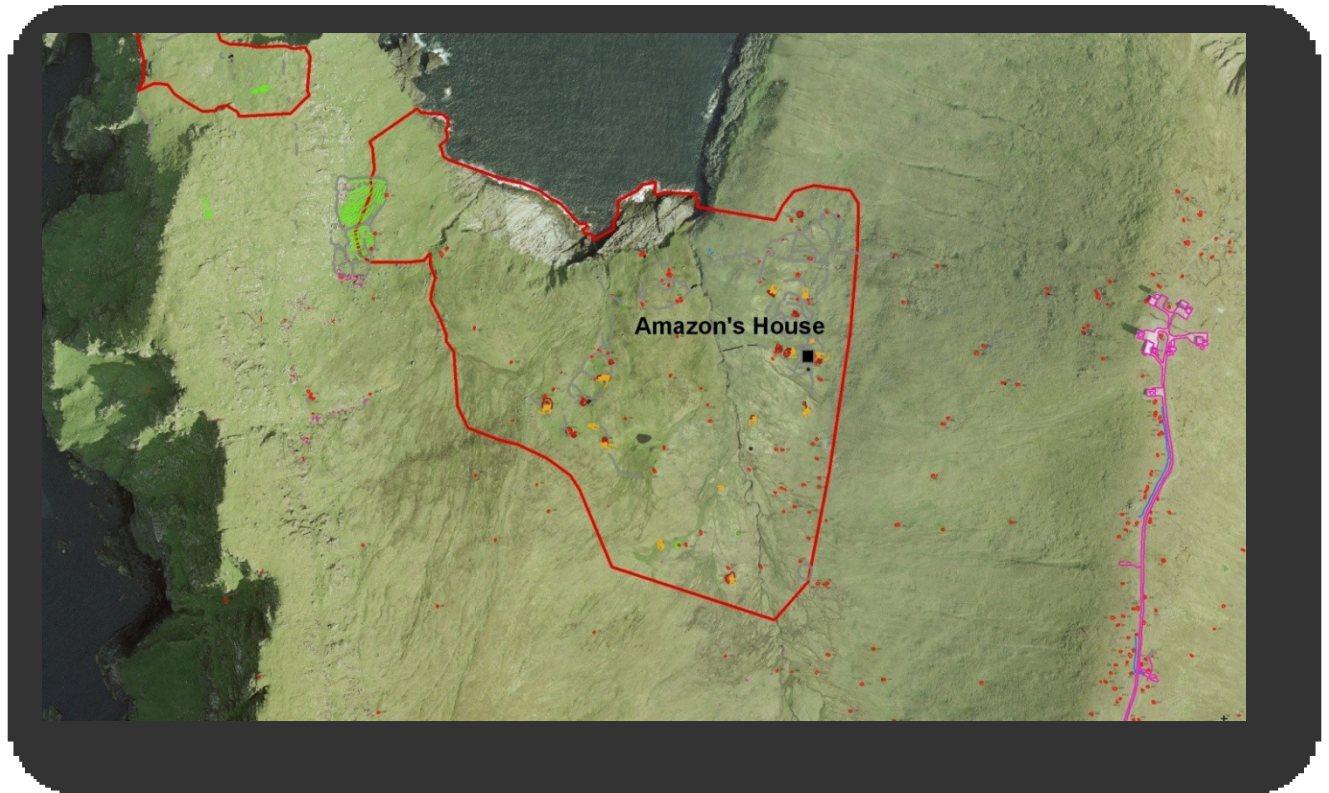


Figure 6 The scheduled area in Gleann Mór. Air photograph licensed to RCAHMS for PGA, through Next Perspectives.

Scheduled area © Crown Copyright, all rights reserved 2011. Line work © RCAHMS.

The archipelago was bequeathed by the 5th Marquis of Bute to the Trust after his death in August 1956, and finally accepted by them in 1957. Immediately thereafter a lease was agreed with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) 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 and its successor bodies, while the Trust, advised by the Ministry of Works, and later Historic Scotland (HS), managed the upstanding structures in Village Bay; the Trust and HS have had a formal Management Agreement since 1996. Since 2003 the Trust has managed all aspects of the care of St Kilda, in partnership with the MoD, Scottish Natural Heritage, HS 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 features are currently part of the more formal programme of conservation works undertaken by the Trust each year.

The Trust has been through a period of great change over the last decade, perhaps brought on by the difficulty in balancing between 'quality' and 'sustainability' – with effects on both staffing and funding.

St Kilda has certainly been affected – by the loss of the full-time regional archaeologist, by the loss of the head of archaeology and by the rapid turnover within the St Kilda Archaeologist post — 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.

The disciplines of archaeology and conservation have of course developed hugely since the Trust took over St Kilda in the 1950s and both now have many facets, specialities and theoretical approaches – specialist conservation management is just one example. Recently, Fleming (2005) and others (eg Lawson 2007) have begun to change some of the theoretical assumptions concerning St Kilda so that the twin pillars that govern the management of St Kilda’s cultural heritage, namely the theory of conservation and the interpretation of the historical evidence, are now seen as dynamic rather than static. An aspiration to complete a Conservation Statement for the Amazon’s House is set out in the Trust’s draft Management Plan for 2011-2016 (2010, 56). The statement was prepared in response to both specific threats to the building, including partial collapse, and the need to adhere to conservation best practice.

In one interesting example of the history of conservation management, Fraser (2000) has demonstrated how manipulative, complex and argumentative theoretical debates can become, and how fruitless inactivity can be. But to this author at least, it seems clear that we must try to be aware of our underlying theoretical assumptions and focus on long term ‘sustainability’. More often than not, this requires a cautious and resource efficient approach, erring towards minimal intervention, and biased towards simplistic rather than complex solutions to interpretative and conservation issues.

Summary of previous descriptions — see Appendix 2

Martin's description of the Amazon's House, first published in 1698, is crucial to our understanding of the use, age and function of the building and it provides the only record of the mythology of the female heroine. Despite the long experience of some authors of the 18th century, descriptions vary little, and it appears that Martin's account was considered authoritative. Martin's reference to the Amazon of Greek mythology tells us more about his awareness of European culture, and it is almost certainly the case that the story of the female heroine has its root in Gaelic stories, and characters like the Mulletach and Scáthach.

It is striking that Martin provided no comment on comparisons and, in general, his writing includes little on 'older' forms of building, such as drystone shielings and blackhouses which would have been prevalent at the time – indeed shielings barely receive a comment in his description of the Western Isles, despite the large amount of historical and archaeological evidence of shieling in that area through the 17th century¹.

Beginning with Muir in 1858, there were attempts to provide more rationalised descriptions including measurements and, at least in the case of Thomas, there was a parallel effort to understand the meaning behind the stories recorded by Martin, and to place the building in the context of other discoveries in Scotland. It wasn't until this second period of interest that it was suggested that the building may be more than a century old, and it was at this time that it was first conceived and presented as an ancient and significant ruin. Muir's excavation must have taken only a matter of minutes in his day; as recorded in the anonymous publication of 1872, it was very full indeed! The strike-a-lights he discovered may or may not be prehistoric, but the context of their discovery, and the context of their use on St Kilda, is not understood. The sketches provided by Muir suggest that the building could have been altered slightly in the later 19th century, although the difference in the shape of the cell that is still roofed must surely reflect the inaccuracy of the sketch.

Heathcote's perspective view from 1899 captures the good condition of the building, despite the stone robbing mentioned by Sands, while his writing exaggerated and embraced a view of the building as both ancient and mythical, and expressed pleasure that it had not been molested by 'the pick axe and shovel of the archaeologist' (1900, 17). Mathieson's description, nearly 30 years later, indicated that one or two of the cells were dilapidated by that stage, and it is arguable that maintenance and use of structures in the glen tailed off rapidly in the 20th century.

The change in the status of the islands in 1957 heralded a great surge of writing, and the publications of the prolific author and ornithologist Williamson, in particular, brought the structures of Gleann Mór to the attention of a wider public. His presentation of the glen centred on the concept of a pastoral

¹ Free to view online versions of Martin Martin's books are now available through Google books, making it easy to search by keyword.

prehistoric community and an architectural development from simple buildings, such as the gathering folds, which he believed were prehistoric houses, to complex forms such as the Amazon's House. The only serious challenge to Williamson's analysis was Macgregor's paper, which was published in a specialist journal, and reached a much smaller audience. The excavation of the Amazon's House by O'Dell in 1958, perhaps undertaken with the hope of discovering another St Ninian's hoard (O'Dell 1957; 1959), were not adequately recorded.

Fifteen years later, another geographer employed by the Trust, Cottam reinterpreted the structures of Gleann Mór, reversing Williamson's sequence and putting forward a thesis of indigenous development, but with comparison's far along the western seaboard. The summary of his reports, published in 1979, influenced many writers in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite undertaking fieldwork since 1977, Harman's work did not reach fruition until 1997, although her input into the RCAHMS volume published in 1988 was significant. At that time, this was the first publication that represented a major investment in field work, and the first project to benefit from the advice, if not the field observations, of experienced archaeologists; the treatment of Gleann Mór is considerably more detailed than previous work and the authors were careful to suggest that a date in the late medieval period fitted the balance of evidence.

Most recently, archaeological writers have looked to structures found in the Western Isles that have been dated to the second half of the first millennium AD. Different examples of these cellular buildings do exhibit broadly similar plan forms, but the context and condition in which they survive, plus the difference in evidence for the character of roofing, throws considerable doubt on the analogy. It is only with excavation that we will be able to progress from the assessment put forward by RCAHMS in 1988; that we have to rely on the historical record which suggests that the Amazon's House is around four hundred years old, and that it was a shieling hut, used in the 17th and probably the 18th century.

Perhaps the most important thread in the historical discourse has been the persistent idea that Gleann Mór is somehow 'different', and that it cannot therefore be seen simply as part of the cultural system used by a community based in Village Bay. There has been a strong reluctance to describe and understand the glen as a landscape which was inhabited and used by the St Kildan community which we know relatively well from photographs and writing produced after c1830. So strong is this perception, that it is difficult to point to any structures in the glen that are consistently understood by authors or visitors as either built by or used by the St Kildans of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Actually however, there is strong circumstantial and direct historical evidence that the glen was a busy occupied place in the summers of the 17th century onwards, full of sheep and cattle, and inhabited by a group of villagers, younger women and/or children from Village Bay. The handful of later photographs demonstrate climbing for birds or eggs, milking of sheep, transporting of turves (which had to be cut), and craft work like knitting. It is fascinating that this aspect of St Kilda's post-medieval culture and the use of the glen has been so thoroughly set aside by many authors, who have looked instead for a distinct and 'lost' culture. Searching for a romantic ideal affected by the allusion to classical mythology used by 19th century polymaths, 20th century authors have driven to create an idea of a 'pastoral community' in the distinct past – while choosing to ignore the mixed economy farmers of recorded history, who used Gleann Mór every day as part of the annual cycle of their farming regime.

Understanding the place – new comparisons

We know from Martin's testimony that the Amazon's House, and probably some of the other cellular buildings in Gleann Mór, was occupied seasonally in the 17th century for the purpose of shieling. We know that this practice died out on Hirta, probably in the later 18th century or early 19th century, and we can assume that the cellular structures were then perhaps used intermittently as shelters and stores until the late 19th century, when they were disused and robbed of stone for cleit building.

Probably from the early 18th century, the people using the glen also constructed small gathering folds with attached cleits which were used to shelter lambs, and we can see that some of these were replaced and repaired, and that some are contemporary with parts of the system of enclosures. The folds tend to be appended to the cellular mounds, and in some cases overlie them, although we shouldn't discount the possibility that the practice of shieling recorded by Martin, and the use of the folds occurred contemporaneously.

The lower part of the glen is covered with enclosures and lines of walling, some of which (at the far N-W) enclose cultivation remains presumed to be 18th century, but the majority are of unknown age or function. Individual elements of this system are demonstrably related to stock control, as they tie into the gathering folds, and others cannot be seen as cultivable, as they enclose rough stony ground. There is also distinctive lack of both cultivation ridges and lynchets, especially in comparison to the remains of the prehistoric field system in Village Bay that is characterised by small enclosures with well-developed soil profiles. The recent RCAHMS survey of the W side and N end of Gleann Mór has uncovered further evidence for enclosures and stretches of walling which appear to relate to the structures found there. It is not clear whether the walling relates to the early 'Amazon's House' type structures, or to the gathering folds, but it appears to be more simplistic than on the E side, perhaps reflecting a shorter or less intensive period of use.

Recent field survey by RCAHMS has also recorded unusual structures around Gleann Mór that are located far down steep slopes, or along exposed paths, which surely cannot be seen as domestic, but fit in well with the pattern of cellular plan building seen in the Hebrides. Site number [NA00SE 12](#), for example, is located on very steep S facing slopes, among boulders (Figure 52). There are others, including [NF09NE 133](#), which is located on Carn Mor below Mullach Bi, with a similar cellular plan. They demonstrate clearly that, on St Kilda at least, one cannot equate an 'archaic' cellular plan with domestic use, or indeed a date in the first millennium AD.

Previous authors have generally suggested comparable sites on the basis of their plans alone, with some allusion to use of corbelling but they have not illustrated the buildings side by side and it is has always , therefore, been difficult to imagine whether they really are similar in plan form. Comparisons have not, in general, been extended to the position, context, function and super-structure of the buildings. A recent example is Mier's statement that Gleann Mór's 'complex clusters of remains bear affinities with the building traditions of Iron Age wheelhouses'. This is an explicit and distinct comparison with a type of Later Prehistoric structure found in the Western Isles, a comparison that is simply not justifiable in

anything but the broadest sense. As has been demonstrated above, such parallels that have been put forward, not only in the 19th century but right through to the present day, can be shown to be inappropriate on a number of grounds. The broadest comparisons, to sites such as Skara Brae and Chysauster (Figure 7, Cottam 1979), simply hold no water, although it is useful to think of St Kilda's buildings as part of the building traditions of the Atlantic's coastal fringe.

In contrast to the approaches of previous authors, I would argue that it is important that any exploration of the meaning and character of archaeological sites of Gleann Mór moves from the known to the unknown. Before we can establish the use of the glen in the early or later prehistoric periods, we need to understand its use in the medieval and later periods, and, in order to do this, we need to clarify the nature of the shieling occupation in the 17th century. As stated by RCAHMS in 1988, the Amazon's House must first be seen and understood as a shieling of c1600. For a detailed and illustrated discussion of examples of shielings, please see the 'comparative sites' section of the conservation statement for Calum Mór's House (Geddes 2011).

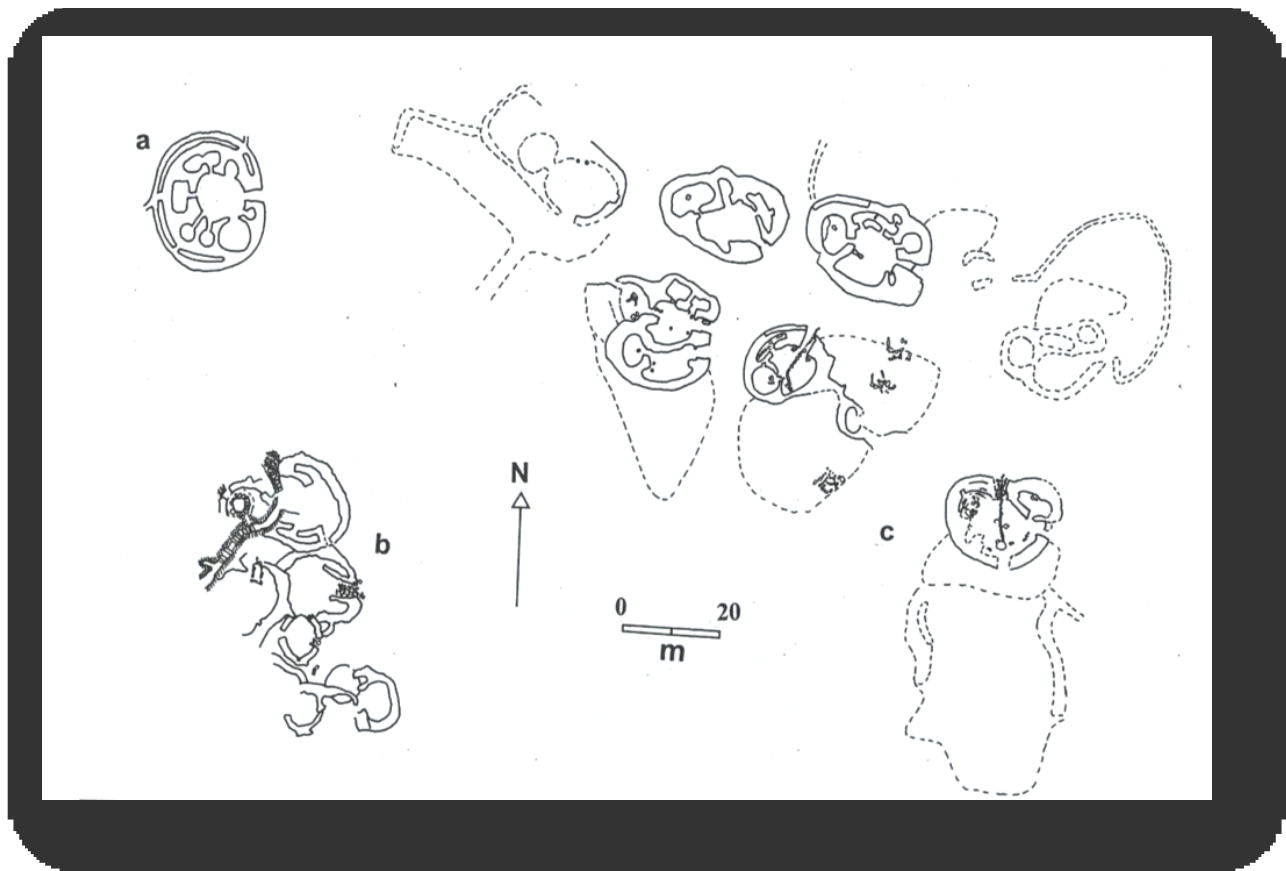


Figure 7 Unenclosed and enclosed sites in Wales and Cornwall: a) Llanllechid, Caernarvon (after Hencken 1933, b) Carn Euny, Cornwall (after Christie 1978) and c) Chysauster, Cornwall (after Hencken 1933) (Gilmour 2000, fig 37)

Understanding the place – description

Archaeology of the location

Gleann Mór is a U-shaped valley with a small central burn, Abhainn a' Ghlinne Mhoir, that flows almost directly to the N, terminating at the cliff edge. It is flanked by hills to the E and W, and by a lower ridge to the S, at about 230m OD. At its greatest extent, the glen is about 1.3km in length and about 1.2km in width. The majority of structures are located in the lower, northern reaches of the glen, below the 100m contour.

The upper limit of the glen is marked by a long turf and stone dyke, probably intended to stop cattle, or possibly sheep, from leaving the glen. Moving down the glen to the N, there are a few cleits in the upper reaches on all sides, but the great majority lie on the direct route between the pass over to Village Bay and 100m contour in the glen, and were probably used to dry and store turf and peat.

Below the 100m contour, there a large number of gathering folds or *Buailtean Chrothaidh*, characterised by one or two walls, perhaps reduced to footings, that converge on a small fold or enclosure, which is in turn surrounded by roofed cells, usually three in number. 19th century writers noted that these folds were used as a method of controlling the sheep flocks, by separating off the lambs, and folding the ewes for milking. The folds vary in size, shape and complexity, and it is unlikely that they were all built or used in the same generation. It has proved difficult to find similar structures elsewhere in Scotland, and it may be that they were developed as a specific response to both the topography of St Kilda, and the breed of sheep, which, until the 19th century at least, were probably Dunface or Scottish Shortwool sheep relatively similar to the well-known Soay sheep – which are notoriously difficult to round up or catch. Slightly similar structures attached to the deer traps in Rum have yet to be fully recorded ([NM39NW 55](#), [NM39NW 56](#)), but apart from this there are no readily apparent parallels.

The converging walls, referred to as 'horns' since the 1950s, take sheep that were being driven with the lie of the land: from the head of the glen to the S (Structures A-E); along from the broad NW slopes of Mullach Mor to the NE (Structures F-I, K, O-P); and, in one case, from the NE as well (Structure M). A detailed analysis of the field banks that have been mapped in the glen demonstrates that some at least are extensions to this system; helping to direct the sheep towards the gathering folds, sometimes from a great distance. Some other enclosures, around Structure K for example, may also have been intended to fold animals.

It is reasonable to argue that all of the enclosures and walls that have been constructed around the folds on the W side of Gleann Mór, if not a proportion of those on the E, are related to the management of sheep, rather than to cultivation. It is presumed in this view that many of the field walls were topped with turf to a height that would make them more of an obstacle for sheep.

However, the greatest density of enclosures and isolated field walls lies along the E slope of the glen, and they appear to be of more than one phase, and perhaps even of more than one function. It is

important to reiterate that there is little evidence for soil accumulation, in the form of lynchets, or as raised beds – features that are very common among the Village Bay field system. Equally, there is no evidence for cultivation ridges, which are apparent outside the Village both at An Lag, and at the far NW of Gleann Mór, in an enclosed field ([NA00SE 13](#)) – both of which were cultivated by people living in Village Bay (Harman 1997, 92).

The glen is also dotted with the remains of cellular buildings, usually built in more substantial masonry than the cleits or the folds, and constructed within a mound that has been completely covered by stone and turf. Many underlie gathering folds, and the recording of these two quite different types of structure has generally been conflated. In addition to the twenty structures labelled by Williamson, Davidson and Cottam in succession, perhaps twelve betray evidence of earlier cellular structures, the best preserved of which are the two roofed cells of Structure F including the Amazon's House. The worst preserved are visible only as foundation courses, the majority of the stone having been robbed for adjacent cleits and/or gathering folds. At Structure A, D, and T there is only the slightest hint of earlier structures. There is little to suggest that these structures are anything other than very broadly contemporary and the similarity between the number of structures in Gleann Mór and the number of families recorded in later documents is likely to be fortuitous. In some cases, but by no means all, these buildings are found in close association with field walls and enclosures, although the stratigraphic relationship is unclear. As mentioned above, some of these cellular buildings are likely to be related to stock control, while others, particularly on the E side, may relate to previous cultivation regimes.

Finally, there are a group of amorphous and difficult to date structures that include rock shelters and a group of buildings on the steeper ground near the shore. As mentioned above, these are unlikely to relate to any form of arable cultivation – the ground is steep, uneven, rocky and often covered in salt spray. They may relate to stock enclosure, or seabird (great auk?) or seal hunting, or they may even have been used as boat shelters – without excavation it is very difficult to tell.

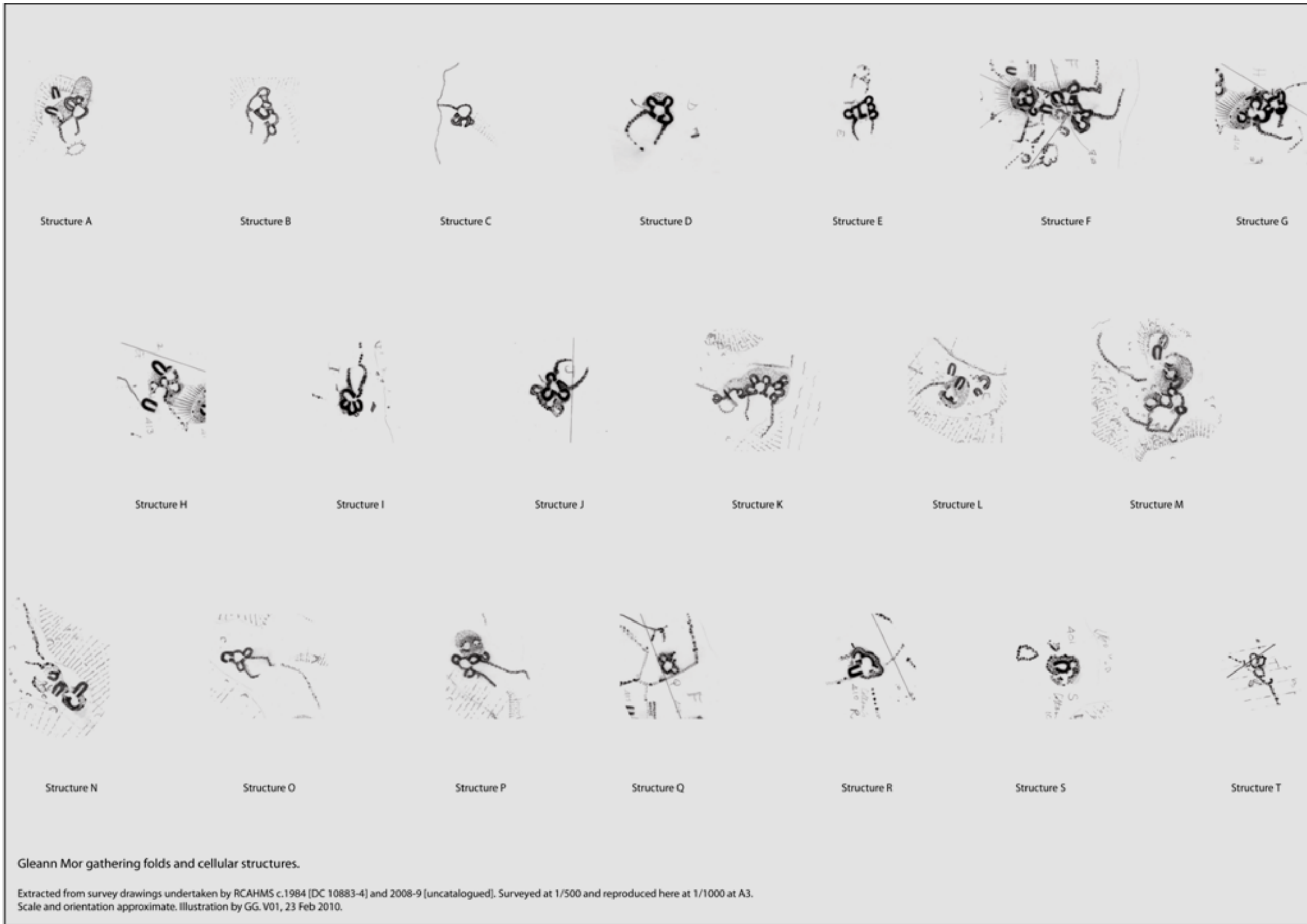


Figure 8 at A3. Glenn Mór comparative plans © RCAHMS

The building itself

Known collectively since the 1950s as 'Structure F', the group consists of two distinct cellular mounds, a gathering fold (with three associated cells), an open 'horned' enclosure, and cleits. The W cellular mound, the Amazon's House itself, consists of one drystone structure with four cells, of which one is still roofed. A later building (cleit 416) partly overlies this mound at the SE. Both the cellular mounds are noted in the RCAHMS Canmore database as NA 00 SE 2 (west) and NA 00 SE 17 (east). The equivalent record in the Western Isles Sites and Monuments Record is ID 11, which covers the whole of Structure F. Aspects of this report cover both the 'gathering fold' and the group of 'Amazon's House' or cellular buildings, but this technical description, and the technical notes on conservation that follow address only the western structure, known as the 'Amazon's House'.

Looking at the Amazon's House in detail, there is evidence of what may have been an earlier entrance on the W side of the mound. On the N flank of the mound, an outwardly splayed entrance, 0.48m wide, leads into a small ovoid cell which is 1.7m in length and retains the remains of a corbelled roof (A). In the W sector there is a short passage, now blocked by fallen stones, which formerly gave access to a large oval cell 2.7m in maximum length. A surviving 1.67m stretch of wall-face in the N sector, coupled with the amount of fallen stone in the interior, shows that the cell was probably corbelled. This stony debris conceals an entrance to a passage on the S side which communicates with a third cell, a large lintel and parts of the jambs still being visible. This cell is almost circular on plan, 1.22m in diameter, and its corbelled walls rise to a height of 0.99m. In the E sector of the main central cell, there is an entrance to a fourth cell, also of ovoid plan and measuring 1.93m in length. The walls are corbelled and the crown of the roof is 1.58m above floor-level. Above the door-lintel there is a 'window' or gap 0.46m wide and 0.21m high, which may have allowed light and heat from the main cell into this, subsidiary, cell.

Around the base of the mound, especially on the S side, there are visible traces of slightly battered wall-face, though the regularity of this should not be over-emphasised.

A photographic survey was undertaken as part of this project. The accompanying plan indicates the positions of the photographs, which will be provided on a compact disc (Figure 9).



Figure 9 at A3. Plan showing the location and direction of photographs taken during the November 2011 survey © RCAHMS

Assessment of significance

Introduction

This assessment of significance is designed to help clarify decision-making by providing a framework and comparative assessment of the importance of different facets of the Amazon's House. Beginning with a re-iteration and critique of the over-arching statements of significance for the archipelago, this section explores some of the underlying thinking that has typically driven the literature. A simplified methodology is suggested and the results are presented as a table, a short general statement and a more in-depth description. The intangible elements of St Kilda's heritage included here are of crucial importance and the wider resource may merit a dedicated conservation statement.

The context

The statement of outstanding universal value in the Management Plan (Trust 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 in 2004. Both the management plan and the preceding documents are imbued with a particular and emotive view of St Kilda's importance that is most easily understood through a typical example:

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 other islands, 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 19th-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 17th century to the time of the abandonment, which provides the means to appreciate and understand the other main qualities*

It is interesting to note that the elements that were drawn out as *most* significant tend to focus on perceptions ('remoteness', 'spectacle', 'vivid'), the story of change, the documentation and the 19th century crofting landscape. These can perhaps be separated into two themes — the material (archaeology, documents, photographs) and the conceptual (dialogues of change, perceptions).

The views expressed in these official documents have been phrased with a specific purpose in mind — sometimes to achieve a practical aim or to provide a unifying theme to aid discussions about the management of change. They are not beyond a critical assessment and, in most cases, were not written with the aim of improving St Kilda's status and, consequently, its exposure, management and funding.

Recent academic work by Fleming (2005), much of which was undertaken at about the same time that this management level consensus was developed, has served to challenge our understanding of St Kilda's importance. His thesis is designed to upset our understanding of St Kilda's history as a simplified story, even a Greek tragedy. 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, a point that has always been clearer to the local communities.

This perspective has yet to be fully absorbed by the contemporary communities that engage with St Kilda, and much of the dialogue of management and value is still imbued with fundamental assumptions about value. Because of this, the well-known changes that happened in 18th and 19th century St Kilda (not to mention those that happened earlier) tend to be presented as processes that happened **to** the community, rather than processes with which they were actively engaged: this has a fundamental effect on how physical aspects of the island landscape are valued.

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)
 - eg the evacuation of the island is seen as an inevitable consequence of negative external pressure
- Reductionism
 - eg the historic community is portrayed as sustainable, idyllic and unique
- Simplicity
 - eg 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 Historic Scotland's SHEP, which was developed after wide consultation. As with any cultural heritage resource management exercise, the subject becomes

dynamic and changeable during the process. Intrinsic values do not tend to change over time (eg the layout of a building) but associative significances in particular (eg with characters and events whether contemporary or past) can change during the process of research and discussion.

Methodology

A table of significance was developed using the overarching and detailed guidance provided by SHEP (2009, 64-65), 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.

Table of significance

Value theme	Value type	Subject	Level	Scale
Intrinsic	Interest and research potential	Large public interest, potential academic interest, part of a group of well-preserved medieval shielings	Considerable	National
	Condition	One cell within the Amazon's House is still fully roofed.	Considerable	National
	Age	The main cellular building dates to at least 1600AD	Exceptional	National
	Story of physical changes	The Amazon's House was probably built in a number of phases, and the group has been added to over time with the other cellular building, the fold and cleits	Some	Local
	Story of functional changes	The abandonment of the shieling system in the 18 th century is an important part of the island's story. The change in use from shieling hut to later use, probably as a store, and then robbing for stone, reflects changes in the island's society.	Considerable	Local
	Architectural interest	Cellular form and its relationship to similar buildings, corbelling of the cell as a widely used technique in different contexts, the gathering fold and cleit	Considerable	National
Contextual	Rarity	A roofed and corbelled shieling hut with 17 th century historical associations	Exceptional	National
	Group value	Part of a landscape dotted with shielings, folds and walls that reflect the use of the glen as pasture from at least the medieval period, and display characteristics that are not common anywhere else	Exceptional	National
	Landscape and setting	Dramatic and 'wild' setting in a stunning landscape	Considerable	National
Associative	Importance to the nation's consciousness	Known as a place itself, the site forms an important part of St Kilda's famed landscape	Some	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	Reflects aspects of the local adaption of general shieling traditions	Considerable	Local
Importance to individuals	Archaeologists, artists, islanders	Some	Local
Close historical associations	Described in detail in the 1690s and related to a well-known folk tale	Considerable	National

General statement of significance

The Amazon’s House holds a unique place in St Kilda’s heritage, uniting the folklore of the island’s culture with the more prosaic element of a shieling ground. It has been of particular interest to visitors since the 1690s and has been described, planned and photographed many times over the ensuing 320 years. Part of a large group of cellular shieling huts in Gleann Mór, the building is the best preserved and, at a national level, is a very rare example of a corbelled ‘beehive’ hut. Dating from the 17th century or earlier, it survived both the impact of the smallpox outbreak, in 1727, and the huge changes of the Improvement period in St Kilda, beginning in the 1830s.

The survival of the building reflects a long history of maintenance and use, perhaps lasting to the late 19th century. It lies within a glen that was used intensively for the grazing of cattle and sheep into the 20th century. In addition, the Amazon’s House is part of a small group of buildings that includes cellular huts, cleits and a gathering fold — a mix of form and function that is unique to St Kilda and reflects the changing use of the glen and developing architectural traditions. The associated folklore of a female warrior links the building at a fundamental level to the pseudo-Christian mythology and beliefs of the 17th century community, and to the wider Gaelic cultural traditions of NW Scotland.

Key elements of significance

Intrinsic

The Amazon's House has long been viewed by visitors as one of the more interesting buildings on Hirta, in the main because of the story recorded by Martin and because of perceptions about age. The descriptions of the building have always come from writers who had been attracted to St Kilda as a broad topic or place to visit, and not from those who come specifically to see the Amazon's House. The majority of these writings have also come from enthusiasts and academics from disciplines other than field archaeology, and the development of ideas about the island's historic features could be researched to produce an interesting study of changing attitudes.

As part of a wider cluster of structures that include a gathering fold, another cellular structure and later cleits, the site provides an opportunity to ask specific questions about the date and function of key elements in the landscape of St Kilda. The structures in Gleann Mór provide evidence for a duality between the two glens that is rarely emphasised in writing about St Kilda, but one that may have been of great importance not only functionally but symbolically. The north glen tends to be ignored by many writers or portrayed as a separate place, perhaps occupied in 'distant times past'.

The building has deteriorated badly since the 1950s, when Atkinson took a useful suite of photographs. Having said that, the Amazon's House and the adjacent roofed cell are the best preserved of a large group in the glen, and they are both in remarkably good condition given their age. It is perfectly possible that similar huts survive in this condition in the Western Isles, but it is unlikely that their date can be assessed with any certainty. The survival of roofed cells from the late medieval period is very rare.

A cautious assessment suggests that the Amazon's House may be a 16th or 17th century shieling, probably rebuilt on the foundations of a building with a similar function, but there remains the possibility that it sits atop a domestic building of the Early Historic or Medieval period, and within a system of enclosures that may reflect either a temporary or long-term history of farming, perhaps including cultivation. Either way, excavations of similar structures in the Western Isles suggests that opportunities for dating, either through typology or scientific methods, should exist.



Figure 10 St Kildan women knitting on An Campar, looking over Gleann Bay. Note the climbing rope lying on the grass.

000-000-570-172-R © Scottish Life Archive. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk

Contextual

Placing the Amazon's House in its regional context is challenging as it requires an almost complete change in how we perceive the building and its place in the past of St Kilda and further afield. We have all been introduced to the building as some form of later prehistoric house.

Thinking of it rather as part of a shieling group, of the 17th century, we can demonstrate that this is still a very rare survival, as the structures of similar type that do exist in the Western Isles are neither of demonstrably similar date or in the same condition. The unusual additions of the folds and cleits, perhaps only found on St Kilda, just add to the rarity of the group.

The cellular buildings in Gleann Mór, of which the Amazon's House is the best preserved, demonstrate a suite of similar features and appear to respect each other spatially. They all appear to exhibit a chronology where the shieling huts are replaced with gathering folds and associated cells, and by recognisable cleits. The group of cellular buildings are an unusually well preserved and complex example of shieling archaeology that sits within a multi period landscape reflecting the use of the glen.

Lying within a stunning landscape but constructed as a turf and stone covered mound, the Amazon's House only becomes noticeable when one is relatively close, approaching as the great majority do, from the S route over from Village Bay. The building has a powerful aesthetic, which gives a feeling of great age, and a strong sense of a rural, if not 'primitive', culture. Our appreciation of this sense of place is helped by the partial collapse of the buildings and their abandonment, which provides what can only be described as an elusive but tangible sense of history and place.



Figure 11 St Kildan women holding the rope for a climber fowling on the E edge of An Campar. Possibly the same trip as depicted in the previous figure.

© National Trust for Scotland.

Associative

Although St Kilda itself certainly holds a place in the nation's consciousness, the Amazon's House is known mainly to those with an interest in the archipelago, whether professional or enthusiast. The folklore noted from the 17th century is a fantastic insight into the period and place, and the consistent record of the building through references into the present day provides an unusually complete description.

The building and its location are imbued with certain values which have developed after the abandonment of the glen for grazing, and of the island as home. For many contemporary visitors, Gleann Mór it is a place apart and one that is to some extent 'lonely' and 'bare', whereas Village Bay can almost appear warm and homely on a good day. These subjective assessments, though difficult to pin down, go some way to explaining the differences in the appreciation of the two glens. It is fascinating to think that, in all the pre-evacuation imagery of St Kilda, there are perhaps only three images of Gleann Mór, one of the milking of a ewe (Heathcote 1900, 76), and two of a group of women working on the E slopes of An Campar (Figure 10, Figure 11).

Values given to the Amazon's House have changed over time — the 17th century community espoused both a functional attitude to it — the building was used as a shieling hut — and a symbolic approach — it was linked to folklore. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, the writing, and the actions of the community, transformed over time until a stage where the building was viewed by visitors as a 'historic site', while members of the local community regarded it as a possible source of stone! These parallel changes may not be directly connected, but they do reflect an important movement in the social value of St Kildan buildings — from internal to external, from functional to 'symbolic', and from a symbolism rooted in Gaelic indigenous culture to a broader symbolism less rooted in place, and more connected to ideas of historical development within the nation as a whole.

Attitudes in the 20th century have been more varied, but it is clear that the writing of Williamson in the late 1950s, for example, is dominated by a sense of adventure, discovery and enquiry. For him, Gleann Mór is an exciting place to explore, and the writers coming after him have tended to embrace this mystery, making almost a conscious effort to avoid an interpretation of the building as a late medieval shieling, and instead looking to myth and legend, in Heathcote's case, or to far flung archaeological parallels. The concept that emerged during the 19th and 20th centuries sees the Amazon's House as an 'ancient enigma', and it is still dominant, despite the functionalist approaches of RCAHMS 1988 and Harman 1997.

Issues and vulnerabilities

Lack of knowledge, but not significance

Since the 17th century the Amazon's house has been a noted and appreciated monument, associated with both antiquity and mythology. What excavation there has been has added little to our understanding, and the accounts of the 20th century, though growing in complexity and sophistication, have not clarified the building's date and function; misunderstandings still prevail. Some of the assumptions about the age and complexity of the building have been challenged above, but this is not the same as a challenge on assertions about its significance. Indeed, putting the legal status of Hirta to one side, the Amazon's House is an extremely important survivor, and a vital link to pastoral practices in an often overlooked area of the island that was crucial to the St Kildan community.

Following the best practice of the day, our efforts to sustain or increase the significance of the building will involve the pursuit of 'knowledge', in the broadest sense. Realising that this need not involve much in the way of invasive work, on this the most well-known of the Gleann Mór structures, frees us to imagine tackling specific and focused questions that consider the use of the glen, while allowing us to conserve the authenticity and patina, and the story of abandonment and decay, embedded in the physical fabric.

Physical Intervention

Like many historic structures, one of the greatest threats to the Amazon's House can come from *us*: the heritage professionals. St Kilda has been viewed in many different ways by individuals and groups, and the tension between them has brought about results that are difficult to predict – who would have thought in 1930 that St Kilda would become a Cold War asset, or a World Heritage Site? Some of this history has resulted in change to both the physical remains on the island, and our views of them. The greatest impacts can perhaps be separated into those of the military, and those of the conservation community. With the best intentions, both groups have favoured a concept which one might call 'positive intervention', and it is fair to say that this has resulted in a great deal of what can most simply be seen as 'tidying up' in Village Bay. The danger of this approach is that it removes precisely the characteristic that is valuable about a historic place – the sense of the passage of time, of change, of degradation (and renewal), and of authenticity – what might be described as a 'patina'. Furthermore, it changes the character of the buildings into museum pieces to be viewed, rather than dynamic places with which to interact.

Because of this pattern of thinking, archaeological and architectural conservation works in Britain are commonly driven, not by the needs of the building or archaeological site (if one can personalise them in that way), but by the need of a community, or the availability of peoples energy, funds and time. This mixture of influences can lead to a very specific form of decision making where sustainability, and, in particular, a 'conservative' approach, can be seen in a negative light.

It is our responsibility to be cautious in our interventions - doing the minimum to retain significance. There is so much we *can* do, in promotion, social research and education particularly, that makes use of funds and energy, but does not result in the loss of authenticity, ambience and patina.

Lack of tangible methods of accessing the past

Although Gleann Mór certainly has a strong sense of place, it is one that is dominated by a slightly claustrophobic and overbearing sense. The glen has a real sense of 'emptiness', of 'remoteness', 'quietness' and a sense of humans in thrall to nature. These feelings are important to grasp when thinking about St Kilda, but an equally important side, which is not really exposed, is the difficulty in getting a sense of the landscape as 'occupied'. If what we are interested in exploring is the culture of the island as it used to exist, we need to be exposed to, for example, cheese made from the island's sheep, or cattle grazing in the glen; to the songs and culture that surrounded the practice of shieling, and the peat or turf fires that were so central to the community for so long. Though not perhaps a dominant feature in the glen, the experiences associated with seabird harvesting – risky climbing, smells, oil, eating birds, feathers everywhere etc, are also crucial parts of the island's story.

Although these ideas are difficult to express and think about, and to act on, it is arguable that we should start to find ways to introduce people to what living on St Kilda was actually like for the Gaelic community. In the case of Gleann Mór, we need to engage audiences with the idea that this glen was 'inhabited', and used as part of a mixed farming economy — it was not, for centuries until 1930, a solitary wild place filled with supposedly ancient ruins.

Drystone wall condition

The roofed cell of the Amazon's House is relatively stable, as are the upstanding sections of coursed stonework around the central cell. Of more concern is the continued collapse of the N, S and central cells, all of which are dragging the standing W wall of the roofed cell out of alignment and threatening its stability.

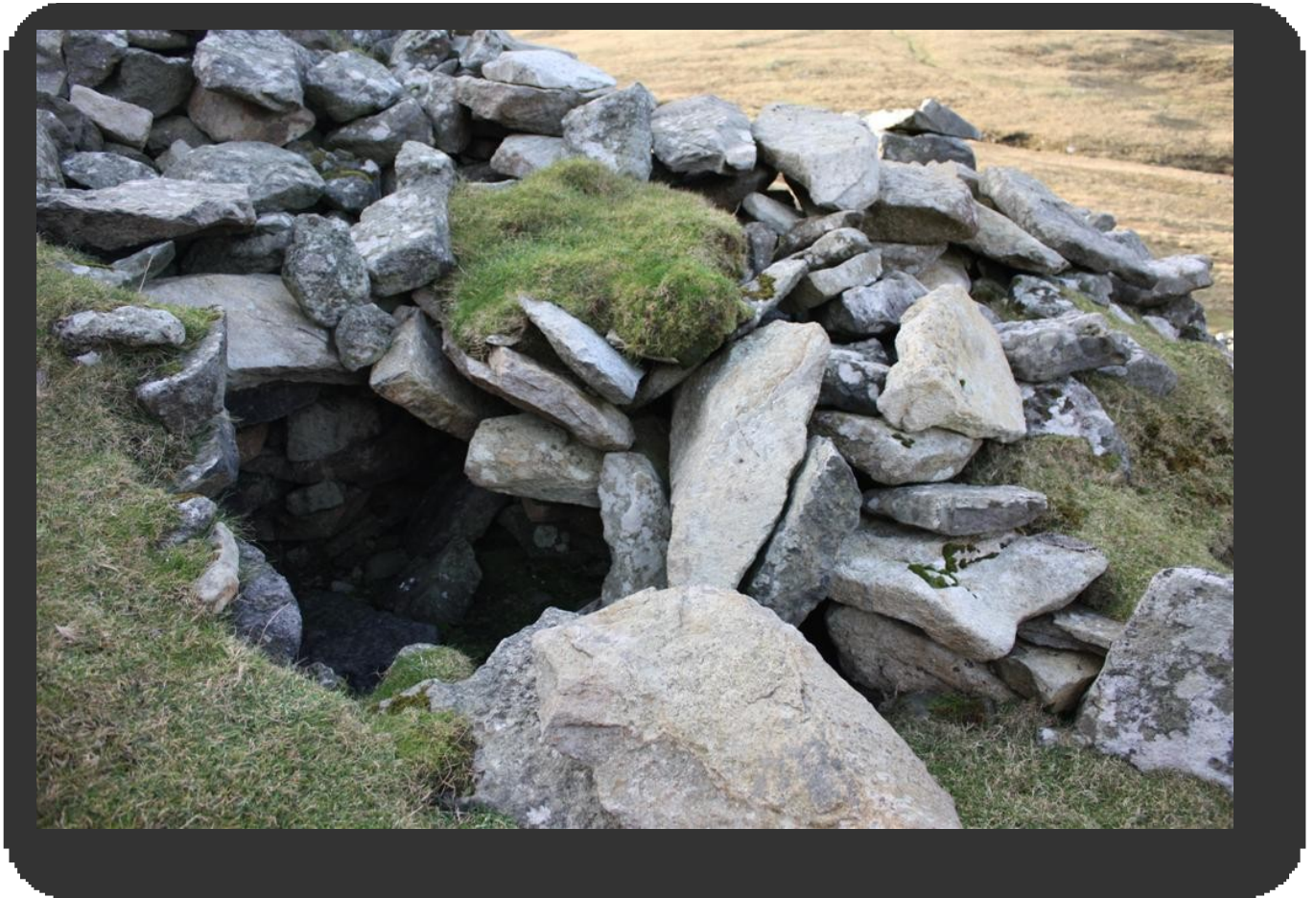


Figure 12 This photograph, taken from the N, is centred on the collapsing roof masonry of the N cell. . 1148-86 © RCAHMS.



Figure 13 The S cell, in the centre of the picture, has collapsed. The masonry on the left of the picture is still actively collapsing, and it may pull the W wall of the roofed cell down with it. 1148-188© RCAHMS.

The building's fabric can be split into three conditions: a) areas that are relatively stable b) areas that require re-turfing, which is considered to be a low impact intervention and c) areas that need the repair of stonework, which is considered to be a high impact intervention (Figure 17). Areas of collapse can also be stabilised with the addition of turf.

Type A – areas that need repairs to stonework

A1 The SW sector of the N cell.

A2 The lintel to the roofed (SE) cell.

A3 The single stone in the roof of the complete cell.

A4 The S sector of the central cell, and the N sector of the S cell.

A5 The end pier of the W wall of the central cell.

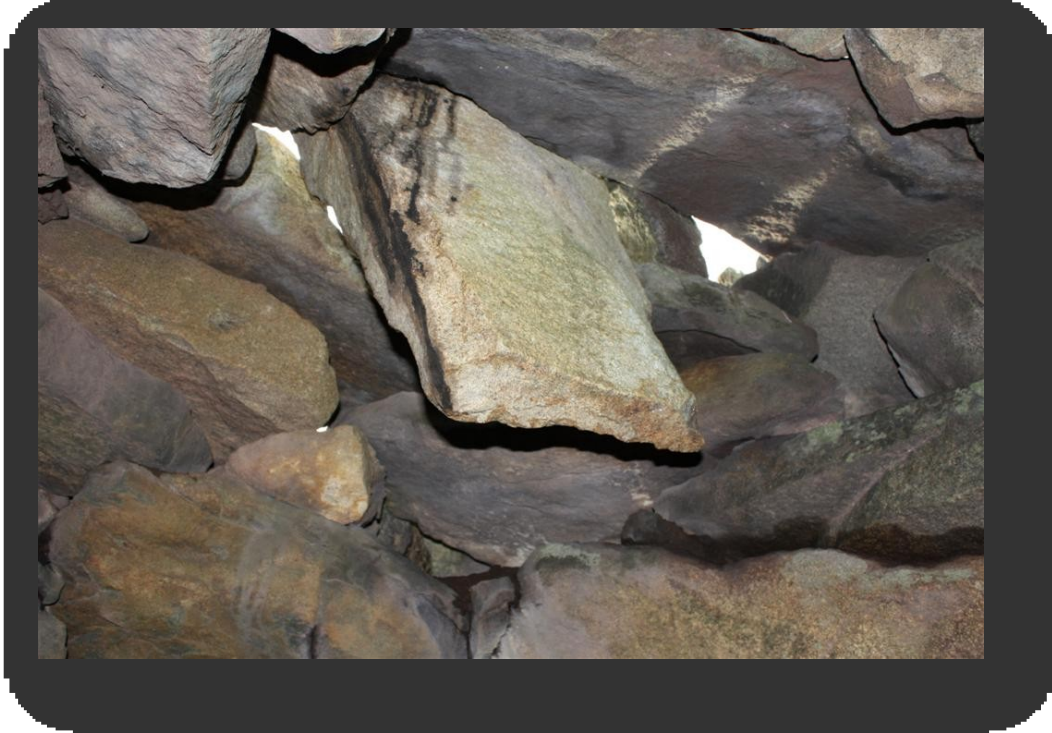


Figure 14 This suspended roof lintel needs to be set back into position. 1148-102 © RCAHMS.



Figure 15 The lower lintel is not adequately supported on the left hand (S) side. Fortunately, it is not bearing a great deal of weight. 1148-103 © RCAHMS.

Turf condition

The whole mound has been covered in a turf capping, which was probably maintained annually when the building was in use. In some areas, the turf is apparently healthy, though the vegetation is short. In others, it is actively eroding at defined edges and some extensive sections of the mound and the roofed cell in particular are no longer protected. The turf cap acts as a form of sacrificial protection as it absorbs the erosive power of wind and rain while protecting the stones beneath. Although it could be argued that the degradation of the turf is a natural process that reflects the abandonment of the site in the 19th century, in this case it has such an important functional and aesthetic role that renewal is justifiable. There is no evidence on St Kilda for the use of a clay substrate and the observations of the author suggest that the turf roofs were, in general, built up from stone and soil, with a cap of living turf sometimes with a few stones laid on top to help with wind protection. The turf cap is receding in a number of places, particularly on the most exposed top and N sides of the mound. The processes of degeneration of the turf cap are basically natural and it should be seen as an element of the building that is dynamic, and in need of regular maintenance.

Type B – areas that need to be re-turfed

B1 The exterior of the mound at the SW .

B2 The central spine of the roofed cell.

B3 The large area between the SE and N cells.



Figure 16 The roof of the Amazon's House cell. This area should be re-turfed. View from S. 1148-115 © RCAHMS.

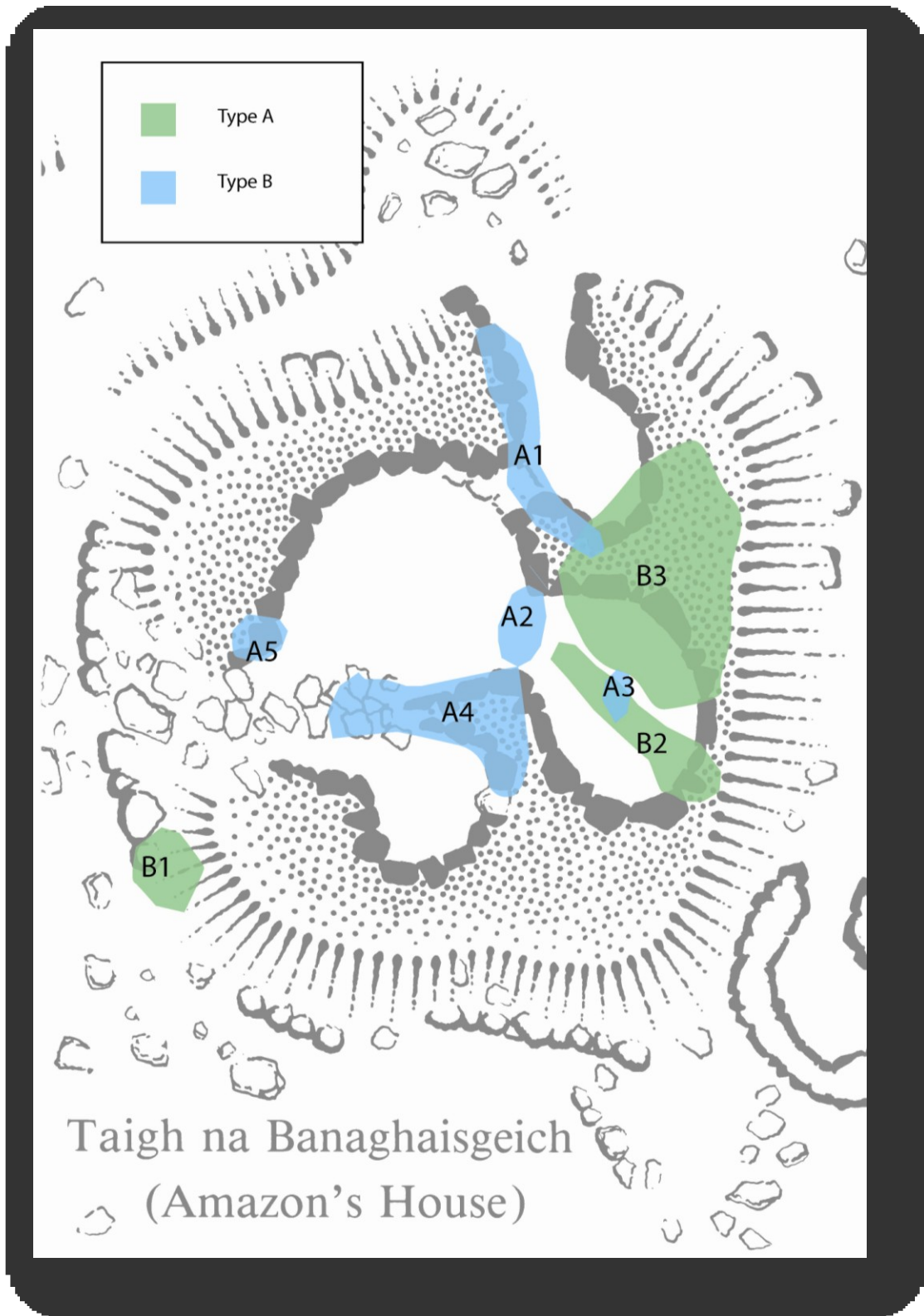


Figure 17 Specific areas with material issues, based on RCAHMS plan

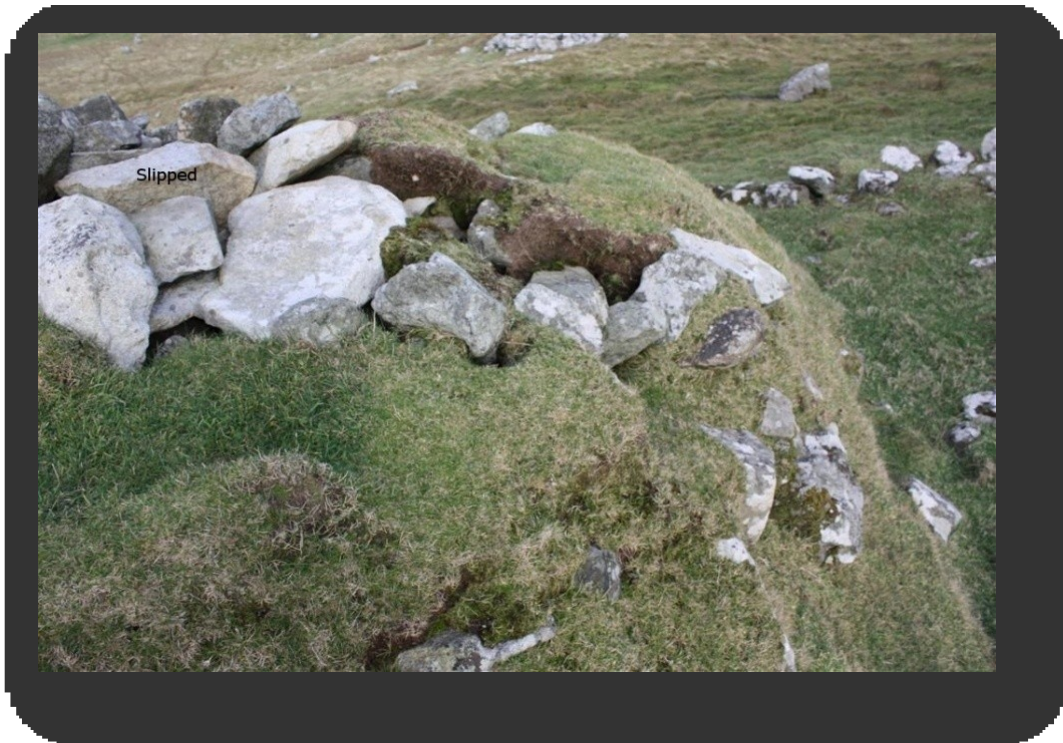


Figure 18 The top of the Amazon's House roofed cell. The annotated stone is hanging down into the interior and should be reset in the roof. This area should be re-turfed. View from S. 1148-116 © RCAHMS.

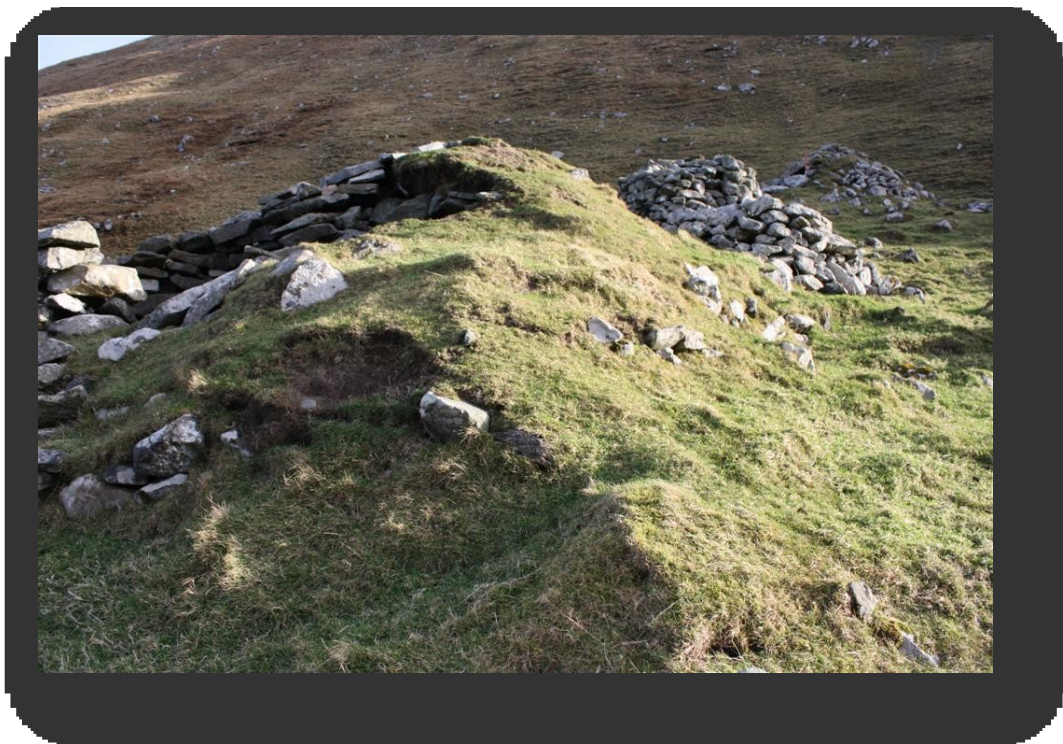


Figure 19 Turf erosion at the SW edge of the mound. 1148-80 © RCAHMS.



Figure 20 The large area between the SE and N cells that would benefit from a turf cap. 1148-120 © RCAHMS.

Actions

Some of the issues and vulnerabilities outlined in the previous section require rapid solutions, while others demand a more subtle 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

The Amazon's House is not an isolated structure, and it should be considered as the best preserved of a group of similar buildings in Gleann Mór. As noted above, there is great potential for research in the glen, and this is one of the main ways in which the building and the area are most significant. Our understanding of the use of the glen in the past is limited, and it does not seem that parallels from research in other parts of the Western Isles can provide many of the answers – we cannot simply apply a model from elsewhere.

It is important that we have both the courage and the confidence to undertake research. The questions we have to ask are interesting and important, the subject is fascinating, and we now have the expertise, technical skills and the *raison d'être*: the results will encourage the pursuit of knowledge through the testing of specific ideas or theories, and there will be a concomitant improvement in our management strategies.

Physically invasive research on the Amazon's House itself is not necessary at this stage, since the research questions can be explored through other buildings, and the conservation work can be undertaken without excavation.

The simple research questions that might be asked include:

Was the field system used for cultivation?

When was the field system constructed?

When were the gathering folds constructed?

When were the cellular buildings constructed?

When were the newly discovered curvilinear buildings at the foot of Gleann Mór constructed?

How was Gleann Mór used in the 19th century?

Who was the 'female heroine' of mythology?

We should also consider the possibility of undertaking research into the intangible values associated with St Kilda, Gleann Mór and the Amazon's particular. It is readily apparent that much of the significance of the building lies, not with its inherent historicity, but with the attraction that it has to modern communities near and far. It presents a very real opportunity to begin to grasp these values which are central to the future of the island and its management.

Immediate conservation work

There is a justification and requirement for immediate repair work on both masonry and turf elements of the building, detailed above. The issues highlighted above should be addressed by an experienced heritage professional, who has read this Conservation Statement in full, and who has a good working knowledge of St Kilda's history and archaeology. The building is too significant for the employment of either novice volunteers or unknown professionals, and the individuals that are used should ideally be known personally to the team that are managing the project. The staff should include an overseer who makes final decisions based on a rationale driven by conservation, rather than practicality in isolation. A programme of works should be begun as soon as possible, as there is a possibility of major collapse.

Major down takings of stone or turf should be specifically avoided, due to their impact on authenticity and patina, and stone work should be strictly limited to the problems highlighted above unless it is specifically agreed with the management team, or is forced by changes in the condition of the structure itself.

Re-pinning should only be undertaken where it is strictly necessary – i.e. where it is required to stabilise an element of the building. There is no clear evidence for the original character and density of pinning, and effort should be made to ensure that the character of the walling is not changed.

There is unlikely to be any need to bring in any stone from elsewhere.

Internal propping may be necessary, and the methodology for this must be agreed with Historic Scotland (Watt 2009).

A similar programme of repair work should be undertaken on the remaining roofed cells in Structure F i.e. cells of the gathering fold, the cleits and the easternmost roofed chamber.

Turf

Turf repairs should be undertaken in the areas outlined in Figure 18. The turfs should be taken from an area agreed by Historic Scotland, ideally one where the vegetation is similar to that currently growing on the mound. Individual turves should be as large as possible and they should be chamfered so that the edges are flush with surrounding stonework. Additional soil should be added underneath the turves, in preference to layering the turves. New turf should be laid at the beginning of the year, before the principal period of growth and before any significant periods of drought – the summer periods when work parties visit the island are almost certainly too late. Netting or fencing should be added if it is apparent from initial monitoring that sheep grazing is preventing the establishment of the turves.

There is no evidence on St Kilda for the use of a clay substrate, but soil should be used underneath turfs where it will help to provide a profile that sheds water easily.

Vegetation and sheep

Specific effort should be made to ensure that plant growth is retained on internal wall faces, and that turf and moss is retained on external ground level stones, contra Watt 2009. There is no evidence that this vegetation growth is causing a loss of delineation, and the vegetation growth indicates the age of the building, and demonstrates the character of the materials used in the original structure, which are all local and natural. The effect of grazing sheep on the structure should be monitored, and the roofed cells should be made inaccessible to sheep by stringing wire or wire mesh across the entrances. For an early and sensitive discussion of potential issues, see Williamson and Boyd 1960, 85.

Promotion

Although the Amazon's House is often mentioned in books about St Kilda, and is known to the residents, the volunteers that stay on the island, and specialists who are working there, the information that is available is often basic and sometimes inaccurate. Although we cannot be clear about the detail, we can certainly provide a simple statement that demonstrates that we know the building was built around 1600 or earlier, significantly earlier than most surviving buildings and that we know it was used as a shieling in the 17th century. The questions that exist, over its origins and the use of the surrounding field system, are interesting as well, and allow us to tell a story that is both informative and enigmatic.

A wide range of digital material is available for the Amazon'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 cellular buildings and gathering folds of Gleann Mór would be an important contribution to the debate.

Vision

The draft Site 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 (Trust 2010, 46-9):

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

The Vision is for St Kilda to continue to be renowned internationally 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; sensitive public access and interpretation.**

The archipelago will benefit from maintenance of 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 will be unrivalled, with St Kilda established as **a model for 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, Historic Scotland, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and the Ministry of Defence and its agents.

This vision is both inspirational and aspirational, and it can be complimented by more detailed statements which take account of the difficulties that the Trust has had over recent years, the difficulties in the economy of the UK and much of the western world, and the distinct possibility that the MoD will pull out of St Kilda within ten years, far less thirty.

Modest aspirations are achievable and sustainable, and a vision for the building that sees both knowledge and sustainability as its primary objectives can be both cost effective *and* forward thinking. Little has happened to the Amazon's House since 1930, and even less since 1957 – the dominant theme has been slow decay and partial collapse. At the same time, our general knowledge has improved, particularly through the series of excavations and survey projects undertaken in the Western Isles. Through a programme of conservation works (limited and monitored by an archaeologist), and a research project undertaken within the glen, it should be possible to stabilise the roofed cells of structure F, and to add greatly to our understanding of the archaeological sites of the glen. We can aspire to the dissemination of a deeper understanding of the history of the building, and a more balanced approach to the survival of the structures with the pursuit of research and conservation of mammals and seabirds. Crucially, the authenticity of the building, and the patina of the building will continue to endure.

We can also envisage the addition of more material through the internet to aid understanding, interpretation and enjoyment of the structure, whether this is videos of conservation work, historic imagery of St Kilda, or plans and descriptions or interactive media. If one believes in the power of 'experience', we can begin to explore the possibility of undertaking practical experiments or projects that help people interested in the island to understand the importance of pastoral and seabird farming to the island's identity.

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Appendix 1 Concordance tables

Williamson Letter	A	B	C	D	E	F	F(AMH)	G	H	I	J
Cottam No.	11	12	18	2	1	3	3	4	9	5	6
RCAHMS Numlink	294879	294880	294881	294882	294883	294884	3960	294885	294886	294887	294888
Published date of discovery	1958	1958	1958	1958	1958	1958	1697	1958	1958	1958	1958
Thomas Plan, 1862							Y				
Williamson Plan 1957	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y
Davidson Plan 1967	Y		Y	Y	Y			Y	Y		
Cottam Plan 1974						Y	Y				
Harman Plan (1997)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
RCAHMS Plans 1/100 1983-6		Y				Y	Y	Y	Y		Y
RCAHMS, 1983-6, 1:500				Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
RCAHMS DGPS survey 2007-9	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
RCAHMS 2007-9 1:100 Plans SRA											
RCAHMS 2007-9, 1:500 Plans SRA	Y	Y	Y								
Gathering fold	GF	GF	GF	GF	GF	GF		GF	GF	GF	GF
Cellular structure	Mound			Not noted, but see DGPS	Poss.	Cell	Cell	Cell	Cell		Cell

Williamson Letter	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	2288
Cottam No.	17	18	19	15	16	14	7	8	10	20	
RCAHMS Numlink	294889	294890	294891	294892	294893	294894	294895	294896	294897	296508	301431
Published date of discovery	1958	1958	1958	1958	1958	1958	1967	1967	1967	1973	2008
Thomas Plan, 1862											
Williamson Plan 1957	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y					
Davidson Plan 1967				Y			Y	Y	Y		
Cottam Plan 1974											
Harman Plan (1997)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y			
RCAHMS Plans 1/100 1983-6							Y				
RCAHMS, 1983-6, 1:500							Y	Y	Y	Y	
RCAHMS DGPS survey 2007-9	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
RCAHMS 2007-9 1:100 Plans SRA											
RCAHMS 2007-9, 1:500 Plans SRA	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y					Y
Gathering fold	GF	GF	GF	GF	GF	GF	GF	GF	GF		
Cellular structure	Cell	Cell	Cell	Cell		Cell		Cell	Cell	Poss.	Poss.

Appendix 2 Previous descriptions

1697—1900

The most important documentary reference for our understanding of historic St Kilda is undoubtedly Martin Martin's detailed account of 1697. The section describing the Amazon's House is repeated here in full, with original punctuation:

Upon the west side of this isle there is a valley with a declination towards the sea, having a rivulet running through the middle of it, on each side of which is an ascent of half a mile; all of which piece of ground is called by the inhabitants, The Female Warrior's Glen. This Amazon is famous in their traditions: her house and dairy of stone is yet extant; some of the inhabitants dwell in it all summer, though it be some hundred years old; the whole is built from stone, without any wood, lime, earth, or mortar to cement it, and is built in the form of a circle pyramid-wise towards the top, having a vent in it, the fire always being lit in the centre of the floor; the stones are long and thin, which supplies the defect of wood; the body of this house contains not above nine persons sitting; there are three beds or low vaults that go off the side of the wall, a pillar betwixt each bed, which contains five men apiece; at the entry to one of these low vaults is a stone standing upon one end fixed; upon this they say she ordinarily laid her helmet; there are two stones on the other side, upon which she is said to have laid her sword: she is said to have been addicted to hunting, and that in her time all the space betwixt this isle and that of Harris, was one continued tract of dry land. There was some years ago a pair of large deers' horns found in the top of Otervail Hill, almost a foot underground. 'Tis also said of this warrior, that she let loose her greyhounds after the deer in St Kilda, making their course towards the opposite isles. There are several traditions of this famous Amazon, with which I will not further trouble the reader

Martin 1934 412-3; Martin 1994 412-3; Martin 1999 244-5

Some elements of this description can be taken at face value but it is interesting to evaluate the nature of Martin's enquiries during his visit in 1697, and the influence that he may have brought to bear. In the first instance, we rely heavily on his translation from Gaelic to English; certainly he was a native Gaelic speaker and his English was excellent, but his translation of 'Female Warrior's Glen' is a very specific one, and we cannot be certain of the original. In his next sentence, 'This Amazon...', he introduces the mythological character which has henceforth been attached to the building, though it seems likely that the word was neither known nor advanced by the island's occupants. Martin was an educated man who had travelled in Britain and London, and was sponsored by Hans Sloane (1660-1753), then Secretary of the Royal Society; he would have been well aware of the Amazons of Greek mythology.

He goes on to note that the 'house or dairy is yet extant', not wishing to describe it exclusively as one or the other. His use of the term 'dairy' is interesting and it presumably comes from use of the building at the time he was writing as a shieling hut: 'they dwell in it all summer'. Elsewhere in the 'Description of the Western Isles', he mentions a number of examples of the use of summer pasture (eg 1999, 61), though the extent to which he does not describe the practice of shieling is in itself notable; is it possible that he thought it somehow uninteresting to his readers, or unworthy of mention?

We can be clear then that this building was used ‘all summer’ in 1697, and, since he describes the use of fires and sleeping, we can also be sure it was slept in overnight. The epithet ‘some hundred years old’ implies that it was a number of generations old, and we can infer from this that at least the roof covering and floor must have been maintained during this time. This repair and renewal is a more explicit necessity in vernacular buildings and sets them apart from Improvement period structures, where there is a movement away from high maintenance local natural materials such as turf, dry stone and mud floors to lower maintenance imported materials such as lime mortar, slate and dressed stone. A vernacular building is dynamic, not a fixed product of a certain build period.

Martin then goes on to describe the ‘body of the house’ and ‘three beds or low vaults that go off’, using their capacity to sit or sleep people as a guide to size. Each ‘bed’ is separated by a ‘pillar’, presumably a block of masonry separating the cells². The upstanding stone outside one cell sounds like a real feature (and is later depicted on the 1862 plan), and the story attached to it is specific and detailed – the description of weapons verify the idea of the ‘female warrior’, and are surely not the accoutrements of a dairymaid (see MacGregor 1960, 24).

The later part of his description focuses on the stories surrounding the ‘Amazon’, some of which he repeats: the first is that she was addicted to hunting; the second is that in her time it was dry land between Hirta and Harris; and the third is that she let her greyhounds loose on the deer of Hirta. Although deer hunting has a strong tradition in the Western Isles, and much is made of the hunt and the importance of it to status in Martin’s ‘Description’, there is no other evidence for a connection with deer and St Kilda, other than his own story of the discovery of ‘deer’s horns’. Although deer hunting was unlikely to be practiced here, there were certainly hunts of seabirds, seals, and even sheep (Harman 1997, 233), and Fleming has related how hunting trips may have been used by the steward and his retinue (2005, 71–2), not just to gather food, but as a form of ritual.

The reference to both hunting and ‘greyhounds’ (deer or wolf hounds, rather than the modern greyhound) brings the story into the gamut of Celtic mythology, where these are relatively common themes. Warrior women *are* known in Celtic mythology, examples including Scáthach, the Mulletach (Muir and Thomas 1862; Mackenzie 1932; Swire 1999) and Morrigan (Green 1997), and they are also commonplace in Norse mythology, as ‘shield maidens’ or as specific figures such as Sif, Freyja or Hveror, associated with battle and warfare. It is perhaps more likely then, that the root of the St Kildan ‘Female Warrior’ story lies here, in Celtic or Norse mythology, rather than in Martin’s analogy with the Greek Amazon, or Seton’s analogy with Diana of Roman myth (Seton 1878, 306; 2000, 224).

Alexander Buchan’s ‘A Description of St Kilda Alias Hirta’ was published in 1727 (and reprinted in 1752) and the fact that he added so little to Martin’s description (indeed he re-published large sections) may indicate that he held the original text to be both reliable and detailed. The text concerning the Amazon’s House is repeated in full, with no commentary (1974 [1752 edition], 46). Kenneth Macaulay, another minister to the St Kildans, produced a *History of St Kilda* in 1764. Despite the fact that some doubt has been cast over authorship (Harman 1997, 92), he provides a very detailed analysis of St Kildan culture, though little detail on antiquities, and the note that describes the Amazon’s House seems only to reiterate Martin’s account (Macaulay 1764, 28).

² The description of the ‘pillars’ and the choice of this word to describe the intervening walls probably sowed the seeds for comparison with Later Prehistoric wheelhouses, which feature freestanding and attached pillars in their construction. The plans are not actually comparable.

By the 1850s, the interest of scholars had settled temporarily on beehive houses, and Captain Frederick WL Thomas's 'Notice of Beehive Houses in Harris and Lewis', part of which was delivered in Edinburgh in May 1858, discussed surviving examples, noting the presence of some in St Kilda³. Of those who attended this meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Thomas S Muir (1802-88) was clearly influenced and his visit to St Kilda on 9th July may have been inspired by the talk:

On our way down from Conagra, we had inspected the *Amazon's* dwelling, which stands on the slope of the hill, on the S-E side of the valley. It is a low, rude, drystone building of irregular oval shape, scarcely distinguishable in general appearance from any of the innumerable little oblong cells which have been erected on the higher part of the island for storing and drying the fowls, etc. The roof is formed of a few turf-covered slabs laid across the converging walls, and has a vent in the centre sufficiently large to admit a person through it. At the west end of the house there is another square hole, close to the ground, but so small as hardly to serve the purpose of a doorway. Inside, the aspect of the cell, which measures 11 feet by 9, is also very rude, and without any interesting features. Within a step or two of the doorway, and standing a little to one side of it, is a short misshapen pillar, and there are three square-shaped recesses, or *beds*, as Martin calls them, in the thickness of the very thick walls, one at the E end, and two on the S side.

To indulge in any speculation regarding the origin of this roughly fashioned, yet in some sort curious building, would be only a misspending of words. Nevertheless, that it belongs to a very remote period, and was designed for human habitation, seem amply attested by the architecture and the internal arrangements; and these, and its situation in the softest and most hidden part of the island, are features which, in default of anything more certain, may naturally suggest connection with a time not much posterior to that of St Columba or his immediate followers, and when the infant population of Hirt was drawing its earliest instruction in the Christian faith from some holy messenger of the Word, who had come over from his distant Iona to seek a home among them.

Muir 1872, 21-2

Muir's description confirms that the main central cell was roofed at this time, with a high central opening, as well as an entrance from the W. The 'misshapen pillar' is presumably the one mentioned as part of the 'Amazon' story by Martin, confirming that this is, without doubt, a description of the same building. Muir, influenced by his knowledge of early ecclesiastical history and archaeology, tentatively implies a date in the 7th century AD, nearly one thousand years earlier than the date implied by Martin of c1600.

The next part of this period of discourse was in February 1859, when Thomas read the second section of his paper. He was able to add the following note citing Muir's knowledge:

From all I can learn, then, these dwellings only now exist in St Kilda, Borrera, the Flannan Isles, the parish of Uig in Lewis, and a few in Harris. A copy of a drawing of the one in St Kilda, by Mr Macdonald, the minister of Harris, is upon the table, and our zealous and active antiquary, Mr Mure, can tell us all about this "House of the Heroine" (or female warrior). The house on Borrera is well described in Macaulay's History of St Kilda, and I have named the Flannan Isles on the authority of Mr Mure.

Thomas 1862, 135

³ F W L Thomas (c1812-1885) was a naval officer, photographer and historian.

One most interesting facet of Muir's trip, which he gave little attention to in his paper, were the results of a little digging in Gleann Mór. He discovered, in the floor of a beehive hut, two small stones or strike-a-lights which he gifted to the Society (1862, 225). In his reading to the society in March 1859, he described the 'house' briefly, referring the reader to both Martin and Macaulay. Prior to the publication of this paper, in 1862, Muir received and could add a note from his friend Captain Frederick W L Thomas, who had visited St Kilda in 1860 and was able to return his own favour:

Here are some notes about the Amazon's House, St Kilda.

It is called Tigh na Banaghaisgeich⁴, ie, the 'Heroine's House,' and is situated in the 'Valley of the Heroine', or Gleann na Banaghaisgeich, on the N side of the island. The house, when perfect and covered with a layer of turf, would have been of a depressed form, and about ten feet high. In plan it is an irregular square, the wall in front being built perpendicularly for three feet (and two feet behind), from thence sloping rapidly to the top.

The house is built of moor-stones, such as were conveniently near, and the stones are not remarkable for their size. The doorway faces the line of the valley, is about 3 feet high, with inclined jambs. The central chamber is 9 x 11 feet, and 8 feet high, irregularly oval; and the arch is formed by overlapping stones in the usual way. There has always been a hole (farleus) at the apex, to allow the smoke to escape and to admit light; the farleus would be closed with a flagstone or turf in bad weather,

Around the central chamber are three doorways entering to irregular beehive chambers, identical in type and style with those at Bragir, Lewis [\[NB24NE 2\]](#), &c., &c. These chambers, in the thickness of the wall, are irregular ovals, about 5 feet high.

In the same glen, and near this Tigh, are the ruins of at least two others of the same kind. The Tigh na Banaghaisgeich is identical with one class of super-terranean or above-ground Pict's houses of the Orkneys; for which see Wilson's 'Pre-historic Annals,' or my own paper in Vol XXXIV of the *Archaeologia* [1851].

Another of these structures was on the adjacent island of Borrera, but it is now destroyed.

Muir and Thomas 1862, 226-7

⁴ Pronounced *Ba-na-ghash-geech*, from *Bana* (female) and *ghash-geech* meaning champion, hero or warrior (Dwelly's Gaelic English Dictionary)

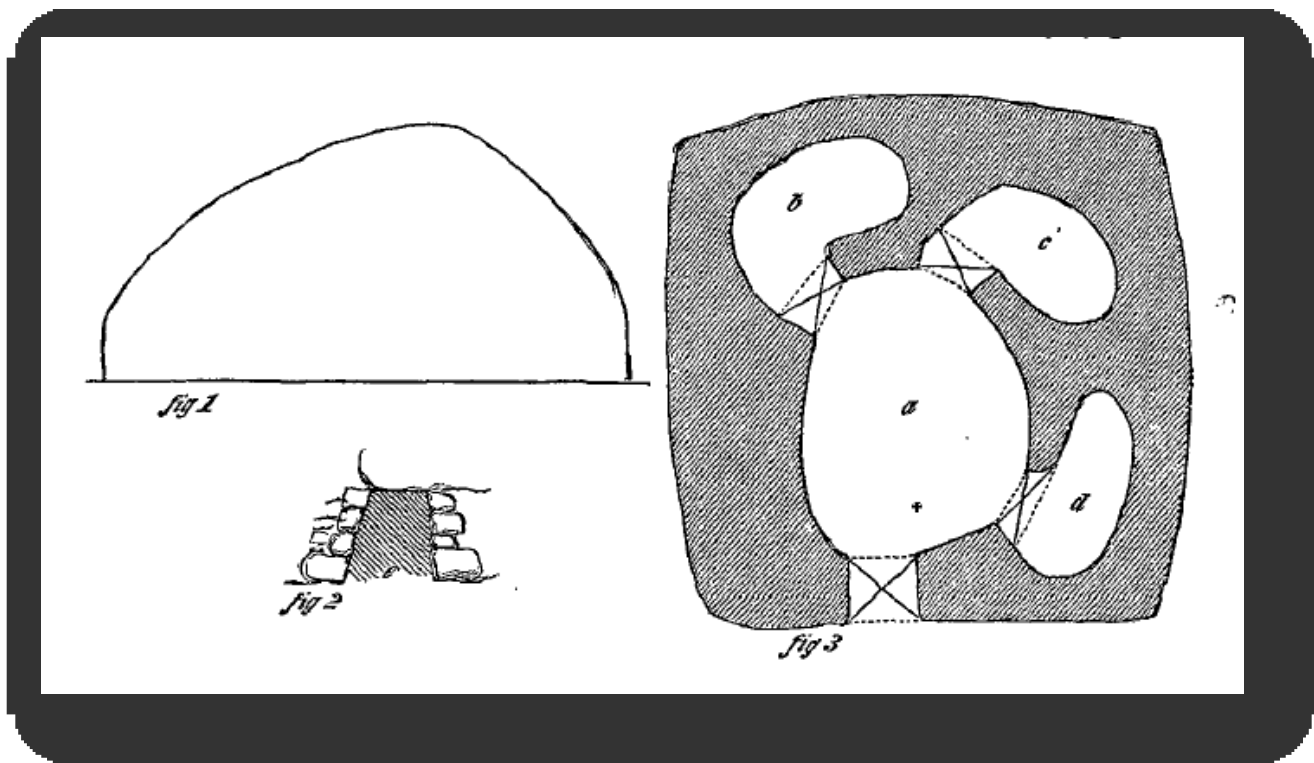


Figure 21 Sketch plan, section and detail elevation of the 'Amazon's House'. Muir and Thomas 1862, 227

In the latter part of the same paper, Thomas recounts the details of a story told early in the 19th century by Mr D Morrison of Stornoway which tells the tale of the female warrior 'Mulletach'. For Thomas, the story provided an ideal character to explain the 'warrior' tradition in St Kilda, which had apparently been lost to the locals by this stage, perhaps due to the impact on oral traditions of the smallpox epidemic of 1727. He also related that 'Mr Macdonald had noted, that in the chamber marked *e*⁵, the progenitor of the Macleods of Berneray was captured' (Muir and Thomas 1862, 228), but it is unclear which event this refers to.

The plan published by Muir and provided by Thomas, though not necessarily drawn by him, is a sketch. It bears a reasonably close resemblance to the surviving structure, particularly in the overall positioning of the cells, and the in the depiction of cell *b* and *d*. The differences in plan form may indicate some changes to the building, at the entrance to *a* and at *b*, where another entrance has been created.

Thomas mentions the building again in his paper on 'primitive dwellings and hypogea', with a brief but important statement on condition, which implies that the building may not have been maintained:

The next class of stone-roofed dwellings are those having oven-like bed-places around the internal area. Of these an almost perfect example (merely wanting the skin of turf) exists as the Amazon's house, in St Kilda; but, as it is described p. 225 vol. iii. of our "Proceedings," it need not be noticed here; and the building described by Sir H. Dryden, as having been excavated by Mr Gordon in South Uist, is of the same order, but is furnished with two doorways.

Thomas 1870, 164

⁵ It is unclear which cell this refers to. There may be an *e* in *fig 2*, or it might possibly be a misprinted *c*.

John Sands (1826-1900) visited the island in 1875 and 1876—7 and stayed considerably longer than most visitors. His description is particularly important as it provides a good measure of the condition of the building at that time whilst also demonstrating that it had become completely redundant and was being used as a source of stone a year later (1877; 1878).

It is circular in form, about 9 feet in diameter, and built of flat stones, which converge as they ascend, until the space becomes so narrow that a single stone covers it. This house is covered outside with earth and turf and looks like a little hill. There were three *croapan* or beds in the wall. One of these beds had been destroyed when I saw the building in 1875, but otherwise the house was in a good state of preservation. Two men, I regret to say, have since taken away a large quantity of stones to build *claetyn*. *Airidh Mhor* is described by Martin and Macaulay. The former calls it the Female Warrior's House, or *Tigh na Bana-ghaisgeach*. All the traditions connected with it, and alluded to by Martin, seem now to be forgotten.

Sands 1877, 188

The building was sketched reliably by Heathcote about twenty years later, 1899, but he does not describe it any further (Figure 22). An unusual view, sketched from the SW, it appears to show the mound in considerably better condition than today, all but confirming the survival of the other cell roofs, which do appear to have been roofed in 1860. A comparable photograph shows the same boulder at the bottom left; the overall reduction in the size of the mound and the collapse of the entrance are readily apparent (Figure 23).

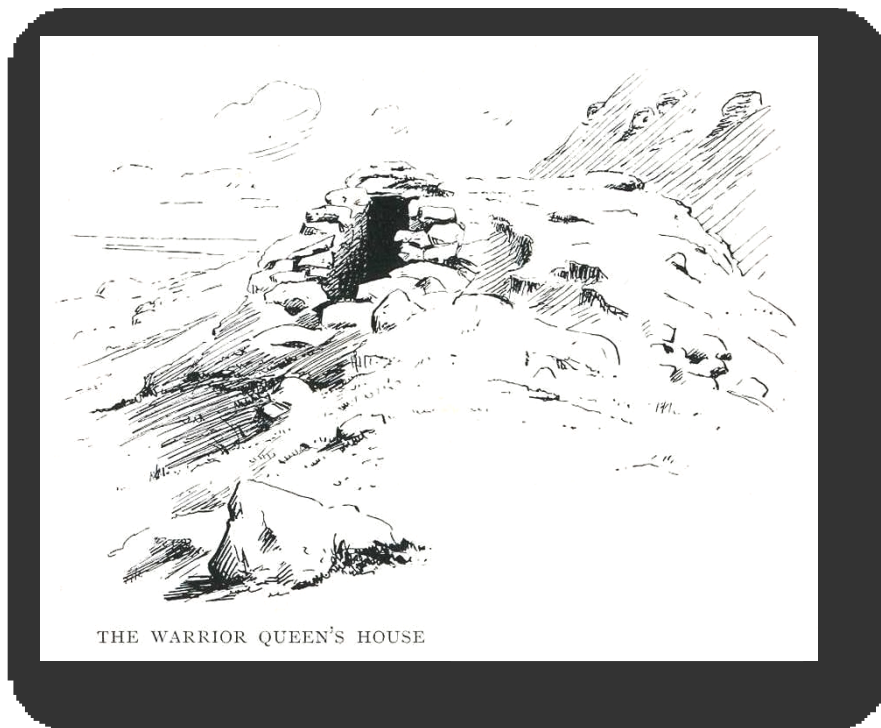


Figure 22 Norman Heathcote's sketch view of the Amazon's House, from the SW (1900, 14).

See Figure 23 for a comparison with the present day.

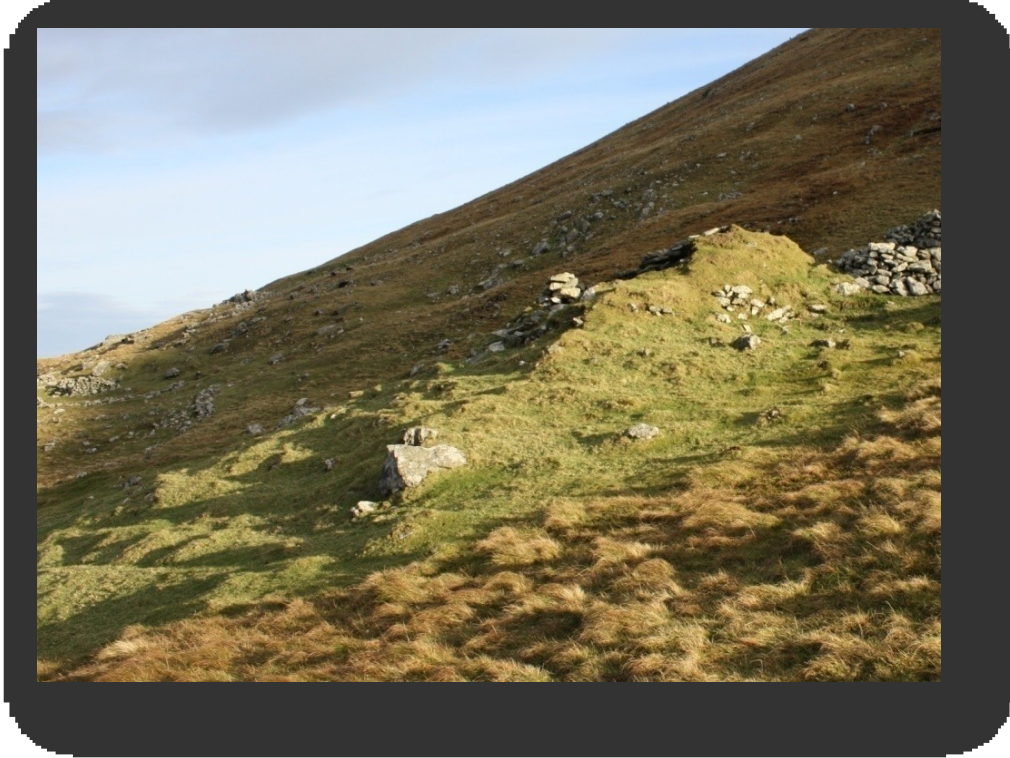


Figure 23 A photograph taken from the same position in November 2010. 1148-70 © RCAHMS

The famous illustration of a 'St Kilda Farm Steading' was originally published in 1895 (Ross 1974, 10). It is perhaps based on the recollections of a summer's visitors trip to Gleann Mór and it may reflect a view of many of the different gathering folds in the glen (Figure 24).

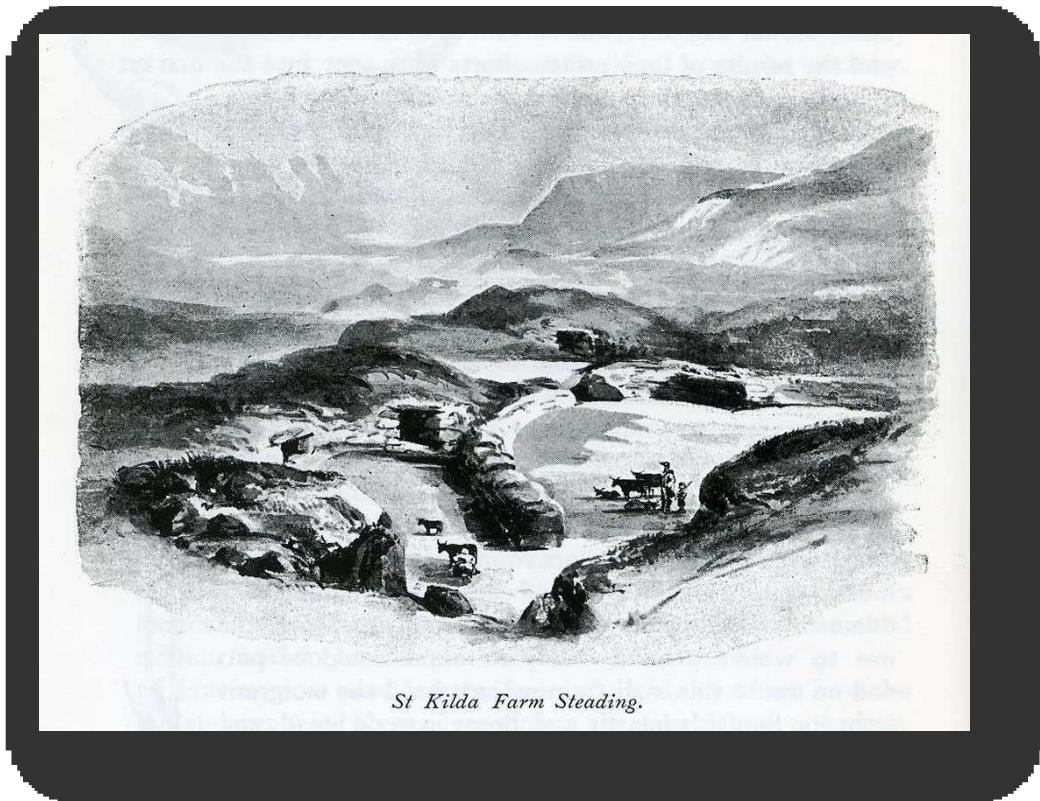


Figure 24 n idealised view, probably based on a Gleann Mór gathering fold, first published in 1895.

1901—1955

After Sands, the second 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 (d1959), in 1927. Mathieson was a noted surveyor who spent five months in St Kilda in 1927 in order to produce the first accurate map of the island, later 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, and photographs, as well as undertaking some excavation in and around the souterrain. Describing the Amazon's House, he wrote:

About 700 feet S-E of the well is the *Airidh mhor* (the big shealing). There is here a group of old huts, the most important of them being the Amazons' House, locally known as *Tigh na Banaghaisgich* (fig. 10). This house is built on the beehive pattern, carefully arched over with stone and covered with turf, so that at a little distance it appears like a green knoll. It is now so dilapidated that my interpretation of it in plan may not in all particulars agree with the original. What now is the entrance appears as if it at one time formed one of the apartments.

Mathieson 1928, 128-9

The photograph (Figure 25), which can be compared with a photograph taken in 2010 (Figure 26), demonstrates that there has been further collapse around the NE cell, and a great deal of turf has been lost from this area.



Figure 25 The main cellular mound of the Amazon's House, photographed in 1927, from the NE (Mathieson 1928). See Figure 11 for a comparison.

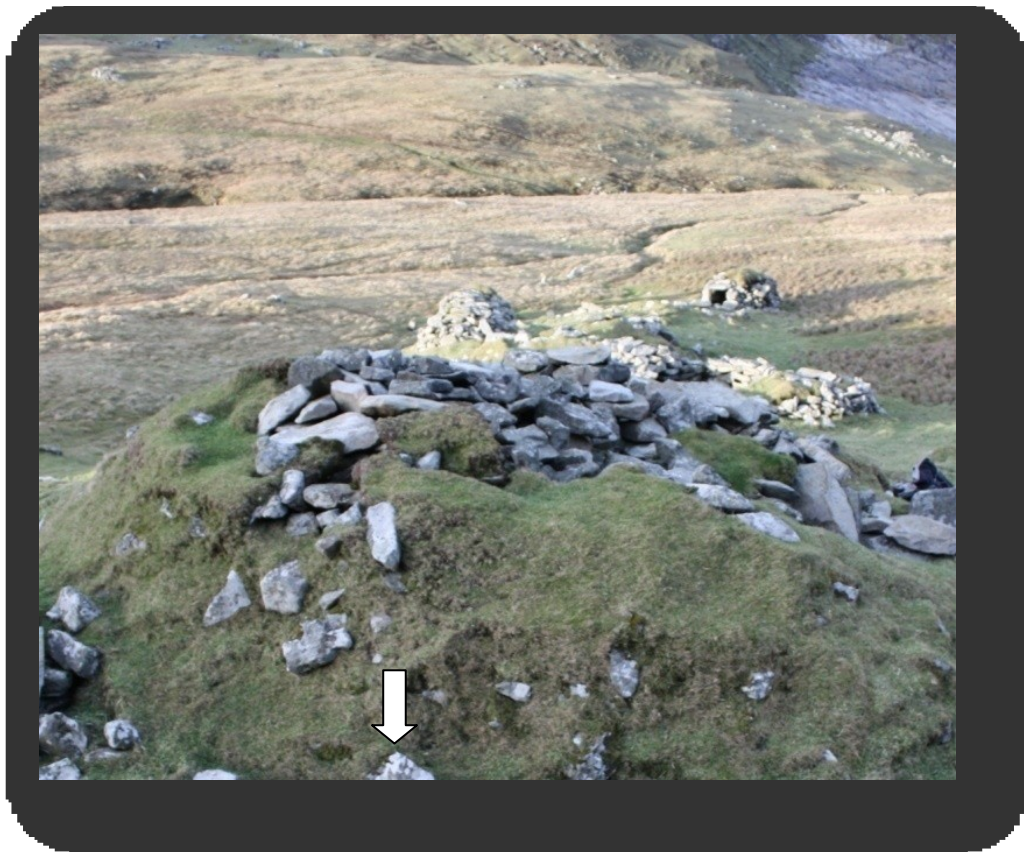


Figure 26 Although this image is taken from a higher position, some of the individual stones in the foreground can be matched with those from 1927. 1148-60 © RCAHMS

Mathieson's plan and sections, though based on sketches, show that both the southerly cells were still roofed at this stage and that the two others were still partially roofed (Figure 27).

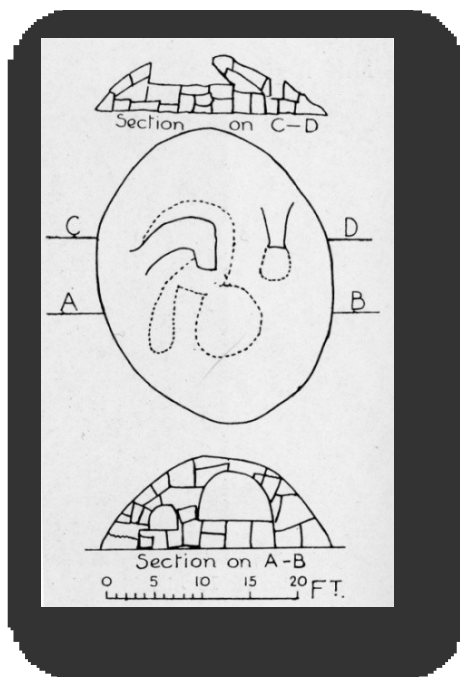


Figure 27 Mathieson's sketch plan and sections. Note that both the SE and SW cells are shown as roofed at this date.

Robert Atkinson visited the islands in 1939, 1947 and 1953, though he makes little mention of the archaeological sites in his writings. His principal interest lay with natural history, but his photographic collection is a significant resource, not least because each image is captioned, catalogued and easily accessible through the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University. Atkinson took eleven images of the Amazon's House in June 1953, including some internal and external shots (S 1044-54).



Figure 28 Atkinson photo taken from the NE in 1953. S1044 © School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University.

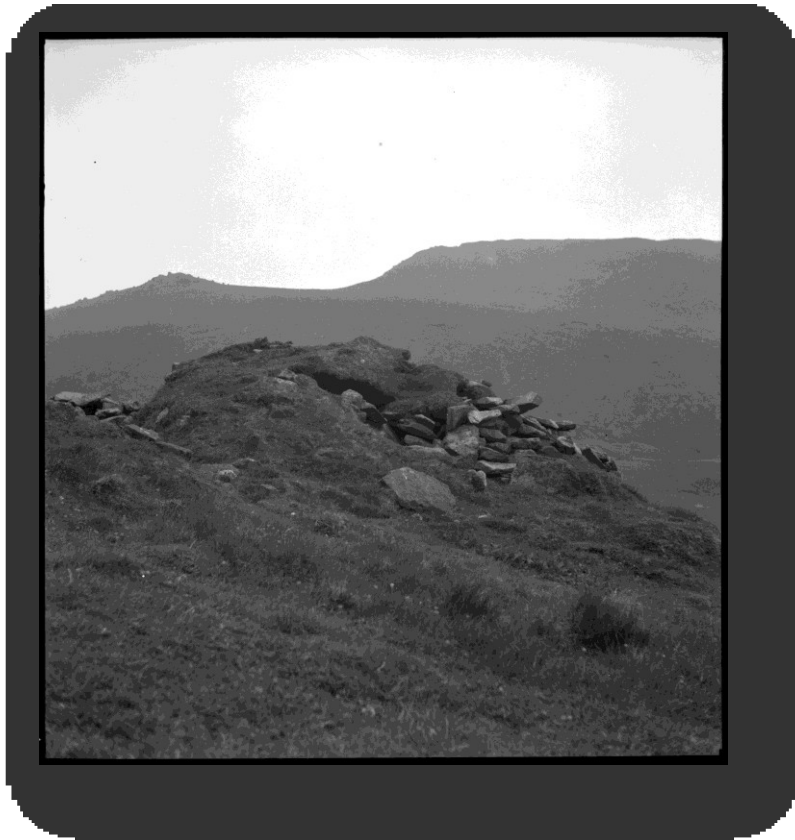


Figure 29 Atkinson photograph, taken from the NE. S1046 © School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University.

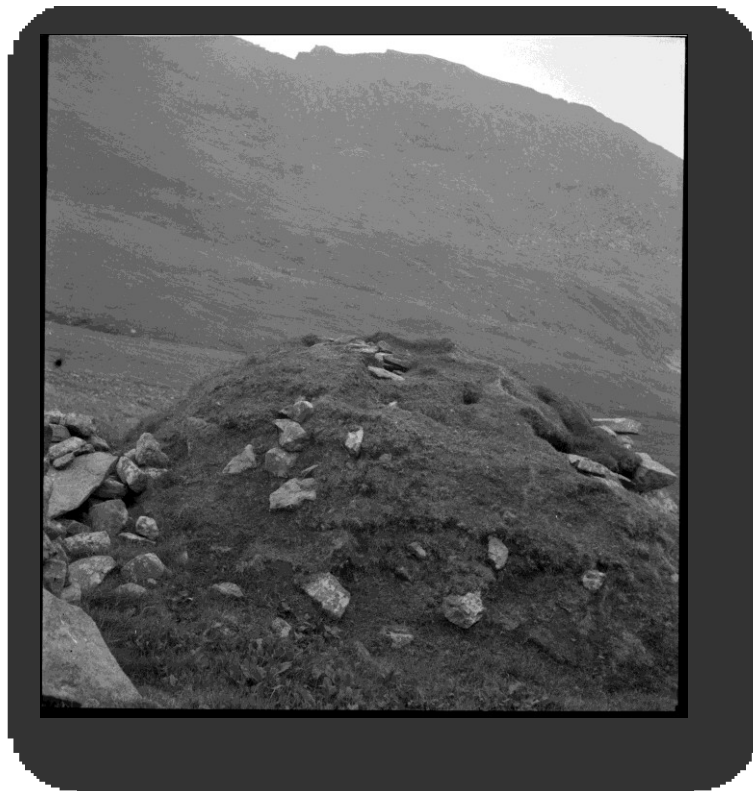


Figure 30 Atkinson photo of the Amazon's House taken from the ESE. S1048 © School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University. This photograph can be usefully compared with Figure 23 and 24 above.

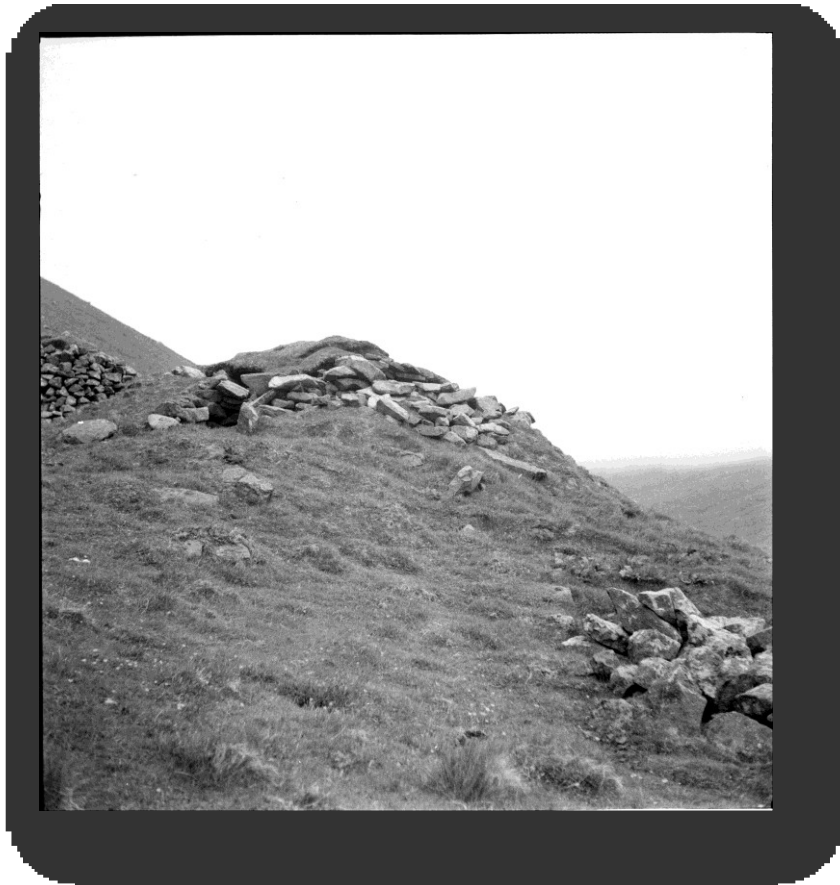


Figure 31 Atkinson photo from NNW taken in 1953 by Atkinson. S1049 © School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University

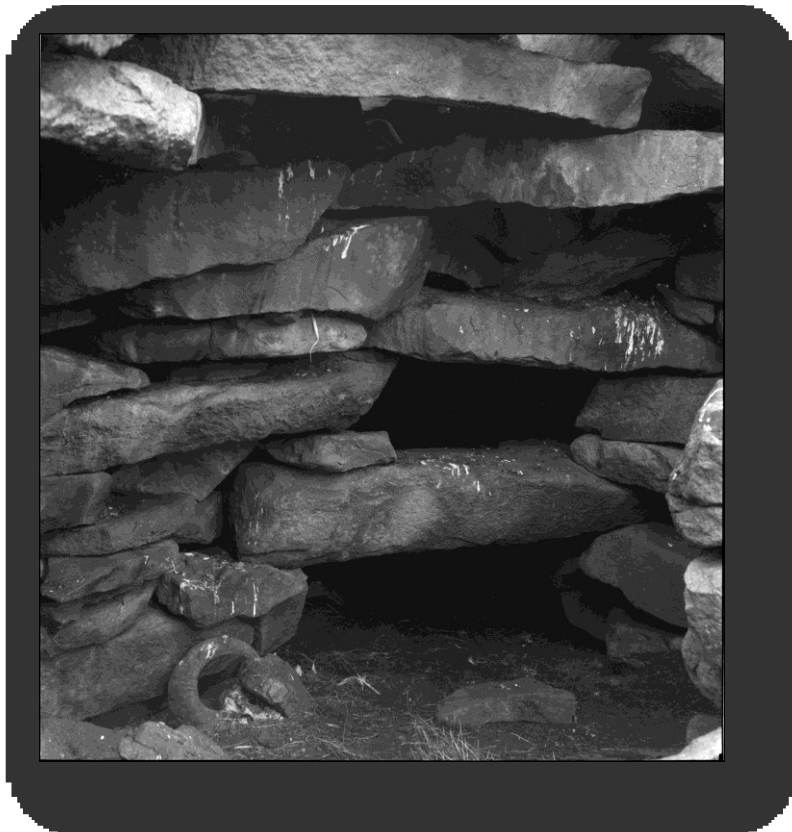


Figure 32 A detail Atkinson shot of the entrance to the surviving roofed cell of the Amazon's House, taken from the W. S1050 © School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University

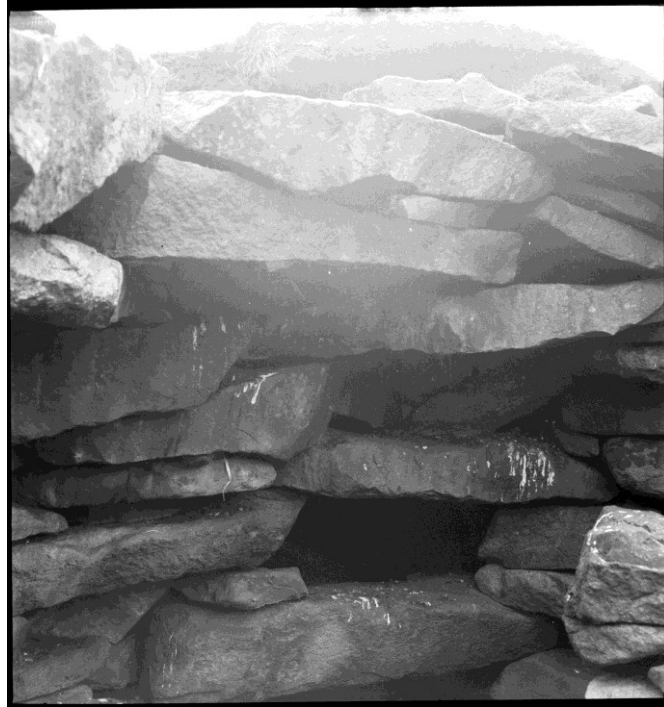


Figure 33 A detailed Atkinson view of the upper part of the walling above the entrance to the roofed cell of the Amazon's House, taken from the W. S1052 © School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University

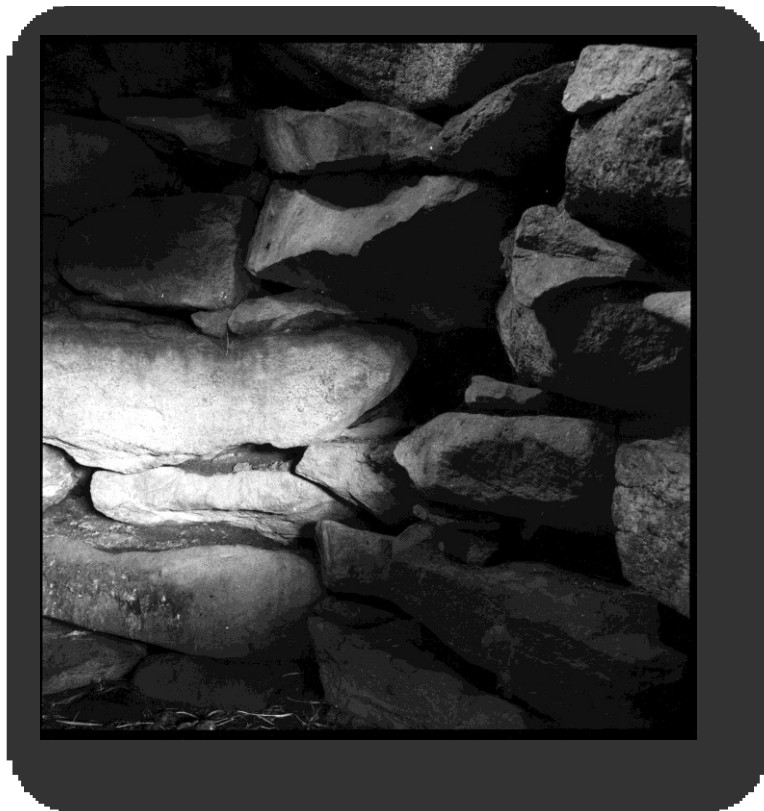


Figure 34 An interior view of the roofed Amazon's House cell, taken from the W. S1053 © School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University

1956—1970

Introduction

The year of 1956 witnessed the most extraordinary change on St Kilda. After many years during which the principal visitors were troupes of naturalists, sometimes including the Marquis himself, 1956 marked the beginning of a sea change in the ownership, management and use of Hirta. A reconnaissance group visited the island in June 1956 on the HMRAFV *Bridport*⁶ with Air Commander Levis to estimate the feasibility of constructing a military base (Williamson and Boyd 1960, 12). Advisors included two St Kildans, Alexander Gillies Ferguson and Neil Ferguson, as well as Max Nicholson of the NC (Burrill 1958)⁷. Beginning in April 1957, the resulting operation ‘Hardrock’ involved the influx of probably the largest human population that St Kilda had ever witnessed, the first vehicles, and the largest changes in the landscape since the 1830s – wrought, not to improve yields in agriculture, but to provide support for the staff operating the radar stations.



Figure 35 James Mackay emerging from the Amazon's House c1959.

000-000-056-456-R © The Scotsman Publications Ltd. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk

⁶ Launched in Dumbarton 1940, broken up Plymouth 1958. Initially Royal Navy (HMS), but taken over by RAF in 1946.

⁷ Edward Max Nicholson (1904-2003), joint founder of World Wildlife Fund.



Figure 36 This image from 2010 demonstrates the level of collapse since the late 1950s. 1148-189 © RCAHMS

The advance party of the Airfield Construction Squadron landed on 16 April 1957, and included in its midst four civilians: R Hillcoat (National Trust for Scotland), R Ritchie (Ministry of Works), K Williamson (NCC) and J M Boyd (NCC) (Hillcoat 1957; Macgregor 1989; Williamson 1957; Williamson 1960, 33). Though they were to visit again, Hillcoat, Ritchie and Boyd came off two weeks later, on 2 May, whereas Williamson was to stay for some time. To add further confusion to this picture, D R Macgregor and I Whitaker of the University of Edinburgh also visited the island in May 1957 in order to undertake a survey of the village and an ethnographic study for the Trust.

The influence of these individuals was felt in different ways, with Ritchie⁸ and Hillcoat for example producing unpublished reports for their respective organisations. Williamson and Boyd went on to produce a number of individual papers, and two popular books in 1960 and 1963, while the principal result of Macgregor and Whitaker's Work was the publication of the former's paper in 1960. It is really Williamson in particular, and Macgregor who worked to create a legacy of information and interpretation, although the impact of the more official representatives should not be underestimated: the process of scheduling some of St Kilda's monuments being one good example.

In tandem with these research and monitoring projects, there was an active policy of conservation works, undertaken by 'supervised' volunteers. In 1958, two Trust work parties and one Joint Schools expedition (organised by a P Witherington) visited St Kilda in the summer. The work parties were led by ornithologist George Waterston (1911-1980) and Trust Master of Works Alex Warwick. Some of

⁸ The HS files from this period are now at the National Archive of Scotland, reference DD27/1015-1017 and DD27/4683.

Waterston's group assisted Professor O'Dell¹⁰, the acting Nature Conservancy Warden, in 'a little archaeological dig in Gleann Mór' (Trust Yearbook 1958). A letter from Boyd to Warwick in September 1958 noted that 'one sees a distinct improvement in the tidiness of the old houses, and the amenity value of the picturesque bay is not unduly spoiled by the camp', giving an impression of the aspirations and concerns of the NC (Trust archive JD/1472/3). The Trust hold a number of photographs of the work parties of the next year 1959 (see also Mackay 2002) and these give some impression of the intensity of their work. In addition, a group of photographs in the Scotsman's archive show the Amazon's House around this time — despite being dated as 1956, they are likely to date to 1959 (Figure 37, Figure 38).



Figure 37 General view of the Amazon's House c1959.

000-000-054-596-R © The Scotsman Publications Ltd. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk

¹⁰ 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).



Figure 38 View from the NE c1959.

000-000-054-597-R © The Scotsman Publications Ltd. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk

Williamson and Boyd (Nature Conservancy)

Kenneth Williamson (1914-1977) was principally an ornithologist, but an early post as a librarian at Manx Museum gave him an interest in folk-lore and archaeology, and he had published a paper on Faeroese water mills in 1947, based on fieldwork undertaken during his wartime posting. He clearly interpreted his brief broadly in 1957, and he appears to have split a very thorough survey of the island with Morton Boyd – there is little evidence that the latter had much to do with the archaeological work (though see Boyd 1957a). The style of the plans produced by Williamson and Boyd is accurate, if relatively simplistic, and the symbology is less developed than other works published at the same time (eg RCAHMS 1956).

Williamson's work, after ensuring that the plan and attitude of the RAF was appropriate to the task, included the most comprehensive archaeological survey to date, not eclipsed until Harman's survey began in the 1970s. In terms of dissemination to the wider public, Williamson and Boyd's books (1960; 1963) managed to combine a level of detail with a broad appeal in a way that few others have managed until the 1990s. In part, this was because both authors were already familiar with the

island, having visited a number of times through the 1950s on ornithological trips (Boyd 1952; 1956; 1957b; Williamson and Boyd 1960, 22).

The principal analysis, and some of the plans of structures in Gleann Mor (F, K, J), undertaken in September 1957, were reported to the Trust in 1957, and published as early as March 1958, while others were successively published later; Structures F, K and M in 1960; B, J, O, P in 1963. Williamson clearly took a lead in the investigation of archaeological landscapes, particularly on Hirta, but Boyd also planned and described the structures on Boreray (Williamson and Boyd 1963). Williamson's thesis, based on a thorough observation of the sites and monuments of St Kilda, and the detailed recording of many buildings on the island, suggested to him that Gleann Mór had played host to a pastoral community, framed in a romantic context:

Could it be (we often wondered) that this, the remotest glen in all Scotland, on the very brink of Europe, once cradled a forgotten culture?

Williamson 1958; Williamson and Boyd 1960, 6

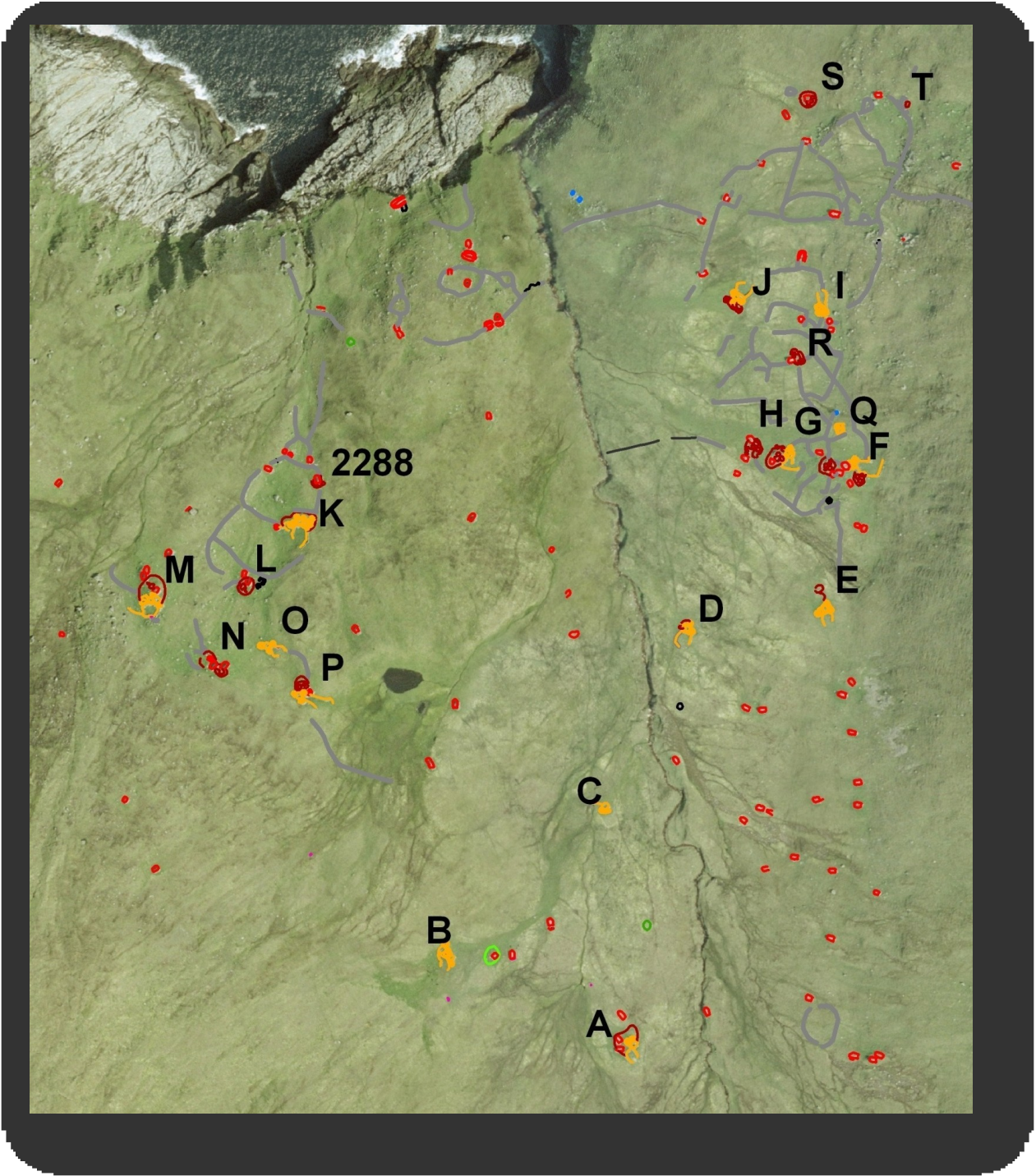


Figure 39 at A3. Gleann Mór; distribution of cellular structures and gathering folds (including possible).

Air photograph licensed to RCAHMS for PGA, through Next Perspectives. (at A3)

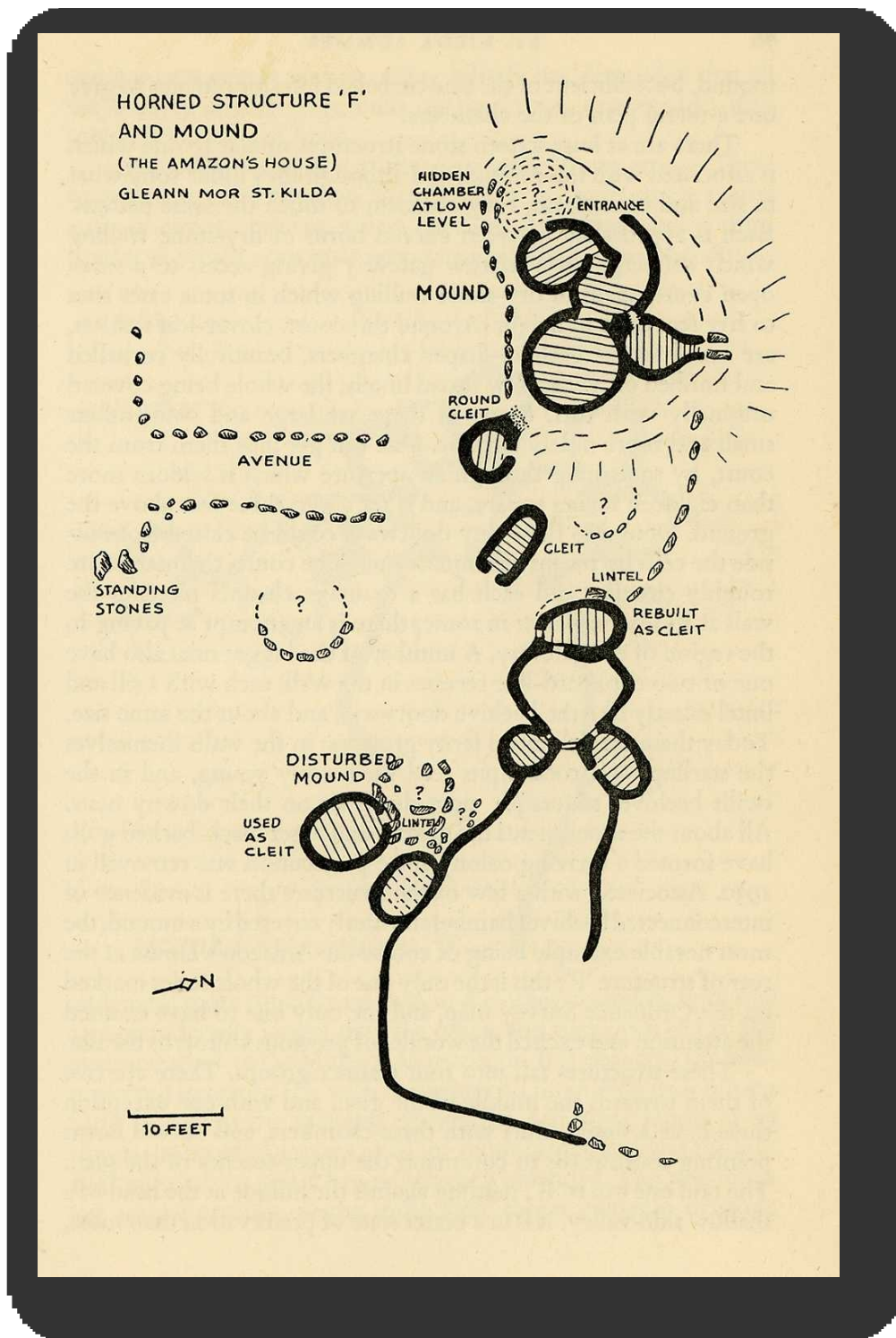


Figure 40 Plan of Structure F (Williamson and Boyd 1960, 69).

Although previous authors had noted the Amazon's House, Williamson argued that the group formed an 'extensive settlement', and he was perhaps the first author to see the archaeological sites within a functional landscape setting. His detailed analysis included a number of key suggestions (1960, 67-76). Firstly, he noted 'at least sixteen' structures across the glen, which he viewed as contemporary. He sorted the structures geographically into clusters, noting similarities in build, and defined the Amazon's House as the 'hub and centre of the culture' (Ibid, 71). Heeding the features around the mound, he noted that 'the surrounding area, especially on the S side, shows evidence of stone alignments or 'avenues', small circles, standing stones, and so on, all of which combine to give the impression that this may have been a ceremonial place' (Ibid 71-2). Aspects of his observation may have come through individuals from St Kilda. He noted, for example, that Structure G had a mound despoiled 'a few years ago' for cleitean (Ibid 72), while this detailed extract provides a powerful reminder of the use of Gleann Mór as grazing:

We have heard from Donald Gillies that the practice continued down to 1906 or 1907. He and his school mates used to dread the approach of the summer holiday, he told us, for then the boys were sent out to the glen to pass the whole day patrolling its upper reaches so that the sheep should not stray; and at dusk their duty was to converge on the foot of the glen, driving the flock before them, so that the lambs could be separated from the ewes and boxed-up overnight in the little beehive cells, to be set free after their dams had been milked next morning

Williamson and Boyd 1960, 72

Crucially then, Williamson realised that the structures had been used to house lambs, but he goes further to argue that:

That they were used as a shieling is beyond dispute, but that they were actually built by the St Kildans for this purpose is beyond belief. Why go to the trouble of constructing elaborate corbelled beehives, complete with substantial weather-proof roof, merely to keep the lambs imprisoned while their dams were being milked?

Williamson and Boyd 1960, 73

Seeing the folds and associated cells as ancient houses, he argued that 'the courts [the area referred to as a 'fold' on RCAHMS plan] may have been living quarters covered by a canopy of skins', but he was unable to distinguish in his analysis between the folds referred to by Donald Gillies, and the corbelled beehives close by. Having said that, Williamson's powers of observation were impressive and he noted the remains of lazy bed cultivation both on the W side of Gleann Mór, and on the island of Boreray (ibid 74), which had been recently thought of as a new discovery (Halliday pers comm). In his mind, these areas of cultivation, and the cellular structures in Gleann Mór and Boreray could be grouped together, and considered evidence for a principally pastoral, and permanent, community. For Williamson, Gleann Mór was an obvious home for pastoralists, with succulent grazing, a water supply, peat and nearby cliffs for sea birds. He even pondered whether the turf head dyke could have perhaps formed a boundary between communities of the N and S glens of the island (ibid 75).

Macgregor and Whitaker (Edinburgh University)

The other significant analysis of the structures in Gleann Mór was put forward at this time was by the Donald Ronald MacGregor, a geography lecturer at Edinburgh University, who had visited the island in April 1957. Macgregor's background was military (Jeffrey Stone pers. comm.), and his publications in the Scottish Geographical Magazine suggest that his interests included cartography (1948, 1953, 1960, 1977): he later took up the post of Reader in Map Studies at Edinburgh. He was specifically commissioned by the Trust to produce a detailed plan of Village Bay, and it is interesting that his methodology, using a theodolite to layout a control network, and a plane-table to carry out numerous individual surveys, was mirrored closely by RCAHMS over 25 years later (MacGregor 1989; RCAHMS 1988). He completed this survey work at a scale of 1:720 in ten days, and this allowed him the time to undertake a more detailed study, the results of which were subsequently published in 1960.

Macgregor's paper was a specific attempt to provide a 'general review' of the islands, based upon geographical survey, a study of existing records, and a consideration of change through geological and historical time (1960, 1). Looking at buildings in particular, he distinguished six different and sequential types of house architecture: underground dwelling, Norse house, corbelled house with beehive and cleit variations, small black-house, improved black-house, and traditional Scottish cottage (ibid, 20). He noted the multi-celled structures in Village Bay and the 'roughly similar type' in Gleann Mór, which he argued were well preserved due to their relatively isolated location (ibid, 22). MacGregor specifically challenged Williamson's notion that the glen was an 'obvious home'. He noted that the aspect of the glen is N-westerly and exposed to prevailing winds, that the access to the sea is more difficult than in the S bay, that the drainage is poor, that there is little direct light, and that sources of stone are more limited.

In a specific analysis of the cellular structures in the glen, Macgregor felt that they may be too small for permanent occupation, noting the absence of a 'stout, central chamber'. Furthermore, he noted that, if each of the twenty structures in the glen were an occupied farmstead, it would suggest that the N glen had a population higher than that of Village Bay in the preceding historic periods (ibid, 24). Finally, he noted that the attribution of the glen to a 'female warrior' may have reflected the long association of the shieling huts with women, noting the absence of a clear Gaelic or Norse root for the name.

Williamson did reply to Macgregor's critique, and suggested that a better climate in the past may have allowed settlement where it seems less likely now. Furthermore, he suggested that the cultivation ridges and buildings on Boreray demonstrated permanent settlement, and if it was possible there, it was certainly possible in Gleann Mór (Williamson and Boyd 1963, 139-140).

Emeritus Professor Ian Whitaker, who formed the other half of the Edinburgh University trip in 1957, focussed his study on aspects of ethnography, although as we can see from Williamson's notes, he did take part in work in Gleann Mór. Whitaker emigrated to Canada soon after to take up a post in the Memorial University of Newfoundland, and his draft paper on ethnology was lost in the post between Canada and Edinburgh in 1960 (Whitaker pers comm). With this unfortunate loss, and the publication of more from Williamson and Boyd in 1963, this phase of study drew to a close.

The re-occupation of St Kilda in 1957 had stimulated a great deal of work on the island, and many of the buildings had been planned relatively accurately for the first time. The debate over the use of the

buildings in the glen and their date reached a crescendo during this period, although it did not stimulate further research, conservation work, or excavation. This had to wait until the early 1970s.

Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division

The next significant contribution to our understanding of St Kilda's archaeological sites came through the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division (OS), as part of their programme of record revision in the Western Isles during the 1960s¹¹. The OS undertook a desk-based revision of their records for St Kilda in 1966, and, as part of this, Beverley Roy Stallwood¹² wrote a summary describing the 'Amazon's House' on the 5th April:

'Tigh na Banaghaisgich' (Amazon's House) has been known since Martin first described it in 1697. The house when perfect, would have been of depressed beehive form (see Thomas' plan) and about 10ft high. It is built of moorstones (not unduly large) and the doorway faces the line of the valley. It was examined by Williamson in 1957, who found it appeared to have been broken into near the top of the mound, but sufficient of the fine corbelled interior remained to give a useful plan of the chambers. Williamson considers that the Amazon's House probably formed part of an early pastoral settlement in Gleann Mór (see NA00SE 1).

Information from OS (BRS) 5 April 1966

Sources: K Williamson and J M Boyd 1960; M Martin 1934; T S Muir and F W L Thomas 1862; J Mathieson 1928.

OS 495 Record Card Site no. NS00SE 2

Following on from this, Jimmy Davidson's field trip in August 1967 resulted in the upgrade of all the archaeological records for Hirta that were held by the OS at that time, as well as the addition of new records, photographs (Figure 41) and plans (Figure 42) at a mapping scale of 1:1250. Davidson noted additional structures in both of the island's valleys, and provided an unusual level of interpretation in his site descriptions.

¹¹ Letters RCAHMS MS 1033/117 and 1033/65 (OS correspondence files) imply that this was part of the overall progress of the office through Scotland.

¹² The identity of the person noted by the initials B R S on the OS 495 card was confirmed by Ian Fleming, formerly of the OS, with the help of P McKeague (RCAHMS).



Figure 41 A general view of the surviving cells, taken by Davidson from the E on 10th August 1967. SC 1225649 © RCAHMS (Ordnance Survey Collection). Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

Davidson described it thus:

The so-called 'Amazon's House' is generally as described and planned by Williamson; both Thomas's and Mathieson's plans are sketched, and are not an accurate portrayal of the site. The 'Avenue' on Williamson's plan is not so regular when examined on the ground, and appears to be simply sides of small enclosures. The 'Standing Stones' appear to be the portal stones forming the entrance to a circular structure, formed by a circle of grass-covered stones, 3.5m in diameter, possible the remains of a 'beehive' hut. Water from a spring now runs through the site. The crescentic line of stones 10ft to the N (marked '?') seems to be fortuitous, as no such pattern could be made out.

OS 495 Card Site no. NS00SE 2

His conclusion with regard to the settlement in [Gleann Mór](#), which he visited on the same day, is also revealing:

That all the structures in Gleann Mór were used as shielings from at least 1697, is discussed elsewhere, but it is also evident that there has been permanent occupation at a much earlier period if one considers the presence of Early I.A. type hut circles in the area, although these, and to some extent the 'beehive' structures, are comparable with the Neolithic houses on Shetland (Calder 1958).

OS 495 Card Site no. NS00SE 1

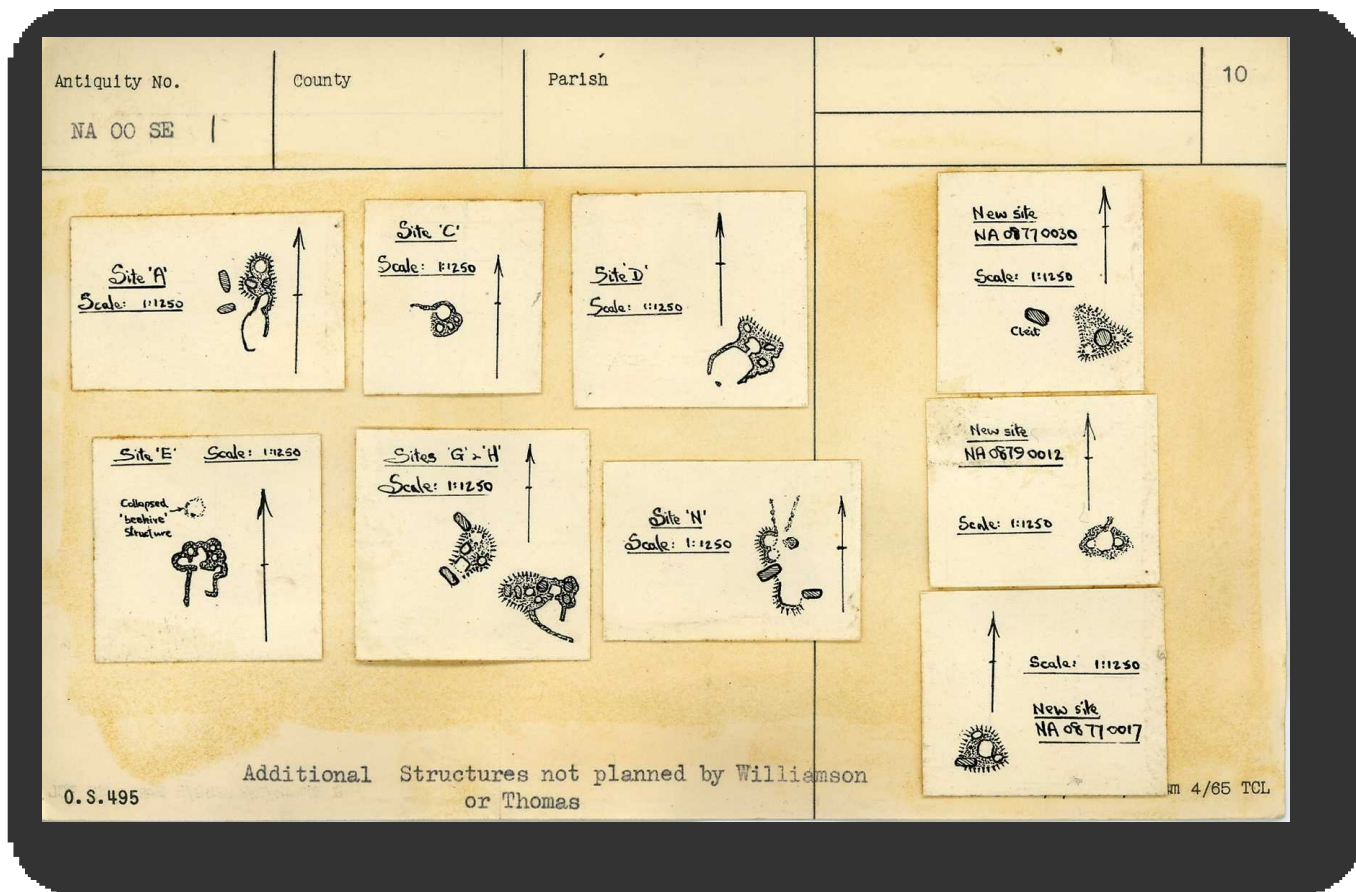


Figure 42 J L Davidson's plans of structures in Gleann Mór, undertaken in 1967. The 'new' sites he recorded were S, T, and Q. © RCAHMS

Davidson's description of Iron Age hut circles and platforms in a number of locations on the island includes Aird Uachdarachd ([NA10SW 1](#)), Geo Chrubaidh ([NA00SE 5](#)), and Leacan An Eitheir ([NA00SE 6](#)), all sites that were first recorded during his 1967 field visits. Reassessment by RCAHMS in the summer of 2008 and 2009 resulted in changes in classification to them all, reflecting an approach to field survey that takes more account of local context, as well as the greater experience of a fieldwork team. Some of the features were created by natural processes, and others are structures that are related in function to cleits. The locations alone, in very high and exposed parts of the island, would countenance against a history of domestic occupation.

The buildings in Shetland which Davidson refers to include those excavated at [Gruting School](#) and [Stanydale](#) (Calder 1958), neither of which are directly comparable to the Amazon's House, either in plan form, state of preservation, or position in the landscape (Figure 43).

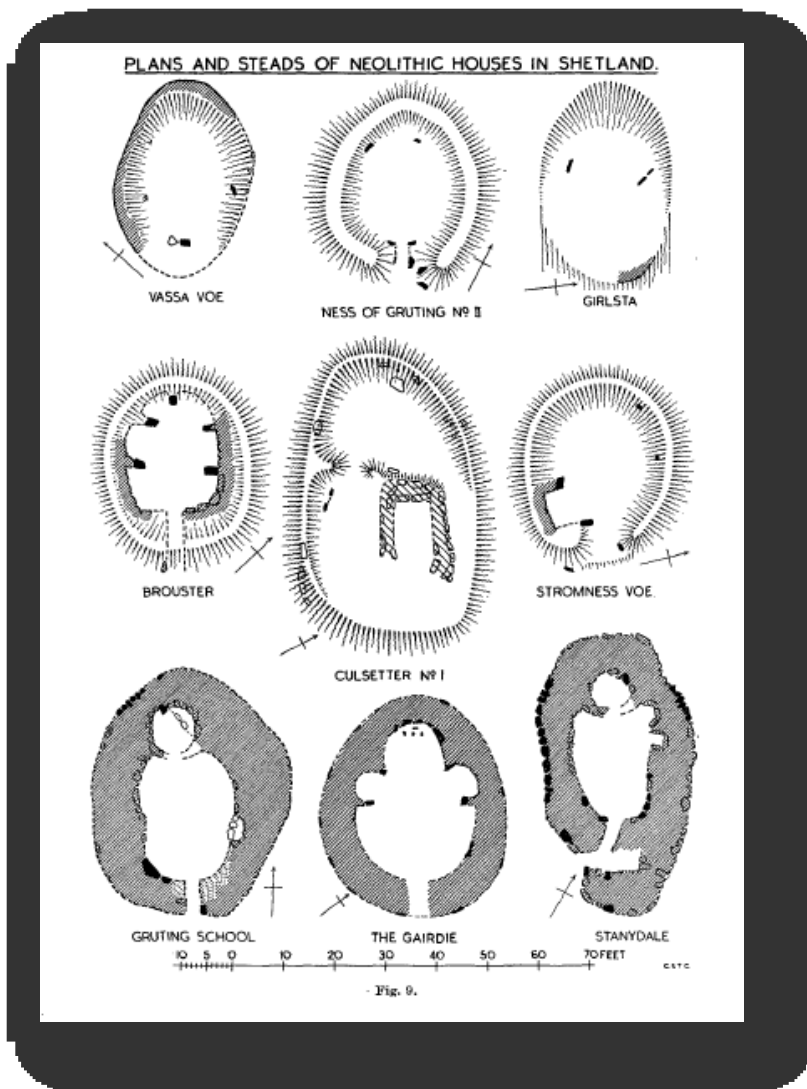


Figure 43 Plans of 'Neolithic' houses from Shetland (Calder 1958, 365)

1971—2010

Barry Cottam (University of Dundee)

During the summers of 1973 and 1974, Michael Barry Cottam¹³, fresh from excavation at Craig Phadrig (Small and Cottam 1971, 1974), undertook five weeks of survey on Hirta at the behest of the Trust (Cottam 1973; 1974; 1979). Most of Cottam's previous archaeological work was in partnership with Alan

¹³ Michael Barry Cottam, a graduate of 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 the late 1980s. He later left the department to establish a career as a chef, and now lives in Cupar, Fife (A Tricker and W Berry pers comm). Further information on the context of this study is likely to be held in the Trust's archive.

Small, who had published material on the Norse period, the Picts and Shetland, and was to edit the Trust's guide to St Kilda (Small 1979).

Then a geographer at Dundee University, Cottam focussed on, in particular, the boat shaped settings of Village Bay, originally highlighted by J L Davidson in 1967, and the gathering folds and cells of Gleann Mór, and he included a discussion of the development and phasing of structures in Gleann Mór in his 1974 report.

Identifying four different groups of structures in Gleann Mór, Cottam distinguished between:

- a) Horned structures
- b) Apparently typical Bronze age structures, e.g. cairns or tumuli, and a possible stone circle
- c) Cleits
- d) Miscellaneous structures including boulder dykes and enclosures, possible shielings, wells, lazy beds

Crucially, he interpreted the 'horned' structures, known more commonly as gathering folds, as early in the sequence, and, although he noted similarities to Neolithic sites such as Skara Brae, he felt there 'was every reason to believe that they are an indigenous monument which evolved locally' (Cottam 1974, 6) (figure 44). He argued not only that the gathering folds were early in the sequence, i.e. early prehistoric, but, after Williamson (1958), that the enclosed folds should themselves be seen as a 'living area'.

For Cottam then, the 'Amazon's House' chambered structures evolved from this gathering fold building tradition, with the techniques of corbelling being improved to allow the construction of larger chambers (ibid 8). Furthermore, he argued that this development included a change in the use of the 'horned structures', which then became storage cells, and forerunners of the cleit. Accepting an early domestic origin for the structures of Gleann Mór, Cottam suggested that their abandonment may have coincided with either a climatic deterioration, or, perhaps, a change in emphasis from pastoral to arable farming, and tentatively put forward an early medieval date (ibid 10).

When looking for a source of the architectural tradition, he turned to hut circles and platform settlements of Hirta (i.e. those identified by J L Davidson in 1967) and beyond, but accepted that this was neither clear nor direct. Influenced by the preservation of the structures, he accepted that a post Iron Age date was more likely, perhaps the 8th century AD, and noted that the later medieval structures of Village Bay (such as Calum Mor's House) may be seen as a degenerate form of the peak of indigenous architecture in Gleann Mór.

In his detailed description of his Gleann Mór No.3 (Williamson's Structure F, incorporating the Amazon's House), Cottam argued that two substantial chambered mounds had been added to the horned structure. His plan and sections incorporate a more detailed attempt to show phasing through hatching. It is noteworthy that the relationship between his horned forecourt and chambers a1 and a2 does not appear to reflect his interpretation of the phasing (Figure 45).

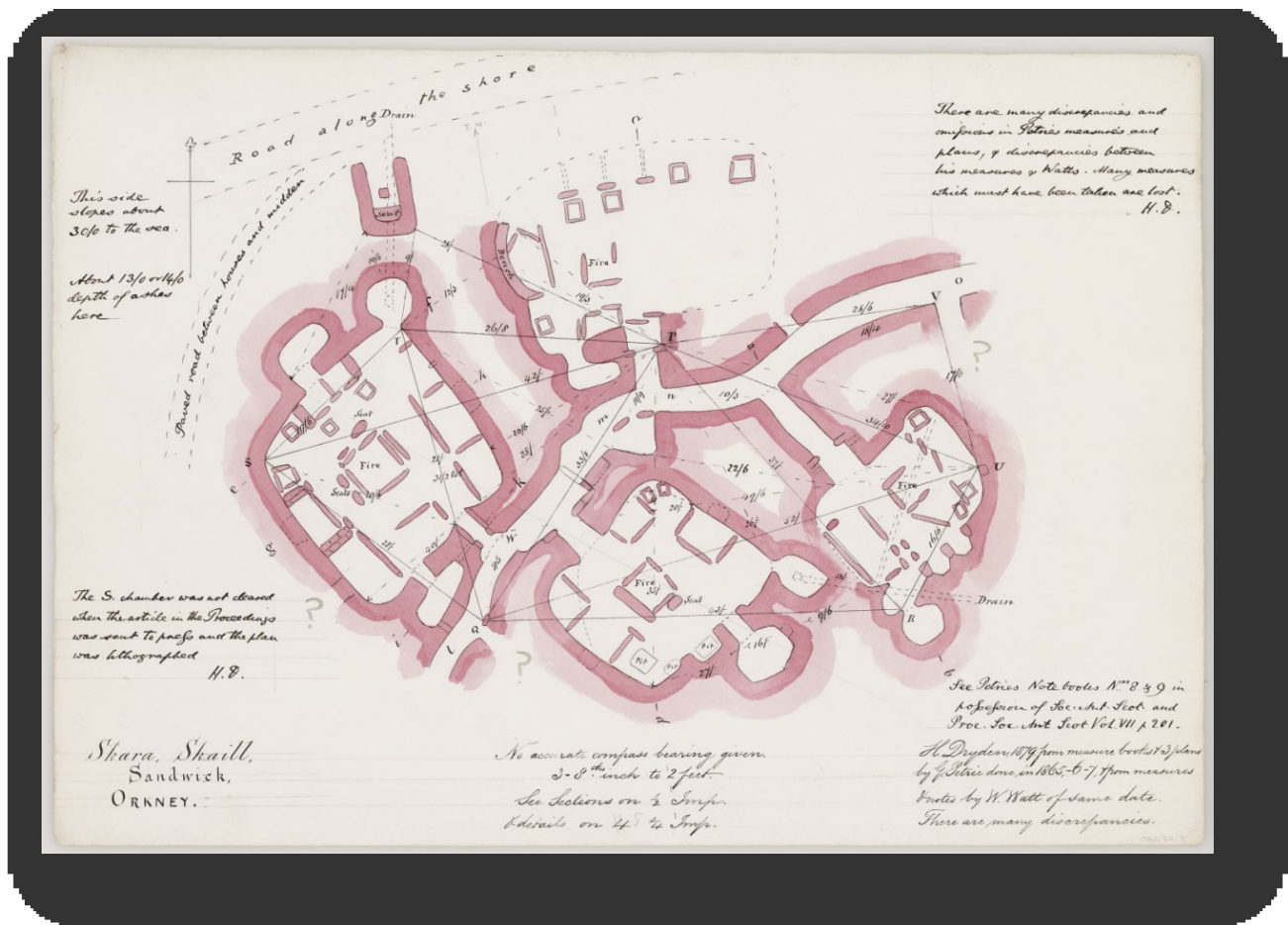


Figure 44 Skara Brae. Digital copy of plan showing excavations by G Petrie 1865-67. Drawn by H Dryden. It is readily apparent from a comparison of the plan here, that the Amazon's House cannot be compared with Skara Brae. DP 041054 © RCAHMS (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Collection). Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

Much of the text concerning Gleann Mór published in 'The St Kilda Handbook' of 1979 is a reprint of the 1974 unpublished report, but the final pages offer a slightly different and more thorough explanation of a theory of origin and evolution. In this, he notes similar structures in Cornwall, presumably Chysauster, but for him, the numerous beehive cells in Scotland and Ireland must be seen as a *degenerate* form, rather than a forerunner. Seeing a 'new group of settlers' reaching Hirta around the 1st to 3rd centuries AD, Cottam suggested that soon after the technique of corbelling was introduced which led to the development, in Village Bay, of a hut with separate living and sleeping quarters, and attached enclosures. A growing population led to the formation of a daughter settlement in Gleann Mór. The disappearance of evidence for similar structures in Village Bay may be explained by re-building, while the abandonment of Gleann Mór could have been caused by a sudden population decline, caused by the Black Death, climate change or economic factors (1979, 60).

A more popular description, written in the 1990s, continues the interpretation set out by Cottam twenty years earlier (1974; 1979):

'Complex F consists of a large horned forecourt leading in to a single court (or fold) with three cells. To this have been added two chambered mounds, and in more recent times three cleitean have been constructed using some of the stone from the mounds.'

'No similar structures exist in Britain or Europe' (Quine 1995, 91-2).

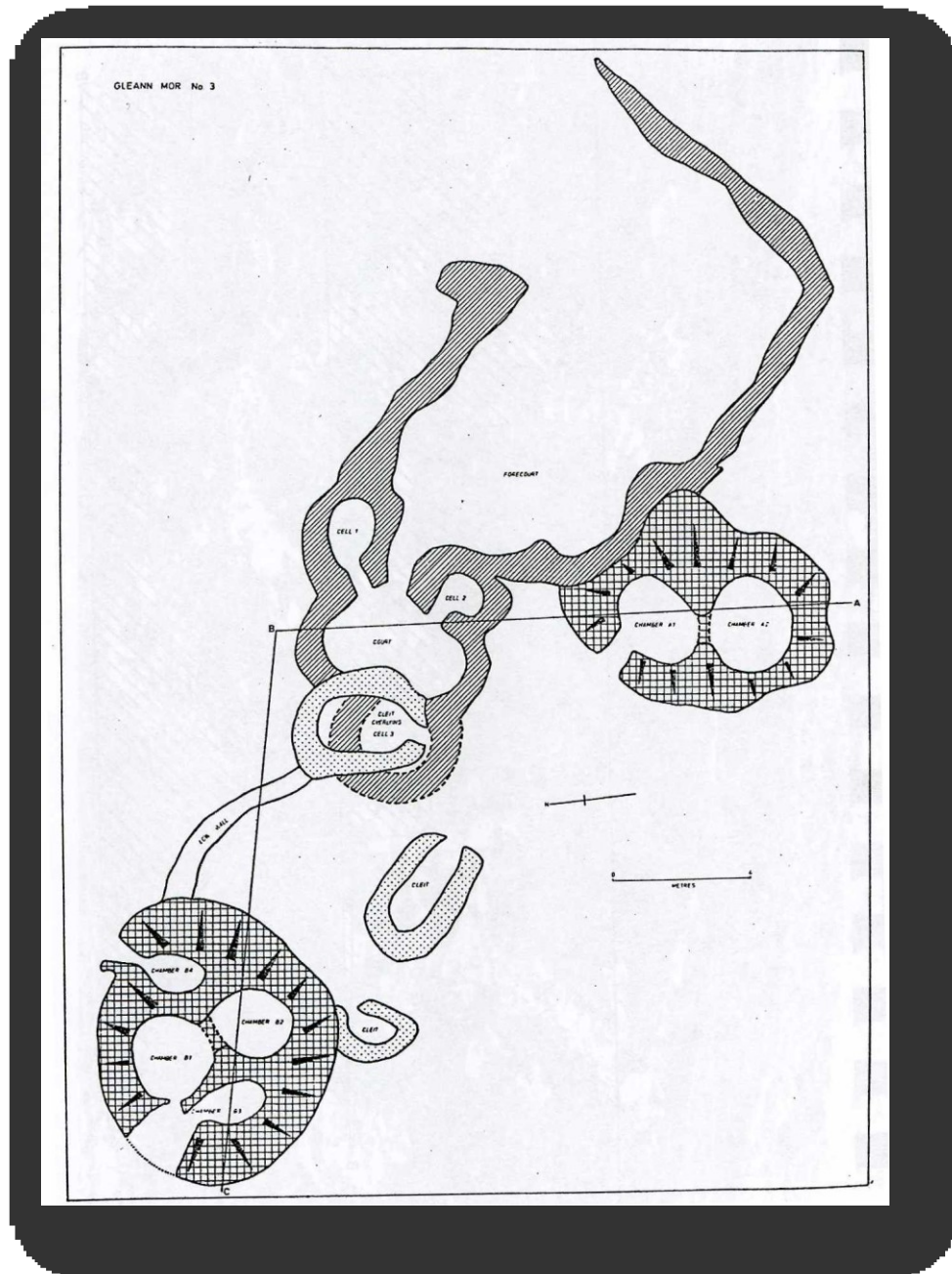


Figure 45 Cottam's plan of Structure F, incorporating the Amazon's House (Cottam 1974).

RCAHMS 1983-86

The drive to include St Kilda on the World Heritage List spurred an unprecedented survey of the island by a team from RCAHMS, for whom it was also the most technologically and logistically complex survey to date. The project, begun in 1983, was perceived from the outset as an architectural survey, as virtually no published works detailed the character of the buildings of the island, and Harman was included as a core part of the survey team and a co-author of the resultant text. The project was coordinated by Geoffrey Stell (an architectural historian), and staffed by Sam Scott, Ian Parker and Alan Leith, all surveyors fresh from the RCAHMS Argyll inventories. Harman, who had previously excavated at the Udal, was a thorough field worker, though it is worth noting that, when looking for comparisons of archaeological material, the staff members had relatively little experience in the NW of Scotland, and relatively little experience in the recording of archaeological as opposed to architectural monuments (A Leith pers comm). This may explain the identification of the robbed out head dykes of village bay as track ways, for example, although dykes and tracks are often related.

It is of interest that the notes of appreciation include thanks to Graham Ritchie, Jack Stevenson (RCAHMS archaeological investigators) and Jim Davidson, the same Davidson who had surveyed the sites of St Kilda 16 years earlier (RCAHMS 1988, vii), though it is difficult to judge the level of involvement of these staff. The actual survey work was principally undertaken by the surveyors, with Stell heavily committed to site descriptions and Harman often working independently (A Leith pers comm).

In the analysis of the settlement and structures of Gleann Mór, Harman and Stell adopted a more cautious approach to that of previous authorities:

The buildings, including those of nucleated character such as the 'Amazon's House', occur in groups and around them is a complicated pattern of much-reduced dykes and enclosures comparable with those outside the head dyke in the village. Some dykes appear to emanate from, and are presumably coeval with, the buildings; others clearly abut the main structures and overlie the foundations of earlier buildings or dykes

RCAHMS 1988, 26

Although more complex and more obviously embodying wheelhouse building traditions, the nucleated buildings in Gleann Mór appear to be of the same species as the surviving cellular structures in the village. The Amazon's House, for example, which is set partly within the slope of the hill, has a central chamber and linked cells, all roofed with turf-covered corbelling. Partly dismantled at one stage and now seriously decaying, this building was already a subject of legend in 1697. Martin Martin also related that 'some of the inhabitants dwell in it all summer, though it be some hundred years old'. Whether or not that was an exact and well-informed estimate, the dates of this building and its neighbours remain to be firmly established. They have been claimed as prehistoric, but all that can be confidently asserted on the basis of survey and historical evidence is that the Amazon's House is of about 1600 AD or earlier.

RCAHMS 1988, 27.

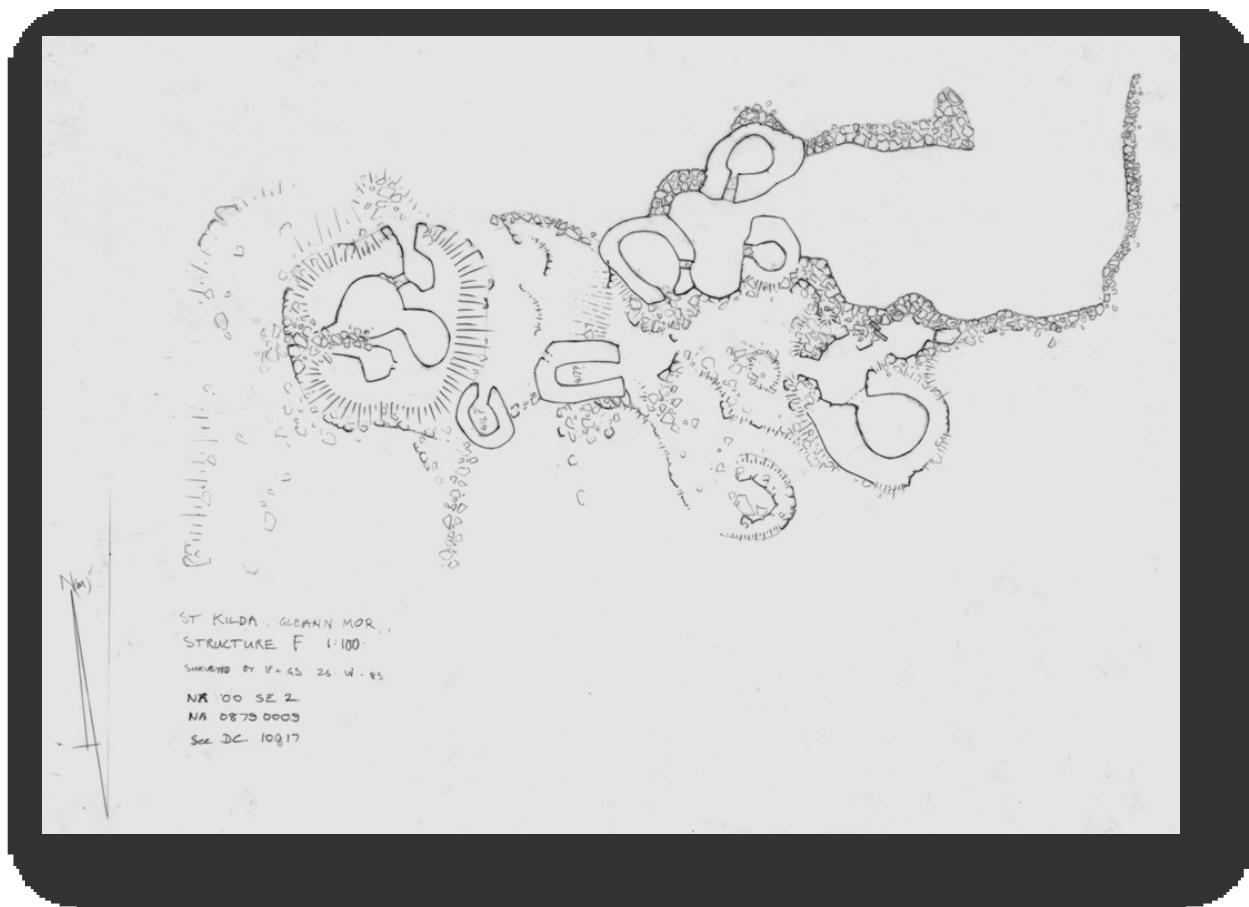


Figure 46 Field survey plan of Structure F including the Amazon's House. Surveyed by G Stell and I Parker of RCAHMS in June 1985.

DC 10844© RCAHMS

Mary Harman

Mary Harman had been in regular contact with RCAHMS since the 1970s, depositing negatives taken during site visits in the Western Isles¹⁴. In the late 1970s, before the publication of Cottam's summary in 1979 and RCAHMS involvement from 1983, she began the most extensive campaign of photography, planning, locating and describing St Kilda's archaeological sites. Taking this further, she based herself at the School of Scottish Studies, and her research culminated in the award of a doctorate and the publication of the encyclopaedic *An Isle Called Hirte* in 1997. The text is structured chronologically, summarising the accounts of the island to 1930, and thematically, looking at aspects of culture in the round such as 'religion' or 'arable farming'.

In her brief description of Iron Age St Kilda, Harman mentions the 'strike-a-light' discovered by TS Muir in the Amazon's House in 1858 which she describes as 'similar to many others found on Iron Age sites in North Uist and Skye' (Harman 1997, 64-5). More recently, strike-a-lights have also been discovered at

¹⁴ RCAHMS NMRS correspondence files hold letters between MH and various members of RCAHMS staff in the 1970s.

Dun Bharabhat, Lewis (Harding and Dixon 2000, 29, 31), where two similar objects were found in the secondary occupation layers. This typological analysis, which may not hold up to an extensive trawl of related literature, is the only categorical link between the Amazon's House and later prehistory. Unfortunately, the context of the find was not recorded, and it is perfectly possible that it had been moved.

As well as producing a detailed plan of the the Amazon's House, Harman published a suite of illustrated comparisons between different St Kilda structures (both in Gleann Mór and Village Bay) throwing a stronger light on the group of such structures that underlie a number of gathering folds. For her, the evidence from observation alone makes it clear that the gathering folds and associated cells follow the 'Amazon's House' type buildings in date and that 'it is possible that the smallpox epidemic [1727] marked the end of the use of the residential shielings on St Kilda' (1997, 152). Harman was the first author to clarify the number and location of the cellular structures in the glen:

There are in the glen the remains of ten or twelve structures which were probably all similar to the 'Amazon's House'. Some are comparatively well preserved and show very clearly the same plan; others are less complete and only certain features betray their relationship to the Amazon's House: corbelled walling, traces of a turfed mound in which the structure was built, and angular 'corners' between cells.'

Harman 1997, 77

The most notable element in Harman's description of the Amazon's House structures is her unwillingness to ascribe to them anything other than a circumspect date and a function that is based on the historical records.

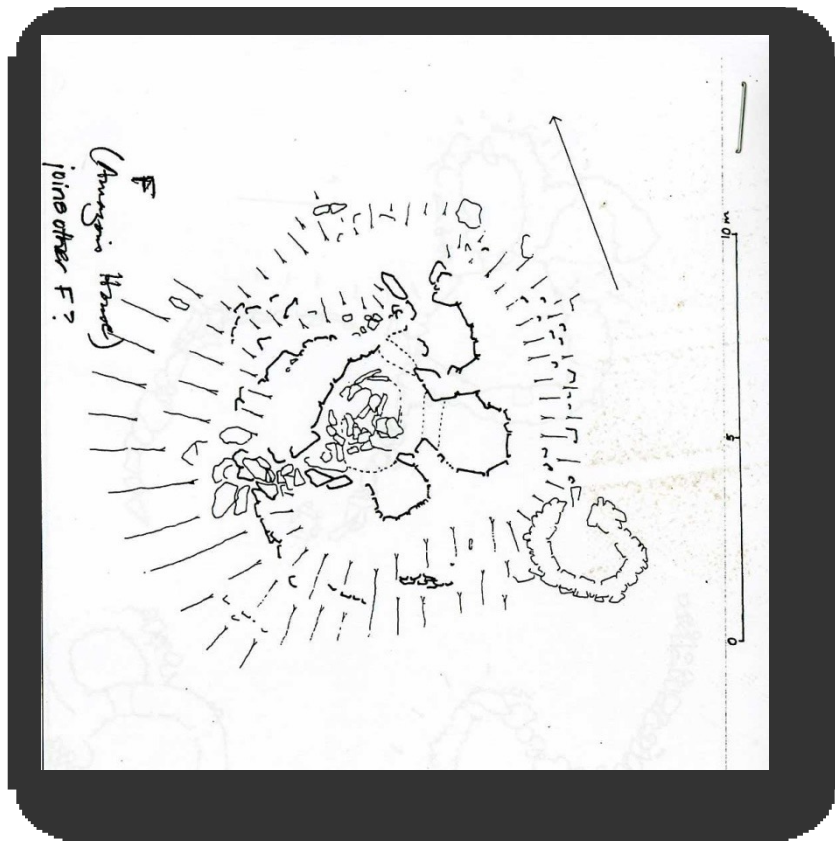


Figure 47 Mary Harman's survey of the 'Amazon's House' (copy courtesy of J Harden).

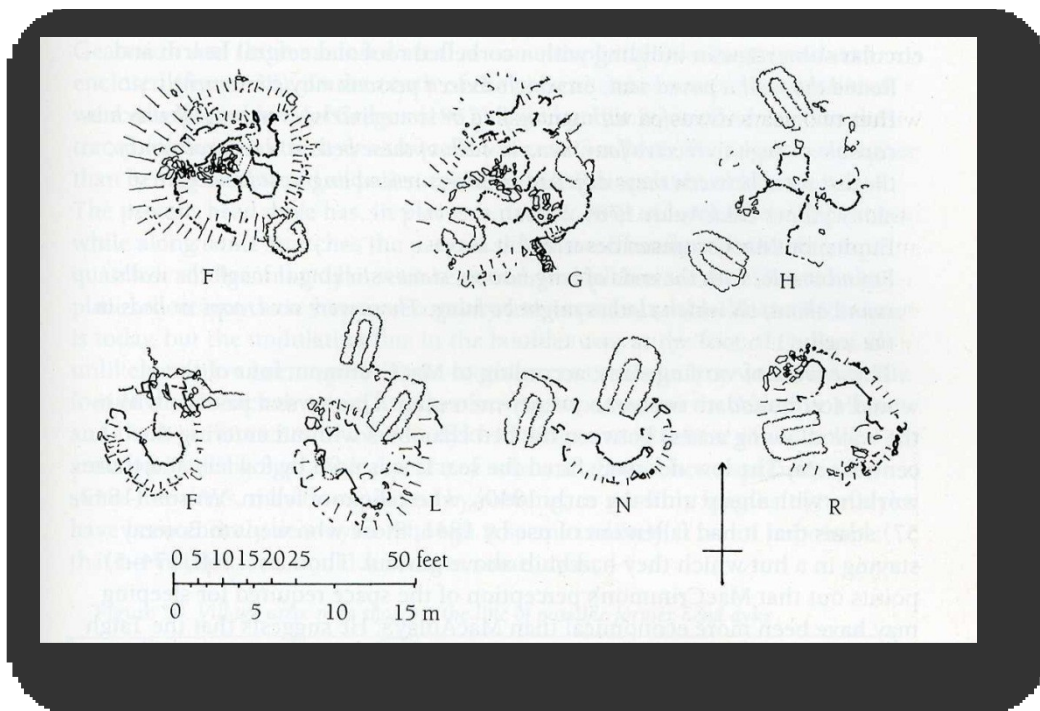


Figure 48 Comparative plan of 'Amazon House' type structures in Gleann Mór (Harman 1997, 77).

Fleming (Independent)

Andrew Fleming's recent work in St Kilda has certainly provided the evidence and impetus for a re-assessment of not only the field monuments, but also our approach and our understanding of St Kilda's place in the 'wider world'. Published academically, and in popular form, his principal thesis involves the re-situation of St Kilda within a Hebridean cultural context, where many of the traits formerly seen as unique are viewed again as part of the culture of the Western seaboard. His careful re-analysis of field monuments has led to a re-assertion of evidence for prehistoric quarrying and agriculture, while a re-analysis of the RCAHMS survey of the 1980s has led to a strong argument pointing to earlier settlement remains around the burial ground. With respect to Gleann Mór, Fleming has only a few short comments to make, but they are worth quoting in full:

In recent history, Gleann Mór was where the women grazed their cattle and sheep in summer, and made butter and cheese. They lived in complex stone structures, sleeping in little corbelled chambers, wall-beds opening on to small enclosed courts. There are about a dozen of these structures; from a distance, they look half sunk into the ground. They are evenly scattered over the lower part of the glen, respecting each other's space. The most celebrated is the Taigh na Banaghaisgeich, translated by Martin as the 'Amazon's House'. When Martin saw these structures they were believed to be 'some hundred years old'. The likelihood is that they are unusually well preserved 'Pictish' houses, dating from within the period roughly AD 400 and AD 900; they were preserved because they were re-occupied and refurbished, with the addition of 'horns' – low walls, in plan like the pincers of a lobster, creating forecourts for handling livestock.

Fleming 2005, 23

The Royal Commission has mapped a cluster of similar primitive looking walled fields in Gleann Mór, on the E bank of the burn, and mostly N of the famous 'Amazon's House'. Here there are at least two ovoid enclosures, perhaps more; these too are 'primary', in that they have field walls running up to them. As at Tobar Childa, the longer, straighter boundaries occur on the periphery, and thus may be relatively late – they look like divisions of land, rather than accumulations of enclosures. So did two communities once inhabit Hirta at the same time, one at Village Bay and the other at Gleann Mór? It seems clear that the 'Amazon's House' and similar structures are later in date than the field walls, and unconnected with them. Mark Edmonds and I have looked for stone tools in Gleann Mór, and failed to find them. However, this is not too surprising. The structures of 'Amazon's House' type, and the nearby cleits, are not constructed from stones dug out of old field walls, nor is there any sign here of recent cultivation episodes which might have uncovered broken hoe blades

Fleming 2005, 51-2

As we have seen, the late prehistoric period in N and W Scotland saw strong cultural linkages and maritime connections between far flung islands and archipelagos, and St Kilda participated in full. If we no longer expect, in general, to find a strange, aberrant, 'insular' culture here, we should probably be prepared to identify the 'Amazon's House' type structures in Gleann Mór as fairly normal houses dating from the Pictish period. They clearly post-date the probably Bronze Age fields in the glen, and were old-looking when Martin arrived, so they should fall within the 500 BC – AD 1000 bracket, roughly

speaking. Quite good parallels for the Gleann Mór structures would certainly include the buildings excavated at Bostadh in Lewis, and the one found within the broch at Dun Vulan on South Uist. There is a respectable amount of evidence for 'Pictish' material culture (c AD 400-900) in the Western Isles. (Incidentally, not many archaeologists believe nowadays that the presence of the material is necessarily evidence for people with a distinct cultural identity.) The fascinating thing about the 'Pictish' levels at Dun Vulan is that they contained bones of deep-sea fish – so it would not be surprising to find that the people of the Western Isles were in regular contact with outlying islands at this period. It seems that we must take a closer look at the structures in Gleann Mór.

Fleming 2005, 61

Fleming's referenced comparisons for the 'Amazon's House' structures lie with the buildings described by Parker Pearson *et al* in their popular book *South Uist* which include later first millennium re-occupation of the broch at [Dun Vulan](#) and Bornaish, in South Uist, and [Bostadh](#), in Lewis (Parker Pearson et al 2004, 110-14). These buildings, examples of both 'figure-of-eight' or 'jelly-baby' houses, as well as less regular cellular structures, share a number of common traits as a group, which include their approximate size, the organisation of space, and date. They are often, but not exclusively, discovered within earlier and more substantial buildings and, in some interpretations, the symbolism of this re-use is seen as important.

Crucially, none of the examples alluded to by Fleming are comparable to the 'Amazon's House' in terms of preservation and, more importantly, there is a lack of evidence that they were stone-roofed. The larger cells were perhaps roofed with timber and thatch, which may suggest a difference in date, or function or cultural affiliation, or all three. The necessity for a thatched timber roof, rather than a turfed stone roof, is most probably influenced by the diameter of these buildings which, in turn, relates to their function, although the ease of access to timber supplies, driftwood or otherwise, must have been a factor.

The largest cell of the Amazon's House is only about 2.2m in diameter, while the main cell in the cellular phase at Dun Vulan is almost 6m in diameter and the main cells are generally over 5m in diameter, as at Bostadh (Parker Pearson and Sharples 1999, 68; Neighbour and Burgess 1996). Where the plan of Pictish houses is very regular, at the [Udal](#) (Figure 49) or Bostadh, it does not match any building on St Kilda very well. Less regular plans, such as at Dun Vulan, vary considerably from site to site and are also a difficult match.

The examples of cellular buildings specifically mentioned by Fleming, as well as those that form part of the comparative group, have been discovered as archaeological sites rather than standing buildings. They are buildings that had gone out of use centuries before. It is also important to note that many published examples of cellular buildings have been discovered at 'prime' locations, often within buildings such as Dun Vulan or Beirgh which were clearly focal points in settlement history. In contrast, the Amazon's House is not in a prime location and it is not clear that it succeeds another early form of building.

Fleming suggests that the survival of the the Amazon's House, for over 1000 years, may be explained by 're-occupation and re-use'. There do not, however, appear to be any examples elsewhere in Scotland of

Later Iron Age roofed structures (rather than sites) that were re-occupied during the medieval and post-medieval. The assertion rests on the assumption that St Kilda would provide a specific context where that may happen – a context where unprecedented survival could occur. Here then we see exactly the logic that much of Fleming’s work has been designed to undermine – that St Kilda is unique, and would provide a unique context for survival of a late prehistoric structure despite it having been in use until c1875, and the clear examples of loss on St Kilda, such as the medieval chapels, the pre-Improvement village etc. This is of particular interest, as it is precisely the kind of thinking that has characterised the literature that concerns St Kilda and received the recent criticism of Fleming and others.

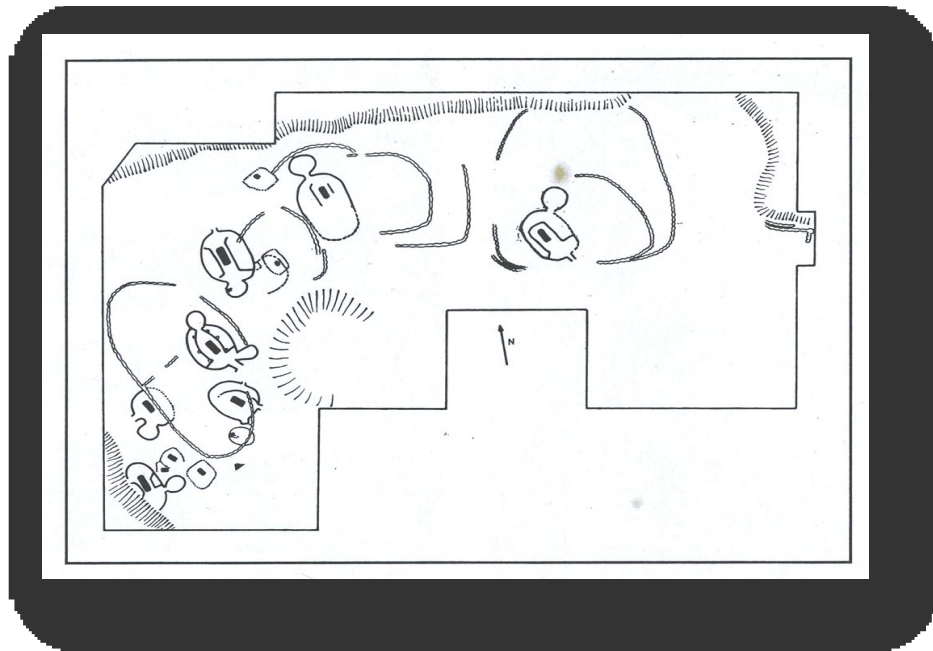


Figure 49 A plan of the pre-Norse settlement at the Udal (Crawford 1996, 89), part of which appeared the 9th and 10th interim report (Crawford 1972, 1973).

RCAHMS Archaeological Survey 2007-2009

The re-nomination of St Kilda as a dual world heritage site prompted a complete re-survey of the archipelago’s archaeological landscapes, undertaken as a partnership project between the Trust and RCAHMS between 2007 and 2009. The project, which is not yet completed, is managed by I Parker, a member of the survey team 25 years ago, and staffed by archaeological investigators and surveyors, with the assistance of architectural and photographic colleagues. The broad range of experience which this team has been able to draw on, coupled with the efficiency and accuracy that modern technology brings, has allowed the reinterpretation of many of the archaeological sites of the island – results that will be made available through the web resources of RCAHMS, principally Canmore, and through a print publication in the future.

The programme of work in Gleann Mór included re-visiting and noting all of the known archaeological sites, prospecting for new sites, mapping all sites with survey grade GPS, capturing digital photographs, producing detailed measured drawings. In the 1980s, an area on the E of Gleann Mór was chosen for

survey with self-reducing alidade and plane table at a scale of 1:500 and a number individual structures were drawn at 1:100 (RCAHMS 1988). Three other areas were drawn with the same methodology at 1:500 in 2008 and 2009 extending the coverage at this scale to the whole of the lower reaches of the glen. In addition, a few examples of individual structures were chosen to illustrate specific types of structure, and again, these were drawn at 1:100. The survey drawings, which have not yet been catalogued or 'inked up', are reproduced below (Figure 50, Figure 51). Of most interest are the unusual curvilinear structures recorded on the immediate foreshore, and the cellular buildings recorded in the steep S flank of An Campar (Figure 52). They simply demonstrate that we do not understand the archaeological sites in some parts of St Kilda, either in terms of date or function. It is not completely beyond the realms of possibility that they may have something to do with the harvest of the Great Auk – which was apparently most easily taken in this part of the island (Fleming 2000, 87).

The trip to Boreray in 2010 (an adjunct to the main survey project) has allowed the recording of a series of enclosures, cultivation strips, and the collapsed remains of earlier structures, probably those referred to in early historical accounts (Halliday pers comm). The cultivation, first noted by Williamson in 1957 (Williamson 1958), does not necessarily indicate that the island had a permanent population, and we must be careful to recognise the turf strips that were cut on a regular basis to signal to people on Hirta.

Most recently, the forthcoming publication by Harden and Lelong also draws an analogy with the cellular structures of the late first millennium AD, building on the work of Simon Gilmour (2000). The comparative plans that Gilmour produced to illustrate the form of 'cellular' buildings are repeated here in full (Figure 53, Figure 54, Figure 55). Gilmour's work on the Later Prehistoric settlement pattern on the western seaboard is perhaps the most crucial to our understanding of whether or not the cellular structures of Gleann Mór, or Village Bay for that matter, fit within the broader pattern noted in the Outer Hebrides (Gilmour 2000). Comparisons to wheelhouses cannot be countenanced, given the results of excavations in the last twenty years which have demonstrated the large number of smaller and less monumental structures now known as cellular, and in their most regular form, as jelly-baby or figure of eight buildings. A brief look at the comparative plans of Later Iron Age structures below (Figure 53, Figure 54) demonstrates that these buildings are not directly comparable to the Amazon's House. Putting aside the issues of context and condition, as mentioned above, they were generally larger, incorporate vertical slabs, and were roofed in a different manner. Gilmour (pers. comm.) has suggested that it may be the Early Iron Age site at Guinnerso that provides the most reasonable parallel. In his PhD thesis, Guinnerso is grouped within Early Iron Age non-monumental structures, such as Coile a'Ghasgain, Skye (Armit 1996, 104) which is certainly different in character. Importantly, Gilmour argues that 'the location of Coile a'Ghasgain and Guinnerso suggests they are transhumance sites', although a link between shieling activity in the medieval and post-medieval and later prehistoric transhumance should not be seen as direct (2000, 76).

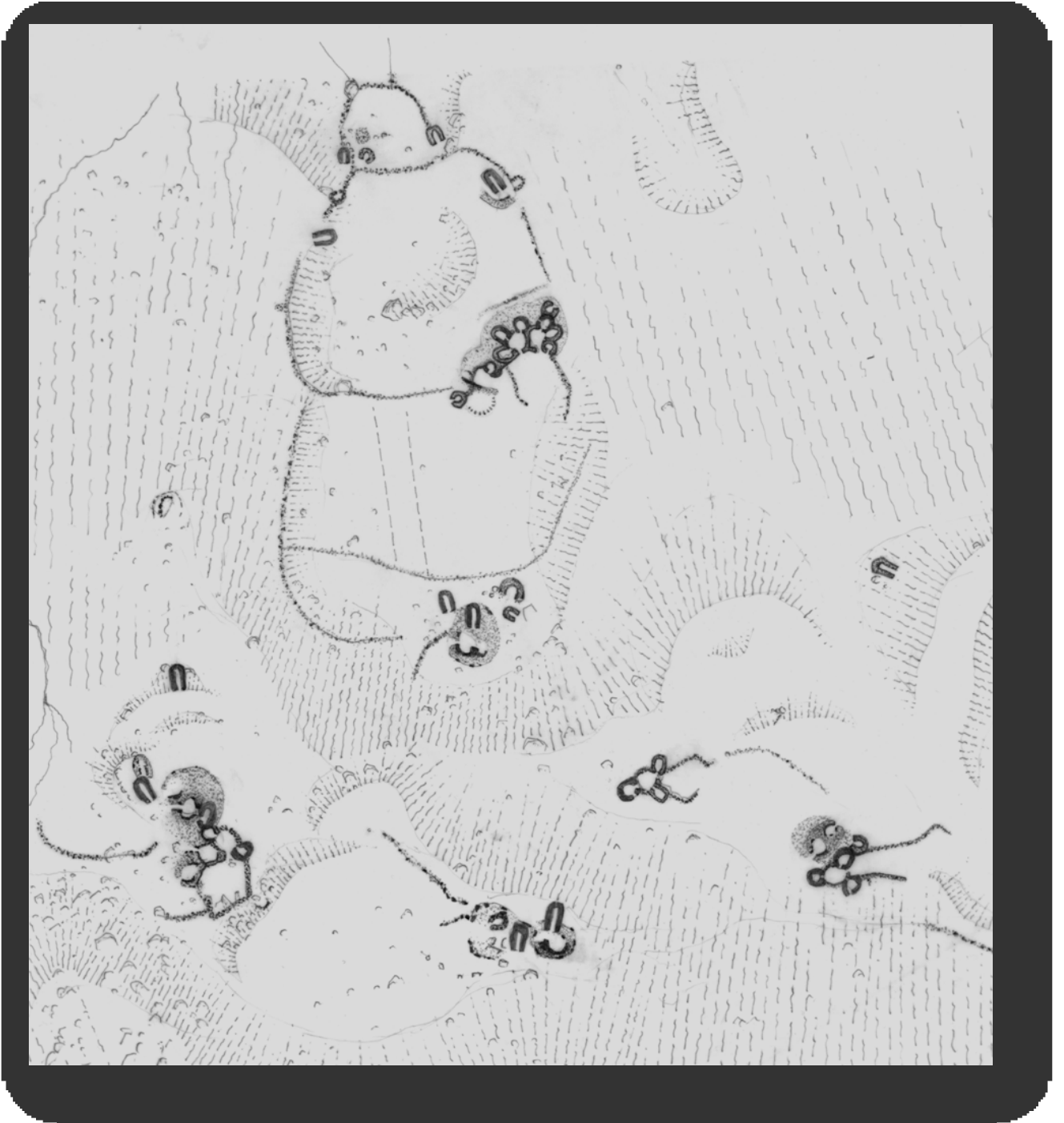


Figure 50 Cellular structures, gathering folds and enclosures on the W side of Gleann Mór. Structures M, N and P line the bottom of the illustration. Uncatalogued field survey drawing © RCAHMS.

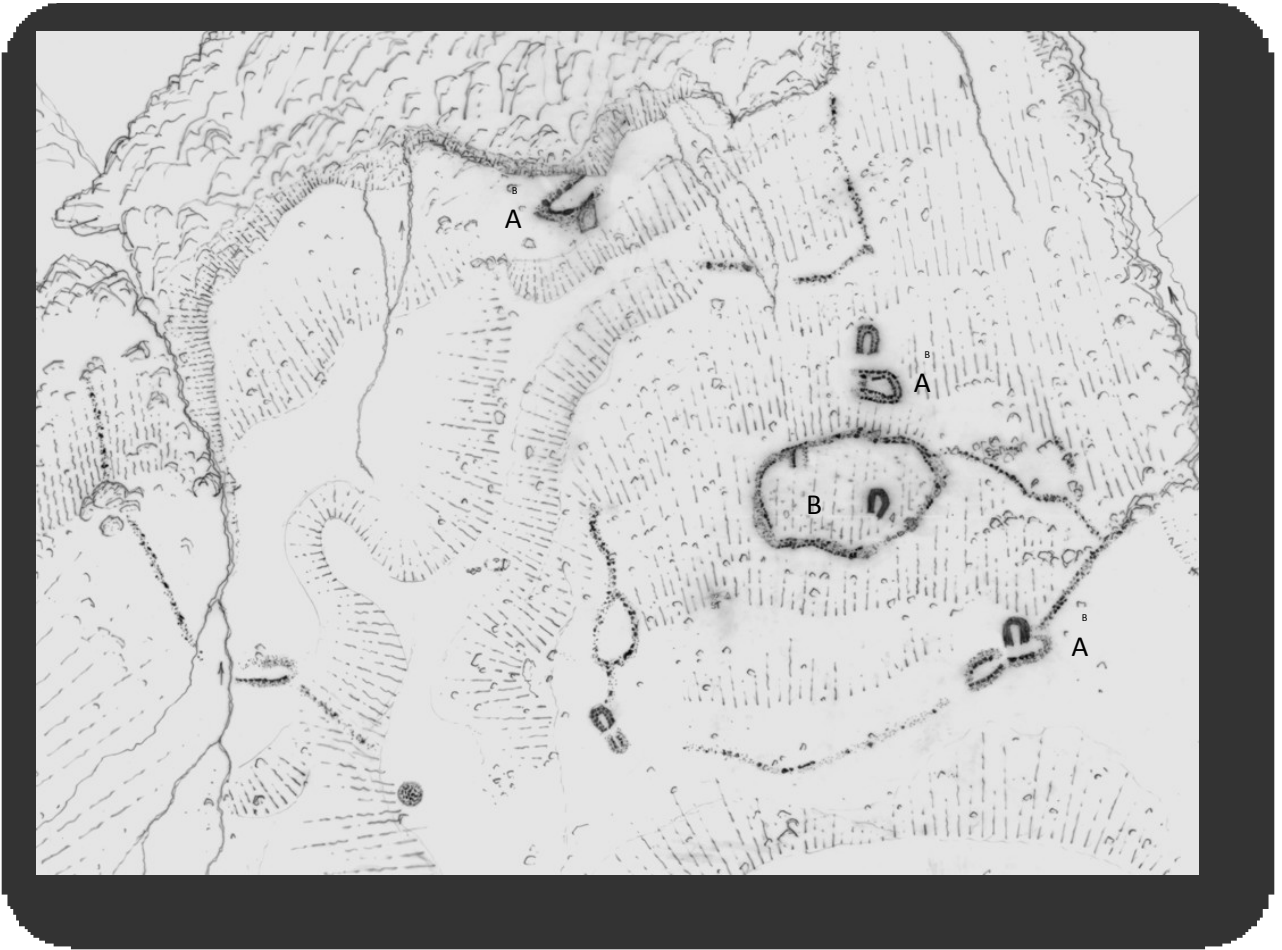


Figure 51 Lower Gleann Mór. Features include large buildings, of unclear function (A), lengths of walling, an enclosure (B) and later cleits. Survey drawing 2008. Uncatalogued © RCAHMS.

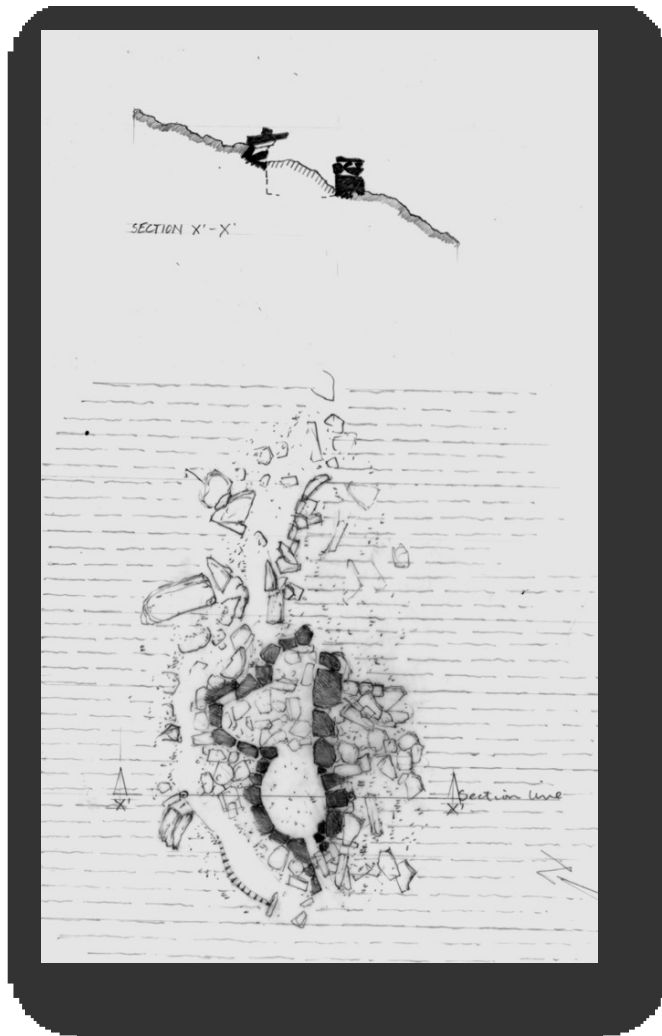


Figure 52 A cellular building or bothy (NS00SE 12) located on very steep ground.

Uncatalogued field survey drawing © RCAHMS.

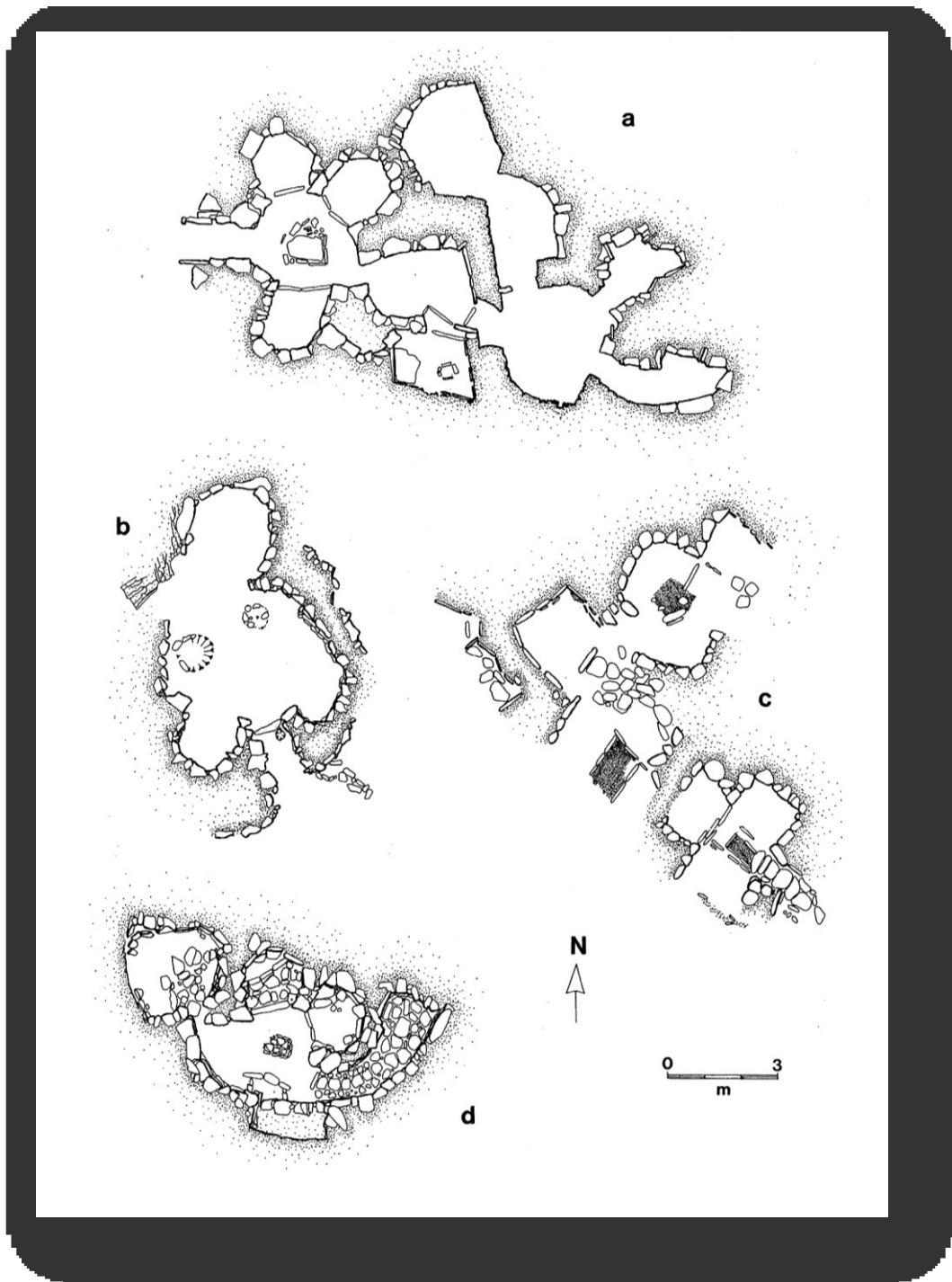


Figure 53 'Shamrock' cellular structures in Scotland reproduced from Gilmour (2000, 396): a) Gurness, Orkney (after Hedges 1987), b) Eilean Olabhat, North Uist (after Armit 1996), c) Buckquoy Buildings 5 and 6, Orkney (after Ritchie 1977), d) Loch na Berie Phase 6, Lewis

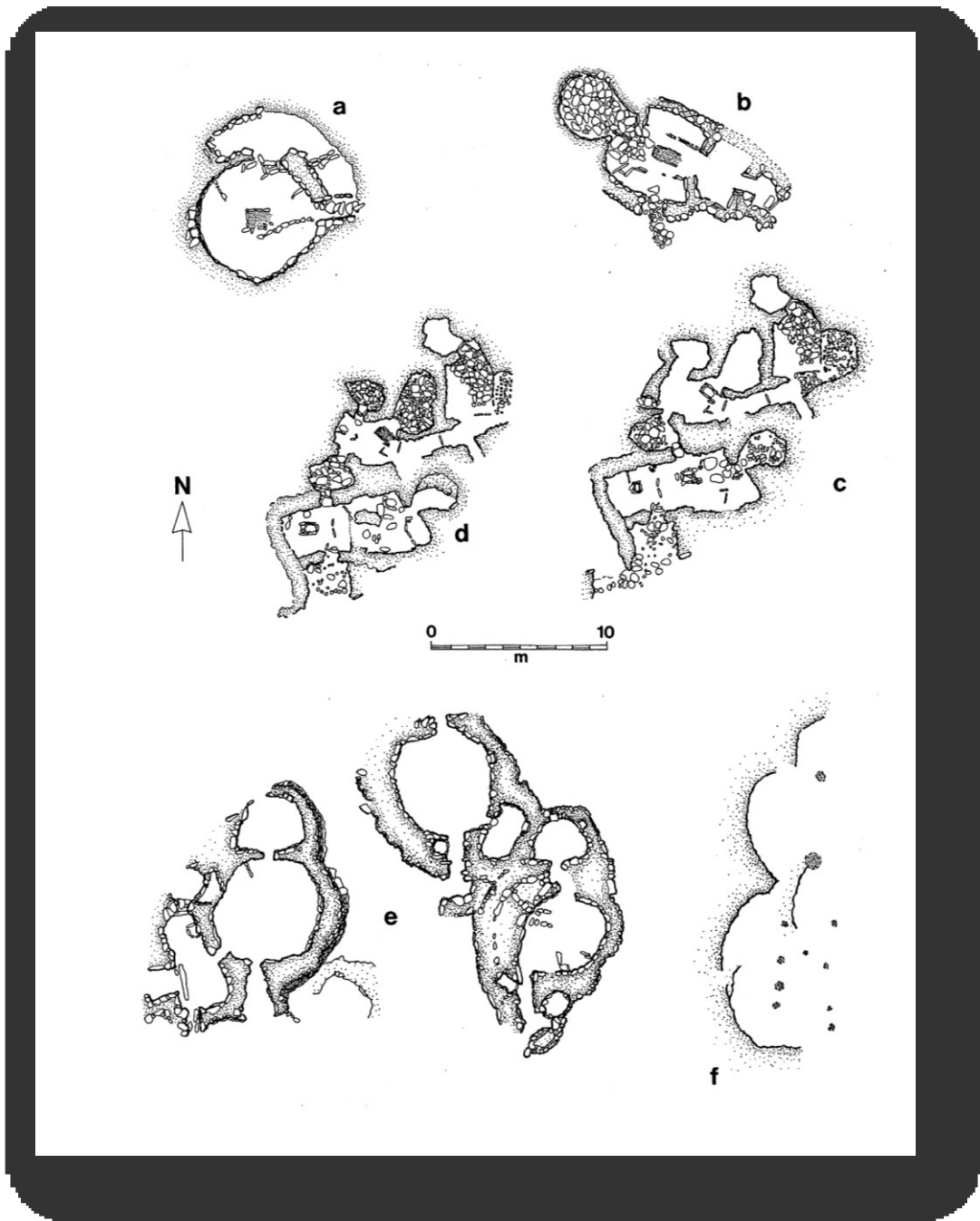


Figure 54 'Figure-of-eight' cellular structures in Scotland reproduced from Gilmour (2000, 397): a) Loch na Beirgh Phase 1, Lewis (after Gilmour), Buckquoy Building 4, Orkney (after Ritchie 1977), c) Howe Phase 8, Orkney (after Ballin Smith 1994), d) Howe Phase 8 (ibid), e) Bostadh Beach, Lewis (after Burgess and Neighbour 1996), f) Brough of Birsay, Orkney (after Hunter 1986)

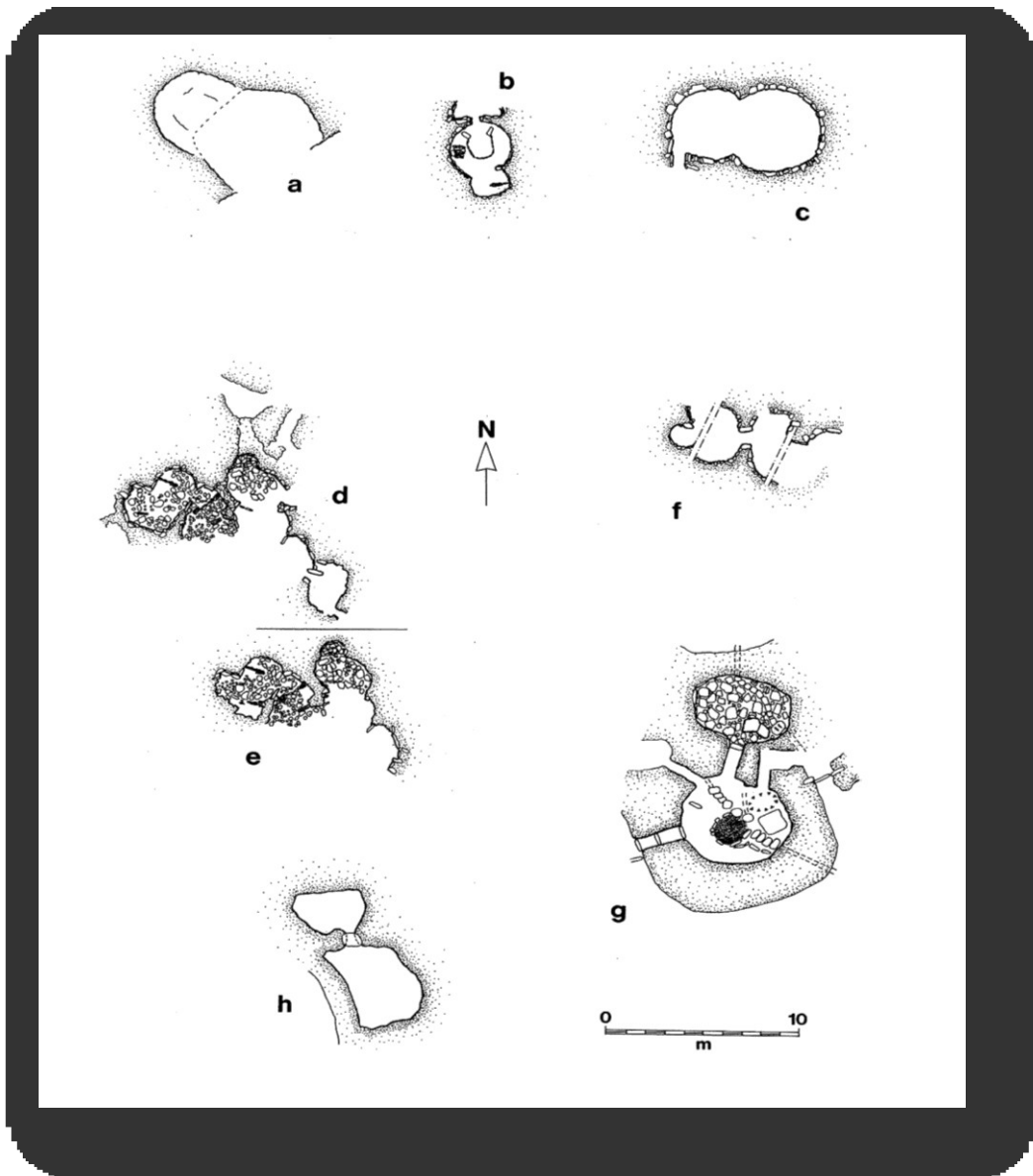


Figure 55 'Figure-of-eight' cellular structures in Scotland reproduced from Gilmour (2000, 398): a) Brough of Birsay, Orkney (after Hunter 1986), b) Scatness, Shetland (after Dockrill, 1998), c) Red Craig, Orkney (after Morris, 1996) d) Howe Phase 8, Orkney (after Ballin Smith 1994), f) Ceann nan Clachan, North Uist (after Armit and Dunwell 1996), g) Wag at Forse, Caithness (after Curle 1947), h) Wag at Forse, Caithness (after Curle 1947)