# **Gleann Mór**

Settlement

Structures

Structures on Hirta

**RCAHMS BROADSHEET 4** ST KILDA Settlement and

# St Kilda Archipelago

Village; detail of survey by Sharbau.

(Juno)

for Scotland and the Nature Conservancy activities on the part of The National Trust also became the scene of regular seasonal the Guided Weapons Range on Benbecula; it Royal Artillery detached from the garrison of permanent military base housing a unit of the From 1957 St Kilda became the site of a

eventually to the evacuation of the last thurtydecline of the island community which led Thereafter, descriptions and pictures chart the

house-building was undertaken in the 1860s.

within a head dyke. A further programme of street and associated cultivation plots formed

assume its familiar crescentic layout with a

of settlement on Hirta. The village began to

major transformation in the form and pattern

Mackenzie, minister on St Kilda from 1829 to

1843. During his incumbency there was a

who wrote about the improvements carried

1758, and by the Reverend J B Mackenzie,

Kenneth Macaulay, who visited St Kilda in

produced the first full-length account, and

St Kilda is largely confined to the last three The historical record of human settlement on

descriptions are those by the Reverend

among the most significant of the later

centuries. Martin Martin's visit in 1697

Soay, Dun and Boreray with its grand

archipelago, the other main islands being now restricted to the largest island of the

more authentic historical name, but Hirta is

(stags) and its derivative forms constitute a

one of the offshore islands closer to the main

Norse Skildir (shields), which on some early

name is almost certainly a version of the Old

The remote and scenically spectacular islands

human settlement in the British Isles. The being one of the most distant outposts of

west of North Uist in the Outer Hebrides, of the St Kilda group lie sixty-four kilometres

maps appears to have been associated with

Hebridean chain. The Old Norse Hirtir

History of settlement

attendant stacks.

out by his father, the Reverend Neil

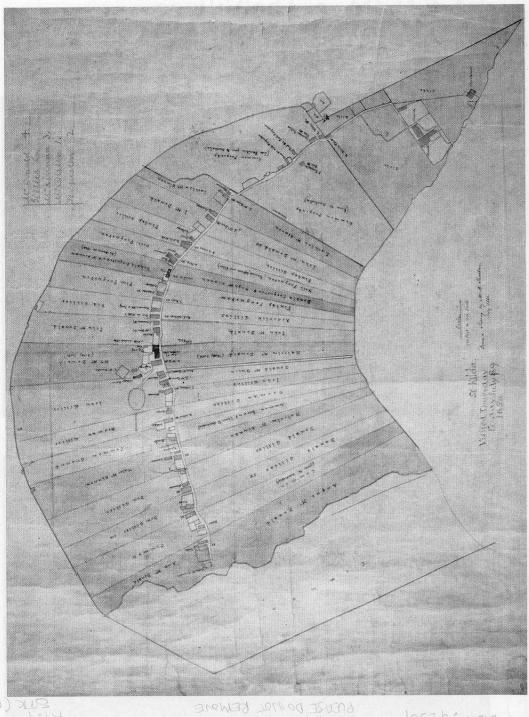
.0£91 inhabitants in August 1930.

ground, now occupied by the army camp, quarantine. The eastern strip of common half of whom died on voyage or in emigration in 1856 of thirty-six islanders, Australia', a touching reminder of the because their former occupants had 'gone to pairs of crofts are marked as common ground on either side of the street are named. Three beds in the houses. The holders of the plots made to the occurrence of at least two wallcabbages and potatoes. Reference is also manure, and the uses of enclosed yards for buildings for storing corn, fish, birds and drawing denotes the functions of ancillary and added details in 1860 and 1861. The Dunvegan, carried out a survey in July 1858 on behalf of the owners, MacLeod of the village by Sharbau, a draughtsman who, graphically displayed in an accurate plan of The effects of Mackenzie's reorganisation are Sparbau survey

village at that date. houses and associated cultivation plots in the making a total of twenty-one or twenty-two probably represented three original divisions,

swept away the thatched roots of many of the In October 1860 a storm of hurricane force

marked on Sharbau's plan. Dunvegan estate. Two of these new houses are under the direction of craftsmen from the sixteen cottages of standard mainland design of 1861 work began on the first of a series of 1830s black houses, and during the summer



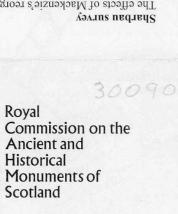
reproduced by courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland) Village; survey by Sharbau, 1858 and 1860

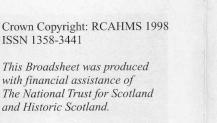


The National Trust for Scotland 🖉 Urras Nàiseanta na h-Alba

HISTORIO







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BORERAY

STAC AN ARMIN 🍐 STAC LEE 🔦

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ST KILDA

**Royal Commission on the** Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS)

John Sinclair House 16 Bernard Terrace Edinburgh EH8 9NX

RCAHMS is a non-departmental government body financed by Parliament through The Scottish Office. Its main objectives are to record and interpret the sites, monuments and buildings of Scotland's past, to promote a greater appreciation of their value through the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS), and to present them more directly by selective publications and exhibitions. The NMRS, which is open to the public, 9.30-16.30 (16.00 on Fridays), at the address given above, contains an extensive collection of material relating to the archaeology and architecture of Scotland, including a large collection of aerial photographs covering the whole of Scotland.

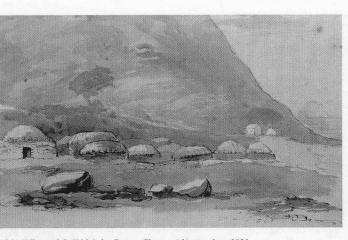
Front cover: Village; street from west. St Kilda 'Parliament', 1886 (reproduced with permission from the George Washington Wilson Collection, Aberdeen University Library).

St Kilda was bequeathed to The National Trust for Scotland in 1957, and is now cared for in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage. For more information about St Kilda, contact: Argyll, Lochaber and Western Isles Regional Office of The National Trust for Scotland, Lochvoil House, Dunuaran Road, Oban, Argyll PA34 4NE.

LEVENISH

ST KILDA

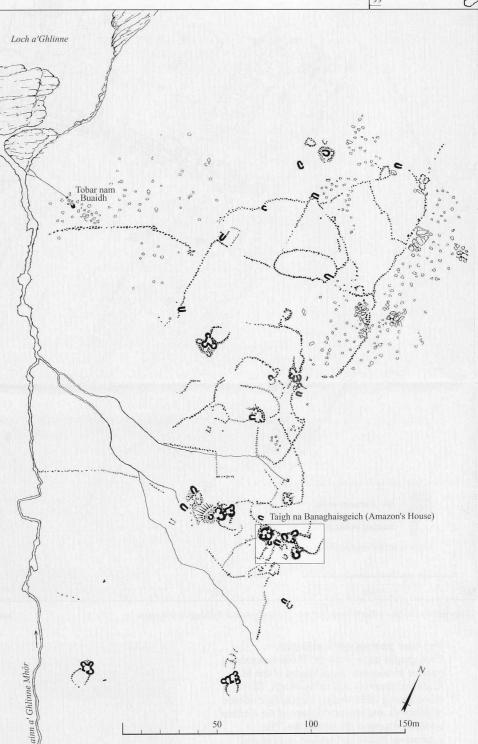
Further information about the sites referred to in this broadsheet can be obtained from the NMRS and from the RCAHMS publication, Geoffrey P Stell and Mary Harman, Buildings of St Kilda (HMSO, 1988), copies of which are available from RCAHMS, price £7.00 including postage and packing. A fuller account of the background is provided by Mary Harman, 'An Isle Called Hirte', A History and Culture of St Kilda to 1930 (Maclean Press, Skye, 1997), price £35.



'Sketch of the Village of St Kilda'; by George Clayton Atkinson, June 1831 (reproduced by courtesy of Dennis Atkinson)

## Early houses in the village

The earliest known illustrations of the village are a pair of watercolours prepared in 1812 by Sir Thomas Dyke Acland, a Devon man who in 1834 left £20 with the minister 'in order to encourage the people to build better houses'. One of these views shows buildings with straw-thatched roofs which are also depicted on the recently-discovered watercolour of 1831 shown above. This view shows even more clearly the technique of rope-thatching with anchorstones, and, in the background, the newly-built church and manse.



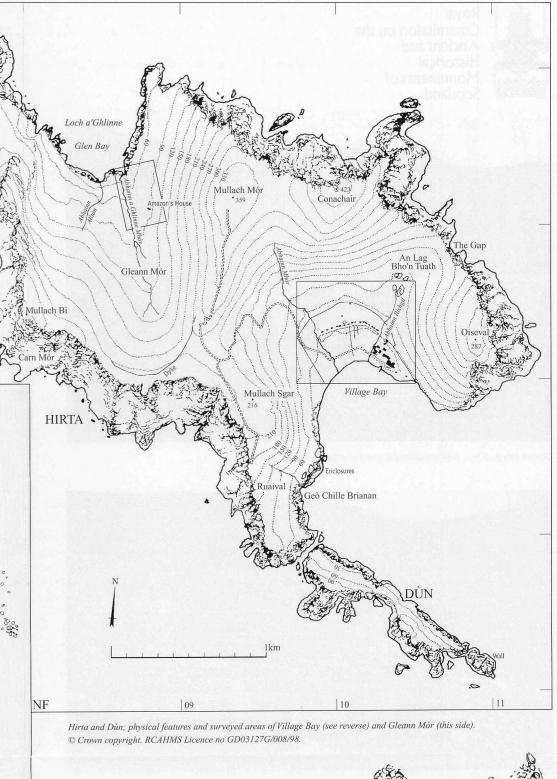
Gleann Mór; area of settlement and fields east of Abhainn a'Ghlinne Mhór.

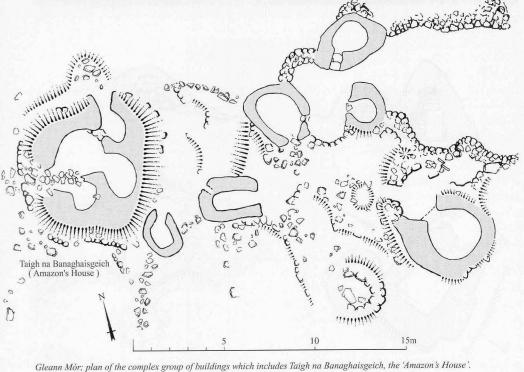
In Gleann Mór, on the north side of Hirta, evidence of settlement and land use is clearly concentrated in two main areas around the lower reaches of the burn. The densest cluster of buildings is on the east side where there is scree material available for building, a welldrained slope, and a water-supply from at least three springs. Such buildings as survive are known or are likely to have been used latterly for temporary or seasonal accommodation. The buildings occur in groups and around these clusters there is a complex pattern of much-reduced dykes and enclosures comparable with those outside the head dyke in the village. Around the head of the glen there is a long continuous turf dyke of unknown date and purpose, possibly originally intended as some form of territorial demarcation or stock control.

Many of the structures are of a complex nucleated character embodying ancient

wheelhouse building traditions, and possibly representing more complete versions of the fragmentary cellular structures in the village. Typical of their general layout and construction, the structure known since at least 1697 as the 'Amazon's House' or 'House of the Female Warrior' (Taigh na Banaghaisgeich) is set partly within the slope of the hill and has a central chamber and linked cells, all roofed with turf-covered corbelling. It was reported in 1697, when this building was already the subject of legend, that 'some of the inhabitants dwell in it all summer, though it be some hundred years old.'

Other buildings of this type have been modified for later use, usually with dykes overlying older cellular foundations and enclosing an outer forecourt. They probably served as gathering folds (Buaile Crothaidh) as Captain Thomas learnt; he was told that 'the huts ... were for the lambs and kids ... from whence they were in sight and smell of their dams, but were prevented from sucking'. Perched on top of these structures, and partly built out of them, are groups of relatively modern cleitean.





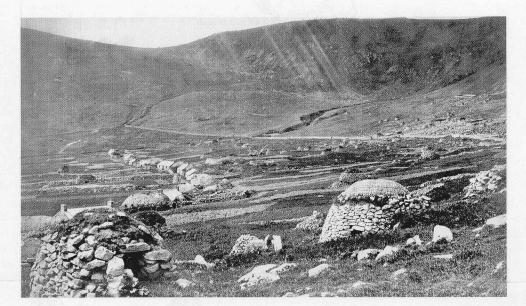


Gleann Mór and Gob na h-Airde; general view looking north over an outlying nucleated structure.

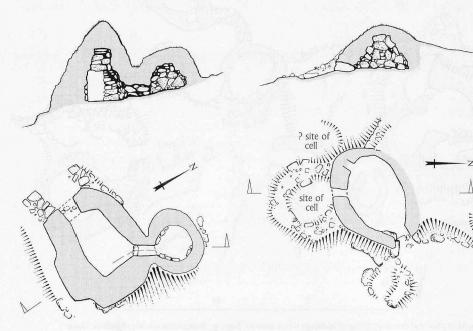




rom east, 1886 (reproduced by courtesy of Stirling Council Libraries). General

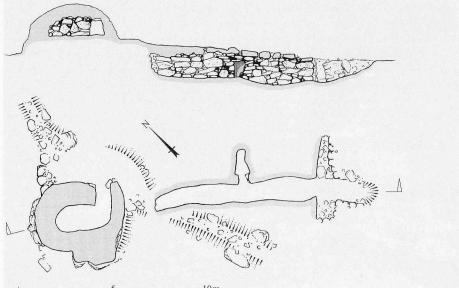


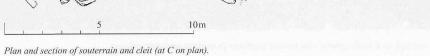
View from east, c. 1878.

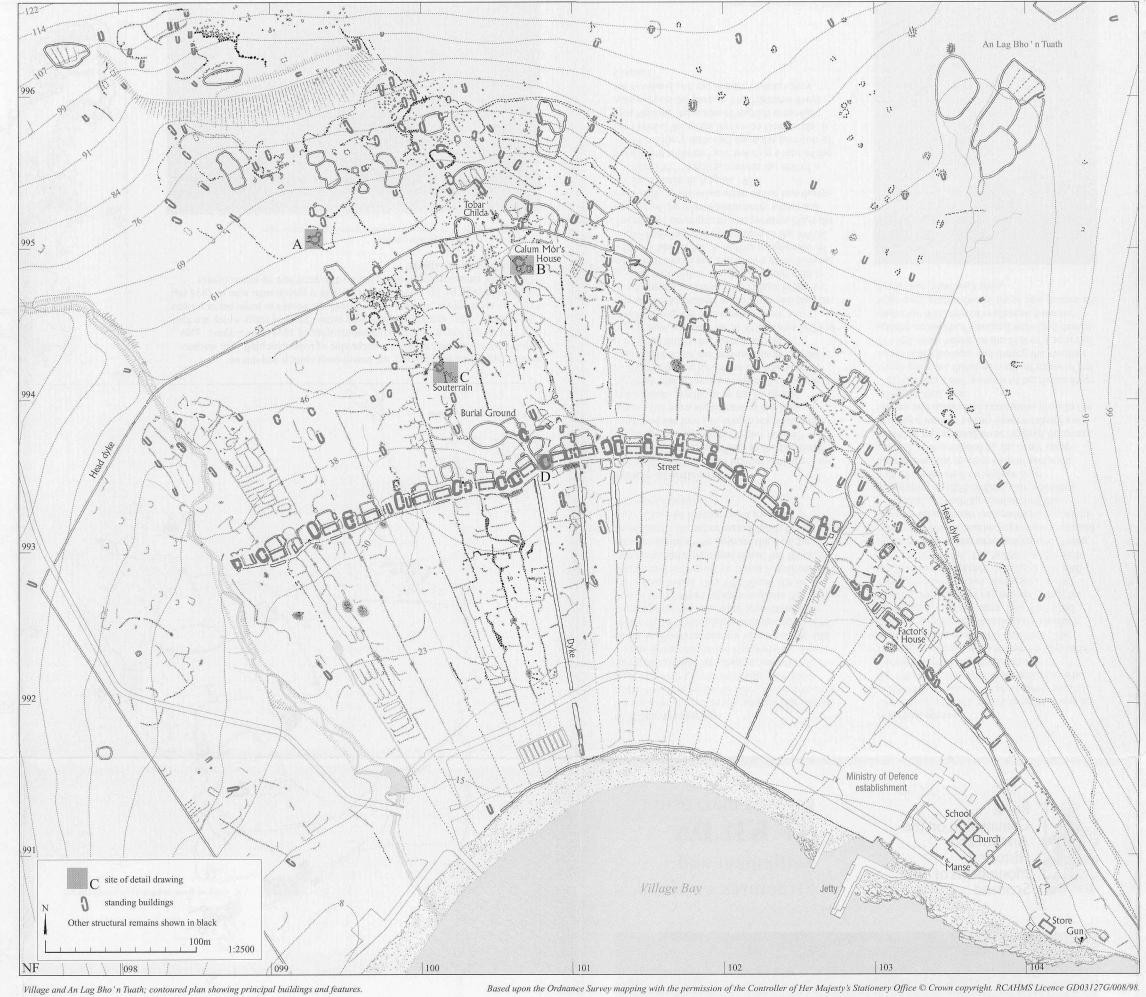


Plan and section of 'cellular' cleit (at A on plan).

Plan and section of 'cellular' cleit, known as 'Calum Mór's House' (at B on plan).







**The later photographic evidence** Photographs taken from the 1860s onwards provide an accurate visual record of the St Kildan community and its buildings. They show, among other things, surprising evidence of removals and reconstructions of the cleitean within and around the head dyke. The contrasting photographs taken in 1886 and 1986 from the steep slope of Oiseval, east of the village, demonstrate some of these changes. Apart from the obvious intrusion of the Ministry of Defence establis ent with its associated road and quarry, there is the jetty, built in 1901. Several cleitean on the lower meadows and one just above the Store have appeared since 1886, whilst a cleit below the Factor's House has been demolished and another built a little further down the slope. The photographs of 1886 show domed roofs of thatch on the black houses between the newer houses, and there is clear evidence of cultivation in places.

**Building-types** From the souterrain which has produced pottery of Iron Age type through to the estate and community buildings of the 19th century, the village on Hirta retains considerable evidence of building through the ages. Evidence of early houses, which appear to predate the reorganisation of the 1830s, is provided by the corbelled, cellular structures in the backlands which survive in the form of modified cleitean. Cleitean are small, drystone structures used for storage, and although they are particularly numerous in the village area, there are no less than about 1,430 of them in the archipelago overall.

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General view from north, 1986.

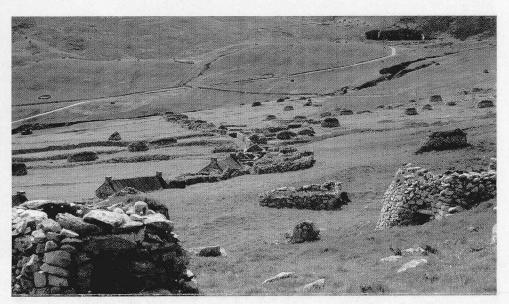
# Wall-beds

A feature of the early dwelling houses, which most visitors remarked upon, was the construction of bed-recesses (crub) within the walls. One visitor likened them to stone-vaulted ovens, disposed around the walls of the huts according to the size of the family. Some of these wall-beds were noted on Sharbau's plan, despite Mackenzie's intention to remove them in the 1830s.

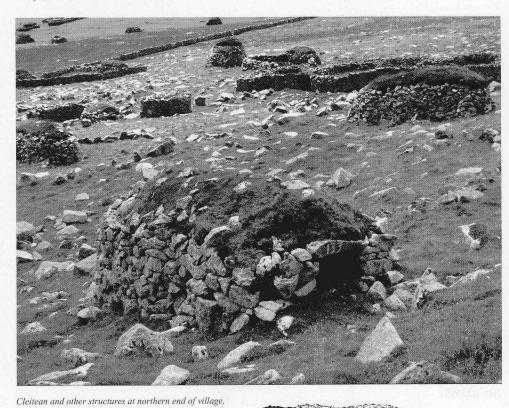
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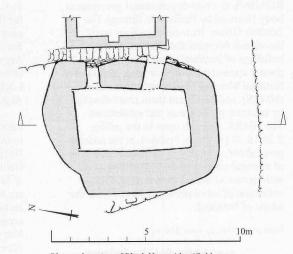
General view from east, 1986.



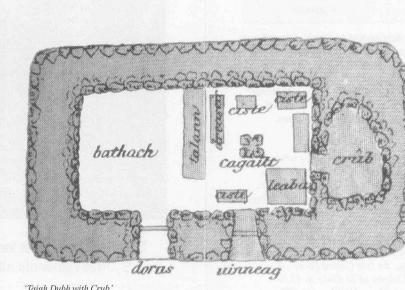
View from east, 1986.







Plan and section of Black House identifiable as 'Betty Scott's Cottage' (at D on plan).



'Taigh Dubh with Crub' (black house with wall-bed); plan published 1870.