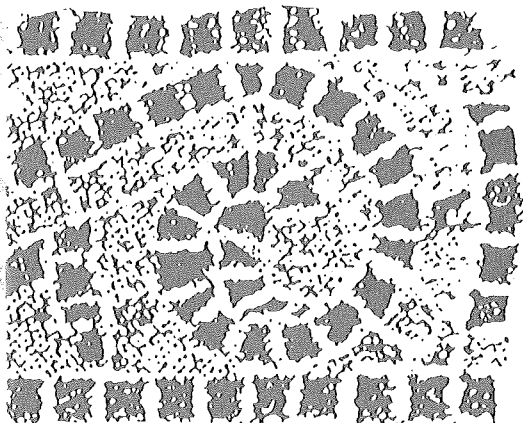

ST KILDA
ARCHAEOLOGY
WARDEN'S ANNUAL
SUMMARY

1996

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*A report and recommendations for further work on behalf
of The National Trust for Scotland*

carried out by

Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division

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ST KILDA
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SUMMARY

by

Lorna H Johnstone

1996

Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division
Glasgow

1.0 Introduction

1996 was the first year of a five year programme to employ a Seasonal Archaeology Warden on the island of St Kilda on behalf of the National Trust for Scotland. Undoubtedly valuable information has been obtained through this initiative and an insight has been gained into the need for further detailed investigation. This report will briefly refer to this years work, as detailed in five final reports (see below), but will concentrate on the problems that were encountered, and how they were resolved. In conjunction with this, recommendations based on the results of the work will be put forward for consideration by the Trust. This will be followed by more general recommendations, based on observation and discussion. The first two parts of the report will concentrate on the work programme only. The third phase of the report will discuss problems encountered on a personal level, ie living accommodation, and the general lack of facilities available for such a lengthy stay on the island.

2.0 The 1996 Season

This is merely a summary of achievements as the information is detailed within the separate reports completed at the end of the season, and also the monthly reports.

Five main reports detail the work completed, that is;

1. The Cleit Condition Report (1996)
2. The Graveyard Survey (1996)
3. A report on the Condition of the Structures in Gleann Mor (1996)
4. Cairn Classification Survey (1996)
5. A report on the Cliff Erosion in Village Bay (1996)

Report on Cleit Condition

The Cleit Condition Report of 1996 simply covered the area mapped by the RCAHMS in the 1980s as true identification of unmapped cleits proved impossible. Mary Harman, an authority on the heritage of St Kilda, was on the island for a week and even she could not accurately identify the cleits with certainty from her own map. The only solution to the problem would be to take copies of her photographs (of which there are over 800), from the RCAHMS for use in the field. The cost of reproducing these photographs and the distinct possibility of damage to them on the island, is something for the Trust to consider. In order for the survey to continue in 1997 this would have to be done prior to next season.

It should be noted here that there is scope for wider study when examining cleits as the form and shape of cleits can differ quite considerably from one to the other, however, it seems that the first priority should be to assess their condition and from there implement a programme of conservation. This programme should be constructed in conjunction with the NTS Archaeologist and priorities discussed and implemented for the 1997 season. The initial phase of this strategy could be compiled from the information obtained in 1996.

Report on the Graveyard

Apart from continual difficulty caused by poor weather, few problems were encountered with this survey. On occasions visitors would remove some of the survey pegs which could be somewhat frustrating but on the whole, although time consuming, the field work went well. In order to complete this work further study is required, however, this would take the form of desk-based study.

The graveyard survey raised a number of questions in my mind about attitudes to death and burial on the island. I think that one of the most pressing matters is to gain access to the Bute Collection, currently closed for refurbishment, and hopefully obtain copies of relevant documents and diaries for the NTS archive.

Report on the Condition of Structures in Gleann Mor

It was while engaged in the field work for this report that I realised just how useful a long term volunteer would have been. It was stated within the *St Kilda Management Plan 1996-2001*, that such a post would exist, however it was not realised. The work undertaken in the glen in 1996 did not realise my ambitions; perhaps if the weather had been better I could have managed alone or with minimal help. Gleann Mor is a unique landscape and the Trust must make an effort to understand it more fully and conserve what remains of it. It is imperative therefore that a long term programme of investigation and conservation with specific goals is formulated as soon as possible. It is felt that The University of Glasgow will seek to form a project of research, in conjunction with the NTS.

The aims of such a programme should be:

1. To establish as accurately as possible the period of use of these buildings;
2. To establish the nature of relationships between structures, and whether there is an identifiable sequence of types of structures and developments in building;

3. To establish the importance of the Gleann Mor settlement in the wider context of the St Kildan landscape.

These three aims are extremely basic but they potentially form the backbone to a detailed and important study which could only enhance our knowledge of the island and the people that have inhabited it. If this suggestion is approved by the Trust next year could see the beginning of the formation of the programme. The Seasonal Archaeology Warden could help to identify areas where excavation would be minimally intrusive but would nonetheless answer relevant questions. If approved, I believe it would be important to draw as many people as possible who are involved with the archaeology of the island into discussion of the best plan of action.

Classification of Cairns on Mullach Sgar

Again the predominant problem with the cairn survey was the weather. Often when the weather was fine the top of Mullach Sgar was blanketed in mist; when this was not the case there was often driving wind and rain. Fortunately the work was completed, however, the results are something of a disappointment. It is my opinion that the 'cairns' are all collapsed cleits. Exactly why there should be a concentration of such badly collapsed cleits in this area is unclear. Ideally, this opinion should be confirmed by limited excavations, but in the meantime it seems unlikely that there are Bronze Age cairns atop Mullach Sgar.

Report on Cliff Erosion in Village Bay

This survey proved more difficult than first anticipated, the sheer height and inaccessibility of cliff face deposits made recording almost impossible in places. These factors, combined with the instability of the cliff face, made close inspection potentially very dangerous in places. With these facts in mind the best course of action was seen to be a survey of the cliff with an electronic distance meter (EDM) which can be repeated in five years time. This way it is hoped that changes in the cliff can be observed *relatively* safely and efficiently. This course of action, coupled with a photographic record and section drawings where this was deemed to be safe, should create an informative record of erosion. It should be noted that Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) have been monitoring the erosion of the cliff at Village Bay for some time and it may be of value to the Trust to gain access to this information and perhaps acquire copies of survey data.

A final note on this subject is that the Army is believed to have also implemented their own survey of erosion; this data is currently unavailable but it would be invaluable for the Trust to have a copy of the survey report, especially if undertaken by specialists in this field.

1996: Further Work Completed and Problems Encountered

In addition to the work described above, a number of other tasks were undertaken. House No 5 had been used for many years as a temporary store for archaeological artefacts unearthed by archaeologists and work parties in the past. Many of the finds had been disintegrating over time in the poor atmosphere within the cottage and it was seen as a primary objective to transfer them from the island to the care of Glasgow Museums. On the whole, this task was achieved, however there were logistical problems.

It was under the guidance of Glasgow Museums that the arrangements for cataloguing and packing the artefacts were made. On arrival on the island it soon became obvious that the volume of artefacts had been severely underestimated. As a result of this the Army were approached for boxes, old newspapers and packing tape to name but a few items. Obviously this is not an ideal situation but I felt I was left with no option if the job was to be completed. The majority of artefacts are now in the care of Glasgow Museums, however there remains a number of rather more awkward objects that will need to be removed in the 1997 season, some of which will require purpose-built packing. For example, the retrieval of two bedsteads, would require two cases of 1.5 m by 1 m with a depth of 0.5 m. The majority of artefacts would need strong waterproof boxes of a reasonable size. Once all the finds are removed from the island an updated catalogue should be compiled and placed with the museum for reference; alternatively, this could be done for the finds already in their care at some point prior to going back to the island in 1997, and concluded at the end of next season.

A variety of other tasks included the following:

I composed a summarised information board on the archaeology and history of the island for the Army on the request of Captain Guy Woods.

Examination of the sites excavated in the 1996 season revealed that, on the whole, the turf seemed to be taking well. Unfortunately the real results will only be seen in 1997, after the winter has passed, but initial examination suggests the results will be good. This assessment, however, does not account for the late spring months when lambs are born. The Soay lambs are perhaps the most destructive element as they take great joy in playing with the loose turf.

I was interviewed by a Japanese television crew for a documentary on World Heritage sites. This was quite early on in the summer but seemed to go well. Unfortunately, however, it was my first experience of television and was quite nerve-wracking.

I discussed the archaeology and history of the island with tourists and visitors. This was never done in a formal capacity; that is, I did not conduct any organised tours. The SNH Warden had a personal interest in the archaeology and history of the island and preferred to conduct these himself. Initially, I felt that this was part of my remit; however, as time passed I was quite glad of his involvement as it released me to pursue other tasks. Ultimately, I formed a good relationship with the SNH warden (Stuart Murray) and he proved to be of invaluable help to me during my stay.

Other tasks included advising work parties on cleit repairs, wall construction, finds packing and other work in progress.

I advised LARG (Large Animal Research Group), on what was and what was not permissible when constructing nets for their annual catch. On the whole, however, they were aware of the main considerations here and Jill Pilkington, the researcher in charge of the project on the island, was more than happy to listen to my comments and comply with any suggestions. On a number of occasions LARG would take time to seek me out and ask for my opinion.

3.0 *Suggestions for Further Work* _____

1997 and Beyond

1996 was very much an introductory year for the post of Seasonal Archaeology Warden. Living on St Kilda for the summer of 1996 presented an opportunity to really think about what the long term objectives of such a post should be, but in the more immediate future (1997) I would like to recommend the following subjects for study;

1. The cleit condition survey should be continued and, if possible, the photographic study of cleits within the head-dyke completed. This is again an area where a long term volunteer would be useful as a considerable amount of time is often wasted on site arranging scales and writing notes.
2. A structured programme of cleit maintenance should be developed and then implemented by work parties under the guidance of the Archaeology Warden. Work party leaders should allow several days within their work schedule for this purpose and should always seek the advice of the Archaeology Warden on commencement of the programme.

3. If agreed by the Trust, a strategy for further investigation in Gleann Mor could be created. This could be done under the guidance of the NTS Archaeologist, Robin Turner, who could usefully visit the island towards the beginning of the season to inspect the Glen with this in mind. If approved, this would form a major part of the work for the 1997 season.

4. A comprehensive photographic study of the structures along the Village street should be commenced, using both colour and monochrome print film. Ideally, a detailed structural assessment could also be undertaken.

Unfortunately, I could only report on this in layman's terms and it might be in the interests of the Trust to consider commissioning a professional building surveyor to examine the buildings in detail.

5. The houses in the Village street are often found to contain rubble and building supplies; all such intrusions should be removed from the structures and either destroyed or stored out of sight of the main visitor attractions.

6. As many 'replicas' of existing archive photographs should be taken as possible. In effect this would create a database of changes in the landscape over the years. This would require a period of desk-based work prior to going to the island in 1997.

7. The area where Neolithic pottery was discovered eroding out of a cliff face should be monitored throughout the summer. I would also like to try and take some more photographs (monochrome and colour print) of the cliff as the photographs from the 1996 season are not as detailed as I had hoped.

8. An examination of enclosure walls within the Head-dyke should be undertaken and walling restored by work parties. It was noted in 1996 that there were a number of walls and enclosures that had been altered since the RCAHMS survey. Most of these changes were minor and would be easily rectified.

9. It would be of value to the archaeological work party directors if I were to be more closely involved in the work programme. I suggest that I should work with them on the various sites for two or three days a week while they are there.

Suggestions for Desk-Based Research

This section is simply a brief note on work that could be done off the island. It is imperative that the St Kilda archive contains better information. As the owners of the island the Trust should have relevant records relating to the history of the island. Such an archive should include as many copies as possible of original photographic work, unpublished diaries and records of births deaths and marriages to name but a few essential items. It should become a prerequisite of going to the island that the Trust automatically receive a report on any work that is done. An example of this would be Richard Tufnell's visit this year to look at the walls. From such information other work will emerge, reports fuel discussion which create other reports and so the archive could grow. On a more personal note, I would like to expand on my study of the graveyard. Within a follow up report I would like to examine attitudes to death on the island and how the St Kildans mourned their dead. I hope that such information might be available within the Bute Collection, within the unpublished diaries of school masters and visitors to the island but only a thorough examination of the collection could determine the quality of information within.

4.0 *General Suggestions and Observations* ———

Archaeological Work and Personal Comfort

The majority of problems were overcome however the weather on St Kilda proved to be the greatest obstacle especially as the work being done required dry, clear conditions (that is taking notes and photographs). By all accounts the weather in 1996 was poor but not exceptional and it is for this reason that I think better provision should be made for working in wet weather. On numerous occasions time was wasted going to Gleann Mor only for the heavens to open or the mist to close in. Unfortunately, taking notes in the rain often proved impossible and notebooks quickly disintegrated. A possible solution to this problem might be to purchase a waterproof Dictaphone, or waterproof notepads and special pens as used by divers.

It would also be invaluable to me if I had a personal computer, a lap-top, that I could use on the island. As things stand at the moment I have to write everything on the island and then wait until I get back to Glasgow before processing the information. I believe that time could be saved if reporting was started on the island when the weather hampers other activities. I do not think that I can suggest this too strongly as I perceive it to be something of a necessity rather than a luxury.

I believe it is generally acknowledged that the living arrangements of the Seasonal Archaeology Warden are close to unacceptable limits of comfort and privacy. The fact that the bedroom is actually part of the toolshed ensures that there is rarely a moment's peace to be had. Despite continued requests for some privacy, there were work party members that chose to ignore this and saw the toolshed as the only place to gain some time alone. Numerous mailboats, (small containers filled with postcards created for the purpose of throwing in the sea) were constructed at all hours of the day. Fumes of paint and turpentine were a common feature of life in the toolshed. On my days off, having a lie-in undisturbed was virtually impossible and it was common for people simply to march into my living quarters uninvited whether I was there or not. Living and working in such an environment can be quite stressful, particularly towards the end of the summer. The work parties change over every two weeks and the result of this for me is the problem of trying to explain my situation to new groups of people that are unable to see past the wonder of being able to spend a whole summer on the island. I would very much appreciate it if work parties could be informed of my presence in advance and could be asked to respect my privacy.

A further point I would like to make is that there are no facilities available for desk work. Originally it was proposed that desk-based work could be done in the bottom of the Featherstore. This, unfortunately, proved to be impossible. The bottom of the Featherstore is damp, dark and cold which meant that I had to sit on my bed and work while hammering, sawing and general work activities went on through the thin dividing wall.

Alternative proposals to address these difficulties are either to restore yet another cottage, or to move the toolshed elsewhere. It is possible that tools and paint could be stored in the bottom of the Featherstore, but if this was the case substantial sound proofing would be required. At present, every noise below the living quarters in the Featherstore, and vice versa, echoes around the interior of the whole building. It would also be worth creating a water supply to the building. This would be a fairly simple operation and I could oversee this in my capacity as Archaeology Warden.

On a purely personal level, for my own comfort on the island, it would be appreciated if I could have a good heater, a couple of lamps, a duvet set and possibly a small fridge. As things stand at the moment I eat with the work parties. This arrangement appears to work on the whole but problems arise when the work parties are not there; quite simply I have nowhere to cook! Luckily, this year Stuart Murray (SNH) was kind enough to let me use the Factor's House.

He had two scientists staying who were also using his kitchen, making things quite crowded. It was purely down to the kindness of Stuart that I had access to facilities; quite frankly I felt a bit like a refugee and would appreciate it if better arrangements were made for 1997.

Work Parties and Island Relations

On occasions it was also necessary to smooth relations between work party members and the Army and SERCO. It seems that many of the NTS parties do not realise that there is an Army presence on the island and can take the use of facilities for granted. This can have the effect of creating poor relations on the island and it is my opinion that work party leaders should brief their members fully on the situation prior to arrival on the island. Obviously, on such a small island, good relations between the various groups are paramount to a hospitable atmosphere. It goes without saying that there are faults on all sides, but on the whole, a tense atmosphere can easily be avoided if all groups are briefed on the situation on the island. This should include the Army.

On the whole, the work party members were excellent people; however, as is always the case in groups that are thrown together, there were a few problems. It is almost always the case that events on the island get blown up out of all proportion. In a different environment things that seem to be great problems at the time, would not be given the time of day.

One further point I would like to make is that it would certainly be of use to me and the NTS if within the 'St Kilda Passport' work party members were made aware of how to deal with artefacts found in the course of their work programme. A general set of guidelines should explain the reasons why, if possible, the discoveries should be left *in situ* as well as how to deal with them if this is impossible. My impression from supervising much of the packing is that the most apparent feature was the general lack of information on the context or provenance of the artefacts; on occasions there was no accompanying information at all.

Other Groups on the Island

I cannot stress enough how helpful and generally kind the Army were to me. They gave me full access to all their facilities and were only too happy to help me out with any problems I encountered. On the whole, they made my stay on the island much easier than it might otherwise have been. They were consistently helpful, polite and pleasant.

SERCO (the company that operate the radars on the island) are also a constant presence on the island throughout the year and they are always pleasant and polite to visitors.

LARG (Large Animal Research Group) were often a presence during my stay and they too were helpful and pleasant and made a great effort not to be obtrusive in any way when visitors were on the island. They were only too happy to explain what they were doing and give talks on their work when requested.

As previously mentioned, Stuart Murray (SNH Warden) was of great help to me during my stay. Initially I felt there could be some conflicts of interest however, we reached an understanding that suited us both and as the summer progressed I feel we both added something to the island in our own way.

5.0 *Conclusions*

On the whole, it was an eventful summer and I feel that valuable work was accomplished. The work parties worked hard and accomplished their goals. The vast majority of members were great people but occasionally there were clashes of personalities, but that is to be expected. The work party leaders were, on the whole, wonderful. Ron Hardie was the first leader of the season and was of immense help to me in my new role. The leaders that had been to the island as leaders on previous occasions were all very professional and ensured that their members had a great holiday. I cannot praise them enough. The new leaders were largely a success, however there were problems occasionally. I would like to pick out Marion Martens as having been particularly successful as a leader in her first season, she ensured that the holiday was a great success despite the terrible weather they encountered. Finally I would like to say that despite some of the problems encountered in 1996 I enjoyed working on St Kilda. It is only natural that the first year of this post would encounter unforeseen problems but I hope that the majority of them can be ironed out for next season.



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