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# ST KILDA ANNUAL REPORT 1997

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*The Annual Report for The National Trust for Scotland*

*carried out by*

*Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division*

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*by*

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1998

Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division  
Glasgow

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## 1.0 Introduction

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This year was the second season The National Trust for Scotland employed an archaeologist on the island group known as St Kilda. The report will be short and concise as work concentrated on a restricted number of distinct areas.

## 2.0 The 1997 Season

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The reports for 1997 are as follows:

- 2.1 Cleit Condition
- 2.2 Cliff Erosion in Village Bay
- 2.3 The Ruinous Remains of St Kildan Dwellings
- 2.4 Dry stone walls within the Head-Dyke

### 2.1 *Cleit Condition*

The cleit condition report proved somewhat more problematic this year. In 1996 the cleit survey focused on structures that appeared on the Royal Commission map issued with the publication 'Buildings of St Kilda'. This year identifying the cleits for investigation proved to be much more difficult. The easiest solution to the problem was to gain access to the cleit photographs contained within the National Monument Records in Edinburgh. Unfortunately relevant photographs (taken over the 1970s and 80s by M Harman) remain uncatalogued. Fortunately some of the structures are positively identified and a running sequence was located. The photographs were photocopied for use in the field. These were for use in conjunction with a rather crude map that indicated the general area of the cleits. Unfortunately the map did not contain any other reference points or contour lines and was quite impossible to use without the aid of the photographic record. A further problem encountered was that the only running sequence of cleits available within the NMRS was situated on the very top of Mullach Mor and across the upper north-western slopes of Conichair. The summer season on St Kilda is infamous for the unpredictable weather conditions which one can encounter. This year the weather was not as turbulent as last year, however, it was often completely inappropriate for photographic survey work. There were solid weeks when the mist and sea fog did not lift from hanging above the Village and as such access to the object of study was impossible. On occasions the wind and rain were also impossible to work in; the wind speed on top of the hill can gust well over 50 miles an hour. The weather was very changeable and what might originally seem a good day for survey work on the hill could easily turn into a gale shortly after reaching the top.

Despite the potential for various problems over one hundred cleits were examined and extensively photographed. Each cleit was photographed from all four sides and internally if this was applicable. Many of the structures had partially collapsed and as such separate internal photographs were not possible or necessary. As a comparison and a gauge to the rate of deterioration all the cleits were compared with their former condition ie the photographs taken by M Harman in the 1970s.

## 2.2 *Cliff Erosion in Village Bay*

The work for the report on cliff erosion in Village Bay was begun last year. Access to the upper reaches of the cliff face did not prove to be any easier. Last year a total station was used in order to make a base plan of the cliff face from which to monitor erosion over the years. It was hoped that this year the information would be available for publication, however, this has not proved to be the case and as such the map does not appear in the report. Despite this set-back the report aims to identify the areas under the greatest threat. The cliff has been divided into sectors in order that greater detail and more accurate results can be achieved. The report takes the form of a narrative with illustrations and photography forming a large part of the survey. A description of contexts and potentially archaeological deposits are also included. It should be noted that access to the soil deposits on top of the cliff was not particularly easy but this is discussed more fully within the report. During the field work for this report it was noted that the beach as a whole was poorly preserved. The cliff face is eroding naturally, but beyond this there are other environmental problems (oil seepage and modern debris) which should be rectified. This is not reported on within the document on cliff erosion as it is not a matter of archaeological significance, however, details of some of the problems are contained within the field notes.

## 2.3 *The Ruinous Remains of St Kildan Dwellings*

The fieldwork for this report took more time than was first anticipated. The sheer number of structures to be measured, examined and photographed (forty two in total) was quite considerable. It would have been advantageous if a long term volunteer had been available to me but this was not the case. Once again the weather proved to be the most difficult adversary. Continual drizzle and mist made photography impossible on many occasions. This report catalogues the dimensions, measurements and features of note relating to each of the blackhouses and mortared dwellings of the St Kildan people. The condition of each of the twenty-six ruinous blackhouses and the sixteen mortared structures and areas of potential weakness are noted as areas requiring attention. This narrative is not intended as a general discussion of St Kildan dwellings, rather it is a factual document concentrating on the *current* state of affairs.

## 2.4 *Dry Stone Walls Within the Head-Dyke*

This condition report concentrates on the walling around the village. This is a working document that can be made available to Work Parties as and when required. The walls and enclosures within the head-dyke were numbered and examined. The fieldwork was largely undertaken by a member of the sixth Work Party which enabled me to work on other projects.

### *1997: Further Work*

A number of other tasks were undertaken during the 1997 season. Three boxes of artefacts which had been stored in cottage No 5 were packed and sent off the island on the 'Poplar Diver', the boat used to transfer Work Party members to and from St Kilda. The materials available for packing were restricted and as such the items had to be packed in bubble wrap, rags, newspaper and anything else that could afford the artefacts some degree of protection. It was arranged with Paul Johnson of the University of Glasgow that he should oversee the transfer of the artefacts from St Kilda to the Kelvingrove Museum. I was to remain on the island for a number of weeks and therefore could not attend to this myself. The items removed from the island were all fairly substantial, but, the damp atmosphere of cottage No 5 has caused some decay. The cauldrons were not packed as they would apparently not fit through the hatch of the 'Poplar Diver'. Other items were also left on the island as again there were problems with transport off St Kilda. Artefacts such as bedsteads cannot get through the hatch on the 'Poplar Diver' and helicopters (upon which space and access are limited) are primarily for personnel only. The cauldrons are in an extremely poor condition and it really has to be asked whether they are worth saving.

A further point to note is the slow but steady decay of the iron implements contained in the museum. The cauldrons and kettles are in an extremely poor condition despite the presence of a dehumidifier. If they are to be saved they will have to be attended to by a qualified conservator in the near future. It was noted by several visitors that the museum itself was 'nice but dated'. The logistics of changing the museums display could prove extremely difficult and exactly how such a small space could be 'modernised' is another question that the National Trust would have to address. Any decisions would have to take into account the removal of the military presence from the island in 1998.

In 1996 the excavations undertaken by the University of Glasgow were concentrated in Ruival. On examination it was concluded that the turf was regenerating well. There are isolated patches where growth is restricted; the stony nature of the soil ensures the process is slow. Some of the 'geojute' has been displaced by sheep, however, as this is a biodegradable material (approximately a three year life span) it has been left as it is rather than replaced.

This season the excavations were concentrated within the scree slopes of Mullach Sgar. They were excavated under the direction of Paul Johnson of the University of Glasgow. A number of structures were chosen from the list of many identified in the survey of the previous season. The structures were partially backfilled with a view to further excavation in 1998. It was my responsibility to ensure the sites were reinstated as directed by Historic Scotland. Unfortunately I was only directed as to what these instructions were the day prior to my departure from the island. In the event the sites appeared to conform to the standards set by Historic Scotland.

I worked in close conjunction with a number of Work Party leaders in 1997, who sought advice on a number of subjects.

Cleit repairs formed a more substantial part of the work programme for the maintenance groups than ever before. Work Party leaders often sought advice on where to extract turf from, the best repair technique to employ and which cleits should be repaired.

On occasions Work Parties completed subscribed tasks ahead of schedule and requested further employ. An example of such a task was the long overdue repair of the dryburn. The stonework was in an extremely poor condition particularly where the army had re-routed its course. Although excavation was avoided, the sides were repaired and should remain steadfast for a number of years. The quality of the workmanship on this project was extremely high.

Over the winter months a number of drystone walls fell into disrepair. The most obvious of these were repaired. An example of this work is the wall abutting the street from blackhouse 'Z'. At my request to the Work Party leader this was repaired by a Work Party member. Other small repairs were also undertaken and are detailed within the Work Party leader reports for 1997.

Dr J Huntly of the University of Durham sought my guidance when extracting cores from cleit roofs. It was deemed necessary to gain as wide a cross section for the purposes of her study. Cores were extracted from what were believed to be original roofs and also from those known to have been repaired in the past.

Once again LARG (Large Animal Research Group) were more than willing to comply with directions when erecting nets for their annual sheep catch. Jill Pilkington never failed to consult me when in doubt as to what was and what was not permissible. All the students involved were briefed by Ms Pilkington as to the sensitive nature of the island on their arrival on St Kilda.

When cruise ships visited the island I made myself available to answer questions about the archaeology and history of St Kilda. A number of guided walks were also undertaken, however, like last season the NTS/SNH (Scottish Natural Heritage) warden often wished to conduct these himself. This left me free to work on my various surveys and monitoring projects when the weather was fair.

I was living on the military base this season and frequently discussed my work with members of the military and Serco and the various visitors they entertained.

This year there were a number of occasions when members of the public believed they had located a previously undiscovered archaeological feature. On each of these occasions I examined the evidence and consulted my colleagues from the University of Glasgow to ensure my opinion was correct. Unfortunately none of the suspected carved stones proved to be archaeologically significant. Photographic records of a 'carved' stone were also presented at the St Kilda Archaeological Research Committee on 09/02/98. It was agreed that it was non-archaeological.

### *3.0 Projects Under Review* ---

1997 was the second year of this post and again valuable work was achieved, however, a number of the suggestions made in last years annual report were not implemented.

An example of this was the 'replicas' of existing archive photographs. Much of the survey work undertaken this season involved a considerable amount of photography. Over thirty-five colour films were used this year and it seemed advisable to try to spread such costs over a number of years. With this proviso it seemed unnecessary to implement the project this year.

The quantity of rubble and debris within the blackhouses and mortared cottages was seriously underestimated in 1996. The true extent of the problem only became apparent when examining the structures in detail this year. It is envisaged that maintenance Work Parties could be involved in this task. Many of the structures contain building debris in the form of stones, aggregate and gravel among other things. If they are indeed to be moved it is necessary that transport to remove the waste from the island is available. There is absolutely no point in simply moving the problem elsewhere. The NTS should discuss the implications of such large scale projects and access to transport with the Ministry of Defence prior to the civilian take-over of the base.

No strategy was agreed for investigation in Gleann Mor. The University of Glasgow intend to tackle this area in the future, presumably after consultation with the National Trust for Scotland archaeologist; Robin Turner.

### *4.0 Suggestions for Further Work* ---

This section of the report discusses potential projects for the future. The subjects contained within Section 3.0 of this report remain as suggestions for further work, however, no date will be specified for the commencement of these projects.



#### 4.1

The cleit condition survey should continue, however, the problems with identification encountered this season will inevitably reoccur unless some mapping is undertaken. It would perhaps be of value if a survey team could map the cleits and thus a comparison with less accurate maps would aid identification. If certain cleits could not be numbered with their originally assigned numbers a secondary set of numbers could be imposed. The examined cleits could then be positively identified and hopefully marked in some manner. It would be hoped that the survey team could also gain access, with the help of the SNH warden, to the various outlying islands also. The survey should include the photography of cleits previously examined but not yet photographed.

#### 4.2

Under the recommendations of the St Kilda management plan the Geo Chruabriadh hut circles are to be recorded. It is suggested that the remains are planned at an appropriate scale. The survey should include photography, detailed measurement and a general narrative relating to their position within the wider context of the island.

#### 4.3

It is suggested within the management plan that the area of the medieval village should be examined in more detail with a view to 'small-scale exploratory excavation'. Although this may not occur for a number of years it would be of value if the area concerned was planned in detail. A suggested scale for this project might be in the region of 1:100. A recently discovered watercolour of 1831 indicates that the medieval village was possibly not located where it has long been accepted as being.

#### 4.4

The information gained from the report on the condition of drystone walls within and including the head-dyke could be put to use. The archaeologist should work in conjunction with Work Parties to repair as much of the walling as time allows within the next few seasons. The plan of the village within the RCAHMS publication 'Buildings of St Kilda' should be used as the base map and **all** repairs should continue to be recorded. The recording should take the form of a photographic record, a narrative and most importantly a map indicating the position of the repair.

#### 4.5

It was noted this year that the earth house is in need of consolidation and repair. The interior is well preserved but extremely damp, however without major works little can be done to remedy this. The mouth of the structure is untidy and somewhat dilapidated. This should be the focus of attention for restorative work. It is envisaged that this work should be undertaken by the NTS St Kilda archaeologist with perhaps one volunteer.

#### 4.6

In order to compliment the report on 'The Ruinous Dwellings of St Kilda' undertaken this season, the mortared houses 1 to 6 should be examined in detail and the restoration work assessed. It is also envisaged that, although extremely denuded, the remains of Blackhouse Y should be planned to complete Mary Harman's series of plans.

#### 4.7

It would be of value to the Glasgow University team if further analysis on the structures within Gleann Mor was undertaken prior to excavation. It is envisaged that a small scale survey of 'areas with the greatest potential for future investigation' is undertaken in association with Dr A Pollard. This work would compliment the feasibility and logistics survey of working in Gleann Mor which will also occur in the 1998 season.

#### 4.8

The St Kilda archaeologist will work on management projects with the Glasgow University team for the period of a month within the summer season of 1998.

## 5.0 *General Suggestions and Observations*

### 5.1

This year accommodation for the archaeologist on St Kilda was within the military base. The difference in the level of comfort between 1996 in the toolshed and 1997 in the sergeants mess can hardly be put into words. The relative luxury of the base ensured that myself and my clothes were clean and dry at all times. I did not have to suffer the fumes of paint and turps, nor did I have to suffer plagues of moths, mice and other unmentionables in my living space. The fact that I had my own room ensured I had space to work undisturbed. In 1996 the discomfort of the toolshed was quite unbearable, however, the worst problem was the continued invasion of space by Work Party members. Despite several notices and numerous personal pleas the toolshed was viewed as common property. In conclusion I would suggest that a long term arrangement is agreed with the military to ensure the horror that is the toolshed is never endured by anyone else.

This year a lap-top computer was made available and it proved to be of great value. I would suggest that this should be available every year as it allowed cataloguing and reporting to begin prior to leaving the island.

Yet again the weather was the greatest problem affecting work. Measuring can be done regardless of the weather but photography requires semi-decent conditions. The weather was not as 'wild' as last year but the mist and drizzle were a constant feature of life. On occasions the weather was tremendous, unfortunately, the best weather apparently occurred when I had my two weeks holiday.

Once again it should be noted that a long term volunteer would be of value, however, the problem of accommodation ensures that this is currently impossible.

### *Island Relations*

On the whole relations on the island were good this year. There were a variety of different groups on St Kilda and all appeared to interact well. Inevitably there were a number of problems, however, each one that arose was soon contained. The first Work Party encountered a clash of personalities between the Work Party cook and the Work Party leader. This resulted in some heated debates and ultimately the cook was 'relieved of her duties'. There were also a number of problems involving certain members of the military establishment. I personally managed to remain somewhat removed from all the various tensions as none of the problems were of a serious nature. Often such circumstances are best left to resolve themselves and the fewer people involved the better. Everyone on the island and particularly the military base made me feel welcome during my stay.

In particular I would like to thank the Army and members of Serco for their hospitality while I was on the island. It was ensured that I was made to feel welcome during my stay and everyone was most helpful when problems were encountered.



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# Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division

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