

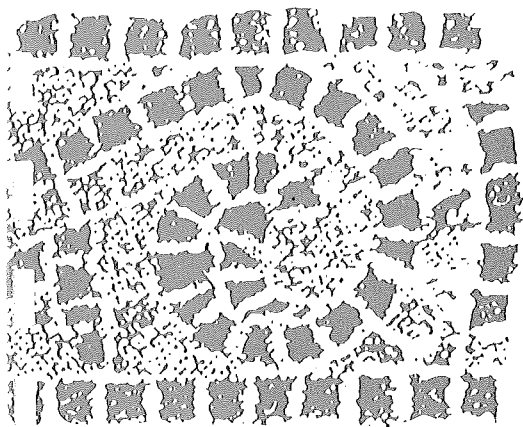
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ST KILDA

Annual Report 1999

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*An Annual Report for The National Trust for Scotland
carried out by*

Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division

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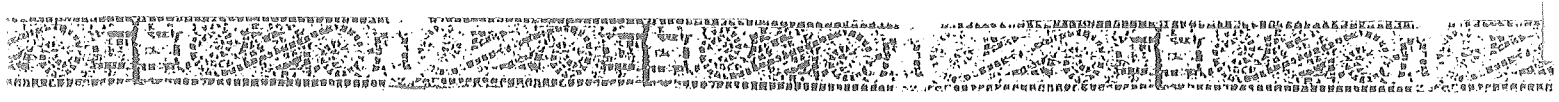
by

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2000

Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division

Glasgow



1.0 *Executive Summary*

The 1999 season on St Kilda was the fourth consecutive year in which an archaeologist was employed by The National Trust for Scotland. This report reviews the work undertaken in the 1999 season while recommending possible projects for the year 2000 season. The funding for this post is provided by both The National Trust for Scotland (hereafter the NTS) and Historic Scotland. In 1999, the NTS funding included contributions from the Peter Stormont-Darling Charitable Trust and Scottish Heritage USA.

2.0 *Introduction*

This report summarises the work of the St Kilda Archaeologist in the 1999 season. The post was created in 1996 to advise on conservation work and monitor and manage the built heritage and archaeological resources of St Kilda.

3.0 *The 1999 Season*

The 1999 season has produced few reports, as the majority of the work programme for this year focused on tasks for which reports were not required. The projects undertaken are outlined below and, where applicable, reference is made to the appropriate report (published and unpublished).

3.1 *Initial Assessment*

Every season begins with a walk around the village to assess any winter damage. The village had fared well over the winter of 1998/99, with very little damage to the area below the head-dyke.

3.2 *Cleit Condition Survey*

This work programme has undergone a major change of direction this year. After several years of attempting to re-identify cleits from uncatalogued photographs and maps, the project has been modified.

A cross-section of cleits is being selected for preservation by the NTS. The selection process began in 1999 and will be completed in 2000. The structures selected (to date) have been chosen for various reasons that are outlined in a separate (unpublished) report. The fieldwork for this project has proved very time consuming, as the vast majority of cleits examined have not been selected for preservation. In addition, the fieldwork is dependent on fair weather, as it is essential that each structure can be re-identified in the landscape in the future.

This is an extremely simplified summary of the criteria used in selecting structures for preservation. A fuller account of the criteria for selection will accompany the cleit report. Photographic recording, sketches and narrative descriptions complement temporary numbered tags attached to selected structures. Following the completion of this process, it is envisaged that the selected structures will be mapped using differential GPS (Global Positioning System).

3.3 *Cliff Erosion*

In 1999, the cliff face at Village Bay was re-examined for evidence of continued erosion. The cliff was first examined in 1996 and several sherds of prehistoric pottery were recovered at that time. Unfortunately, detailed recording proved impossible, as the height and unsteady nature of the cliffs would have made it too dangerous. Photographic survey and narrative description proved to be the only viable recording methods. In 1999, further photographic work was undertaken and it is hoped that this will identify the areas under greatest threat. A report on the cliff erosion has been published following the 1999 season.

3.4 *Artefacts*

Several artefacts from various seasons of excavations have been held in House No 5 in the Village Street. This house currently serves as the NTS toolshed. The house is partitioned and the smaller of the two rooms contains various corroding iron artefacts. These items were photographed; however, it should be noted that this recording was carried out in unfavourable conditions. The artefacts were photographed outside, as the interior lighting of House No 5 is poor and the space inadequate for this purpose. These photographs will be circulated to the St Kilda Archaeological Research Committee for commentary. Some of the artefacts appear to be too poorly preserved to survive a move to the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow.

In addition to the artefacts that known in House No 5, several further boxes of artefacts were recovered from the loft space. These items were discovered under various empty boxes, old overalls and other discarded goods. A number of corroding iron artefacts were found entangled in a wooden fish box, while others were located in various parts of the loft space.

Unfortunately, these artefacts only came to light in the last week of the St Kilda Archaeologist's stay on the island. For this period of time the weather was extremely poor and there was no opportunity for photography, but the majority of items were wrapped in acid-free tissue, labelled with arbitrarily assigned numbers, boxed and transported by helicopter to Aberdeen. From Aberdeen, the boxes were transferred to Glasgow University. The artefacts will ultimately be deposited in the Kelvingrove Museum with the rest of the St Kilda archive.

3.5 *Gleann Mor Structures*

In 1996, the structures in Gleann Mor were the subject of a condition survey (Johnstone 1996). The structures are of two main types: chambered summer dwellings or sheilings and horned structures designed for livestock management. In 1999, the structures were re-examined in an attempt to determine the current rate of decay. Photographs from the 1996 survey were taken into the field and each structure was examined against this record. It became apparent that few of the structures had suffered from further decay in this time. Those structures which had continued to erode were photographed again in 1999.

In conclusion, the structures are continuing to decay, but the process is slow. Several structures had suffered minor damage in the intervening years, with one or two stones falling away, but there were no major collapses.

3.6 *Museum*

The museum is in a state of disrepair, with the displayed artefacts continuing to decay at an alarming rate. The display boards and the museum as a whole are now outdated and require modernisation. An unpublished report (Johnstone 1999) for the NTS provides a detailed account of the museum, its contents and their general condition. A detailed photographic record accompanies this report.

3.7 *Quarry Feature*

One of the duties of the St Kilda Archaeologist this year was to photograph a reported eyesore at the quarry. Following examination of the feature with the St Kilda Warden (who was employed in the post for the first time this year), it was unanimously decided that the artefact was not an eyesore. The visual impact of what is probably a relic from Operation Hardrock has been greatly exaggerated.

This artefact is constructed mainly from wooden sleepers with a number of iron fixtures attached; however, its true function is unclear. The St Kilda Warden found it necessary to check with me that he had identified the correct object, as it blended very well into the surrounding landscape. It is the opinion of the St Kilda Archaeologist that this feature should be left to decay naturally because:

1. The object is not an eyesore; it is not immediately visible and must be actively sought. It is unlikely this artefact could ruin an individual's enjoyment of the landscape.

2. Most of the artefact has become buried and it is very likely that in removing it the landscape would be scarred considerably. Any scarring is unlikely to be permanent, but the recovery could take some time. It is also likely that in order to remove the object, Scheduled Monument Consent would be required from Historic Scotland and Potentially Damaging Operation Consent from Scottish Natural Heritage. This all seems to be considerable effort for little result.
- 3 The provenance of the object is unknown, but it is likely to be associated with quarrying operations from the 1950s or 1960s and is therefore of some archaeological interest in itself.

3.8 *Visitor Liaison*

The St Kilda Archaeologist is commonly required to liaise with visitors. The St Kilda Warden is responsible for visitor management on the island, but occasionally requires assistance due to sudden rises in visitor numbers, particularly during spells of good weather.

On occasions I was required to meet yacht crews and explain the safety issues, the facilities, and the few rules set out by the Warden, such as the prohibition of lone walking beyond the head-dyke. I was also occasionally required to assist with cruise boat passengers. Sometimes visitors requiring specific information about the archaeology or history of the island were referred to me; for example, this year some visitors wanted to know the exact locations of some of the photographs in the museum in order that they could replicate them.

In addition to assisting holidaying visitors, I was often required to accompany groups that are on the island for business reasons. In the 1999 season, there were visits from a number of NTS employees, a health and safety delegation from both the NTS and SNH, and a visit from the NTS Archaeologist Robin Turner. The Western Isles Archaeologist Mary MacLeod also visited this season and I accompanied her around Hirta.

3.9 *Work Parties*

One of the main duties each season is to advise the work party leaders on the work programme received from the NTS Regional Office in Oban. In 1999, the St Kilda Archaeologist was involved in advising work party leaders as to which cleits were to be repaired and where the turf was to be taken for use in roof repairs. In 1999, a substantial amount of time was spent discussing the merits and pitfalls of various repair techniques with a number of work party leaders.

The work undertaken was to a high standard; however, further work by the St Kilda Archaeologist was occasionally necessary. All repairs were photographed by work party leaders both before and after work was undertaken.

In addition to advising on repairs, each work party was taken on a tour of the village. This usually lasted about two or three hours (depending on the interest of the party involved) and party members were encouraged to ask questions.

3.9 *Examination of Repaired Cleits*

In 1999 the repaired cleit roofs (1996-1999) were examined on various occasions. The success of the cleit roof repairs has been monitored over recent years as part of an ongoing process. It is hoped that a methodology to ensure successful repairs can be developed from the results. A report will be produced following the 2000 season of work.

3.10 *Excavation Assistance*

The St Kilda Archaeologist was involved with the work of the University of Glasgow excavation team for a period of three weeks, assisting in the recording of the site and supervision of work party members.

3.11 *Weather Stations*

The St Kilda Archaeologist was called upon this year to advise the University of Edinburgh Large Animal Research Group (LARG) on their proposal to erect weather stations in the Village Bay area. Following a meeting to discuss the project and liaison with Sally Foster of Historic Scotland, LARG propose to erect three long-term stations around the Village Bay area. The first is to be positioned near St Brendan's church site, the second at the quarry and the third on one of the military road street light poles. Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) will be required for this purpose and Historic Scotland are now processing this request.

3.12 *Cleit Recording Tables*

Further work undertaken this year included constructing cleit recording tables. These tables were designed by R Turner and a number were completed during periods of wet weather while on the island. The work involves tabulating information already available in the cleit condition survey reports from previous years. In addition, the photographic catalogue from the 1999 season has been prepared (using Excel) and all the photographs have been labelled. Some further work on the entire photographic catalogue (1996-1999) is required in the future.

3.13 *Accident*

This year was a tragic year in that a work party member died while out walking. The party member had gone walking round the Oiseval cliff path, and it is assumed that he got into difficulty and fell to his death. Everyone on the island felt the tragedy at the time, despite the fact that he had only been on the island for one week. In the circumstances I made myself available to assist in any way I could, but following the recovery of the body there was little anyone could do. I spoke with a number of work party members and offered assistance to the St Kilda Warden. On the day following the accident a memorial service, which was attended by almost everyone on the island, was held in the church.

3.14 *Island Relations*

This year the work parties all seemed to enjoy the island thoroughly and, almost without exception, everyone got on well. The Serco employees were all very hospitable and the accommodation provided for the St Kilda Archaeologist was greatly appreciated. As previously mentioned, the death of a work party member in early August of 1999 came as a shock to everyone on the island, but the community pulled together. The weather was poor for much of the summer; however, the end of July and beginning of August proved to be dry and hot throughout. The fair weather lifted spirits and there were a number of outdoor social events to take advantage of this.

3.15 *Reports*

The reports on the Puffinn and the Restored and/or Renovated Mortared Structures of St Kilda were produced in 1999, as was the report on Cliff Erosion.

3.16 *Archaeological Action Plan*

Work on the Archaeological Action Plan for St Kilda is ongoing and a recent draft has been edited. Further proposed tables of work are under construction and this project will continue during the 2000 season.

4.0 *2000 Season* _____

4.1

The season will begin with an assessment of the damage sustained to the structures below the village head dyke over the winter of 1999/2000. This damage will be reported to the NTS Sub-Office in Oban and adjustments can be made to the 2000 season work parties' programme of activities in order to incorporate necessary repair work.

4.2

The main work programme for the 2000 season will be to complete the identification, recording and tagging of cleits for monitoring and preservation. As noted above, several were selected for preservation in 1999; however, this project is time consuming and several structures have still to be selected in 2000. It is envisaged that the structures' positions will eventually be mapped using differential GPS. This project will form a major part of the St Kilda Archaeologist's work remit for the 2000 season.

4.3

The St Kilda Archaeologist will liaise with the work party leaders and provide assistance, guidance, advice or suggestions as required. This forms an important part of the duties of the St Kilda Archaeologist.

In addition, the St Kilda Archaeologist will continue to provide assistance and advice to the Large Animal Research Group when necessary.

4.4

The St Kilda Archaeologist will assist in the supervision of the University of Glasgow excavations, which will be directed by Dr Tony Pollard and Mr Bob Will. The excavations will focus on the lower eastern slopes of Mullach Sgar. This season should complete excavations at this site, which have been ongoing since 1998.

4.5

The St Kilda Archaeologist will complete the monitoring of cleit roof repairs 1996-2000. This 5-year monitoring process should provide some interesting results. A report will suggest possible ways forward which might improve the success rate of the roof repairs. It is possible and even likely that further, more specialised research on the subject will be necessary in the future.

4.6

As noted above, the Archaeological Action Plan for St Kilda is currently ongoing and further work will constitute part of the 2000 season of work.

4.7

The St Kilda Archaeologist will attempt to remove the remaining artefacts from House No. 5 to the mainland. If this is not possible, each artefact will be photographed for the NTS St Kilda Archive.

5.0 *Conclusions*

The work undertaken in 1999 proved to be of value. The 2000 seasons' projects are yet to be finalised, but those outlined above will form the greater part of the work for the forthcoming season.

6.0 *Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank Dr Tony Pollard for managing the project for GUARD. Robin Turner provided support and encouragement throughout the season and edited a draft of this report. Olivia Lelong edited the final version of this work and Jen Cochrane provided administrative assistance in producing the report.