



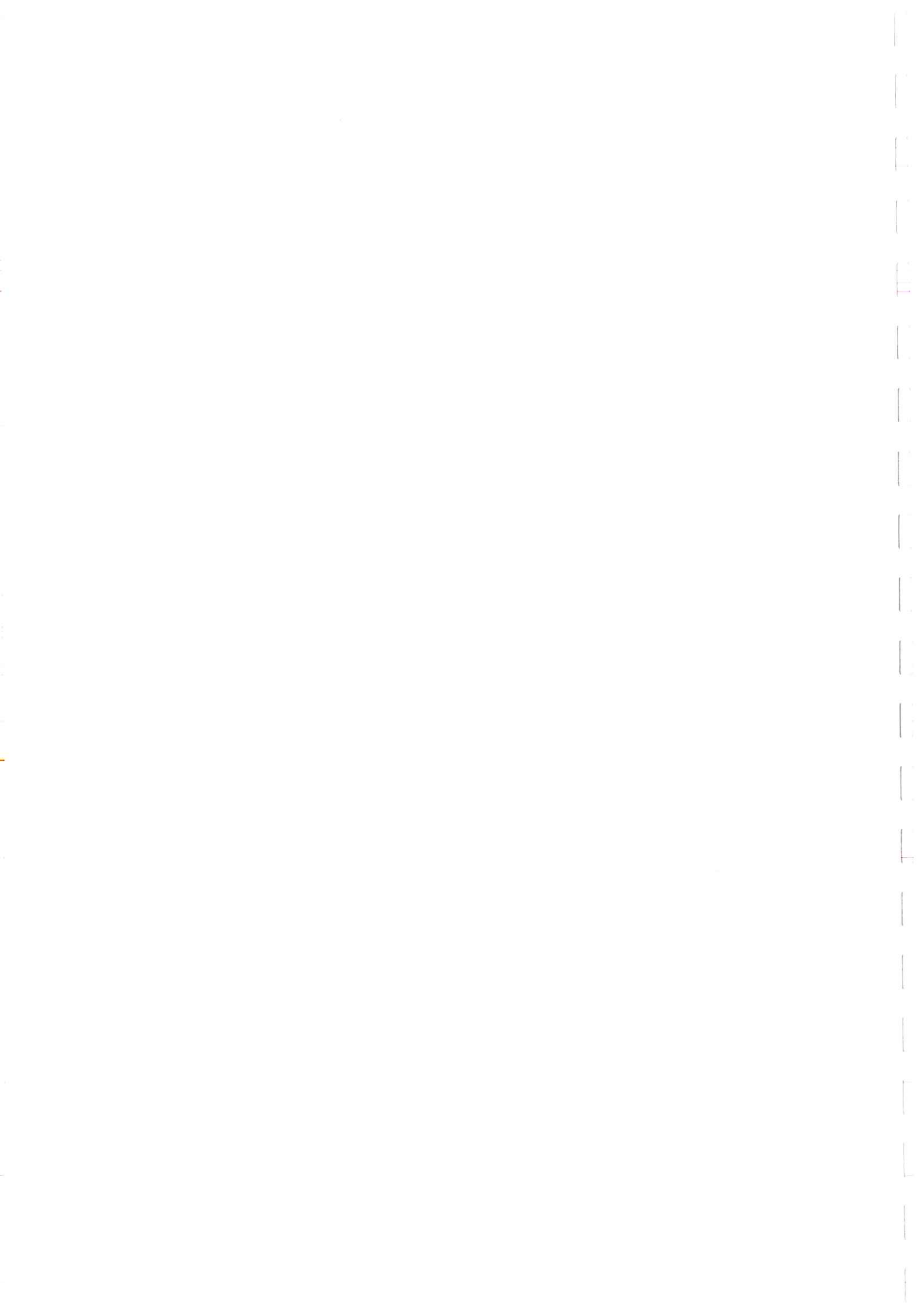
The National Trust
for Scotland

ST KILDA ARCHAEOLOGIST ANNUAL REPORT 2001



Cleits above An Lag on Hirta

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St Kilda Archaeologist 2001



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1.0 Executive Summary

This report summarises the work of the National Trust for Scotland St Kilda Archaeologist during the 2001 season. The fieldwork for two projects was completed during the four-month stay on Hirta, followed by the preparation of the associated reports once back on the mainland. This season saw the culmination of the project initiated by Lorna Johnstone to nominate a selection of cleitean for monitoring and possible long-term management – work that has been on-going since 1999. The second project was a watching brief carried out for QinetiQ/SERCo to fulfill Scheduled Monument Consent conditions for construction works being undertaken by R.J.Macleod (Contractors) Ltd. Other work was also undertaken and this is summarised.

2.0 Introduction

2001 saw a change in management and personnel for the position of National Trust for Scotland St Kilda Archaeologist. With the completion of Lorna Johnstone's time as St Kilda Archaeologist in December 2000, the Trust decided to bring the management of the position in-house and then appointed Marcia Taylor, who had prior experience of working on St Kilda, to the post for 2001. Notwithstanding these changes the role of the St Kilda Archaeologist remained unaltered, concentrating on issues of conservation management, and being funded jointly by the NTS and Historic Scotland.

3.0 The 2001 Season

3.1 Foot-and-Mouth

Out-breaks of Foot-and-Mouth Disease from February 2001 onwards affected visitors to St Kilda and consequently the duties of the St Kilda Archaeologist. Initially St Kilda was closed to the public and Work Parties were cancelled. This position was reviewed regularly by NTS staff and by the mid-point of the season the island was re-opened using a permit system and two Work Parties were re-organised. Operation of the permit system was the responsibility of Andy Robinson the NTS/Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) Warden. The Archaeologist provided cover of these duties when required by the Warden. On these occasions boats were met and greeted, permits checked or assigned and visitors landed and disinfected. A short introductory talk was given, which included orientation information about the main island and its facilities, as well as an explanation of the new regulations in place to combat the disease.

3.2 Initial Assessment

The initial task of any season on St Kilda is to examine the damage resulting from winter storms on the upstanding structures in the Village area. It is usual practice for the Warden to have forewarned the Oban office of the NTS with details of any obvious major collapses, as he arrives on the island a month before the archaeologist. However, the Archaeologist undertakes the full survey of the Village landscape, records problems and submits a damage report to the Building Surveyor in the Oban office. This year, for the first time a photographic record accompanied the report. Certain drystone structures had suffered from varying degrees of collapse, in particular several cleits required major repairs and many enclosure walls had become dilapidated. Most of the works identified were repaired by the first Work Party of the season, although cleit 126 proved problematic and work on this

structure was halted by the archaeologist because of concerns over safe working conditions and potential damage to the structure.

An inspection of the back-filled excavation site of 2000 also took place. The turf appears to have re-taken particularly well in some areas and with varying degrees of success in others. There is minimal protrusion of green plastic coverings and unobtrusive small angular stone debris remains the only indication of spoil mound areas. A short informal report was produced and submitted to the Oban office.

3.3 Cleit Preservation Project

Work on the Cleit Preservation Project was finished this season. The project derived from the Cleit Condition Surveys of 1996-1998 (Johnstone) and was undertaken between 1999 and 2001. Its aim was to identify a representative sample of the dry-stone structures known as cleitean (singular - cleit) for preservation.

Some 311 cleitean were chosen on Hirta as a representative sample from the 1261 such structures still surviving in the archipelago (Harman 1997). All cleitean selected in 2001 were physically marked as agreed with Historic Scotland - with Paraloid and an ink dot. Previous attempts to mark the structures with aluminium tags had proven unsuccessful. Concordance work was also carried out on the various numerical systems used to identify cleitean between 1970 and 2000, enabling the Trust to revert to Mary Harman's numerical sequence for cleit identification. The report produced as a result of the fieldwork (Taylor 2001) documents the varied processes behind the choice of individual structures, as well as providing a basis for future monitoring of the chosen cleitean.

3.4 Watching Brief

In 2001 QinetiQ Hebrides Ranges upgraded several service facilities on Hirta. A watching brief was required by HS for the Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC). As there were no archaeological excavations on Hirta during 2001, it was possible for the St Kilda Archaeologist to provide the watching-brief services to QinetiQ/SERCo. A good working relationship was established between contractual staff and the Archaeologist, ensuring that advice was always sought and given prior to any action, so that the utilities work progressed smoothly.

The septic tank, an area in front of the Power Station, and the croft-lands south of the 1957 military road were affected by the works. No in-situ archaeological deposits were encountered but residual artefacts were recovered during the contractor's excavations of disturbed ground. These included a sizeable collection of handmade potsherds as well as some broken 19th/20th-century artefacts.

Information was recorded to enable the possible production of density and location patterns for the artefacts recovered. Patterns may be related to agricultural practices in the 1830s croft-land divisions, but they could also be linked to the currently known coastal erosion sites that are revealing handmade potsherds, as well as the dump sites located on the boulder beach. A study needs to be made of all the pottery types recovered for age, type and fabrics. In particular, the handmade sherds need to be compared with other prehistoric potsherds found on St Kilda.

Soil samples were also taken for possible analytical purposes, even though this was previously disturbed ground.



A clearer understanding of early MoD activities also resulted from interpretation of the watching-brief findings. The re-excavation of an early fuel pipeline running the length of the croft lands revealed that stones from the nearby shore wall had been robbed at intervals to refill this trench. This accounts for the current denuded appearance of this wall. The spoil from the MoD's construction of a sump access chamber mid-way along this pipeline created or added to at least one of the dumps of material situated on the boulder beach below the croft land edge. Comparisons could also be drawn between the stratigraphic relationships revealed during excavations from all areas. Similarities in these sequences lead to a suggestion of the original stratigraphic landscape construction before MoD involvement on the island. Details of these results are contained in the report produced from the watching-brief (to be lodged in the NMRS).

A photographic record and drawn archive from the contractual work was also produced (also to be lodged with the NMRS on completion of post-excavation works).

3.5 The Rubble Survey

A survey of rubble and rubbish in and around the Village area was initiated in 2001. This began with the production of a photographic record and field notes recording content of the interiors of all ruinous dwellings along the Street and areas of waste-material dumps across Village Bay. A small-scale clean-up operation ensued and Work Party members under archaeological direction removed some obvious alien material and other more general rubbish.

3.6 Cliff Erosion Survey

The 2001 change of personnel necessitated a familiarisation with the state of the soft cliff erosion in Village Bay. It is common practice for the Archaeologist to monitor annually the state of the cliffs to capture information about any serious changes in the rate of erosion. Full surveys are undertaken every three years and the next formal report, including photographic monitoring, is due in 2002. This year little change was noted as a result of natural agencies.

However, a mechanical accident late in 2000 has produced a section of active erosion and disturbance. The crane that was being used in the construction works at the Power Station toppled over the cliff edge, damaging the eastern end of the main, cliff-edge, dry-stone dyke. Stones were displaced, wall footings exposed and an area of archaeological stratigraphy revealed. Four months after the accident, during the Archaeologist's assessment of the results of the damage, a fragment of handmade pottery was recovered from the material that had ended up on the boulder beach below the accident site and another fragment was noted protruding from the deposits sealed by the wall and exposed in the cliff section above. The in-situ fragment was not recovered in 2001 as safe access could not be gained without specialised equipment. An attempt was made, with limited success, to record it photographically. There are now three points along the cliff-face where active erosion has revealed handmade potsherds.

A short informal report was produced in 2001, including details of the finds and a photographic archive. This report will act as a base for the full 2002 survey report of cliff erosion that has occurred since 1999.

3.7 Visitor Liaison

The St Kilda Warden, Andy Robinson, is responsible for visitor management on St Kilda but the Archaeologist shared the load as necessary (as already noted at 3.1 above regarding the Foot-and-Mouth precautions). For example, a variety of tours around areas of Village Bay were given to certain visiting parties. Cruise ship passengers were divided between the Warden and Archaeologist to enhance their excursion experience on St Kilda and to ensure that the numbers trying to access the small space of the St Kilda Club Shop were staggered over time. Introductory tours were offered to and accepted by each Work Party. Supplementary tours of the wider village and historic landscape beyond the head dyke were also given to groups from the Work Parties, the LARG Research Group and by a direct request from an interested group from a visiting charter boat.

A party of original members of the early RAF Hardrock Campaign also visited the island in 2001. It was a pleasure to accompany these gentlemen in their re-experience of Hirta after nearly fifty years absence. Some members were quite overwhelmed. Memories of their time were exchanged during social time and copies of early photographs donated. General contact with members of the public and island staff whilst carrying out working duties and enjoying out-of-hours social time frequently prompted requests for information about St Kilda's past and present. Without exception the Archaeologist was happy to oblige with responses to such requests and discussions frequently ensued.

3.8 Work Parties

One of the main duties of the St Kilda Archaeologist is to provide support and advice to Work Party leaders and members about the tasks scheduled for their time spent on the island. Work Party A was primarily concerned with repairs to dry-stone structures and dykes damaged during the winter storms of 2000. The Archaeologist worked in a close hands-on manner with this Party, helping and advising with repairs. Much valuable experience was gained from physical participation in the repair tasks and from discussions with Party members about their thoughts on the nature of these structures.

Work Party B's tasks concentrated on the repair and maintenance of the historic buildings currently in use on the island, work which the Leader was very experienced in. The Archaeologist was therefore not involved in a hands-on way with their work but did offer advice. In particular, the Work Party was regularly reminded that all repairs, no matter how minor, required prior approval from Historic Scotland. A compromise had to be reached for the Featherstore, however, and the modern bolt fitted to the southern door will be replaced in 2002.

3.9 Island Relations

This season the extra-special experience of St Kilda that all visitors gain when they come to the islands was certainly heightened by the closure due to Foot-and-Mouth restrictions for an early period of the summer season. When visitors were allowed access again, those that did arrive on the island considered themselves very fortunate. The closure also had a great affect upon the SERCo and QuinetiQ employees who look upon the arrival of visitors by sea as the end of the winter period. Once restrictions were lifted and Work Parties and yachts alike returned they were all enthusiastically welcomed, resulting in a warm and friendly atmosphere particularly between Work Parties and SERCo / QuinetiQ staff. The extra disruptions to island life caused by the contractor works taking place in 2001 did not seriously detract from the St Kilda experience. Although many visitors commented upon the disturbance initially, by the end of their time on the Hirta they appreciated the reasons

and many felt that the addition of contract staff strengthened the community and sociable spirit of the islands.

3.10 Reports

Three reports were produced in 2001, covering completion of the Cleit Preservation Project, the Watching Brief associated with SERCo/QinetiQ sub-contracted works, and this Annual Report. Four informal papers were also produced, on the winter damage to structures in the Village Bay area, further additional damage as and when it occurred, cliff erosion, and the 2000 excavation site.

4.0 The Coming Season - 2002

4.1 Damage

The 2002 season will begin with an assessment of damage sustained to structures in the Village Bay area. The damage will be reported to the NTS Oban office and incorporated as appropriate into the Work Party programme.

4.2 Cliff Erosion

A photographic record of the cliff sections in Village Bay will be produced along-side a report detailing their condition in 2002. The deposits on the beach could also be assessed and this could be an ideal opportunity to include Work Party member assistance.

4.3 Gleann Mor Survey

A full condition report on the structures in Gleann Mor is required in the 2002 season. This will include the cleitean that are associated with the sheilings. It comes at an appropriate juncture after the completion of the first stage of the Cleit Preservation Project, which did not include the cleitean in this area.

4.4 Cleit Preservation Project

The Cleit Preservation Project will enter its second phase in 2002. The photographic record of the cleitean singled out for preservation will be completed and monitoring will begin. All cleitean in the project and those nearby that are necessary for re-location need to be marked with their identification information and a preservation logo where appropriate. The cleitean could also be located using a GPS, if available for testing during the 2002 season.

4.5 The Work Parties

The St Kilda Archaeologist will liaise with the Work Party leaders and provide assistance, guidance and advice as required. The Archaeologist will also assist with the excavations at Mullach Sgar directed by Bob Will of GUARD, which should resume for another season after the hiatus in 2001.

4.6 LARG

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

5.0 Acknowledgements

The author would like to extend her appreciation and thanks to the following individuals and institutions: Andy Robinson, St Kilda Warden; Jill Harden, NTS Highlands and Islands Regional Archaeologist; Dave Clark and Tony Horne, Island Supervisors and all the staff of SERCo. Eurest and QuinetiQ; all Work Party leaders, cook and members from the 2001 season; Anne May, Alasdair Oatts and Donald MacAskill, NTS Oban office; Sally Foster, Historic Scotland; Lorna Johnstone, GUARD (former St Kilda Archaeologist); Robin Turner, NTS Senior Archaeologist; the staff of the NTS Oban and Inverness offices and Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD).

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