



The National Trust  
for Scotland

## **St Kilda Archaeologist Annual Report 2002**



**Susan Bain  
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*Highlands and Islands Regional Office*  
*Balnain House, 40 Huntly Street, Inverness, IV3 5HR*

## 1.0 Executive Summary

This report summarises the work undertaken on the island by The National Trust for Scotland St Kilda Archaeologist in 2002. During the summer there were six work parties, four undertaking repair and maintenance work and two involved in archaeological excavation. The repair and maintenance work parties carried out a number of tasks under archaeological supervision that included; repairing cleit roofs, drystone dykes and plantigrues; investigating the drains around the roofed buildings and carrying out experimental lime-pointing work, all as approved/agreed with Historic Scotland through the Management Agreement. The archaeological work parties continued to excavate the site on Mullach Sgar. A number of cruise ships and smaller vessels visited with a total of approximately 1600 visitors, a number of which came on guided walks. A coastal erosion survey was carried out in Village Bay; the structures in Gleann Mor were monitored; a photographic survey of certain cleitean carried out and a photographic and measured drawing survey of the Munitions Store was completed. Fuller reports on some of these topics will be produced before the next season.

## 2.0 Introduction

The post of St Kilda Archaeologist in 2002 was held by Susan Bain, initially this post was managed from the NTS Highlands and Islands (south) Office in Oban, with archaeological advice from Jill Harden, NTS Highlands and Islands Archaeologist. However with the closure of the Oban office and the redundancy of all the staff, management moved to the Inverness Office. The post and duties of the St Kilda Archaeologist were unaffected by the restructuring of the NTS.

## 3.0 The 2002 Season

### 3.1 Coastal Erosion

A photographic survey of the coastline in Village Bay was carried out in June. Photographs from the last coastal erosion survey in 1999 were used as a reference and also to gauge the extent of any erosion. Previous erosion surveys had taken "face on" or oblique views of the cliff face. This was supplemented this year by top edge views which may better help gauge the depth of material lost.

The survey indicated that since 1999 there had been a loss of 1m or more from sections B, C, the lower terrace in section F and the east end of section E. There was also noticeable erosion in section A and E. The remaining sections were either unaffected or only had slight vegetation loss. Whilst the rate of loss may be unusual because of the severity and direction of the winter storms in 2001-2002, this rate is clearly very worrying and will affect the Store.



*A fragment of hand-made pottery*

Two sherds of handmade pottery (STK02/21) were recovered from section B; a layer of burning was also noted in this exposed section.

A fuller report on the coastal erosion will be produced.

### 3.2 *Gleann Mor Structures – condition survey*

All the structures in Gleann Mor were re-visited this year. The photographs from previous visits in 1996 and 1999 were taken into the field in order to replicate the views taken and also to note any change since 1999. Most of the structures appeared to be unchanged since the last monitoring visit, although minor changes were noted in a few. These changes are presumably the result of severe weather and/or the activities of the Soay sheep.

A fuller report on the condition of the Gleann Mor structures will be produced.

### 3.3 *Cleit Preservation Project*

Of the 311 cleits listed for active maintenance in the Cleit Preservation Programme (Taylor 2001), 80 did not have a complete photographic record. Unfortunately it was not possible to visit all of them to complete the record but 68 cleits were visited and a photograph taken of each elevation and interior (where possible).

The majority of cleits showed no change from the description and photographs taken between 1996 and 2001. However a few had suffered some minor damage, these included:

Cleit 120	corner A/D collapse
Cleit 479	corner C/D collapse
Cleit 799	stone lintel collapse
Cleit 513 (The Chimney Cleit)	corner A/B collapse
Cleit 900	recent tumble in front of side A

Sixteen of the seventeen cleits identified for annual monitoring in the Cleit Preservation Programme were also re-visited and checked.

### 3.5 *Rubble in Houses 7,9,10-13 & 16 and Blackhouse F*

The Management Agreement with Historic Scotland includes the proposal to remove the builders' rubble from within houses 10,11 & 13 in 2002, following appropriate investigation and consideration. The assessment of the rubble in the houses was not completed this year but a report will be produced before the 2003 season, so that detailed consideration can be given to the work by Historic Scotland before the 2003 work party season begins.

### 3.6 *Munitions Store Survey*

A standing building survey was carried out on the Munitions Store. Where possible all internal and external elevations were photographed (STK02:18/16-25). All the external and two internal elevations were sketched at 1:50.

A fuller report including a statement of significance and assessment of its condition will be produced.

### 3.7 *GUARD Excavations*

Excavation by the University of Glasgow continued on the eastern slopes of Mullach Sgar. A large area was opened up to expose the 'horned structure', structure 3 and the area in-between, in order to determine any relationship between the two. Handmade pottery was again recovered from the area of the horned structure. The interior of structure 3 was fully excavated and several stone tools recovered from the floor levels. Walls of a larger structure were exposed in the area between structure 3 and the 'horned structure' although their full extent remains unclear.

An increasing amount of time allocated to the excavation is being spent exposing and back-filling the site. The possibility of using repair and maintenance work parties in this process was discussed. The St Kilda Archaeologist assisted in some of the fieldwork and liaised with the Project Directors, Bob Will and John Duncan.

### 3.8 Work Parties

During the 12 weeks of the summer when there are work parties on the island a great deal of the Archaeologist's time is spent working with them. This year, as always, they were an enthusiastic and hard working bunch with a range of skills that could be adapted and used on St Kilda.

i) Sections of walling were repaired including: the dyke to south and north of cleit 2; planticrue 3, cleitean 15, 18, 31, 36, 94 and the enclosure behind house 3. A number of artefacts were noted during these repairs.



ii) Repairs to the turf roofs were carried out on cleitean 3, 11, 18, 63, 73 and 82

iii) Two areas on the east front elevation of House 14 were picked out and re-pointed with lime mortar as specified by Historic Scotland.

Each area was re-pointed using a different mortar mix; to the west of the window a St. Astier mix was used, a Jura Kaulk mix was used on the east side of the window

iv) The work parties also investigated and cleaned out the drains around Houses 1, 3 and 4 under archaeological supervision. This showed that, as expected, the drains had been repaired and replaced

in the recent past. It also highlighted the need to include a drain clearance schedule in every year's work programme.

The St Kilda Archaeologist investigated the nature of the drainage around House 6. This appeared to show a complete lack of drainage which may account for the flooding problems around and within the house each winter. The investigation also highlighted the need for a detailed archaeological excavation of the area prior to the drainage works which are required before the re-roofed and re-lined house can be fully used.

v) Damp problems have been regularly reported over the last few years along the base of the north wall of the church. The opportunity was taken this year to investigate them. As part of the investigation a small exploratory trench was dug under archaeological supervision along the north wall. This revealed that there is no drain along the north side gable of the church. Appropriate drainage works may be required for this building too.



vi) Drainage around the Factor's House was also investigated, this revealed a corroding and leaking pipe, broken joints and lack of drainage along one side. The joints were resealed and a soak-away put in along the south side of the house, the silted up drainage channels above the Factors House were also cleared.

No archaeological features were noted although a number of 19th/20th century artefacts were noted.

A fuller report on the drains around the houses will be produced.



### 3.9 Other Works

#### *Watching Brief – Mullach Sgar*

The anchoring guy ropes on the radar tracking mast on Mullach Sgar were replaced this summer. This involved the re-locating of the concrete plinths to which the guys are attached. RJ McLeod Contractors Ltd were contracted to carry out the works in May-June. Access to the site was agreed on-site between RJ McLeod site manager (Donnie Campbell) and NTS St Kilda Archaeologist (Susan Bain). Three holes were excavated by JCB; all were approximately 1.2 square metres in plan and varied in depth from 0.8m to 2.2m. No evidence of structures or artefacts were noted. The use of a JCB and power barrows in wet conditions caused some damage to the vegetation and upper soil layer. However no archaeological features were noted.

#### *St Kilda Soay Sheep Project*

Throughout the summer members of the *St Kilda Soay Sheep Project* were on Hirta as usual. During the annual catch it was particularly important that there was liaison between the Archaeologist and project members. An introduction to the village area and an explanation of its archaeological importance was given to all project members. The project leaders ensured that all their staff were aware of the issues and conditions of the Scheduled Monument Consent and ensured the catch was carried out with all due care and attention, not only to the sheep, but to the upstanding monuments as well. The Soay sheep catch went successfully with no damage of note to any of the monuments (or sheep).

#### *Soil Sampling – University of Aberdeen*

As part of a Leverhulme programme of research into pollution on remote Scottish Islands a research assistant, Claire Deacon, from the University of Aberdeen spent 10 days on Hirta taking a series of soil samples from cultivated areas. As all of the sample pits lay within scheduled ancient monument areas the St Kilda Archaeologist was present throughout the sampling programme. All the pits excavated revealed homogenous cultivated soil varying in depth from 0.3m to almost 1m. A number of artefacts were recovered from the sample pits; these included a few sherds of 19<sup>th</sup>- 20<sup>th</sup> century ceramics, fragments of leather, later 20<sup>th</sup> century iron fragments and a few sherds of hand-made pottery which may be prehistoric.

#### *Coastal Defence*

The cliff face immediately in front of the Store had suffered extensive erosion over the winter months. In order to minimise the effects of potential future storms, and as a temporary



measure until a full assessment of coastal defences can be prepared, three gabion baskets were placed immediately in front of the Store.

These baskets were placed on the stone foreshore and filled with loose stones and boulders recovered from the slipway area. The area behind them was filled with loose stones in order to avoid scouring. This work was carried out by the St Kilda Archaeologist and Warden and is intended merely to absorb some of the impact of winter storms this year. It

was not intended, nor should be viewed, as anything other than a temporary measure. It was assumed that this action would at best reduce any erosion and at worst have no effect whatsoever.

A team of erosion specialists visited St Kilda in late September 2002 and will produce a report and recommendations for future action.

#### *Conservation*

Rain and frost has also caused damage to the concrete base for one of the stays of the 1913 radio mast, located in front of the Factor's House. The conservation department of the National Museums of Scotland were contacted for advice as to the possibilities of repair and the way in which such bases might be conserved for the future. It was recommended that the Historic Scotland stone conservation workshops should be contacted and this is now being progressed.

#### *3.10 Island Relations*

This summer was a time of change for base staff, as the running of the base transferred from Serco to QinetiQ. While there were some changes in job descriptions the personnel remained the same, although this was of course a time of uncertainty. However the base continued to provide essential support to the St Kilda Archaeologist, not only supplying accommodation and food but also the occasional lift to the top of the hill and trip in the boat; they provided storage for various boxes and materials and also the essential safety back up for lone working. QinetiQ staff ensured that the St Kilda Archaeologist was consulted over issues which may be of concern, including the emplacing of a new crash barrier on Mullach Sgar; the construction of a concrete plinth at the POL ramp and the repainting of the zebra crossing.

The St Kilda Archaeologist liaised closely with the Warden over issues of concern to both, including: coastal erosion, guided walks, work party schedules, wall repairs and drain clearance. The Archaeologist and Warden on occasion teamed up to work in areas that were particularly remote or with difficult access eg monitoring cleits on Mullach Bi.

#### *3.11 Education*

Correspondence between the archaeologist and Yeland School, Lancashire was carried out as part of a school project on St Kilda. Guided walks were offered to cruise ships, all work party members, researchers and staff.

## **4.0 2003 Season**

#### *4.1 Cleit Preservation Programme*

A photographic record will be taken of the few remaining cleits in the Cleit Preservation Programme which so far are inadequately photographed. A work plan will be drawn up for the regular monitoring of the cleits that are to be actively maintained. The plan will then be progressed by the St Kilda Archaeologist and work party members every year.

#### *4.2 Work Parties*

The St Kilda Archaeologist will provide advice and guidance to the work party leaders as required. The Archaeologist will also provide advice and support to the professional staff that organise the archaeology work parties for the NTS. There will also be an increase in the secondment of work party members to work with the St Kilda Archaeologist this year, as necessary and appropriate.

#### *4.3 Cliff Erosion*

A walkover survey of the coastline in Village Bay will be undertaken in order to assess any erosion and its impact on archaeological deposits and structures.

#### *4.4 House Drains*

The drains around Houses 2 and 5 will be investigated and cleaned out as necessary. Following the investigation of the drains around the other roofed buildings during the 2002 season, the forthcoming report is bound to identify additional, necessary drainage works. If agreed with Historic Scotland, these will be started. In particular, the initial assessment of the drainage problem around House 6 revealed archaeological deposits containing material from the occupation of the house in what may be an undisturbed context. The drainage problem must be dealt with, so it will be necessary to undertake a full archaeological investigation of the area around House 6 before insertion of appropriate land drains.

#### *4.5 Assessment of Builders' Rubble*

Where appropriate the rubble will be removed from the houses identified in the Management Plan. A report on the significance of the rubble will be produced before the 2003 season.

#### *4.6 Bracken Control Assessment*

Desk-based research, as well as field survey of the spread of bracken in the Village Bay area will be undertaken. Proposals for any appropriate action will be outlined in a report produced before 2004.

### **5.0 Acknowledgements**

In this my first year I should like to give thanks to everyone who generously offered advice and support: Andy Robinson, St Kilda Warden; Jill Harden, NTS Highlands and Islands Regional Archaeologist; Dave Clarke and Tony Horne, Island supervisors and all the staff of QinetiQ, Eurest and Movecon; all the work party leaders, cook and members of the 2002 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 and GUARD.



## Appendix 1

### Soil Sampling on Hirta, 2002

#### *Summary*

The Department of Plant and Soil Science, University of Aberdeen took a series of soil samples and one peat core from different areas of Hirta during a ten day period in August 2002. These samples will be used as part of a wider study of polluting metals in the soils of remote island communities

#### **Methodology**

All of the soil sampling sites lay within Scheduled Ancient Monuments. The Department of Plant and Soil Science had applied for, and been granted, Scheduled Monument Consent by Historic Scotland. Whilst not a condition of the SMC it was thought prudent that the NTS St Kilda Archaeologist was present during the excavation of all the pits.

It became clear that the original timescale of one week was optimistic given the weather conditions, terrain and nature of the sampling. Large samples, weighing between 15-40 kgs were taken from 15 pits; some of these pits lay 2km over steep terrain from the nearest road. The pits were approximately 0.5m wide and dug using a shovel, the turf layer being removed first. The sample material was placed in a plastic sack and the remainder laid to one side until required for back-filling. In some pits further samples for pollen analysis were taken by using Kubiana tins. A number of small samples were also taken for micromorphology. The pits were dug until bedrock or a natural soil was reached.

A total of nine pits were excavated from the Village area. All were taken from the cultivation area in front of the houses. Two of these were taken from below the Consumption Dyke. The Consumption dyke was built around 1830, it was hoped that samples from below the dyke would allow a comparison of pre- and post-improvement plaggen soils.

Pit 1 – was located close to the road in front of House 1. The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.5m through a dark brown sandy silt flecked with granophyre grit. Modern artefacts were noted including a fragment of glazed drain pipe and a round iron nail. An unglazed sherd of coarse ware was also recovered, which may be prehistoric (STK02/022).

Pit 2 – was located in front of House 3. The pit was dug to a depth of 0.8m through a dark brown sandy silt with frequent granophyre flecks. A number of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century artefacts were noted including fragments of slate, green vessel glass and glazed ceramic. A possible prehistoric pot sherd was also recovered (STK02/23).

Pit 3 – was located in front of Houses 6/7. This was dug to a depth of 0.6m through homogenous dark brown clay sandy silt, flecked with granophyre grit. The occasional fragment of debris from domestic fires was noted.

Pit 4 – was located in front of House 9, down-slope of cleit 86. The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.43m before hitting a large granophyre stone.

Pit 5- was located in front of House 11 within what appears to be a cultivation terrace. This was dug to a maximum depth of 0.6m through a dark brown silty loam. A sherd of white and brown glazed ceramic (STK02/28) was noted and also two sherds of probable pre-historic pot (STK02/30)

Pit 6 – was located in front of House 14, midway between it and the road within a cultivation terrace. This pit was dug to a depth of 1.0m through mid-brown silty loam above a dark brown clay silt. No artefacts were noted.

Pit 7 - was located in front of House 16, midway between the House and Cleit 94. This pit was a maximum 0.3m deep through a dark brown silty loam lying above mid brown stoney layer. One fragment of probable Rockingham pottery was recovered.

Pit 8 – was located against the east elevation of the consumption dyke. The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.75m through three distinct layers. The turf was removed to reveal a mid/dark brown sandy silt with few inclusions. Material from the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was observed in this layer including the base of an earthenware ‘meatloaf’ jar and two small fragments of leather with copper rivets. Below this lay a more compact grittier layer which lay above a medium brown sandy clay silt. A further two courses of the consumption dyke were visible below the turf layer, no evidence for a construction trench was noted.

Pit 9 – was located against the west elevation of the consumption dyke. The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.6m through homogenous dark brown silty loam. The pit lay in a hollow which runs parallel to the dyke and may be the remains of a construction trench.

#### An Lag

Three pits were excavated within An Lag, the bowl of flat land that lies above the village. All three pits were located on the cultivation terraces that lie out with the stone enclosures

Pit 10 – was located on the south side of An Lag on a clear cultivation rig. The pit was dug to a maximum depth of 0.45m before hitting a large granophyre boulder, the soil was a gritty sandy-silt.

Pit 11- was located immediately to the north-east of the enclosures

Pit 12 – was located a little to the south of cleit 1001 on a possible cultivation rig. This was excavated to a depth of 0.8m through homogenous gritty grey/brown sandy silt.

#### Gleann Mor

Pit13 – was located a little to the northwest of Structure I on the east side of Abhainn a’ Ghlinne Mhoir. The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.46m through a dark brown clay silt which lay above a boulder clay.

Pit 14- was located upslope of Structure K on a possible cultivation terrace on the west side of Abhainn a' Ghlinne Mhoir. The pit was excavated to a depth of 0.6m through a dark grey/brown silty clay. One possible tiny fragment of unglazed pot was recovered from this pit (STK02/31)

Pit15 – was located on a cultivation terrace below the boulder field on the west side of Glen Bay. This was dug to a depth of 0.84m through dark brown silty clay with few visible inclusions.