



The National Trust
for Scotland



St Kilda Archaeologist's Annual Report 2006



**Samantha Dennis
October 2006**

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Cover plate:

The deterioration of a cleit wall and turf roof in Village Bay, Hirte

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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 by the St Kilda Archaeologist for the National Trust for Scotland on the island in the summer of 2006 and off island in the winter of 2005-2006. It will further outline the work scheduled for the winter of 2006-2007 and the summer of 2007.

During the summer of 2006 there were five volunteer Work Parties carrying out work on the island. Three of the Work Parties undertook conservation work whilst the other two were involved in excavations in Village Bay.

The conservation work parties completed works under archaeological supervision. These tasks included repairs to drystone wall, cleits, cleit roofs, enclosures, and drains, as well as participating in routine monitoring programmes, all approved by Historic Scotland through the Management Agreement. The archaeological work parties excavated exploratory trenches in Village Bay, under the supervision of GUARD.

Other work carried out on the island in 2006 included a full coastal survey in Village Bay, monitoring cleits according to the Cleit Preservation Project, a study of the so-called boat-shaped structures in An Lag, and monitoring of turf roofs on cleits in Village Bay.

2.0 Introduction

In 2006 Samantha Dennis held the post of St Kilda Archaeologist. The post was managed by Susan Bain, Western Isles Regional Manager, from the NTS Highlands and Islands Office in Inverness, with archaeological advice from Jill Harden, NTS Highlands and Islands Archaeologist.

3.0 The 2005/2006 Winter Season

During the winter months the St Kilda Archaeologist worked on producing the Annual Report for 2005, as well as finalising three unpublished reports. *An Archaeological Watching Brief of Contractors Works on Hirta, St Kilda 2001* details the work watched by Marcia Taylor, the National Trust for Scotland St Kilda Archaeologist in 2001. The works carried out by QinetiQ/SERCo included installation of a new fuel line and associated interceptor pits and an extension to the existing septic tank. The second report, *Excavations at The Gap, Hirta, St Kilda 1995*, forms part of the archive of a rescue excavation of a 'boat-shaped setting' carried out by Robin Turner (NTS). Results led the excavator to conclude that the remains could be of a non-domestic Bronze Age setting, though a more recent reassessment queries this interpretation. Work was also carried out on the *Cleit Preservation Project* report. Final edits were made to cleit report, and the data gathered over the past 30 years was entered in a database by a temporary contractor, John Burns.

Work on the NTS St Kilda photo archive is ongoing and was partially tackled in the winter of 2005/2006. Catalogue numbers were correlated with those of the NTS digital archive and more images were scanned, thanks to John Sinclair and Isla Robertson.

4.0 The 2006 Summer Season

4.1 Coastal Erosion

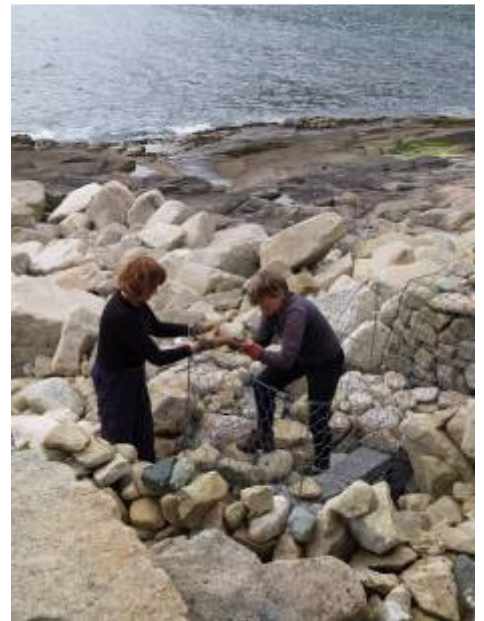
A full survey of the coastline in Village Bay was conducted in the first week of May. The methodology, established in 1999, included assessing any changes to the beach and cliff when compared to monitoring photographs taken annually since 1996 (Johnstone 1999).

In summary, the eastern end of the Bay has undergone the most change, including fallen stones and soil from the cliff edge. The continual erosion in this part of the Bay is of grave concern in relation to the potential damage to the Store from further coastal erosion. The western end of the Bay, in contrast, is stabilising with only minor collapses noted.



Coastal erosion observed at east end of Village Bay

In late summer a new temporary gabion basket was constructed in front of the Store and one of the old temporary gabion baskets was repaired.



Filling the new gabion baskets outside the Store

A full assessment of the coastal erosion will be produced in due course (Dennis forthcoming).

4.2 Cleit Preservation Project

The Cleit Preservation Project (CPP) aims to monitor the current state of preservation of a selection of cleits on St Kilda and repair them when necessary. A database records monitoring details of each cleit within the programme. With the help of volunteers from the Army and from Work Parties, 293 of the 313 cleits in the CPP were successfully monitored in 2006. This total includes all 111 cleits located within the Village head dyke, while the remaining 182 were located in the regions of Ruaival, Mullach Sgar, Mullach Bi, Mullach Mor, Conachair, Oiseval, Gleann Mor, and the Cambir. Twenty cleits in the CPP list were not monitored this year and will therefore be prioritised during any winter visits or at the beginning of the 2007 season.

Of the total 293 cleits monitored, twenty-seven showed minor change (one or two stones fallen or slipped), ten showed major change (more than two stones collapsed, or significant damage to lintels), six showed further erosion to the turf roof, and a further six showed signs of turf regeneration on the roof. Of the ten that showed major changes, one located within the head dyke and one just beyond the head dyke, cleit 40 and cleit 168 respectively, were repaired by a drystane dyker and Work Party members. The other seven cleits that showed major change, cleits 933, 1021, 307, 1199, 906, 908, and 909, will be repaired in 2007.

Cleits monitored:	
- within village head dyke	111
- across Hirta	182
Total	293
Cleits with minor changes	9 %
Cleits with major changes	3 %
Cleits with turf erosion	2 %
Cleits with turf regeneration	2 %



Photo of the major collapse of cleit 168, just beyond the head dyke, taken before its repair in July 2006



Cleit 168 being repaired by drystane dyker and Work Party member

4.3 Dyke Survey

This year the Dyke Survey focussed on recording the planticrues in Village Bay - there are twelve such enclosures. The diameter, wall thickness, wall heights, and wall



Planticrue (P-03) located within head dyke

condition were recorded for each structure and entered into a database. In addition, digital photographs were taken from four angles, including both interior and exterior views.

A start was also made on fully recording all the enclosure walls within the Village Bay area. These include small garden enclosures located behind the houses and blackhouses along the street, as well as the large enclosure walls beyond the head dyke.

4.4 Work Parties

The Work Parties accomplished the following in the summer of 2006:

- i) Wall repairs were carried out to enclosures by cleit 154 and near cleit 166, and to the consumption dyke near cleit 87. Repairs to the walls of cleits 168, 105 and 40 were attempted. Repairs to cleit 105 were abandoned because of its unstable and dangerous nature. Repairs to the Dry Burn were carried out under the supervision of a drystane dyker, Jim Ramsay.
- ii) Turf roof repairs were done on cleits 22, 34, 45, 56, 69, and 71. Unfortunately repairs could not be carried out on cleits 101 and 63 because of nesting fulmars.



Lime pointing the façade of House 12

- iii) The graveyard gate, constructed in the summer of 2005, was hung.
- iv) Repointing was carried out on the front facades of Houses 12, 13, 14 and 15, supervised by Iain Small (NTS Stonemason, Culzean Castle).
- v) The drains were cleared by Houses 1, 3 and 12, blackhouse R, and through the camping enclosure by cleit 8.
- vi) The Gun was recoated with a protective layer of bitumen.
- vii) Other work included mending the church rones, painting the Factor's House downpipe, and pitching the roofs on Houses 4,5, and 6.
- viii) work not carried out included further work on the drain of the church.

4.5 GUARD Excavations



Excavations south of the Village street

Archaeological research within the Village was conducted under the supervision of GUARD between June 23rd and July 22nd, 2006.

A significant area above and below the street between Houses 8 and 12 was surveyed geophysically. This extended the areas surveyed in 2004 and 2005, ensuring a complete geophysical picture of the crofts from the head dyke down to the coastline.

Excavation this year was used to test the results of the previous year's geophysical surveys. Trenches were opened over anomalies as well as apparently blank areas. Both the survey and the excavations will be reported by GUARD.

4.6 Other Works

4.6.1 House 6 drain

Following the excavations carried out in previous years relating to the drainage system around House 6 (Bain 2002, 2003, 2005; Dennis 2005) a new drain was cut along the east gable of the house. It is hoped that this will solve the winter flooding problems.



Excavation along the east gable of House 6 in preparation for a new drain

The Archaeologist excavated the drain with the assistance of Work Party members. The excavations revealed the remains of a simple drain lined on the sides by stones. There was no indication of lining along the base. The drain had silted up and been used as a dump in the 20th century. The material was cleared this summer and the new soak-away drain was constructed. The soak-away already in place at the rear of the house now connects with the new drain running along the east gable, similar in design to that around House 3.

Details of the 2006 excavations will be added to those of previous excavations around House 6 and produced as a separate report (Dennis forthcoming).

4.6.2 Munition Store drainage

The St Kilda Archaeologist investigated the flooding along the path to the Munition Store. Two small trenches, 0.9m x 0.5m and the other 0.6m x 0.5m, were deturfed along the path between the Gun and the Munition Store in an attempt to locate the original drain. The results indicate that a simple drain runs parallel to the path on its north-western side.

4.6.3 Jetty slipway repairs

The Archaeologist repaired the slipway leading down to the jetty, outside the Scheduled Area. The slipway had been damaged in the severe winter storms in 2005 which resulted in the gradual exposure of underlying electric cables.

A stretch, approximately 2.5m long and 1.5m wide, of paved stones had become dislodged leaving a cavity. This was cleared of vegetation, levelled off using sand, and filled with large stones embedded in lime mortar.



Jetty slipway before repair



Jetty slipway after repair

4.6.4 Soay Sheep Project

Members of the St Kilda Soay Sheep Project were on Hirta for part of August for the annual catch. As in past years, this involved setting up nets and runs across Village Bay. The project leaders ensured that all their staff were aware of the issues and conditions of the Scheduled Monument Consent and ensured that the catch was carried out with no disturbance to the monuments.

4.6.5 Visits

- Annual visit from representatives of *Historic Scotland* and *National Trust for Scotland* to agree upon works to be carried out during the summer season of 2006. *Rod McCullagh* (HS) extended his stay to familiarise himself with the island.
- *Stephen Watt* of Historic Scotland visited Hirta on August 15th to assess the works completed in accordance with the Management Agreement.
- *Chris Yorke* spent four days in August on Hirta assessing and auditing the tracks, routes and pathways across the island.

4.6.6 *QinetiQ Works*

According to the works schedule consent had been given for improvements to the drainage of the road and buildings occupied by QinetiQ, and the removal of high and low voltage cables. At the time of the Archaeologist's departure from the island in September the work remained outstanding.

4.6.7 *Research*

Susan Bain undertook her Churchill Fellowship in the spring of 2006. She visited numerous turf structures in Iceland, the Faeroes and Norway and spoke to local skilled craftsmen. Her experiences will greatly improve our understanding of turf roof methodology and the repair techniques applied to the cleits on St Kilda (Bain forthcoming).

4.7 *Island Relations*

As always, QinetiQ staff provided vital support to the St Kilda Archaeologist throughout the year. This included providing 'on the ground' updates during the winter months, and also safe storage of archives on the island.

4.8 *Staff Relations*

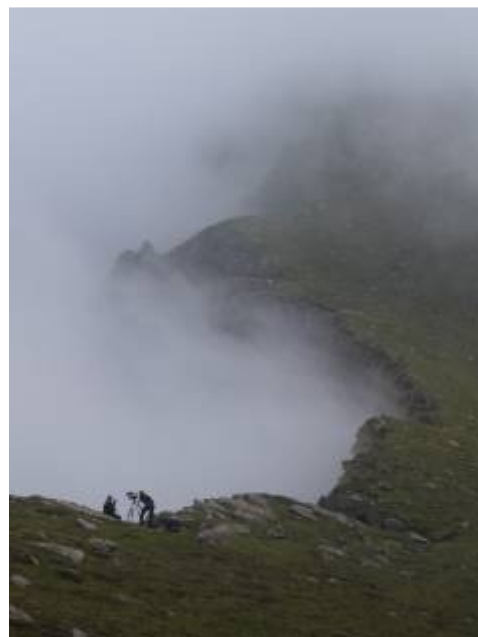
In 2006 the NTS Ranger post was held temporarily by Neil Mitchell and Peter Holden, and then ultimately by Jon Easton. Sarah Money held the post of Seabird and Marine Ranger post for the second year. There was daily liaison between NTS island staff on issues that concerned all: Work Party schedules, construction work specifications, watching briefs, and guided walks.

4.9 *Education*

Guided walks were offered to a variety of visitors to the island, including cruise ship passengers, contractors, researchers and staff. Amongst the larger groups were those from the Black Prince, Hebridean Princess, Clipper Adventurer, Girigoriy Mikheev, and Explorer.

Considerable time and energy was dedicated to interviews and also to organising logistics for a wide range of national and local papers, radio stations, and television crews. Amongst these were:

- BBC *Coast* filming by Ellen Jackson to be broadcast October/November 2006
- *Proiseact Nan Ealan*, a Gaelic multi-media team to be broadcast June 2007
- BBC Gaelic filming for a children's programme to be broadcast spring 2007
- Icelandic film crew producing '*Ginklofinn*', a documentary on infantile tetanus.



Ellen Jackson filming at the Gap

5.0 The 2006/2007 Winter Season

It is anticipated that the winter season off island will be spent –

- Producing this Annual Report.
- Producing reports detailing the results from the long-term coastal monitoring surveys carried out since 2002, and works on the drains around House 6.
- Cataloguing Mary Harman's photographs of numbered cleits of St Kilda stored at the RCHAMS in Edinburgh in advance of the proposed RCAHMS survey of Hirta 2007-2009.
- Input of data on a structure-by-structure basis for the NTS Sites & Monuments Record, commencing with the cleit data. It is intended that this will link with mapping software for use on the island.
- Writing articles for St Kilda Mail and NTS Archaeology Bulletin.

6.0 The 2007 Summer Season

6.1 Cleit Preservation Programme

A work plan outlines regular monitoring of the cleits that, according to the Cleit Preservation Programme, are to be actively maintained. Work in 2007 will continue to include visits to cleits, assessing damage, and taking photographs.

6.2 Work Parties

The St Kilda Archaeologist will continue to provide guidance and encouragement to the research teams and Work Parties.

6.3 House drains and drainage

Work will continue on the drainage in Village Bay in an attempt to solve the flooding issues in the houses, Munition Store, and along the street. A selection of drains are cleared on an annual basis and this will continue to be the case in 2007.

6.4 Coastal Erosion

In light of the threat to structures such as the Store, the survey of the coastline in Village Bay will continue on an annual basis.

6.5 Dyke Survey

Work will continue on the photographing and recording of the head dyke, planticrues and enclosures in Village Bay.

6.6 Historic Photos

More work will be done on the comparative analysis of historic photos from the archive. This includes identifying structures and landscape features from archive photographs, noting changes, and re-taking 'same view' photographs.

7.0 Acknowledgements

Many thanks to everyone who made the position of St Kilda Archaeologist both possible and enjoyable for me over the past year. I would like to thank Sarah and Jon for their wonderful company on the island throughout the summer; to Susan and Jill for their support and encouragement; to all the Work Party members for their dedication

and hard work; to Rod McCullagh for his inspirational words; and to QinetiQ and ESS staff for logistical support and advice.

8.0 Distribution List

Copies of this report are distributed to:

- NTS St Kilda Archaeologist (2 copies)
- NTS St Kilda Ranger
- NTS Western Isles Area Manager
- NTS Inverness SMR
- NTS Inverness Office Library
- NTS Edinburgh Office Library
- Historic Scotland (2 copies)
- RCAHMS NMRS
- Western Isles Council SMR
- QinetiQ, St Kilda
- Scottish Natural Heritage, South Uist

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