Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

# STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## The Skellig lighthouses

Designation: Ownership

National Monument No

RMP Number:

SMR Number

Townland:

Date of Document: June 2022

*This Statement of Significance is a summary document intended to inform the reader of the key reasons why a monument or place is special or significant. It is not intended to be a Conservation Plan or a definitive archaeological or conservation assessment. It will be periodically reviewed and update.*

**Introduction: Historical background**

Up to the construction of the Skellig lighthouses in the 1820s there were no navigational lights in existence on the west coast of Ireland between Cape Clear Island off the county Cork coast and Loophead at the mouth of the River Shannon in county Clare, a distance of some 178 km. As Maurice Fitzgerald, the Knight of Kerry, indicated to the British authorities, this oversight seems likely to have caused shipwrecks in Dingle Bay and Ballinskelligs Bay. To Fitzgerald and his contemporaries, the obvious location for an additional light was at Bray Head on Valentia Island. However, after surveying the Kerry coastline George Halpin Senior (c. 1755-1854), the Superintendent of Lighthouses (since 1810) and Inspector of Works to the Ballast Board (since 1800), considered the Great Skellig rock as a more suitable location. The British lighthouse board at Trinity House in London originally had reservations, not only about the choice of site but also with Halpin's plan for two lighthouses on the rock, but eventually granted permission for the project in late 1820. In 1810, the Ballast Board, which was essentially responsible for the port of Dublin, acquired the responsibility for Irish lighthouses, beacons and seamarks. The Board entered into negotiations with the owner of Great Skellig, the Butlers of Waterville, county Kerry, in 1821, which were protracted and eventually ended up in arbitration. The Butlers preferred an annual rent while the Board sought a lease in perpetuity. An Inquisition held in Tralee in November 1821, however, ruled that the sum of £780 be paid to Butlers by the Board to acquire ownership of the rock.

Halpin snr was a builder and self-taught civil engineer, with no formal training. There were only 14 Irish lighthouses in existence when the Ballast Board became responsible for them in 1810, but by 1867, owing to the work of Halpin snr and his son, George jnr, there were over 72. Prior to the completion of the Skellig lighthouses in 1826, beginning with the Old Head of Kinsale tower in 1814, Halpin snr had already designed 11 lighthouses, of which all but one was eventually built (Cox 2002, 294). One of the advantages that the Skellig Rock shared with other lighthouse locations such as South Bishop (off the coast of Wales), Blackrock (Mayo) and the Bull Rock which, while having hazardous landing places, none of them required elaborate foundations (Hague and Christie 1975). In consequence the lighthouse towers on the Skellig rock were not required to be as robust as, for example, that on the South Rock, off the coast of Newcastle, county Down, begun in 1793, which was

similar to Edward Rudyerd's Eddystone lighthouse of 1709, or indeed the later Fastnet lighthouse. Yet considerable expense, and physical effort (which led to at least one fatality) were required to improve the existing landing places and the roads required to link the lighthouse and their ancillary structures.

The main engineering challenge for Halpin was intercommunication between the upper and lower lights. This involved the construction of a steeply inclined roadway, extending along the southern tip of the rock from Cross Cove to the Lower Lighthouse, after which it turned sharply northwards to reach the Upper Lighthouse, a distance of around 646m (fig. 1).

**Fig. 1 (centre) 1826 access road connecting upper and lower lights on Skellig**

The section of the road near the lower light also has a substantial stone retaining wall. The campaign of blasting into steep rockfaces, during which a workman called Peter Cane was killed in November of 1825, took longer than expected and it was not until 1826 that the lower light was nearing completion (fig. 2). Indeed, such were the delays that work had not begun on the upper light until 1826 and was not finished until 1827. Many Irish lighthouses of the period were built with either Wicklow or Dublin granite, but Halpin chose to use the

stone quarried on the rock for both the main walls of the lighthouse towers and the keepers'

**Fig. 2 The lower Skellig lighthouse of 1826.**

houses, with imported granite used somewhat sparingly for the internal tower staircases, the lantern 'blocking' floors, windows and also for internal skirting boards in the dwelling houses. The upper tower and the external walls of the keepers' houses were also finished with imported slate cladding, while brick was also used for some internal walls and chimney breasts in the houses. The keepers' accommodation on the upper and lower lights were also provided with elaborate cast iron porticos, with classical entablatures, even though either of these would ever be on show to the public. The hazards of the Skellig location for lighthouse workers became apparent during the construction phase of the mid 1820s when, in the early months of 1826, some 40 men employed on the island were stranded for a month 'without victuals or fuel'.

**Fig. 3 The upper Skellig lighthouse.**

The upper light on the rock (fig. 3), which was essentially a two-storey structure, was some 372ft (113.38m) above high water and was visible at sea in clear weather for a distance of around 25 miles (40.2km). Both this and lower light tower house (which was later demolished) were the same height. The lower light was 175ft (53.34m) above high water and visible at 18 miles (28.9km) on a clear day. The original lights were first order catopric (i.e. which used reflectors to concentrate a beam of light, that could be seen at a distance), and employed Argand oil lamps to create a light source using sperm oil up to the late 1840s. However, after the construction of a new light on Inishtearaght on the Blasket Islands, some 22 miles (35.4km) due north of the rock, in May 1870, the upper light was decommissioned. Thereafter, the maintenance of the lower light required less than half of the original complement of lighthouse keepers, and in the 1890s accommodation was provided both for Inishtearaght and Skellig keepers at Knightstown on Valentia Island.

In late 1909 the lower lighthouse (fig. 4) was equipped with a new, third order, flashing light, while a fog signal was also added later, in 1914, but which caused difficulties from the outset. Its machinery was later dismantled, and it was manually operated up to 1940. During the Second World War the signal was taken out of operation until 1948 and was later seriously damaged by rockfall in 1953. In 1966, the tower of 1826 on the lower Skellig light was demolished and replaced with the reinforced concrete tower which still stands. This tower, along with a new engine room (which still retains a sizeable part of the original plant) and the light became electric. The internal reorganization of the dwelling constructed by Halpin in 1826, was completed at a cost of £49,000. The concrete Heli pad was added in 1969. After just over 160 years of continuously manned service, the lower light on Skellig became fully automatic on 22 April 1987.

**Fig. 4 The lower Skellig lighthouse, as shown in *The Graphic*, 9 August 1884.**

**Statement of Significance**

- These nineteenth-century lighthouses form part of the World Heritage Site yet are, in their own right, industrial archaeological monuments of international significance
- The double light arrangement on Skellig, completed in 1825-7, is the earliest example of its type in Ireland. George Halpin Senior later created double lights on Eagle Island (1835), Slyne Head (1836) and Oyster Island (1837). Only two examples of twin rock lighthouses at Pentland Skerries (Orkney Islands, 1794) and the Calf of Man (1816-19) are known from Britain.
- The total cost of the Skellig lighthouses, upon completion in 1827, was £41,651, which makes them the most expensive lighthouse installations to be built in 19th-century Ireland.
- The extensive access road, blasted out of the rock by Halpin snr in mid-1820s, is without parallel in any rock lighthouses of Ireland or Britain. In terms of civil engineering heritage, it pre-dates William Bald's blasting of coastal cliffs at Cushendun, county Antrim, to create a section of the Antrim coast road in the early 1830s
- Owing to its virtual abandonment in 1870, the remains of the upper light and its ancillary structures retain many of their original features, such as granite skirting boards.
- The cast iron porticoes provided for the entrances to the keeper's dwellings on the upper and lower lights are unique
- The upper light tower is one of the best-preserved examples of an 1820s Halpin snr designed lighthouse tower.
- The mid-1960s machinery and plant associated with the reinforced concrete lighthouse tower, which replaced the original lower light of 1826 in the keeper's dwellings, has become very rare. In many instances, such plant would have been scrapped by the early 1980s.
- The Commissioners of Public Works, in 1880, made the unusual step of appointing a small number of the older lighthouse keepers as caretakers of the monastic buildings on Skellig.

**Excavation**

The upper light and the keeper's dwellings were excavated by Alan Hayden in 2020.

**Research**

There is no detailed academic study of Irish lighthouses. The first general account of the Skellig lights is by T. G. Wilson in *The Irish lighthouse service* (Dublin, 1966) The best available survey is Bill Long's *Bright light white water. The story of Irish lighthouses and their people* (Dublin, 1993), which provides the most comprehensive account of the development of the Skellig lights. Later works, such as Kevin M. McCarthy's *Lighthouses of Ireland* (1997, Sarasota, Florida), are mostly based on earlier accounts.

**Access**

There is currently no public access to the lower or upper lighthouses. At present neither site has been listed in the RMP or the NIAH.

**Conservation**

Remedial and conservation works are ongoing.

**References**

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