

Excavations in the Upper Lighthouse Station, Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry

Ministerial Consent No. C001045. Works No. W000428

Excavation Licence No. E005321. Detection device licence No. R00551

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Introduction

Three small areas within the Upper Lighthouse station which could not be excavated in 2021 due to the presence of bird nests were excavated in June 2022 (fig. 1). The three areas were:

- 1- The southern shed (4a) attached to the east side of House 2,
- 2- The outside long-drop toilet (8) of House 2
- 3- Two sheds (21 & 26) outside the east side of the main complex.

Southern shed (4a) attached to the east side of House 2,

This small room was cleared of the remaining rubble which revealed its intact yellow Yorkshire Sandstone flagged floor (figs 2 & 3). It was cracked in places due to the impact of a large fallen stoner which demolished its southern wall that held a window and the doorway into the shed. There were also yellow sandstone skirtings on the internal faces of the walls, except the west wall where the plinth supporting the adjoining house was exposed (fig. 4.) Vertical scars of timber uprights supporting shelving survived on the internal face of the walls with corresponding small sockets in the sandstone floor slabs (figs 4 -7).

Long-drop toilet (8)

All but the basal 300mm of deposits were removed from the chute of the toilet (figs 8 & 9). The basal deposits were left *in situ* as they contained a puffin nest but can be easily removed at a later stage when required. There were no signs of an underfloor drain entering this toilet as had been discovered in that of House 1.

External shed (21)

The southern element of shed (21), which consisted of three rooms, was excavated in 2022. A depth of more than a metre of rubble survived in the south room (fig. 10). This excavation evidenced that its floor had been removed and its internal ground level was lowered (fig. 12) when shed (26) was later added to its east end (see below). It is possible that it originally or at one time had a suspended floor as there were three holes in the south wall at the same level as the floor of the other two rooms of the shed (fig. 11).

The northern room of the shed had a window and doorway in its north wall. The central had a window in its east wall. The third room which was excavated in 2022 likely had a window in its east wall but this wall was lowered to foundation level when shed (25) was later added (fig. 14).

There were traces of mortar foundations in the northwest corner of the east room (fig. 12) outside the doorway which led out from the main enclosure. These might have formerly held steps leading down to the lowered floor level. The fills of shed (21) consisted largely of the collapsed remains of the walls on its north and south sides. A large part of the brick wall on its north side collapsed as one large chunk which was overlain by the collapse of a smaller area of the upper part of the external sandstone masonry wall on the south.

The wall dividing the north and central sheds was removed joining the two rooms into one when shed (26) was added, as the addition of the shed blocked the window of the central room. The central room was refloored with Yorkshire sandstone slabs after the removal of the wall. None of the (21) shed rooms had sandstone skirting. The east wall of the three rooms had a fake plinth on its external face (fig. 13). This consisted of large 100mm-thick sandstone slabs with chamfered tops which were attached to the outside face of the wall differing from the actual plinth of the main complex which supported the walls.

In 2021 it was thought that the three roomed shed (21) was a later addition to the complex. However the remains revealed in 2022 suggested it was part of the original design although built abutting the east side of the wall of the complex. The doorway in the east wall of the main enclosure (fig. 12) which leads to the southern of the three rooms in shed (21) displayed no signs of having been broken through the wall and therefore on present evidence was primary.

Griffith's Valuation (1851) gives a brief description of the two lighthouse stations on Skellig. It says that the PK and AK of the lower station occupied identical accommodation. However, in the upper station the PK's house had an additional extension, which is likely to have been shed (21) and so it appears that House 2 was occupied by the PK.

Later Shed (26)

Shed (26) was added to the east end of shed (21) after another shed (25) had been added. The building of shed (25) blocked the window of the central room of shed (21) and the wall dividing the central and east rooms of shed (21) was removed and the central room was refloored. Shed (26) was next added butting against the south side of shed (25). As the ground sloped steeply down to the east the floor of sheds (25) and (26) lay at a lower level than that of shed (21) (fig. 14). When shed (26) was built the entire east wall of the southern room of shed (21) was demolished, the floor of shed (21) was lowered and the roof of the old shed was extended to cover the new one, which was floored with large roof slates laid on mortar (fig. 15). The fills in shed (26) contained a lot of coal fragments suggesting it was used as an additional coal store. It also suggests that it was added before the abandonment of the Upper Station in 1870.

Finds

The only notable find uncovered was part of the bowl of a spurred, nineteenth-century clay pipe made by Patrick Stokes, PP Manufacturer, Tralee- a known maker who operated at the Square, Tralee from at least 1881 to 1894 (Norton 2013, 33) (fig. 16). The pipe likely dates to before 1870 so it extends the known work timespan of its maker. It and a few sherds of stoneware vessels were found in the fills of shed (26).

Iron stains

Rust marks of the iron base hoops of barrels which were not visible in 2021 showed up on the floor of shed (21)- 300mm-diameter casks- (fig. 17) and in the side yard of House 2 -800mm diameter water butts- (fig. 18). The rust mark from an iron fire fender also showed up on the floor in front of the kitchen fireplace in House 2. (fig. 19)

Conservation

The excavations exposed the floors and base of the walls of the buildings which before excavation were partly obscured with debris. Little to no debris has built up on the floors since

their exposure in 2021. The floors of the buildings and yards are composed of the same yellow sandstone flags used for wall cappings and for the yard surface in the lower station on Skellig and were used extensively both internally and externally in a large number of other lighthouses. Therefore their uncovering does not expose them to any danger. It was also felt that covering the floors would be problematical from a number of points. Firstly any cover would only seal dampness into the floors and not allow them to dry out naturally. Secondly, any covering would be attractive to birds. The tarpaulins used to cover the ground before excavation began last year only attracted birds which roosted using the tarpaulins as cover. The base of the walls revealed are also in no greater danger than the areas of walling which were never previously covered by debris. There is nothing to suggest that any large areas of walling are structurally unsound and liable to collapse. The stone skirting in the buildings rests on the floors of all but the main front room of the each house and so are secure. In the two front rooms the skirting is not supported by flooring and so may be vulnerable to detaching from the wall. However as the slabs stand only six inches above the soft fills of the rooms they are in no danger of cracking or breaking should they slip. The iron elements which survive in three fireplaces are perhaps the most vulnerable of all the elements in the buildings. However, while they were previously buried they would have been exposed to the same wetting and drying that they are presently exposed to and so will be no more vulnerable than they previously were. They will have to be examined by a conservator to determine how they can be best protected *in situ* until such time as the buildings are made weathertight.



Fig. 1. Plan of areas excavated in 2022 and resulting changes to phasing.



Fig. 2. Shed 4a after excavation.



Fig. 3. Detail of doorway of shed 4a.



Fig. 4. West wall of shed 4a, scars of shelving.



Fig. 5. North wall of shed 4a, scars of shelving.



Fig. 6. East wall of shed 4a, scars of shelving.



Fig. 7. South wall of shed 4a, scars of shelving.



Fig. 8. Toilet 8 after excavation from north.



Fig. 9. Toilet 8 after excavation from above.



Fig. 10. Shed 21, south end before excavation.



Fig. 11. Shed 21, slots in north wall.



Fig. 12. Shed 21, after excavation, looking west.



Fig. 13. Shed 21, east wall with fake plinth.



Fig. 14. Interior of shed 21, with shed 26 in background.

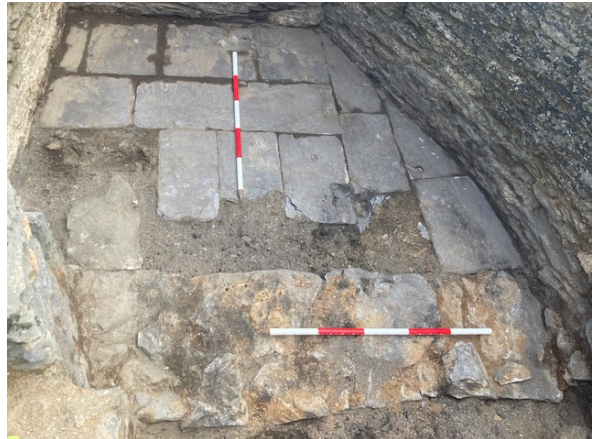


Fig. 15. Floor of shed 26



Fig. 16. Clay pipe from shed 26.



Fig. 17. Shed 21, centre room, cask rust marks.



Fig. 18. Side yard, House 2, rust stains of barrels.



Fig. 19. House 2, kitchen, rust stain of iron fender.