

**Skellig Michael Co. Kerry- Archaeological Monitoring of Extension of Cross Cove Canopy on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway.**

**(Ministerial Consent No. C001122; Works No. W000562**

**Excavation Licence No.E005411; Detection Device Licence No. R000586)**

*Alan R. Hayden*

*October 2022*

## **Introduction**

A surviving Workmen's Accounts Book from Skellig lighthouse (SCH2)<sup>1</sup> mentions payments to M. Keane<sup>2</sup>, F. Harrington<sup>3</sup> and J. McGuire<sup>4</sup> from September to November 1959 for erecting a shelter on the lighthouse roadway on Skellig Michael. This appears to have been the canopy at Cross Cove, which Richard Foran stated was erected after the loss of Sheamus Rohu on the rock at Cross Cove on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1956. There are also references to repairs to and the cleaning the roof of the canopy in another original Skelligs log, an Accounts Passed Book (SCH1), in the last quarter of 1960.

Due to rockfalls the lower end of the canopy on the east side of Cross Cove was extended in 2017/18.

## **The 2022 canopy extension**

Subsequent to another rockfall to the east of the canopied section of the lower lighthouse roadway in June 2022, a report by Michael O'Sullivan identified areas of the lower part of the lower lighthouse roadway which were most prone to rockfall. The OPW then proposed to extend the Cross Cove canopy by an approx. length of 100m down towards the landing (fig. 1). The writer assisted by Megan Willingham undertook an archaeological survey and impact assessment of the area of the proposed canopy extension in June 2022 (fig. 2). The OPW were granted Ministerial Consent to extend the Cross Cove canopy by approximately 100 metres down towards the landing on condition that the works were archaeologically monitored. A length of approximately 80m of new canopy was erected in July 2022 and the writer archaeologically monitored the works.

## **Archaeological monitoring results**

The new canopy was of similar construction to the original and the previous extension and consisted of a frame of scaffold poles supporting a roof composed of 100mm-thick larch planking (fig. 3).

The base of the poles supporting the inner side of the canopy were set in holes either opened in the vertical stone surface of the base of the lateral drain or holes core drilled into rock (fig. 4) where the latter was exposed. The stones removed from the lateral drain were replaced after construction (fig. 5) as has been done previously.

---

<sup>1</sup> This and the other lighthouse volume mentioned (SCH1) are two of a series of the only original Skellig Lighthouse logs that appear to survive and which the writer and Megan Willingham fully photographically recorded and transcribed in 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Described as a mason, he worked on Skellig from at least 1953 to 1959.

<sup>3</sup> A labourer (judging by his surname he was likely from Castletownbere) who is recorded as having worked on Skellig from at least 1959 to 1966.

<sup>4</sup> A labourer from Castletownbere whom we know worked on Skellig in 1959 but who probably worked there at other times too.

The frontal supports were set in holes typically about 300mm in depth and 400mm square excavated into the surface of the roadway immediately inside the parapet wall (fig. 6). The surface of the roadway varied in different areas from simple compacted clay and stones, to larger vertically set stones some with a thin covering of concrete. Care was taken to ensure the material used to backfill the holes did not enter holes or cracks in the wall. The use of a dry mix post cement also helped greatly in this regard. Where the vertically set stones were encountered these were replaced after construction.

The inner side of the frame was anchored to the rock by scaffold ties and steel cables while every second upright on the outer side was anchored to the rock outside and below the roadway by steel cables encased in plastic tubing to make them more visible to birds.

The only feature of interest noted was the 300mm high opening for a surface drain in the parapet wall immediately below the road surface level (fig. 7). The outer side of the wall there had been rebuilt at least once due to damage by falling rocks or storms and the outer side of the former drain was covered over, possibly as it was either not recognised or because the drain was no longer in use. The former drain lies between two closely spaced subsurface drains which remove water from the lateral drain on the inner side of the roadway and the disuse of the former surface drain has not affected drainage on the roadway. The opening of the drain was sealed with a sheet of tin and stones before the foundation hole was infilled to ensure it was not blocked (fig. 8).

As has been noted many times before, parts of the base of lime harling render survived on the inner side of the parapet where the modern road level was slightly higher than the original. The internal face of the wall was originally fully rendered and was likely regularly whitewashed both for appearance and also to make it more visible at night.

## **Conclusions**

As anticipated the canopy extension did not reveal anything of great significance or interest other than the opening for surface drain in the parapet wall.

In the morning to mid-afternoon when visitors come to the island, the area of the new length of canopy benefits from direct sunlight (fig. 9), which means it is nowhere as dark beneath it as beneath the canopy in the more shaded Cross Cove. As there is nothing to see above the canopy from the road level and as the external side of the canopy frame is but a line of well-spaced scaffold poles it also does not obstruct the view and detract from the visitors experience.

Where the roof or outer face of the canopy is visible from a distance it represents such a small area compared to the height of the cliffs below and above that it is not visually intrusive (fig. 10).

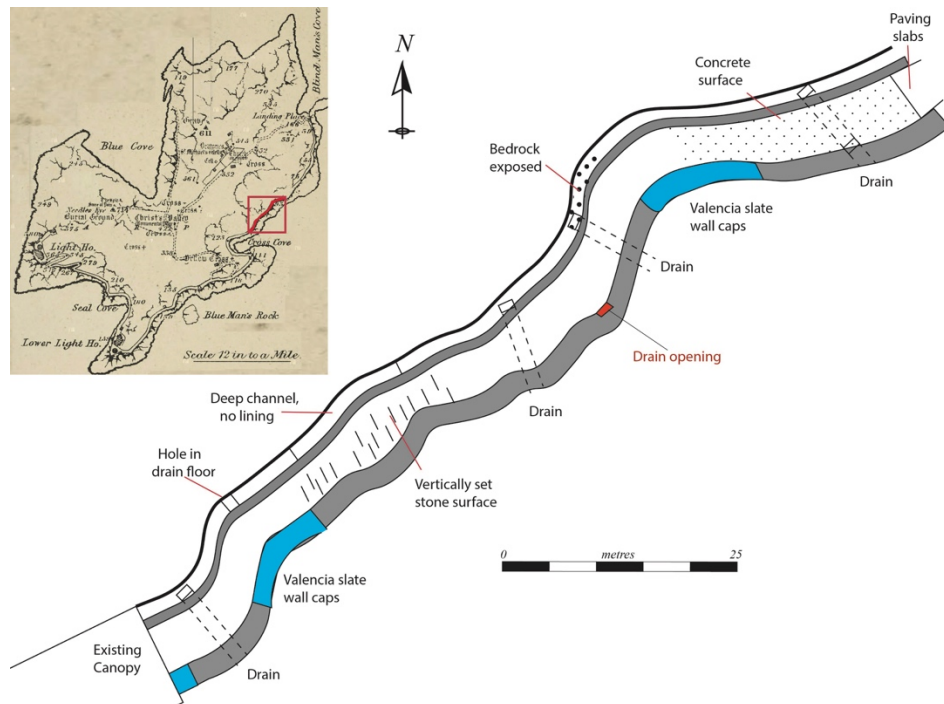


Fig. 1. Location of canopy extension and features on roadway with recently revealed drain opening highlighted.



Fig. 2. Area of roadway before canopy constructed.



Fig. 3. Canopy under construction.



Fig. 4. Cored hole, inner side of roadway.



Fig. 5. Stones of lateral drain replaced after construction.





*Fig. 6. Typical foundation for pole on outer side of canopy.*



*Fig. 7. Disused drain ope uncovered.*



*Fig 8. Drain ope sealed before backfilling.*



*Fig. 9. The sunlight beneath the completed canopy.*



*Fig. 10. The completed canopy viewed from the helipad.*