

Additional Method Statement for Archaeological Monitoring of Conservation of Upper Lighthouse Terrace Wall, Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry

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Background

The Upper Lighthouse Station on Skellig was built on a terrace blasted out of the rock in the 1825-6. The outer side of the terrace is defined and supported by an approximately 60-metre long, high, lime-mortar bonded, local stone wall, capped by a parapet wall that rises above the finished level of the terrace. The terrace wall supports the ground on which many of the buildings in the complex stand and so is the most vital element of the structure of the station. The wall has clearly moved in the past and parts of its parapet have collapsed, so its repair is required to ensure the survival of the complex.

The original method statement submitted for the works stated that the wall would be examined by the full team of persons involved (see below) and a course of action agree upon before works were undertaken.



Plan of the Upper Lighthouse Station showing the perimeter wall.

Initial Inspection

Scaffolding was erected to allow for the initial examination and recording of the wall.

The external face of the terrace and parapet wall of the main Terrace of the Upper Lighthouse Terrace station was examined on the 13th July 2023 by the writer in the company of the OPW senior conservation Fergus McCormick, OPR architect Blatmahc O'Muiri, OPW District Works Manager Maurice Fitzgerald NMS district archaeologist Dr. Connie Kelleher, ecological clerk of works Brian Power, OPW clerk of works Pat O'Shea, and OPW safety personnel, scaffolder and the crew who will be undertaking the conservation work to the wall.

The condition of the wall was examined and discussed and a course of action for the work to the wall was agreed.



View of the parapet wall taken from the sea below.

Results

Contrary to expectations the base of the wall was in excellent condition and will not require underpinning or a major intervention. It appears that the movement in the upper part of the wall may be no more than the result of the overall initial settling of the wall, which given its height could have caused all the movement evidenced.

While as usual there was little mortar remaining in the face of the wall and the joints are open, the wall was in remarkable good condition considering its age and its very exposed location. There were many loose stones which will have to be hammered back into place and many small gaps, many of which will need to be infilled with stone leaving nesting opportunities for birdlife but overall, the wall was secure.

The top of the wall will have to be rebuilt and capped with Valentia Slate slabs mortared in place. The amount of rebuilding of the upper part will vary considerably from little at the south end to the whole height above the finished terrace level immediately beyond the dwellings and west of the lighthouse tower, where the parapet wall was almost completely demolished, probably by the collapse of the lantern of the lighthouse sometime after the 1930s.

There is one part of the wall at the southeast end of the site (immediately south of the long drop toilet in the yard of house 1) where a short length of the parapet wall was later rebuilt on a line further inward. The top of the lower and

older outer line of the wall has unravelled and is loose and will require rebuilding, knitting back into its former line and capping.

Two previously unknown features were revealed by the examination:

Firstly, the higher wall at the north end of the yard around the second house started life as the same height as the parapet wall at the rear of the dwellings but was later raised in height, no doubt because of the wind coming from the northwest. The flat bed of mortar which underlay the original capstones was visible on the outer face of the wall beneath the later rebuilding. It was not visible on the internal face of the wall.

Secondly, an iron ring pinned by an iron bolt to the bedrock lay on the outside of and at the base of the parapet wall opposite the lighthouse tower. This can only have had a use before the parapet wall was built and likely was used to secure the rigging of the lifting equipment used to construct the lighthouse tower.

The works to be undertaken

The conservation of the wall will be undertaken by the OPW masons and crew following the usual method used on the lighthouse walls on Skellig. Local stone, matching that in the wall in size and character will be used for repairs. Lime mortar will be used as bonding, as in the original work, but the face of the wall will not be pointed and gaps and small chambers will be left to allow birds utilise them for nesting. The finished level of the parapet wall is clear from the surviving sections and from scars on buildings which abutted the wall. The parapet wall will be capped with Valentia slate slabs, as again previously used on the lighthouse roadway walls on Skellig.

Sampling strategy

Samples will be taken of some of the areas of unusual mortar noted in the wall and in structures adjacent to it.

Finds retrieval strategy

No ground works or ground disturbance will be undertaken so it unlikely that any finds will be uncovered. To date no cultural material has been found in the lighthouse walls as they were built from the stone blasted from the rock at the start of the lighthouse construction process.

Reporting

After the completion of works the archaeologist will rephotograph the wall identifying the areas repaired and will submit a report, containing the photographs taken before works were undertaken and photographs taken after it was completed.