

**Archaeological Monitoring
of Conservation
of
Upper Lighthouse Terrace Wall,
Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry**

**Ministerial Consent C001045; Works No. W000428; Excavation No. E005321;
Detection Device No. R000551.**



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*Alan R. Hayden
October 2023*

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Introduction

The Upper Lighthouse Station on Skellig was built on a terrace blasted out of the rock in 1825-6. The outer side of the terrace is defined and supported by an approximately 60-metre long, wall built of local stone wall, lime-mortar bonded, and capped by a parapet wall that rises above the finished level of the terrace. The terrace wall supports the ground on which 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 was required to ensure the survival of the complex.



Fig. 1. Plan of the Upper Lighthouse station showing the part of the perimeter wall conserved in 2023.



Fig. 2. View of the parapet wall of the Upper Lighthouse station taken from the sea below.

The Works

The OPW erected scaffolding along the length of the wall from the south end of shed 21 to the north end of the 'Teacher's House' in June and early July 2023 (fig. 1). The external face of the terrace and parapet wall was examined and photographed on the 13th July 2023 by the writer in the company of the OPW senior conservation architect Fergus McCormick, OPR architect Blatmach O'Muire, 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 would be undertaking the conservation work to the wall. A course of action was agreed and conservation works were undertaken on the wall in July and August 2023.



Fig. 3. The dramatic scaffolding erected by Brendan O'Connor and the OPW Skellig crew to facilitate the work on the wall (photographs by Brian Power).

Contrary to expectations the base of the wall was in excellent condition (figs. 4, 8 & 13) and it did not require underpinning or any major intervention. It appeared that the movement evident in the upper part of the wall may have been no more than the result of the initial settling of the wall, which given its height could have caused all the movement evidenced there. The wall was also clearly rapidly built, as work did not start on the upper station until late 1825 at the earliest and the light was lit in December 1826.

While as usual there was little mortar remaining in the face of the wall and the joints were open, the wall was in remarkable good condition considering its age and exposed location. There were inevitably some loose stones, which were hammered back into place and some small gaps, which required infilling with stone leaving nesting opportunities for birdlife, but overall the wall was stable.

The top of the parapet level of the wall had suffered more due to its movement and it was loose and partly collapsed in places behind the two dwellings. The loose stone on its top was removed, the top was rebuilt, secured and capped with Valentia Slate slabs mortared in place along its entire length as none of the original capstones survived. The amount of required rebuilding of the upper part of the parapet wall varied from little at the south end to the whole height above the finished terrace level beyond the dwellings and west of the lighthouse tower (fig. 12), where the parapet wall was almost completely demolished, probably by the collapse of the lantern of the lighthouse sometime after the 1930s. A short section of the wall was also repaired and rebuilt inside the 'Teacher's House'.

The top of a 5m long section of the parapet wall at the southeast end of the site (immediately south of the long drop toilet in the yard of House 1) was in poor condition (fig.

5). Here a shed (no. 21) had been built inside the line of the wall cutting off access to it from inside the complex. Perhaps as a result, the length of the parapet wall outside the shed was not maintained and the top of the line of the wall had unravelled and was loose. It required some rebuilding to secure it and knit it back into its former line. The external wall of the adjacent shed (No. 21) was also in poor condition and was repointed to secure it.

The sandstone slab tops of the two rubbish chutes in the parapet wall behind the houses were missing and were replaced with Valentia Slate slabs (figs. 6 & 7).

Two previously unknown features were revealed by the works:

Firstly, the higher wall at the north end of the yard around the House 2 had evidently been first built to 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 (fig. 11). It was not visible on the internal face of the wall which was rendered.

Secondly, an iron ring pinned by an iron bolt to the bedrock lay outside the base of the parapet wall opposite the lighthouse tower (fig. 10). This can only have had a use before the parapet wall was built and likely was used to secure the rigging for the lifting equipment used to construct the lighthouse tower.

The wall was re-examined and re-photographed by the writer on the 23rd August 2023, after the completion of works and before the scaffolding was removed. A representative selection of the before and after photographic records of the wall and the works undertaken are included below.

Conclusions

The works to the main length of the terrace and parapet walls in the Upper Lighthouse station were completed in 2023. The walls were examined and fully photographically recorded before and after work and aside from a few minor features nothing of major interest was revealed

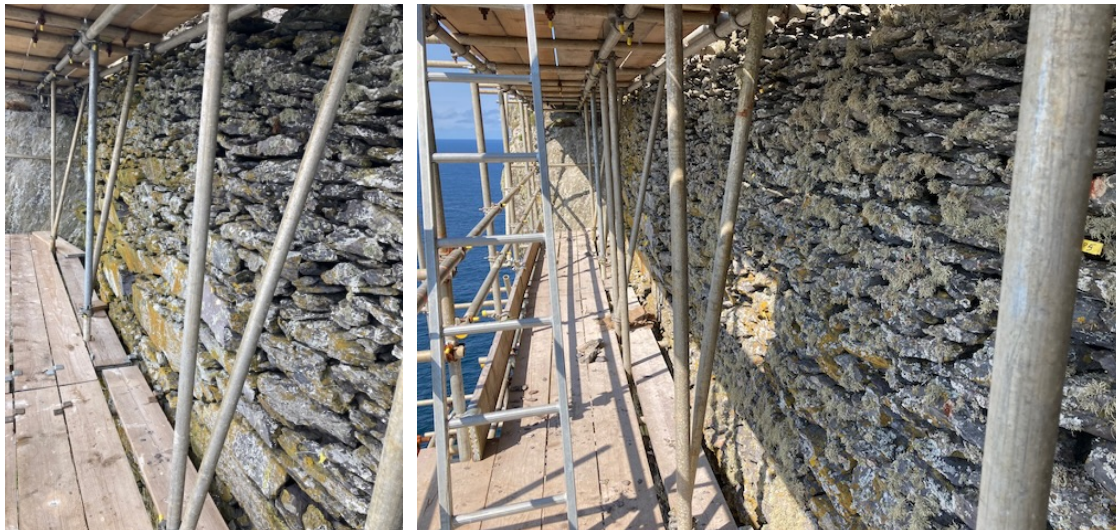


Fig. 4. Before (left) & after (right) photographs of central part of south wall of terrace from base (bottom) to top (top).



Fig. 5. Before (top) & after (bottom) photographs of top of terrace wall & wall of shed No. 21, to the south of the houses.



Fig. 6. Before & after photographs of parapet wall and details of rubbish chute behind House 1



Fig. 7. Before & after photographs of parapet wall and details of rubbish chute behind House 2



Fig. 8 North end of south wall, general views.



Fig. 9. Opening of drain from toilet House 2.



Fig. 10. Iron ring fixed to rock at base of wall.



Fig. 11. Raised top of north end of south wall.



Fig. 12. Rebuilt parapet of north wall.



Fig. 13. North wall exterior.



Fig. 14. Rebuilt section of wall in 'Teacher's House'.