

Archaeological Method Statement
for the Monitoring of Repairs
to the North Steps,
Sceilg Mhichíl, Co. Kerry.



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ABSTRACT

A rockfall over the winter of 2024/25 damaged an approximate length of eight of the drystone masonry steps leading up from the North Landing. This method statement covers the archaeological monitoring of the proposed repairs to these damaged steps.

THE SITE

Introduction

The island of *Sceilg Mhichíl* lies 11.6km off Bolus Head, the westernmost tip of the Iveragh Peninsula, Co. Kerry (SMR: KE 104A-001; National Grid Reference 024812 060654). The island, which is approximately 21.9 hectares in area, is owned by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on behalf of the Irish people, with the exception of the lower lighthouse station, the helipad and its adjacent store, which are owned by the Commissioners of Irish Lights (CIL). *Sceilg Mhichíl* is a National Monument the preservation of which is a matter of national importance by reason of its historical, architectural, artistic or archaeological interest.

The entire island was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996 in recognition of the outstanding universal significance of its cultural landscape and the importance of its protection to the highest international standards.

On present evidence the monastery on *Sceilg Mhichíl* was founded in the seventh century and was occupied at least seasonably up to the twelfth or thirteenth century. After this permanent or semi-permanent occupation was abandoned, the monastery remained an important, largely summer, pilgrimage site until the end of the eighteenth century (Bourke, Hayden & Lynch 2011).

The monastery also remained in the hands of the Augustinian monks based on the mainland at Ballinskelligs until 1578 when, as a result of the Desmond Rebellion, Queen Elizabeth I dissolved certain monasteries that were under the protection of the earl of Desmond and the *Sceilg* islands thus passed into secular hands and eventually to the Butler family (*ibid.*).

In 1821 the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin (also known as the Ballast Board) who were the predecessors of the Commissioners of Irish Lights, purchased *Sceilg Mhichíl* from James Butler of Waterville for the purpose of erecting two lighthouses and their associated domestic quarters etc. The two lighthouses came into operation in December 1826 and were manned by a total of four keepers and their families who all lived on the rock. The Upper Lighthouse was withdrawn from service in 1870 and the families of the remaining two keepers of the Lower Station were moved ashore to dwellings in Knightstown on Valentia Island in 1901. The Lower Station then became relieving and was

continuously manned by a crew of three keepers until it was de-manned and automated on the 22nd of May 1987.

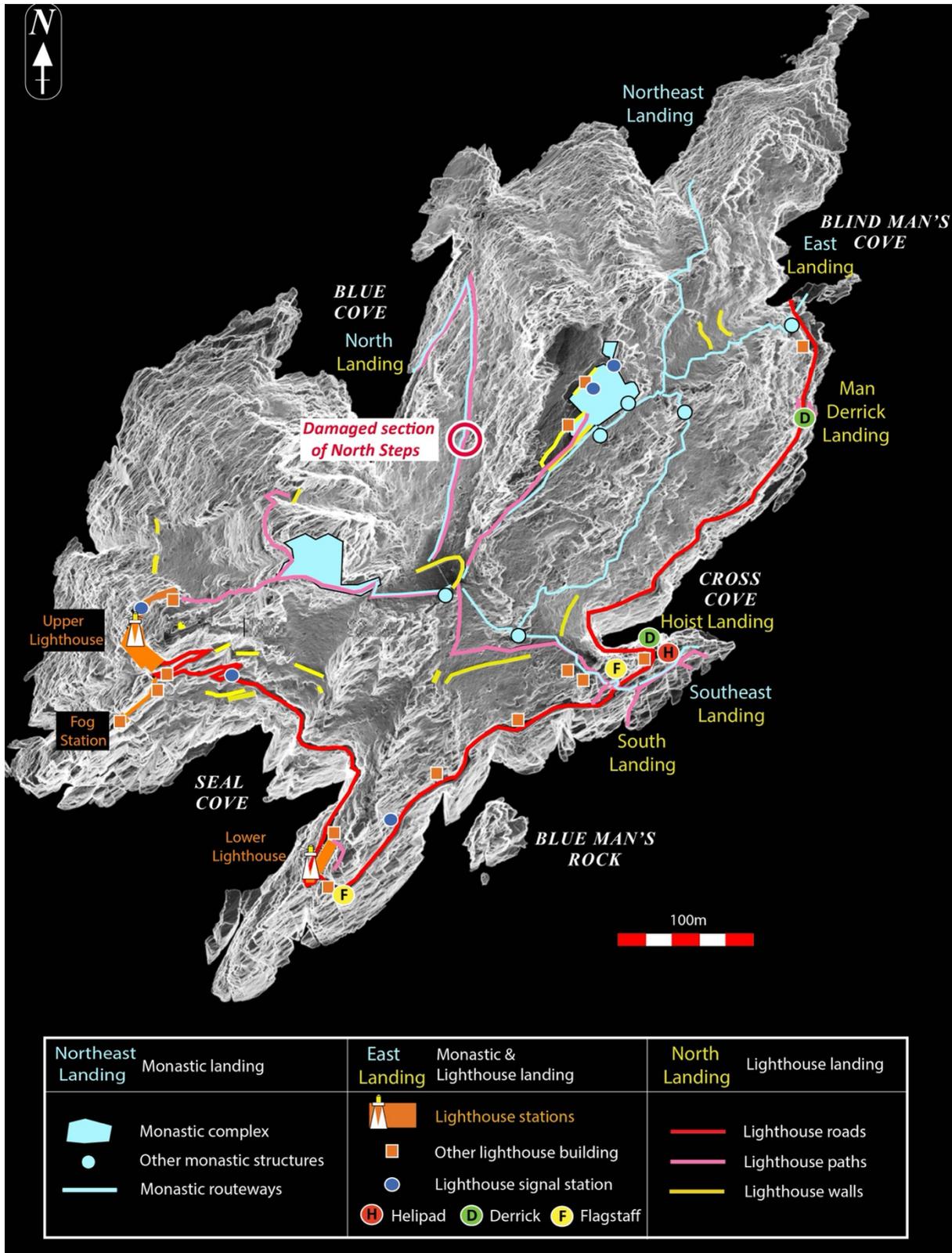


Fig. 1. The principal early-medieval and lighthouse features on Sceilg Mhichil with the location of the area damaged on the North Steps indicated.

The Archaeology and History of the Monastic-Period Structures on Sceilg Mhichíl

The archaeological and conservation works undertaken by *Dúchas* / Office of Public Works (OPW) / the National Monuments Service (NMS) on *Sceilg Mhichíl* between 1986 and 2010 were described in Bourke, Hayden & Lynch (2011). Conservation and excavation works were undertaken in the monastery, on the South, North and East Steps and on the South Peak. Exploratory visits to and photographic surveys of other areas, such as the Northeast Steps and Southeast landing, were also described. The finds uncovered, the environmental and other samples taken, and the early history of the site were also described and discussed.

The Archaeology of the Lighthouse Occupation of the Island

Between 1821 and 1826 the builders of the lighthouses on the rock lived in and used the monastery for storage and religious services and altered it and the access steps to it to suit their purposes. The keepers and their families also continued to use the monastery for religious services after the lighthouses came into operation in December 1826. The OPW initially appointed each successive Principal Keeper of the Lower Lighthouse Station as guardian of the monastery after it took over responsibility for the monastic remains in the 1880s. CIL masons, workmen and the keepers themselves several times undertook repairs or rebuilds in the monastery for the OPW.

Some of the OPW / NMS archaeological excavations in the monastery from 1986 to 2003, on the South Peak from 2004 to 2010 and exploration at the time and later also identified other lighthouse-era built structures on the island.

After the completion of archaeological works on the South Peak in 2010 the OPW began work on conservation of the lighthouse-period structures on the island. From 2011 to 2015 the works were under the archaeological supervision of archaeologists from the NMS. In 2011 Martin Reid excavated the large lighthouse-era terrace beside the Wailing Woman ledge and uncovered a building and nineteenth-century finds (Reid 2011). A brief report by the architect on works undertaken in 2014 mentions that a large part of the wall of the Lower Lighthouse Roadway between the Lower Lighthouse and Cross Cove was scaffolded, repaired and conserved and a drain beneath the roadway in Cross Cove was also excavated and repaired (Rourke 2015).

Archaeological monitoring was undertaken of minor repairs after rockfalls and to facilitate the construction of additional lengths of protective canopy on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway below Cross Cove (Hayden 2016 & 2106a;). Larger-scale excavation and conservation work was also undertaken from 2017 to 2020 on the Upper Lighthouse Roadway (Hayden 2017; 2018; 2019 & 2020) and in subsequent years extensive excavation works were undertaken in the Upper Lighthouse station itself (Hayden 2021; 2022; 2023 & 2023a).

In 2022 the writer also undertook assessment and monitoring of work associated with the construction of an 80-metre-long extension of the canopy on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway, the construction of three, all-metal crash decks on the Lower and Upper Lighthouse Roadways and to facilitate other minor interventions on the roadway and in the Lower Lighthouse Station (Hayden 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2022e & 2022f).

The annual pre-season sweeps on the island were also archaeologically monitored in 2024 and 2025 (Hayden 2024 & 2025).

The writer and Megan Willingham have undertaken detailed and extensive research on the history of the lighthouse occupation and have also recorded all the lighthouse features on the rock including nearly 500 items of lighthouse graffiti. We can now, for example, identify more than a thousand people who lived, served or worked on the island for the lighthouse

service over the years. This research is vital to any understanding of the history and development of *Skellig Mhichíl*. However, due to the lack of state funding, this research remains outside the public domain at present.

LANDINGS AND ACCESS ROUTES ON SCEILG MICHÍL

The monks used four separate landing places to access the monastery – the Northeast, East, Southeast and North Landings. The latter three were also used and improved by the lighthouse builders and keepers in addition to landings they constructed- the man derrick landing, the hoist landing in Cross Cove and the South Landing. The different landing places on the island provided alternative access / egress points, when wind direction, tidal flow, weather or sea conditions might have hampered the use of another. The landings led to the monastery via long flights of rock-cut and /or drystone masonry steps which were improved or rebuilt on several occasions by the monks and / or the lighthouse men.

The North Landing and Steps

The lowest run of steps from the North Landing in Blue Cove extends upwards and eastwards in a straight line. This length is exposed to high seas and so the steps are rock cut, as are the lower parts of the steps from the other landing places on the island. The small size of the steps suggests that they are likely to be of early-medieval date, as the early-medieval rock-cut steps elsewhere on the rock are consistently narrower and smaller than those cut by the lighthouse builders and keepers in the nineteenth century. Several of the steps also show signs of having been widened, probably in the nineteenth century.

From the top of this line the route doubles back to the west and runs diagonally upwards across the steep scree slope beneath the high cliffs on the east side of the cove. After an initial short run of rock-cut steps the remainder are composed of drystone masonry and there is a long almost straight run of steps with occasional flat landings up to Christ's Saddle.

The North Landing is seldom accessible and was only used by the lighthouse men on a few occasions, as it also required a long trek dragging gear up to the Saddle and then back down the South Steps to reach the lighthouses. Given the recutting of the lower rock-cut steps it is likely that the lighthouse men improved or at least partly rebuilt the masonry steps so that they could be safely used. However, no details survive of any work they may have done here.

The alignment of the fracture planes in the high bedrock cliffs above the east side of the North Landing means that they are particularly susceptible to the scaling off of large slabs of rock that have a high likelihood of impacting on the North Steps. The way the masonry sections of the North Steps were built into the steeply sloping ground also rendered them vulnerable to erosion and collapse. Unlike, for example the East Steps, when the side support of the North Steps gave way, the individual steps fell away quite easily. The steep slope below the steps also meant that much of the disturbed masonry either ended up in the sea or crashing onto the rock below and shattering.

The drystone masonry sections of the North steps were conserved in the late 1990s or early 2000s. However, there is little detail about this work in the public domain; all that is available is the following brief description by G.D. Rourke that is to be included in the forthcoming report currently being compiled on the archaeological works on the island:

Where the steps had fallen away, a residue of masonry had remained. From examination of the slope and of the construction that remained it was clear that this was a long, straight flight of steps with the occasional flat landing. It was possible to set up ropes from the rock above to scour the steep ground below and retrieve what had been caught in the fall. This was a slow process and the retrieved steps had to be pulled back up to the locations whence they fell. All that was possible to retrieve was taken back up but gaps remained; in these areas the side retaining walls were reinstated and the ground above consolidated and left sloping. It is now possible to reach the north landing safely again.

As a result, it is not possible to identify with certainty what might be original masonry and what might be reset masonry on the steps.



Fig. 2. Looking down on the damaged area.



Fig. 3. The scar on the slope above the steps.

WINTER 2024/25 DAMAGE TO NORTH STEPS

After the island was first accessed by the OPW crew in April 2025, the OPW foreman Pat O'Shea reported that a section of the North Steps had been damaged by a rock fall. While monitoring the annual sweep of the island later in the same month, the writer examined the damaged area.

There was a deep scar about 10m in length in the campion cover on the slope above and adjacent to the east side of the damaged section of the steps. There were no visible marks that a rock had detached from the high cliffs above and so the damage may have been caused by a large rock slipping downslope from the scree slope above the steps.

The drystone masonry of approximately eight steps was damaged and appears to have been largely removed by the rockfall. The outer supporting wall below the steps also appears to have been completely demolished and any masonry that may survive in the base of the

steps is hidden below the loose material that fell onto the area. None of the large slabs which formed the surface of the steps and which would have been pushed downhill were visible on the steep slope below and they may all have been lost into the sea. A few more blocky large stones were present but they appear more likely to be part of the material which fell onto the steps.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING of REPAIR WORKS

Given the steep slopes in the area all works undertaken will have to be done by rope and harness and under the supervision of the OPW rope access supervisor.

The area of the scar above the steps will be examined to identify and remove any further material that might be in danger of slipping and the area will be stabilised. The steep slope below the steps will also be searched for any fallen masonry, which will be retrieved for reuse.

The damaged area of the steps will then be cleaned of loose debris under archaeological supervision and any surviving *in situ* masonry will be recorded before any repair or rebuilding is undertaken.

As the original top slabs are probably all lost, new slabs will be required to replace the originals on the surface of the steps. However, the stockpiles of stone currently maintained on the island do not appear to include suitable stone. In any case, they all lie a considerable distance from the damaged area of the North Steps and transporting stone from them to the North Steps would provide difficulties. As a result, stone to replace the missing elements will likely have to be sourced locally. The campion-covered scree slope above the steps is littered with stone and might provide either suitable slabs or larger rocks that could be split to form the required material. Any searching and removal of rock from the area will be archaeologically monitored. There are no known archaeological features on this slope.

The Ecological Clerk of Works on the island will also have to approve and monitor the works, as they might have a potential to affect birds that might be nesting in the area. The presence of nesting birds might also have an impact on the timing of the works.

The rebuilt masonry will also be recorded after the completion of the works.

In the unlikely event that anything of previously unknown archaeological significance is uncovered, the archaeologist may halt the works or require their alteration to avoid any archaeological impact. The NMS will be immediately informed of any such discoveries and their advice, recommendations and requirements will be adhered to.

REPORTING

Following the completion of the works, a report on the archaeological monitoring will be submitted, as per the conditions of the Ministerial Consent issued for the works.

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