

Archaeological Monitoring of Repairs to the North Steps, *Sceilg Mhichíl*, Co. Kerry.

Ministerial Consent No. C001455, Excavation Licence No. E005831,
Detection Licence No. R000767 and Works No. W000820.



Alan R. Hayden,
September 2025

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* *Cover photograph*: Sketch by Robert Calwell (1862-7) of the Skelligs Rock Lighthouses (CIL).

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ABSTRACT

*A rockfall over the winter of 2024/25 damaged ten of the drystone masonry steps leading up from the North Landing. This reports describes the archaeological monitoring of the repair works which were undertaken under Ministerial Consent No. **C001455**, works No. **W000820**, archaeological excavation licence No. **E005831** and detection licence No. **R000767** between the 11th and 20th of August 2025.*

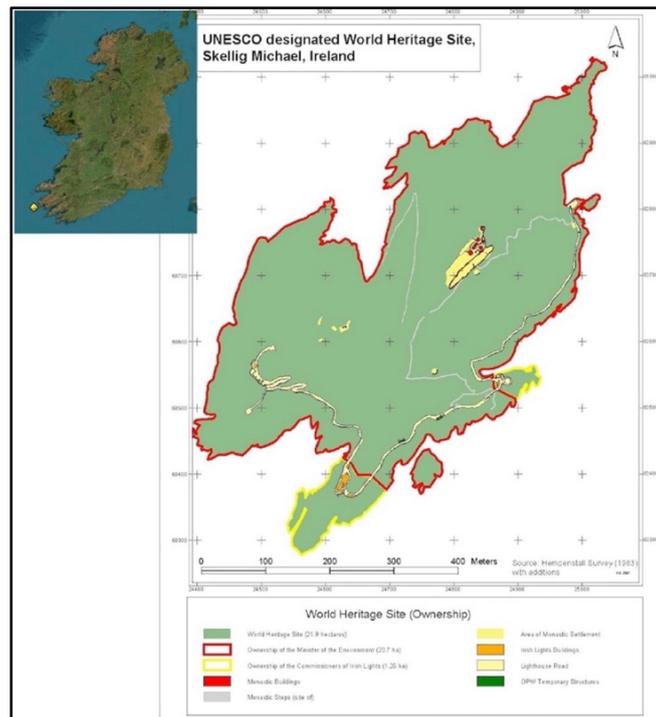


Fig. 1. The location of Sceilg Mhichíl and the extent of the UNESCO World Heritage Site on the island (after NMS).

THE SITE

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 424731 560703) (*fig. 1*). The island, which is approximately 21.9 hectares in area, has been in State ownership since 1989, with the exception of the Lower Lighthouse station, the helipad and its adjacent stores, which are still owned by the Commissioners of Irish Lights (CIL) (*fig. 1*).

Sceilg Mhichíl is a National Monument, which 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. The island also lies within the recently created *Páirc Náisúnta na Mara, Ciarraí*.

The Island is overseen by the *Sceilg Mhichíl* Implementation Group (SMIG) - comprised of the National Monuments Service (NMS), the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the Office of Public Works (OPW)- and an Expert Advisory Committee (EAC), which each meet twice a year. The NMS administers the island on behalf of the Minister of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), the OPW is responsible for conservation, maintenance, access and guiding services and the (NPWS) safeguards and researches the wildlife and ecology on the rock, as it is also a Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

On present evidence the monastic settlement of *Sceilg Mhichíl* (*fig. 2*) was most likely founded in the late sixth or early seventh century (Bourke, Hayden & Lynch 2011, 453; Hayden *et al. in prep.*)¹ and continuously occupied, at least seasonably, up to the twelfth or thirteenth century when the monks left the island. The main structures they built consisted of the monastery on the East Peak and a hermitage and pilgrimage site on the South Peak, all accessed from four landing places by sets of rock-cut and masonry steps.²

After the permanent or semi-permanent occupation of the monastery was abandoned, the monastery passed into the possession of the Augustinian monks based on the mainland at Ballinskelligs. They held it until 1578, when because 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 (*ibid.*). After the Restoration, Robert Reading and his wife Jane, Countess of Mountrath were granted *Sceilg* in 1674,³ but the island passed down to the Butler family from Waterville in the eighteenth century. The island and monastery remained an important, largely summer pilgrimage site, until the early eighteenth century when pilgrimage to it had begun to die off (Bourke, Hayden & Lynch 2011, 24). However, it continued as a destination for periodic local visitations and devotion until the mid-twentieth century (Hayden, A. *in prep.*; Gibbons & Gibbons 2019).

The Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin (also known as the Ballast Board) acquired the island in July 1821 and in August of that year began the

¹ A C¹⁴ date of of cal. AD 540-638 (UBA-20004: 1486+/-27) was obtained from organic material on the floor of the remains of an early oratory revealed beneath the Large Oratory in the monastery (Hayden *et al. in prep.*).

² For a full description see (Bourke, Hayden & Lynch 2011).

³ Hayden (*in prep.*). Coincidentally, Reading was described as a 'great projector of Lighthouses' and was responsible for the construction of cottage lighthouses at Island Magee, Co. Antrim (1660s), Loop Head, Co. Clare (c.1670), Copeland Island, Co. Down (c.1700), two at Kinsale, Co Cork (1665) and one of two planned for Howth, Co. Dublin (1667).

considerable enabling works required to allow them to erect two lighthouses (Upper and Lower) on the island (fig. 2). Construction of the access roadway began in early 1823 and the two new lighthouses were both lit on the same day, the 4th of December 1826, although completion works went on for another eleven years.

The two lighthouses were each manned by a principal and assistant keeper, who lived with their families, relatives and others in a pair of dwellings attached to each station.

After lighthouses came into service nearby on Calf Rock in 1865 and Inishtearaght in 1870 there no longer was a need for two lighthouses on Sceilig and the Upper Lighthouse, which was more prone to being obscured by fog was withdrawn from service.

In 1901 the families of the two remaining Skelligs Rock keepers moved ashore to newly built dwelling in Knightstown on Valentia Island, which they shared with the families of the Inishtearaght keepers.

In 1985 work began on the automation of the Skelligs Rock Lighthouse and the last keepers left the island in 1987 after which the lighthouse was looked after by an attendant keeper from Valentia Island.

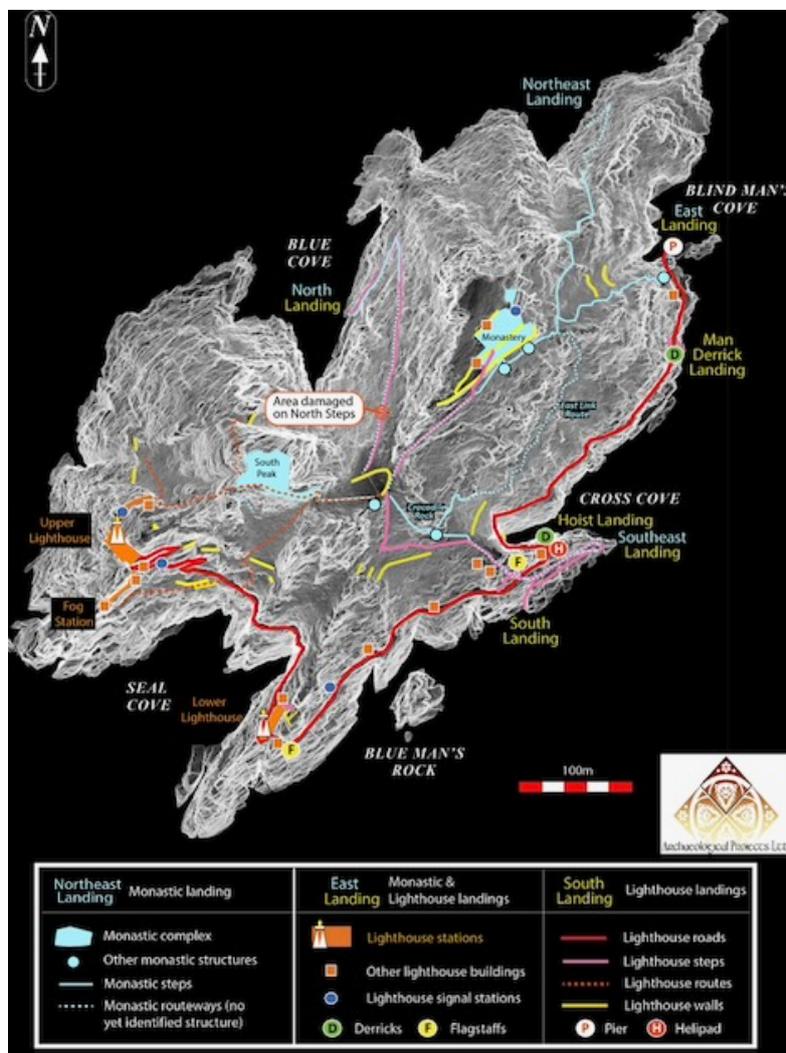


Fig. 2. The principal early-medieval and lighthouse-era features on Sceilig Mhichil, with the location of the area damaged on the North Steps marked (A.R. Hayden).

ARCHAEOLOGY on SCEILG MHICHÍL.

Introduction

The Ballast Board surveyed the island in the Autumn of 1821 but unfortunately their drawings do not survive.⁴ The first surviving reasonably accurate plan of the island was compiled by the Ordnance Survey in 1838-41 (Co. Kerry 6" Sheet 104a) and the first surviving detailed plan of the monastery was drawn up, not by the Earl of Dunraven in 1877, as has too often been erroneously stated, but ten years earlier by John Townsend Trench (Trench 1867).⁵ Other early surveys and accounts of the archaeological remains on *Sceilg* were largely or wholly concerned with the monastery, although some also mentioned the daunting ascent of the South Peak.⁶ Liam de Paor compiled the first modern catalogue of the early-medieval structures then known on the island (de Paor 1955). A more comprehensive survey was undertaken in the late 1980s and was published as part of the *Survey of the Barony of Iveragh* (O'Sullivan & Sheehan 1996). This was later subsumed into the first volume of the *Archaeological Inventory of Co. Kerry* (Byrne *et al.* 2009).

This data formed the basis for the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) listings for the island, which at the time of writing, still remain to be updated with the evidence uncovered from the majority of the 1986-2010 archaeological works. The SMR also does not currently include any of the lighthouse structures on the rock.

The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) never visited the island and as a result, Kerry Co. Council's list of protected structures does not include any of the lighthouse buildings or structures on the rock.⁷

The Monastic Structures

After the OPW assumed responsibility for the monastic remains in 1880, they successively appointed each new Principal Keeper of the Lower Lighthouse Station as caretaker of the monastery until at least 1934. In these early years, CIL masons and workmen several times undertook repairs of the monastic remains on behalf of the OPW, and even after the OPW employed their own operatives to work on the rock, the lightkeepers continued to look after the monastery, right up the 1970s.⁸

Modern conservation works on the island began in 1978 and up to 2003 were undertaken in the monastery and on the South, North and East Steps. The first archaeological involvement with these works was Con Manning's monitoring of the stripping of sod and peat growth in the monastery in 1980 although archaeological works "proper" only began in 1986; there are no records in the public domain of any of the archaeological works undertaken between 1980 and 1985.

⁴ The payments made in October 1821 for these drawings are recorded (Hayden *in prep.*).

⁵ Dunraven's published 1877 plan was an engraving of Trench's earlier survey. Trench was an amateur architect from Kenmare, a J.P. for Kerry and a land agent for Lord Lansdowne.

⁶ For example, Smith (1756), Dunraven (1877, vol. 1), Westropp (1897), *Anon.* (1897), Allen (1891), Foley (1903) and Henry (1948 & 1957).

⁷ However, the NIAH lists many other lighthouse stations for example, that nearby on Bull Rock, Co. Cork and also lists the 1901 Skellig and Inishtearaght keepers' houses on Valentia Island. Kerry Co. Council's list of protected structures includes other lighthouses, for example that on Valentia Island, as well as the Skellig and Inishtearaght keepers' houses on Valentia Island.

⁸ There are few records in the public domain regarding the conservation works undertaken on the island from the 1880s to the late 1970s. What is accessible, is generally less than complimentary about them (Hayden. *in prep.*).

From 2004 to 2010 the conservation works concentrated on the remains surviving on the South Peak, which Horn *et al.* (1990) had previously described. Most of the archaeological works undertaken in association with the conservation works in the monastery and on the access steps between 1986 and 2003, and all of those undertaken on the South Peak, were preliminarily described and discussed by Bourke, Hayden & Lynch (2011).⁹ This also included an analysis of the early history of the island, preliminary descriptions of several newly discovered routeways,¹⁰ including the earliest access to the monastery- the Northeast Steps- and a summary of the conservation works undertaken since 1978. A final report on the these excavations and discoveries is in preparation (Hayden *et al. in prep.*).

The Lighthouse Occupation

The lighthouse service kept detailed records of the work they did on the island. However, many of these records do not survive but those that do, combined with evidence from other sources tell us a great deal about the lighthouse occupation of the rock.¹¹

Between 1821 and 1826 the builders of the lighthouses occupied the monastery and altered it and the access steps to it to suit their purposes. The lightkeepers also utilised the monastery as a signal station during World War I, and used the large oratory in the monastery for occasional religious services right up to the 1970s.¹² The archaeological excavations in the monastery and on the South Peak uncovered many of the lighthouse-era interventions and structures (Bourke, Hayden & Lynch 2011). The writer also monitored the excavation of two small engineering test pits on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway in 2008 (Hayden 2008). However, it was only after the completion of the works on the South Peak in 2010, that the OPW began the dedicated conservation of the lighthouse-period structures on the island. Reports on these conservation works are available online for 2014 (Rourke 2015) and annually from 2020 onwards (OPW 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023, & 2024).

In 2011 Martin Reid (NMS) excavated the large 1820's terrace beside the Wailing Woman Ledge in advance of its conservation. A summary account of this work (Reid 2011) mentions that the remains of a small building were uncovered.¹³

Between 2012 and 2015 the OPW undertook extensive conservation work on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway, which was also monitored by NMS archaeologists. The only information available on these works is the OPW architect's summary report for one of these years: 2014 (Rourke 2015). It records that part of the wall supporting the Lower Lighthouse Roadway between Cross Cove and the Lower Lighthouse Station was conserved, that a drain beneath the roadway in Cross Cove was excavated and repaired and that an area of the North Steps damaged by rockfall was also repaired.

In 2016 minor repairs to the parapet wall after rockfalls and the excavation of pits for extensions to the Cross Cove canopy were archaeologically monitored on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway (Hayden 2016 & 2106a).

Larger-scale excavation and conservation works were undertaken on the Upper Lighthouse Roadway from 2017 to 2020, which saw most of its c.400-metre length excavated, recorded and conserved (Hayden 2017; 2018; 2020, and 2025; OPW 2020). In the following

⁹ The stratigraphic sequence of the monastery given there and by Bourke (2005) has been reworked and much altered in recent years (Hayden *et al, in prep.*).

¹⁰ Which still remains to be fully explored, recorded and surveyed (Hayden 2024d).

¹¹ Hayden (*in prep.*).

¹² (*ibid.*).

¹³ It is shown on the first 6th edition of the Ordnance Survey map of the island (1839-41, Co. Kerry, Sheet 104).

years, the greater part of the Upper Lighthouse station was also excavated and recorded (Hayden 2021; 2022; 2023; 2023a; 2023b; 2023d, and 2025; OPW 2021; 2022 & 2023) (fig. 3). All these works were undertaken in close cooperation with the NPWS Ecological Clerk of Works (ECoW), Brian Power, as required by the NWPS impact assessments (Walsh & Partners 2021).

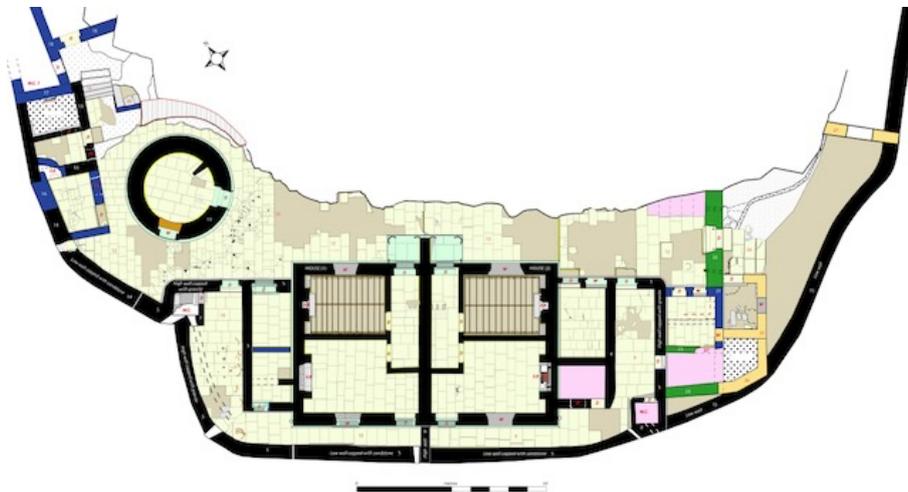


Fig.3. Post excavation plan of the Upper Lighthouse Station (A.R. Hayden)

These archaeological excavations are the most extensive yet undertaken in any lighthouse in the country.¹⁴ The work in the Upper Lighthouse Station revealed original features such as its timber and sandstone floors,¹⁵ which like many others do not survive in the much-altered Lower Lighthouse. The excavations on the Upper Roadway likewise revealed features that no longer survive on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway.

In 2021 the writer, assisted by Megan Willingham, began researching the history of the lighthouse occupation of the island to aid our understanding and interpretation of the excavations we were undertaking on behalf of the State on *Sceilg* and which is a normal requirement of licenced archaeological work. Unfortunately, despite assurances, this has received no support from the state, but it is now nearing a conclusion.¹⁶ It involved the examination of all available sources, published, unpublished and online, included interviews with former Skellig keepers, workers and boatmen and the discovery of locally held artefacts and a large number of primary documents.¹⁷ It was conducted in association with Richard Foran (the last and longest-serving lighthouse keeper on the rock) and Giulia Bernasconi (the Commissioners of Irish Lights' Archivist), who facilitated access to the CIL Archives held in Dun Laoghaire and to the uncatalogued material held in the Baily Lighthouse in Howth. It has uncovered a quite staggering amount of information.

¹⁴ The only other archaeological excavation works undertaken on Irish Lighthouses were test trenching by the writer at Hook Head Lighthouse, Co. Wexford (Hayden 1999), and by Claire Walsh and the writer at Cromwell's Point Lighthouse, Valentia Island, Co Kerry (Walsh 2002).

¹⁵ Rynne's statement that the floors and skirting were granite is incorrect, they were composed of yellow 'Yorkshire' sandstone, which was used in the great majority of 19th-century lighthouses in the country.

¹⁶ Hayden (*in prep.*).

¹⁷ Which include the final lighthouse daily log book from the rock, that contains the final keepers' sign off on the day they left the rock for good.

In our spare time on *Sceilg*, we also fully recorded and analysed all the lighthouse structures and features we could access on the rock, including the previously overlooked almost 500 items of lighthouse-era graffiti.¹⁸ The results of this work and research are vital to any understanding of the more than 200-year-long history of the lighthouse occupation of *Sceilg Mhichil*. They also contribute to a better understanding of aspects of some of the monastic structures.

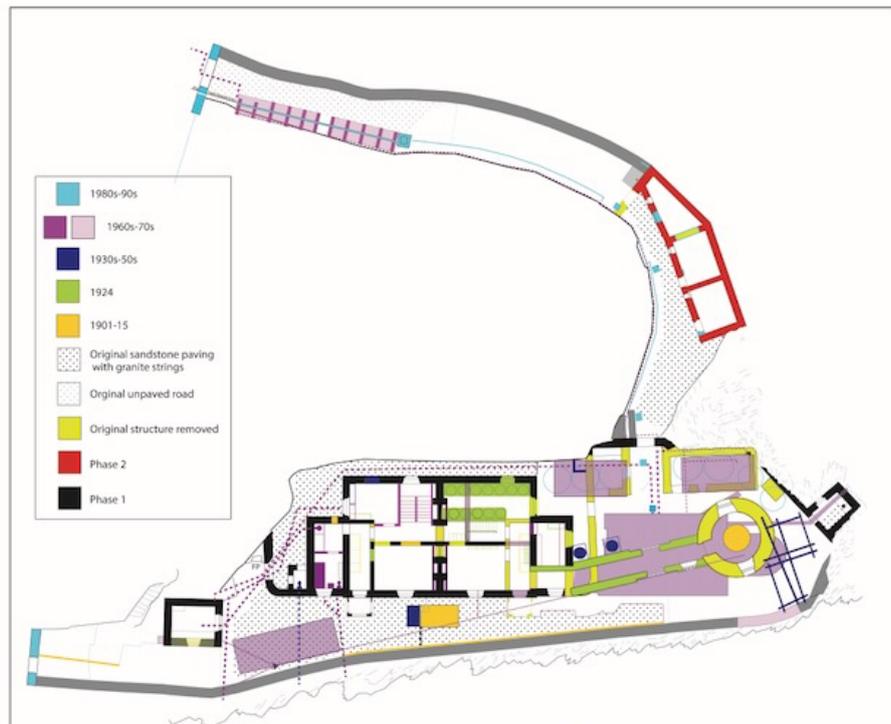


Fig. 4. Phase plan of the Lower Lighthouse Station (A.R. Hayden).

Between 2022 and 2024, archaeological assessments and monitoring were undertaken of works associated with the construction of an 80-metre-long extension of the canopy on the Lower Lighthouse Roadway (Hayden 2022b; 2022e; OPW 2022;) and of three, all-metal crash decks on the Lower and Upper Lighthouse Roadways (Hayden 2022a; 2022d & 2024a; OPW 2022; 2023, & 2024).

In these years, archaeological assessments and monitoring were also undertaken of minor interventions on the Lighthouse Roadways, in the Lighthouse Stations, on the South Steps, on Christ's Saddle and in the Monastery (Hayden 2022c; 2022f; 2023c; 2024; 2024b, & 2024c; OPW 2022; 2023, & 2024; NMS 2024).

The annual pre-season 'sweep' on the island was archaeologically monitored for the first time in 2024 (Hayden 2024; NMS 2024). Monitoring of the 'sweep' again in 2025, provided an opportunity for the first archaeological examination of the scree slope above Cross Cove, which yielded some significant results (Hayden 2025a).

¹⁸ Hayden, A.R. & Willingham, M.A. (2022). Since enlarged & updated (Hayden *in prep.*).

THE NORTH LANDING

Introduction

It should be remembered that today's visitors to the island do not set foot on a single early-medieval step until after they have entered the monastery, such was the extent that the lighthouse builders altered the access to the monastery.¹⁹

We know that the monks used four separate landing places to get to the monastery and South Peak – the Northeast, North, East, and Southeast Landings (*fig. 2*).²⁰ 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 (*fig. 2*). The different early 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 early landings led to the monastery or South Peak via long flights of rock-cut and drystone masonry steps, many of which were improved or rebuilt by the monks and / or the lighthouse men. The lighthouse landings were similarly designed but some were also singly used for materials and others for personnel.



Fig. 5. The North Landing and North Steps. The steps below the white arrow are rock cut (A.R. Hayden).

The North Landing and Steps (*figs. 5-6*)

The lowest run of steps from the North Landing in Blue Cove are very heavily eroded and extends upwards, from above the mean low tide mark²¹ eastwards in a straight line (*fig. 5*). This length is exposed to high seas and so the steps are all rock cut, as are the lower parts of the steps up from the other landing places on the island. The small size of these steps

¹⁹ Hayden (*in prep.*).

²⁰ There is no evidence that the monks ever used the South Landing.

²¹ The lighthouse-era steps to the man-derrick and South Landings also both run down to mean low tide level. The base of the early-medieval East Steps are buried beneath the later pier and the lower part of the earliest steps to the monastery on the island -the Northeast Steps- still remains to be explored. The two sets of early-medieval and lighthouse steps to the Southeast Landing led down to a cliff about 6 metres above sea level and never went any lower.

suggests that they could be of early-medieval date, as the early-medieval rock-cut steps elsewhere on the rock are significantly narrower and smaller than those cut by the lighthouse builders in the early nineteenth century.²² Several of the steps also show signs of having been widened, possibly in the nineteenth century.



Fig. 6. The base of the North Steps (A.R. Hayden).

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 final route used by the lighthouse men follows a straight line up to the north side of Christ's Saddle. A few masonry steps, which by their width and nature were likely constructed by the lighthouse builders survive near the base of the route. A better preserved and longer run of wide masonry steps remain on the upper part of the route where it reaches Christ's Saddle. It has been presumed, due to lack of evidence of an alternative, that the upper part of the early route used by the monks was the same as that later used by the lighthouse men.

Research has shown that the lighthouse keepers certainly used the North Landing and Steps, but only rarely, due to the fact the landing was seldom accessible and required a long trek carrying gear and provisions to reach the lighthouses. There are also nineteenth-century records of fishermen coming ashore on the North Steps.

The alignment of the fracture planes in the high bedrock cliffs above the east side of the North Landing renders them particularly susceptible to the scaling off of large slabs of rock and the North Steps have been damaged many times by rockfalls. The way the masonry sections of the North Steps were built into the steeply sloping ground also made them

²² There are some smaller and cruder steps on the routes up from the Southeast Landing to the Wailing Woman Ledge. These were part of the early routes the lighthouse builders used to access the monastery, but were also previously used by the monks, so the smaller steps are probably of early origin.

vulnerable to erosion and collapse. When the side support gave way, the individual steps fell away quite easily. The steep slope below the steps also meant that much of any 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 at some stage between the early 1980s and the early 2000s. The following description of the work by G.D. Rourke (included in Bourke, Hayden & Lynch (2011, 31) is the only information we have on this work:

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.

While employed on the South Peak, the writer also photographed rockfall damage to the North Steps in 2007 and again in 2008. Part of the lower section of the wall and masonry steps was damaged by high seas in 2012 and may have been repaired afterwards. Another section was repaired in 2014 after damage by a rockfall (Rourke 2015).

WINTER 2024/25 DAMAGE TO THE NORTH STEPS

Introduction

After the island was first accessed by the OPW crew in April 2025, the OPW foreman Pat O'Shea recorded and reported on the 14th of April that a section of the North Steps had been damaged by a rockfall. While monitoring the annual sweep of the island a few days later (Hayden 2025a), the writer inspected and photographically recorded the damaged area on the North Steps on the 17th of April (*figs. 10 & 11*), as part of a record compiled of the damage on the rock over the winter (Hayden 2025b). The OPW inspected the site on the 30th of April and at their request, the writer submitted an archaeological method statement on the 4th of May 2025, which described and archaeologically assessed the works required to repair the steps (Hayden 2025c). Following a response from the NMS, the OPW commissioned drone photographs of the damaged area, which were taken by Fergal Flannery on the 11th of June 2025, which unfortunately was a day of low cloud and fog (*figs. 8 & 9*). The NMS along with the OPW also inspected the damaged area on the same day.



Fig. 7. 2010 photograph showing the two large rocks which slipped in the winter of 2024/25 and caused the recent damage to the North Steps (A.R. Hayden).

The Damage Done (*figs. 7-12*)

Two large rocks lying between five and ten metres above the roadway (*fig. 7*) slipped downwards and damaged approximately ten of the drystone masonry steps of the upper part of the North Steps. There was a deep scar about 10m in length on the slope above and adjacent to the east side of the damaged section from where the rocks had slipped (*figs. 8, 9 & 11*). Any bird nests in this area are likely to have been destroyed.

Bedrock lies close to the surface beneath the area damaged on the steps (*fig. 12*). As a result, there would only ever have been 2 or 3 courses of masonry, totalling 200-400mm in height at most here. The low height of the original masonry provided little cushioning and so almost all the masonry was likely to have been removed by the slipped rock.

The outer side of the two steps immediately above the damaged area were also partly loosened and their other sides were pushed outwards by the impact (*fig. 10*). The steps below the damaged area were undisturbed (*figs. 10 & 12*). They lie on top of a more than a metre-high drystone wall, as the underlying rock drops vertically immediately below the damaged 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. A few large blocky stones were present but appear more likely to be part of the material which fell onto the steps.



Figs. 8 & 9. Drone photographs of the damaged area on the North Steps (F. Flannery).



Fig. 10. Looking down on damaged area (A.R. Hayden).

Fig. 11. The scar on the slope above the steps. (A.R. Hayden).

Fig. 12. Looking up at damaged area (A.R. Hayden).

THE REPAIR WORKS ON THE NORTH STEPS

Introduction

Ministerial Consent No. C001455 was granted for the works on the 8th of July 2025. However, due to the presence of large numbers of nesting puffins in the area, the start of the works was deferred until they had left the island as usual on the final weekend in July. The works were undertaken and archaeologically monitored under Works No. 000820, Excavation licence No. E005831, & Detection Licence No. R000767 between the 11th and 20th of August 2025.

Preparatory Works

Due to the steepness of the slopes in the area, safe rope access had first to be established by the OPW rope access supervisor, Brendan O'Connor. A sweep of the area above the damaged steps was undertaken to examine the steep scree slope and secure or remove any other rocks that could potentially slip or fall. It was undertaken in conjunction with the archaeologist and ECoW, Brian Power, to identify and examine any stone that might potentially be used in repairing the damaged area of the steps.

After the conclusion of the sweep, the area of the deep scar left by the slipped rock above the steps was stabilised and any loose material was removed and stone retrieved for potential reuse. This area included one large rock that weighted several tonnes and which was loose. Attempts made to split it failed and as it could not be secured in place, it had to be slid down the slope and beyond into the sea for safety. The rope access personnel successfully achieved this without causing any damage (*fig. 13*).

The steep slopes below the steps were also searched and any loose rocks present were first examined by the archaeologist and the NPWS ECoW, Brian Power before being hauled up by the rope access personnel for reuse.

It proved something of a struggle to source enough suitable stone for the works, as the area had previously been stripped of stone for earlier repairs. Any stones which fell on the area subsequently appear to have largely slid downhill and into the sea due to the steepness of the slopes here. One large naturally fallen boulder identified by the rope access personnel near the top of the slope below Christ's Saddle was suitable for splitting and several large flags were taken off one end of its upper face for use in the rebuilding work.

Before works were undertaken on the steps, the OPW crew also removed plant growth from the upper part of the steps above the damaged area as it constituted a slip hazard.

Early Routeway

During the sweep above the steps, a potential early route was identified (*fig. 16*) leading downwards from Christ's Saddle. It followed the top of the scree slope above and east of the present steps to a point just beyond the line of the damaged area of the steps below. A vertical rib of bedrock forced it to alter its course downhill after this point, where it would have run along the line of the present steps. Several flat stones were noted in positions, which suggested they were deliberately laid to form steps along the route. The archaeologist marked out the area of this possible early route with ranging rods to ensure that no stone was removed from this potential early feature.

The Excavation

Following the sweep and after safe rope access was established to the damaged area of the steps, the fallen material in the damaged area was cleared by hand and the underlying rock below was cleaned down and recorded photographically by the archaeologist. The material removed consisted of loose campion soil, clay and stones and measured up to 400mm in thickness. Its clearance revealed that none of the original masonry survived of the eight lower steps damaged and that only the outer side of the two uppermost steps damaged survived. This masonry had been pushed outwards and loosened (*fig. 13.*).

No artefactual or historical environmental remains were uncovered during the excavation.

Rebuilding

Using the stone gathered, the OPW foreman mason Pat O'Shea and OPW mason Mike Connors assisted by the rope access personnel and Tom Kerrisk, and observed by the archaeologist, rebuilt the eight missing steps and repaired the upper two partially damaged steps in drystone masonry, replicating the format, style, size and height of the other steps (*fig. 14.*).

Examination of masonry lower down

After work was completed on the steps and after a safety line had been established, the opportunity was taken to examine and remove weed growth from the lower part of the masonry steps up from the north landing. The lower end of the wall defining the outside of these steps was apparently damaged by high seas in 2012 and appears not to have been rebuilt afterwards, presumably due to a lack of stone. The masonry of the presently surviving lower end of the standing wall is loose and will require tightening if more of the walling is not to be lost in the future (*fig. 16.*). The stone on the top of a considerable length of the lower section of the wall has also been loosened and tossed about by wind and sea and could also do with being relaid to secure it and the top of the wall.

CONCLUSIONS

The damaged section of the steps was successfully rebuilt by the OPW crew under the supervision of the archaeologist and the ECoW, Brian Power.

The OPW rope access personnel did a Herculean job in finding stone for the works and the OPW masons, as ever, did an exemplary job replicating the size and style of the original steps. A full photographic record was made of the works and some of the images taken are included in this report.

The scarcity of locally available stone for the repairs, due to the local terrain and its past scouring for stone for earlier repairs means of course that after the recent works, there is now virtually no usable stone left in the area for any future repairs. And without doubt, repairs will need to be undertaken in the future, as the North Steps are the most prone of any area on the island to damage by rockfalls, due to the local topography. Therefore, consideration, might be given to either the establishment of a stockpile of suitable stone adjacent to the area (of course ensuring it is not invaded by nesting birds and does not detract from the visual amity) or to the development of a methodology of getting stone to the area in times of need.

The absence or inaccessibility, of previous records of repairs and their archaeological monitoring on the North Steps (and indeed on other parts of the island) is clearly also an issue that needs to be addressed.

The discovery of the start of a probable early route from the Saddle down to the North Landing was perhaps the most interesting outcome of the works. The route followed the top of the scree slope and in doing so, echoes the line taken by much of the longer East Link pilgrimage route from the East Steps to the Crocodile Rock platform (*fig. 2*). In both these cases, following the top of a scree slope was both a natural and convenient route but also one that required the least work to establish. A prominent bedrock ridge however prevented the monks from following the top of the scree slope further downwards to the North Landing.

The existence of this earlier route appears to confirm that the upper part of the North Steps is of lighthouse construction. This was long suspected as the width and style of the steps are more akin to other lighthouse steps on the island rather than to those of the known early-medieval steps up from the Northeast and East Landings.

The lower end and the top of the wall defining the outer side of the North Steps, close to the start of the lowest masonry section, which appears to have been rebuilt or created by the OPW in the 1980s-early 2000s, requires some tightening and relaying.

WORK PHOTOGRAPHS



(a) Attempting to split rock in scar.



(b) Gathering rock from below.



(c) Damaged area after cleaning



(d) Work on rebuilding first steps.



(e) Rebuilding nearing completion.



(f) Rebuilt steps before final clean up.

Fig. 13. The progress of the works on the stairway (A.R. Hayden).

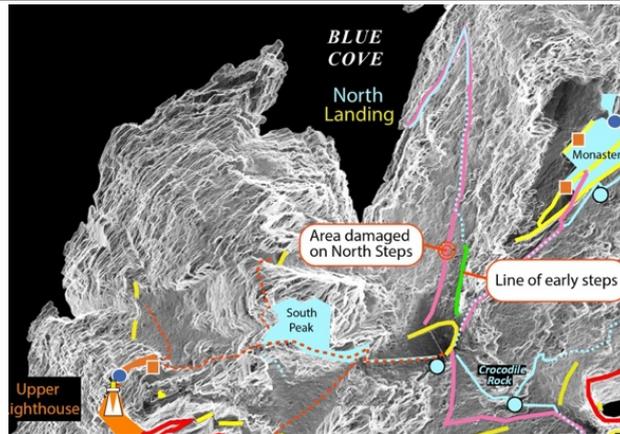


(a) Before (left), after (right), view looking up to the damaged & repaired section of the stairway.



(a) Before (left), after (right), view looking down on the damaged & repaired section of the stairway.

Fig. 14. Before and after photographs of the damage and repair on the steps (A.R. Hayden).



(a) Location of the possible early route down to the upper part of the North Steps



(b) View up the possible route.



(c) Probable masonry step.



(d) probable masonry steps.

Fig. 15. Plan and photographs of the possible early route down from Christ's Saddle (A.R. Hayden).



(a) Surviving lower end of wall.



(b) Side view near base of wall.



(c) View down over lower part of wall and steps.

Fig. 16. The lower end of the masonry section of the North Steps (A.R. Hayden).

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