

**Archaeological Method Statement**

**for Monitoring**

**of**

**Annual Safety Sweep,**

**on**

***Sceilg Mhichíl, Co. Kerry.***

***Ministerial Consent C001189***

***Works No. W00530***

***Licence No. E005547***



**Archaeological Projects Ltd.**  
archaeological consultants & contractors - since 1989

*Alan R. Hayden -*  
*April 2025*

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Alan R. Hayden, Archaeological Projects Ltd.

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a method statement to cover the archaeological monitoring of the annual pre-work season safety sweep on *Sceilg Mhichíl*, Co. Kerry for 2025.

## 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 1826, the Upper Lighthouse was closed down in 1870 but the Lower Station was continuously manned until it was automated in 1987.

## **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). Works were undertaken in the monastery, on the North, East and South Steps to the monastery and on the South Peak. Exploratory visits to and 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 1826 (Bourke, Hayden & Lynch 2011). 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 surveying and recording elsewhere on the island, uncovered or identified other lighthouse-era built structures and deposits - see the various reports in Bourke, Hayden & Lynch (2011).

After the completion of archaeological works on the South Peak in 2010 the NMS / 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 north of 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 lighthouse roadway and in the Lower Lighthouse Station (Hayden 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2022e & 2022f).

The annual safety sweep undertaken in 2024 was the first one archaeologically monitored (Hayden 2024).

## THE SAFETY SWEEP

### Introduction

The 2025 safety sweep is scheduled to be carried out on *Sceilg Mhichíl*, weather permitting, over the week starting the 14<sup>th</sup> April and is a part of the *Sceilg Mhichíl* annual maintenance plan. The Safety Sweep will be carried out prior to the island opening to the members of the public and before the OPW *Sceilg Mhichíl* Guides are present. The works will consist of the clearance of debris and the removal of loose materials which could potentially fall from sections of the slopes above the Lower and Upper Lighthouse Roadways extending from the landing at the East Pier to the Upper Lighthouse Station.

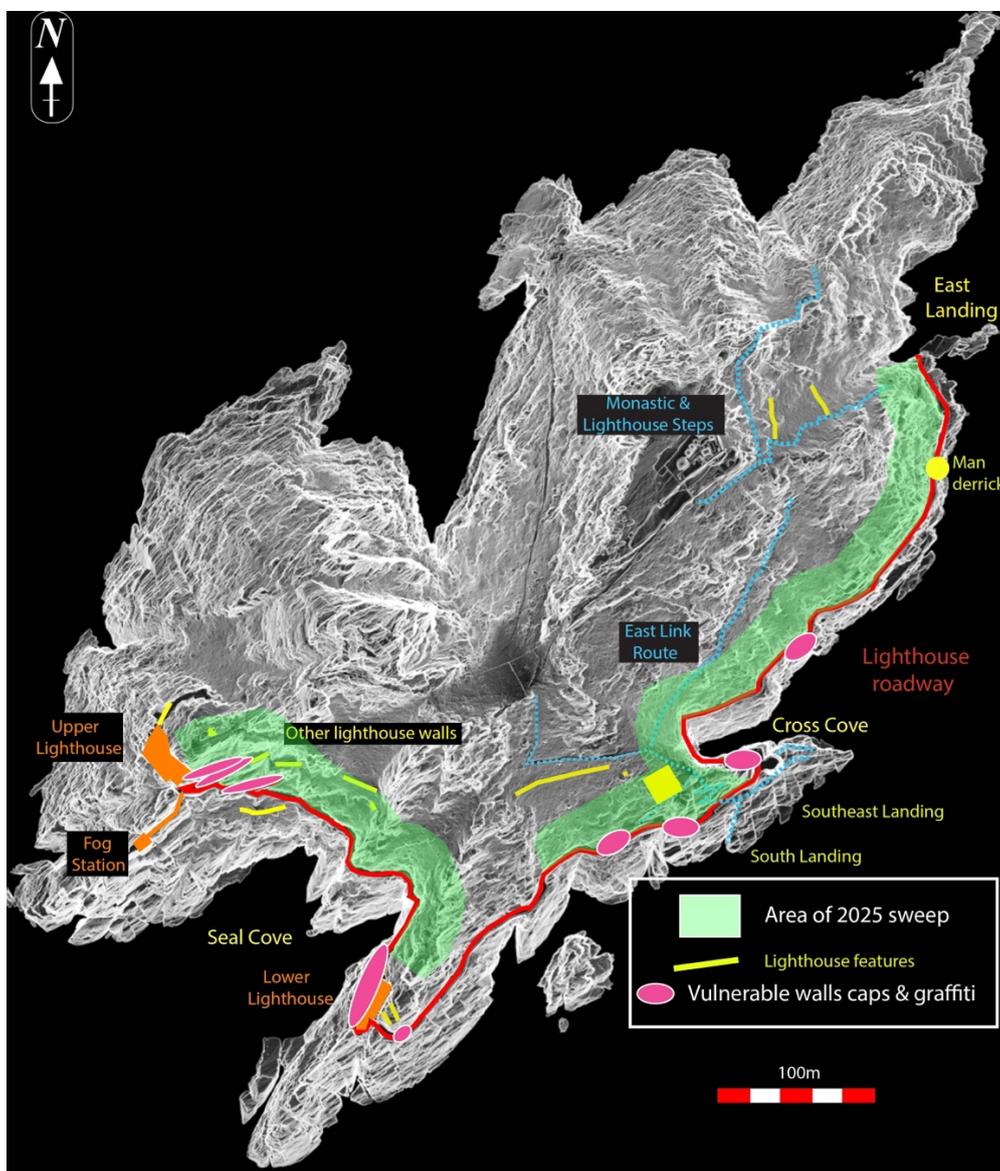


Fig. 1. Lidar image of *Sceilg Mhichíl*, showing the area of the sweeps (green) and the known principal archaeological features in their vicinity.

## IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED SWEEP

The sweep has the potential to have an impact on the locations where it is undertaken but also on the areas below, due to the possible impact of falling material.

### The Sweep above the Lower Lighthouse Roadway

The topography of the area to be swept from the East Landing at Blind Man's Cove to the east side of Cross Cove is steep and relative inaccessible. It has never been comprehensively explored or surveyed by an archaeologist and there are no known archaeological features in the area. The steep slopes, its topography and location however mean that is unlikely that there are any archaeological features in this area.



*Fig. 2. Photograph (taken from helipad) of potential masonry terrace / traverse on East Link Route above cross cove.*

Above the area of Cross Cove the sweep crosses part of the line of the known East Link Route- an early pathway used by pilgrims to reach Christ's Saddle and the South Peak from the East Steps to the monastery. The east end of this early routeway was explored by Michael Gibbons who found the remains of a beehive hut and crosses cut from the rock. The exact location of these features is not known. The remainder of the route has been tentatively identified from the LiDar survey of the island (fig. 1) but has not been visited or explored, so what exactly it contains and indeed its exact route is not known. The line of the part of the route above Cross Cove is visible from both the Helipad and just above the Wailing Woman Ledge. There appears to be a clear terrace crossing the slope but whether this is of early date or of lighthouse construction is unknown. At the east end of this terrace there are what appear to be further potential terraces (fig. 2), areas of masonry and possible masonry steps, none of which have been examined up close. These and any other features that survive here are particularly vulnerable as none are known for certain and many may not be readily recognisable as archaeological features.

Between Cross Cove and the western end of the area to be swept there are a number of known and easily recognisable archaeological features:- the rock-cut and masonry steps of the various routes from the South and Southeast Landings leading up to the East Link Route and to Christ's Saddle and a small masonry toilet of Lighthouse

date. All these features are well known and clearly visible and hence are unlikely to be impacted by the Sweep.

A number of lighthouse walls cross the slope to the west but all appear to lie above the area to be swept.

### ***Areas below the Lower Lighthouse Roadway Sweep***

#### *East Landing to Cross Cove*

The lighthouse roadway and feature on it from the East Landing to Cross Cove could be impacted by falling material emanating from the Sweep. However, the steep cliffs on the inner side of the roadway up to the start of the canopy and the presence of the canopy means that the majority of falling material is likely not to hit the roadway but to oversail it. The only area that might be vulnerable are the features of the man derrick and its landing.

The parapet wall of this length of the lighthouse roadway below the sweep, apart from a short length where a couple of original sandstone capstones survive (and which are protected by the canopy) and the roadway itself has been rebuilt many times and any potential impact on them is therefore, in any case, of less consequence.

#### *Cross Cove*

The steepness of the cliffs above Cross Cove and the presence in it of the canopy over the roadway mean there is unlikely to be any impact below the sweep in this area.

#### *Wailing Woman Ledge to west end of sweep*

There are a number of features that potentially could be impacted by falling stones below this area of the sweep. These include:

- The excavated lighthouse platform with building lying west of the Wailing Woman Ledge and the bases of the former flagstaff on the Wailing Woman Ledge itself.

- The original sandstone capping slabs of the parapet wall of the lighthouse roadway survive in two places in this area; the southeast end of Cross Cove and just before the start of the stairway to the monastery. All of these are heavily inscribed with Lighthouse-era names and initials .

- There is a large sloping rockface opposite the workmens' huts which contains many inscribed names and initials of lighthouse keepers and personnel. They could be vulnerable to stone swept down the slope by the sweep.

None of these areas were impacted by the Sweep undertaken in 2024.

### **The Sweep above the Upper Lighthouse Roadway**

There are a number of lighthouse-era walls in the area to be swept above the Upper Lighthouse Roadway. All are clearly visible and so are unlikely to be impacted, unless by falling material.

### ***Areas below the Sweep above the Upper Lighthouse Roadway***

The Upper and Lower Lighthouse Stations themselves will not be impacted by the sweep due to the topography. The only feature below the sweep that might potentially be impacted by falling material is the lighthouse roadway itself, which in general should be able to take potential impacts without undue damage . However there are some parts of

the parapet wall that contain original sandstone capstone (see fig. 1) which would be vulnerable to falling materials.

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPACT MITIGATION AND MONITORING OF THE SWEEP**

The unknown features on the part of the early East Link route where the sweep crosses its route will be examined by the archaeologist before the sweep of this area is undertaken. The setting up of a safety rope has been requested and will be arranged to facilitate this work. Any features identified will be indicated to the personnel undertaking the sweep so they can be avoided.

The archaeologist will be present on the site throughout the whole period of the sweep, and will liaise with the persons undertaking the works. The archaeologist will closely observe the works undertaken to ensure that no archaeological features are disturbed and to assess and record any unforeseen impacts of the work. The personnel undertaking the sweep will be made aware of all the vulnerable features within the areas to be swept and below them, to lessen the potential impact upon them.

Should anything of archaeological significance be uncovered or impacted the archaeologist may require the alteration or cancelation of parts of the works. The NMS will be immediately informed of any such impacts or discoveries and their advice, recommendations and requirement will be adhered to.

### **REPORTING**

Following the completion of the works the archaeologist will submit a report on the archaeological monitoring of the works.

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