

Archaeological Monitoring

of

Annual pre-Season Sweep

on

Sceilg Mhichil, Co. Kerry

2025.

Ministerial Consent C001189

Works No. W00530

Licence No. E005547



Archaeological Projects Ltd.
archaeological consultants & contractors - since 1989

Alan R. Hayden

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ABSTRACT

This report describes the results of the archaeological monitoring of the annual pre-season sweep on Sceilg Mhichíl, Co. Kerry, which was undertaken over two days, the 16th and 17th April 2025.

Nothing of archaeological or historical interest was impacted by the works.

The setting up of safety ropes allowed a first archaeological examination of part of the area of the sweep that revealed some significant and previously unrecorded structures and features.

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. The Upper Lighthouse was closed down in 1870 and the families

of the keepers of the Lower Station were moved ashore to Valentia Island in 1901. The Lower Station was continuously manned until it was automated in 1987.

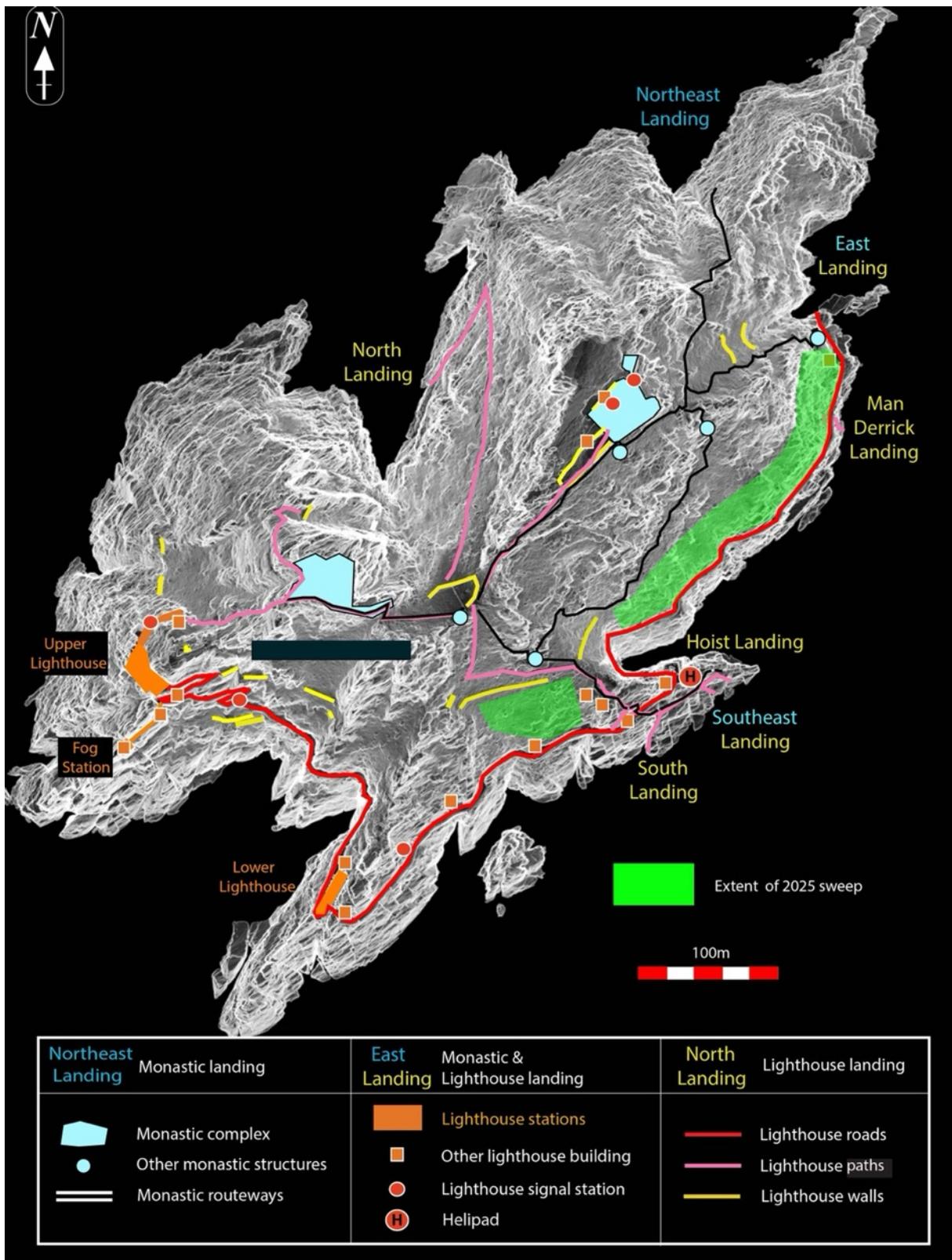


Fig. 1. Locations of the areas swept in 2025 and the principal early-medieval and lighthouse features on Scelig Mhichil.

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 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 and recorded other lighthouse-era built structures on the island.

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 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 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. We can, 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 however remains outside the public domain.

THE 2025 SWEEP

Each year before the OPW guides and any visitors come out to *Sceilg Mhichil* a sweep is made of the ground above the Lower Lighthouse Roadway and sometimes also of the area above the Upper Lighthouse Roadway. The sweep is designed to identify and remove or relocate any loose material, which could potentially fall and injure persons using the roadway, which in the case of the Lower Lighthouse Roadway is part of the route tourists use to reach the monastery. The persons undertaking the sweep are rope access experts, as the work had to be done on steep and high slopes.

Pre-season safety sweeps have been undertaken on the rock for a number of years but that in 2024 was the first one archaeologically monitored (Hayden 2024).

The 2025 sweep consisted of nine transects above the Lower Lighthouse Roadway extending from the East Landing to the east side of Cross Cove and a walkover of the slope above the area from the Wailing Woman ledge to the west end of the workmen's huts. (fig. 2). Each area was examined for loose material, which if located was placed in a secure setting where it could not fall.

The archaeologist was present on the site throughout the period of the sweep, and closely liaised with the persons undertaking the works.

All of the lines of the sweep were undertaken in areas where there were no known archaeological features or structures or the known archaeological structures were clearly visible and so could be readily avoided. No material was pushed downhill. The works had no impact on the surviving archaeological remains.

One large stone, which had fallen onto the roof of the canopy built in 2022 (fig.2) was pushed over the side avoiding both the parapet wall and nesting birds below. Single areas of the 2016 and 1959 canopies in Cross Cove were also damaged by falling rocks, which did not lodge on the them.



Fig. 2. Large stone lodged on roof of 2022 canopy.

PREVIOUSLY UNRECORDED ROUTES AND FEATURES

Safety ropes were set up by the OPW rope access supervisor Brendan O'Connor to allow a first archaeological examination of the slopes above Cross Cove which along with a re-examination of the area of the Crocodile Rock Platform yielded significant results.



Fig. 3. (Yellow line) East Link route from Crocodile Rock Platform (left) eastwards above Cross Cove; 1959 canopy visible at bottom. (White line) Lighthouse wall above Cross Cove

The East Link Route

Michael Gibbons first suggested the existence of this route after he discovered the remains of a round drystone building and a cross cut from the rock on it east end close to where it opened off the East Steps (fig. 1). He was unable to explore the remainder of the route. However, examination of the LiDAR survey of the island revealed the line of the route as far west as the slopes above the east side of Cross Cove. It was not evident how the route ran above Cross Cove. It was thought it may have descended down to run on the same line as a lighthouse wall above the cove (fig. 3). This passage was however blocked by a large rock outcrop above the east side of the cove and there was no clearly visible route across or around it.

The setting up of safety ropes in 2025 enable the writer to explore the top of the slope above Cross Cove. This revealed the existence of an easily walked route from the known end of the East Link Route westwards. It began with a short and easy uphill climb from the known end up to the top scree slope (fig. 4). The scree slope here has a thick campion cover and so no man-made features were visible. Following the top of the gently rising and easily walked ledge this led to a protruding spur in the cliff (fig. 5) which when rounded came to the top of a slope above the back of the Crocodile Rock Platform above the South Steps (fig. 6). Two rock-cut steps and possible masonry survive on this slope (fig. 7 & 9) while its base led to a set of previously known rock-cut steps marked by a previously-known cross cut from the rock and leading down onto the Platform (figs. 8 & 9)

The rock-cut steps here were thought to lead up somewhere to a route uphill to the monastery, however no such route was ever found despite a search of the area above. It is now clear that the steps actually led to the East Link Route.



Fig. 4. Section leading uphill from the previously known west end of the route up to the top of the scree slope



Fig. 5. Route to corner (in foreground)



Fig. 6. Looking down on route from corner to back of Crocodile Rock Platform.



Fig. 7. Rock cut steps on route down from corner to back of crocodile Rock Platform



Fig. 8. Back of Crocodile Rock enclosure. Rock-cut steps up to end of East Link Route (left arrow) and cross cut from rock (right arrow).

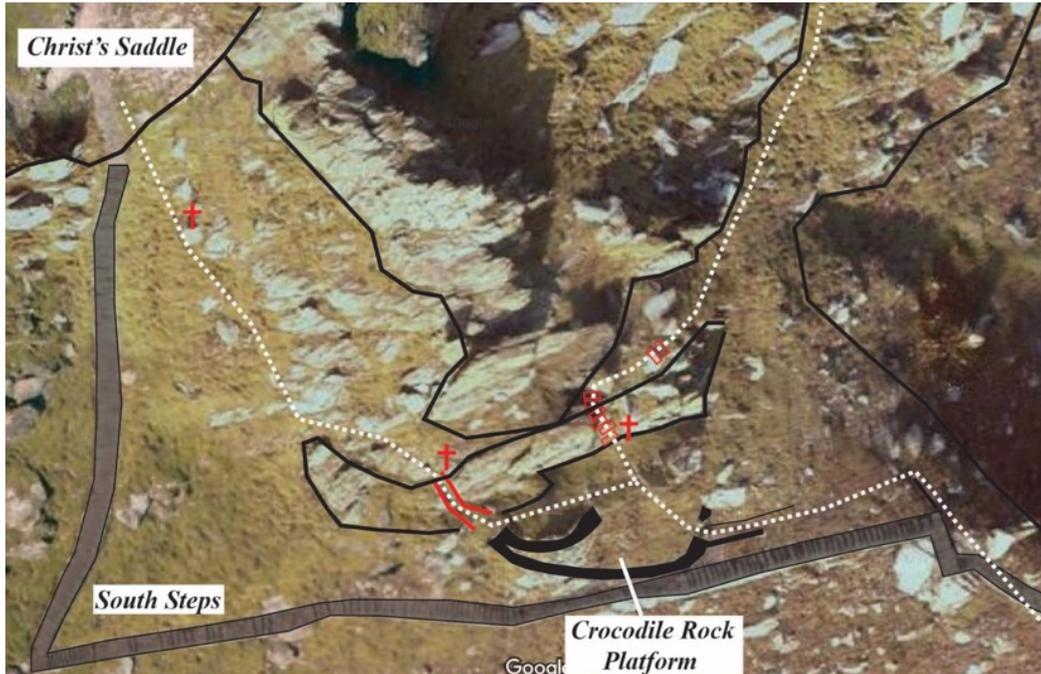


Fig. 9. Satellite photograph of the area around the Crocodile Rock Platform and the routeways through it, showing crosses cut from the rock (red crosses), rock cut steps (red rectangles), walls (thick black lines) and gully (red). The breaks in slope are indicated by the narrower black lines.

Crocodile Rock up to Christ's Saddle

There was no clear route leading off the west end of the platform upwards. However a re-examination of the area in 2025 revealed the existence of an easily climbed, narrow and campion filled gully in the rock cliff at the back of the northwest side of the platform (figs. 9-12). The stump of a possible previously unrecorded cross cut from the rock on the flat rock to the right of the top of the gully is visible from the platform indicating that this indeed was a used route. (figs. 11-13)

Exiting the top of the gully another and large cross-cut from the rock in visible straight ahead up an easily walked slope which leads up the Saddle to the east of the top of the South Steps (figs. 9, 14 & 15).



Fig. 10. West end of Crocodile Rock Platform with start of route up gully marked.



Fig. 11. The route up the gully with cross cut from the rock at its top marked by arrow.

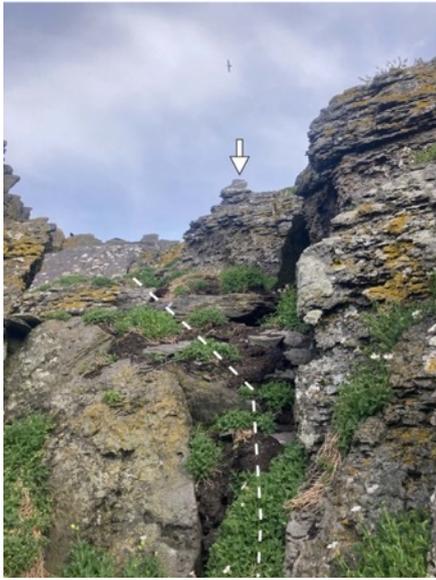


Fig. 12. Top of gully with cross cut from the rock Indicated by arrow.

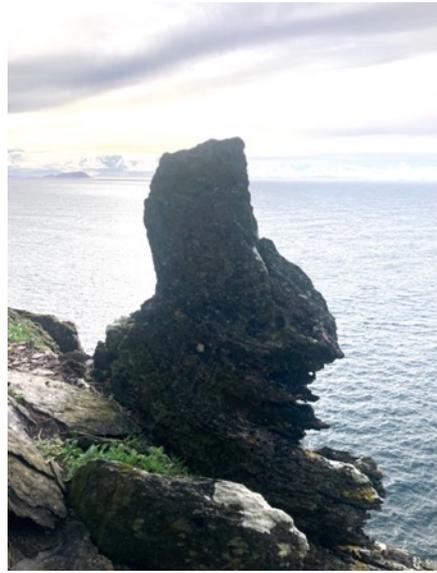


Fig. 13. Close up of cross cut from the rock at the head of the gully



Fig. 14. Route above Crocodile Rock Platform, crosses cut from the rock marked by arrows.



Fig. 15. Looking down from top of South Steps, upper cross cut from the rock visible at left.

Crocodile Rock down to the Southeast Landing

One side of a clear entrance survives in the drystone wall defining the east side of the Crocodile Rock Platform. These leads out onto a small traverse defined by a drystone wall on its south side (fig. 16). Following this line straight eastwards leads to the north end of a north-south aligned unnaturally flat area close to the cliff (fig. 17). This has been remarked on previously by the writer but this year was the first time it was visible devoid of campion cover. A clear edge was visible on its west side cutting across the natural grain of the ground. It would appear that this could have been a man-made traverse leading downslope to the prominent corner (marked by a yellow sign bearing a black arrow) on the South Steps.



Fig. 16. Entrance and terrace leading from east side of crocodile Rock Platform



Fig. 17. Possible route east and down from Crocodile Rock platform. Unnatural flat ledge extending downhill at right.

The line of the early route on down to the top of the cliff above the Lighthouse Roadway here has been obscured by the present South Steps and lighthouse works on the Wailing Woman Ledge.

There is however a clear and well-known route down the cliff below onto the Lighthouse Roadway. This follows an easily walked series of natural zig-zag ledges down to the roadway. There are no visible early features here and the ledges contain typical Lighthouse pocked squares for grip and there is a fine flight of typical Lighthouse rock-cut steps at the top of the slope. That the lighthouse builders initially used and augmented this route suggests that there was an earlier one here.

Below the roadway two runs of early rock-cut steps survive, one on the south side of the top of the initial flight of lighthouse rock-cut steps (fig. 18) and another further down and to the east. The area between the two was heavily altered by the routeways constructed and areas blasted out by the lighthouse builders and later by works to erect the helipad.



Fig. 18. A run of small early steps cut through by large lighthouse steps down to south and southeast landings below the lighthouse roadway

CONCLUSIONS

Nothing of archaeological or historical interest was impacted by the works undertaken during the Sweep.

Taking the opportunity of the Sweep to set up safety ropes allowed a first archaeological examination of the area above the canopy in Cross Cove, which combined with a re-examination of the Crocodile Rock area, produced interesting results.

It allowed the identification of the western section and end of the early East Link Route, which runs westwards from the East Steps. The route ends at the Crocodile Rock Platform above the South Steps and descends to the platform via two sets of rock cut steps, the lower of which is marked by a cross cut from the rock.

Another route was revealed leading upwards from the Crocodile Rock Platform via a short narrow gully in the cliff at the northwest side of the platform. The top of the gully is marked by another cross cut from the rock and from there runs past a third cross cut from the rock and on up to Christ's Saddle.

The entrance visible at the east end of the Crocodile Rock Platform leads out onto a walled traverse and eastwards to the north end of an unusual break in the slope, which was only visible due to the slow growth of the campion cover this spring. The route appears to have turned south and extended along this area. The route then disappears beneath the later steps and other Lighthouse works reappearing on the cliff leading down to the lighthouse roadway and below to two sets of early steps that led down to the Southeast Landing.

The discovery of this early route from the Southeast Landing to the Saddle finally allows the identification of the original monastic route to the Saddle and also indicates that the presently used South Steps are entirely of lighthouse date. This had long presumed to be the case due to the noticeably different width and tread height of the South Steps compared to the earlier Northeast and East steps to the monastery. But also from a statement by Crofton Croker who visited the island when lighthouse construction was in progress "*to complain of the ruggedness and horror of the path, [up from the Southeast landing to the Saddle] is unjust to former devotees; as a boatman, who remembers it before the commencement of the present works, expressed his surprise at the 'smooth and elegant stairs' which had been made.*" (Chatterton, 1939, 293-4).

The lighthouse steps of course had to facilitate the transport of kegs of gun powder and other materials from the Southeast Landing (where the lighthouse builders initially landed on the island) up to the monastery, where they were stored during the period the lighthouses and ancillary structures were under construction between 1821 and 1826. The climb up the cliff above the roadway to the Wailing Woman Ledge and that up the narrow gully at the end of the Crocodile Rock platform would have provided difficulties for men carrying such materials and the new steps the lighthouse builders created bypassed both these areas and provided an easily walked route up to Christ's Saddle.

Of all the early features mentioned above, none were included in O'Sullivan and Sheehan's (1996, 278-90) survey of the island and only the Crocodile Rock Platform and the wall of the enclosure on it are listed in the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) maintained by the NMS for the island (KE104A001062-Platform and KE104A001030-enclosure). The cross cut from the rock and the rock-cut steps at the back of the platform, although known about for decades are not mentioned.

The final discovery of the line of the west end of the early East Link Route highlights the fact that the majority of it has never been even explored by an archaeologists- apart for its east end where many years ago Michael Gibbons found a cross cut from the rock and a round stone building on it.

These early routes (along with the Northeast Steps, which were the earliest steps built to the monastery) and the features on them are important and some of them have been known about for a considerable time but none are included in the SMR, nor are they accurately located or marked on maps. There is a clear need for their exploration, full survey and recording, accurate delineation on maps and inclusion in the SMR, so that the features on them are better known and can be adequately protected. This would of course also facilitate an assessment of their condition and the identification of any issues that could affect their future survival.

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