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World Heritage in Ireland

Sceilg Mhichíl WHP Annual Report

NMS Archaeological Review

2025 Season

Prepared by the National Monuments Service (NMS)
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NMS An tSeirbhís
Sádehomharthaí Náisiúnta
National Monuments Service

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1 Executive Summary

The following brief report provides an overview of works that necessitated archaeological oversight during the 2025 season, and the nature of that oversight/monitoring on the World Heritage Property (WHP). All archaeological monitoring was carried out by a suitably qualified and experienced archaeologist engaged by the Office of Public Works (OPW) following approval of their proposed methodology by National Monuments Service (NMS). The archaeological works were carried out under a registration number as issued by NMS within the Ministerial Consent process.

A rockfall during the off-season period damaged the roof of one of the new safety crash decks on the upper Lighthouse Road. Also a rockfall/landslide took out a section of the North Steps leading down from the monastic site. This is a difficult area and warranted focused discussion to ensure safety was paramount while undertaking the recording, repair and conservation works.



Figure 1. Drone image of the monastic settlement on the North Peak of WHP Sceilg Mhichíl

Minor conservation works, that form part of the annual maintenance regime of OPW colleagues, was undertaken, including along the Lighthouse Road, steps up to the monastery. No ground works were involved.

The Climate Vulnerability Assessment (CVA) Report was launched and published in November 2025, delivering on and drawing to a conclusion the partnership project between National Geographic's Preserving Legacies Project, the NMS and the OPW.

2 Management and Governance

NMS is the Focal Point for the WHP, and act as archaeological advisors. OPW manage the WHP on behalf of the Department. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) oversee and advise on the natural heritage of the Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC), as designated under the EU Directives.

The 2025 season proved challenging with frequent inclement weather affecting visits to and works on Sceilg Mhichíl. Access was severely hampered for the boat operators, with high seas, strong winds and intense precipitation throughout the summer months. Progress was therefore slow. Archaeological works were limited.

The required management meetings were held. The Sceilg Mhichíl Implementation Group (SMIG) met twice to discuss high level issues, review the Action table in the Management Plan and to consider the increasing climate impacts of rockfall on the island. No meetings of the Expert Advisory Committee (EAC) took place in 2025, due to the slow season and need to focus on rescue and repair works, rather than research projects. That being said, a select number of projects were undertaken by external experts, including completion of the Vegetation Survey by University College Dublin, Puffin and Kittiwake survey by University College Cork, and the publication also by University College Cork of the *Geology of Sceilg Mhichíl: A Field Guide*.

These formal SMIG meetings are supported by two works meetings in the Killarney District that discuss in detail specific works that are needed each season. These two meetings take place at the start and end of the year. Works are identified and requirements agreed, and the necessary Ministerial Consents and Natura Impact Statements/Appropriate Assessments set out.

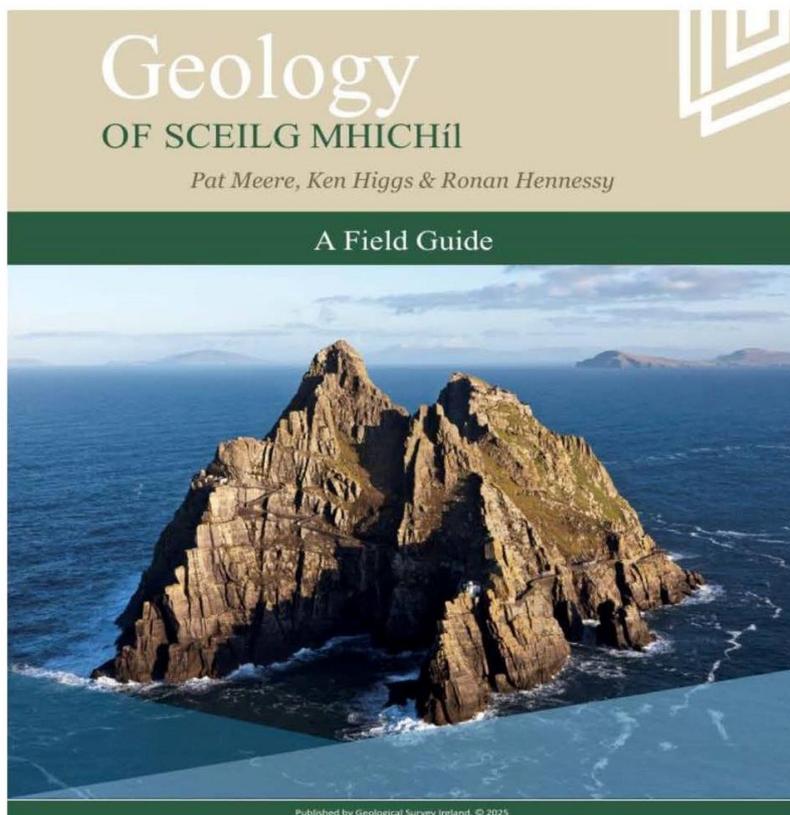
Additional management meetings may take place if and when required to discuss specific works or issues arising.

BOOK LAUNCH

Geology of Sceilg Mhichíl - A Field Guide

Pat Meere, Ken Higgs & Ronan Hennessy

School of Biological, Earth & Environmental Science, UCC.



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 **Geological Survey**
Suirbhíreacht Gheolaíochta
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Wednesday, July 23rd, 2025

7-9pm, Tech Amergin, Waterville.

All Welcome!



3 Sceilg Mhichíl WHP - Background

Enigmatically rising from the sea, the Skellig Islands (Sceilg Mhichíl and Sceilg Bheag) have become globally recognisable, their historical, folkloric, literary and archaeological importance are equalled only by the sheer natural abundance of wildlife - flora and fauna - that is to be found thriving on the rocky crags and within the crevices of these rugged outposts. Home to both man and beasts, the Skelligs have been a source of wonder through the ages and continue to be so. Gerard Boate in his 1657 book **Ireland's Natural History** describes the Skellig Islands thus: '...to those that come from the south, when first they begin to see them, [they] resemble the sails of ships'.¹ The cultural function of the islands went beyond the early monastic settlement and it is within the context of their maritime setting that the Skelligs also need to be considered. In so doing, the wider story of these islands and their place within the North Atlantic can be better understood.

A national monument (no. 61) in the ownership of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996, Sceilg Mhichíl is the most spectacularly situated of all the early medieval island monastic sites in Ireland, with well-preserved access steps, a monastery, a remote hermitage and other monastic structures. The island's isolation has helped to preserve and protect these monastic remains. Their state of preservation and authenticity mean that Sceilg Mhichíl is of immeasurable historical importance. It represents a unique cultural achievement, illustrating a significant period of history and an element of civilisation that disappeared long ago. It is one of four World Heritage Properties on the island of Ireland, alongside Brú na Bóinne, the Giant's Causeway, and Gracehill Moravian Church Settlement.

In addition, the island embodies the establishment of lighthouses on Ireland's coast in the 1820s – a project that was particularly challenging along the Atlantic seaboard. A winding cobbled roadway that is a testament to the engineering prowess of the builders links the twin lighthouses on the island and which, in themselves, are excellent examples of our industrial archaeological heritage.

¹ Boate, G. (1657). *Ireland's Natural History being a true and ample description of its situation, greatness, shape, and nature, of its hills, woods, heaths, bogs...* (London), p. 47.



Figure 2. Lower Lighthouse and Lighthouse Road from the Upper Lighthouse.

In its UNESCO inscription affirming its Outstanding Universal Value, it is noted that the monastic enclosure of Sceilg Mhichíl illustrates, as no other property can, the extremes of a Christian monasticism characterising much of North Africa, the Near East, and Europe. It is an outstanding unique example of an early religious settlement deliberately sited on a pyramidal rock in the ocean, preserved because of a remarkable environment.



Figure 4. Sceilig Mhichíl, that pinnacle known locally as ‘The Rock’.

The earliest documentary reference for a settlement on Sceilig Mhichíl is contained in the eighth century **Martyrology of Tallagh** which refers to the death of a monk from Sceilig named ‘**Suibhní of Scelig**’. It suggests the eremitic colony was by then established on the island and thus men were rowing or sailing to and from the mainland or continental Europe to Sceilig from that time or indeed earlier. The thirteenth-century source **Libellus de Fundacione Ecclesie Consecrati Perti**, when describing the difficulty in accessing the island, informs that visitors coming from the mainland could reach the rock in one day if weather and sea conditions allowed, but should the sea decide to rise up, boats made of timber that were covered in skin and held together by tar, would be crushed by the waves.² From those early times, these traditional skin-covered wooden boats, of which the local Naomhóg, currach-style craft still continues in Co. Kerry, would have been the vessels used by the monks.

Viking raiders on the other hand, would have used their longboats, powered by large, square sails and multiple oar propulsion to access the island. Certainly, from the ninth

² Ó Riain-Raedel, D. (2009). ‘Skellig Michael: The German Connection’, in J. Sheehan and J. Crowley (eds), *The Iveragh Peninsula: A Cultural Atlas of the Ring of Kerry*, Cork University Press, Cork, pp 136–137.

century, when both the **Annals of Inishfallen** and **Annals of Ulster** mention raids by Vikings on Sceilg, the use of marine craft to land on the island was well recognized. When the island monastery went into decline from the thirteenth century onwards and monastic settlement moved to Ballinskelligs on the mainland, pilgrimages and voyages to Sceilg continued. With the advent of larger sailing ships from the medieval period onwards, smaller ships' boats would still have had to be used to access the precarious landing places on the islands and it is these landing places that provide cultural evidence for how the natural features of Sceilg were manipulated and moulded to allow for maritime engagement.

Carved steps, ledges and platforms facilitated both landing on and then access to the heights of Sceilg Mhichíl. There are three primary sets of recorded steps leading from the water's edge and they ascend from sea level up the steep slopes to the interior of the island. The long flights of steps that lead to the monastic site comprise of those from the north landing at Blue Cove; from the South landing at Cross Cove and the east steps leading from Blind Man's Cove to the monks' garden. The lower parts of the south and east steps were destroyed during the building of the lighthouse road and pier in the 1820s. The road now leads from that pier at Blind Man's Cove and connects with the south steps that are those used by visitors to the island today.³ While the steps and landing points are undoubtedly associated directly with the development of the monastic settlement on the island, such features traditionally had wider maritime functions, including allowing mariners access to resources like fresh water, wildfowl and shelter but they also facilitated piracy and smuggling activities when the clandestine exchange of goods was critical to the success of such illicit business.⁴

The nautical use of the islands, and Sceilg Mhichíl in particular, as beacons for the safe passage of ships was physically recognized in 1821 when construction began on the two lighthouses on Sceilg. The placement of the upper and lower illuminations ensured they acted as leading lights for passing ships and the two together prevented confusion with the fixed light on Cape Clear to the south. With the building of the

³ Horn, W., White Marshall, J., Rourke, G., O'Leary, P. and Snodgrass, L. (1990). *The Forgotten Hermitage of Skellig Michael*. University of California Press, p. 7; *Skellig Michael World Heritage Site Management Plan 2008-2018*, Office of Public Works & National Monuments Service, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, p. 7.

⁴ Kelleher, C. (2020). *The Alliance of Pirates: Ireland and Atlantic Piracy in the Early Seventeenth Century*, Cork University Press, Cork University Press.

lighthouses, the island was again the focus of habitation, with the keepers and their families living in both lighthouses on the island until 1901.⁵

Sceilg Mhichíl is also one of Ireland's most important sites for breeding seabirds, both for the diversity of the species and the size of the colonies it supports. Its extreme location off Ireland's Atlantic west coast leaves the heritage of the island particularly exposed to the impact of extreme weather.



Figure 5. Puffins are among the most enigmatic and colourful of the birds who nest and breed on Sceilg.

⁵ Commissioner of Irish Lights: <https://www.irishlights.ie/tourism/our-lighthouses/skelligs-rock.aspx>

4 2025 Season

As with the opening of season 2024, the pre-season inspection of 2025 also began with the identification of rockfall damage. This time at the upper crash decks on the Lighthouse Road and also at the North Steps below the monastic site. A large rock had impacted the roof of the crash deck and a series of rock slides had taken out a section of about 10 of the North Steps. Other works too took place but these did not warrant archaeological input apart from an application by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to insert a select number of bird boxes around the island.

4.1 Ministerial Consents and Extension works in 2025

Two new Ministerial Consents were approved by NMS to OPW and NPWS for works while three extensions to existing Ministerial Consents were approved by NMS to OPW. Progress was also made on the post-excavation analysis and write up of a small 2011 excavation undertaken by NMS at a platform erected by the lighthouse keepers (Ministerial Consent **C000475**).

4.1.1 C001455: Repair and conservation of North Steps.

This was the most extensive works carried out in 2025, and the most difficult. It required pre-works survey and archaeological advise, with an approved method statement setting out how best the steps could be repaired. An added consideration was to ensure non-disturbance of nesting birds with an ecologist on site at all times too. The archaeological works was carried out under registered no. E005831.

4.1.2 C001449: Insertion of nest boxes.

The works required for this was the digging for discreet holes into which artificial nest boxes were inserted for manx shearwater and storm petrels. The NPWS applied for the Ministerial Consent and engage a suitably qualified archaeologist to monitor the excavation of the holes. The archaeology was carried out under register no. E005382.

4.1.3 C001122 Ext: Crash deck repair and insertion of security gate.

The impacted stones were removed from the crash deck at upper lighthouse road and the steel roof repaired by OPW. In the lower Cross Cove area, there was a need to repair the decking there too. As well as that, and to ensure no access can be achieved

during the off-season on the island, a security gate was installed beneath the Cross Cove crash deck. This was erected using the frame of the crash deck and thus no ground disturbance was required.

4.1.4 C001092 Ext: Erection of CCTV signage landing pier.

Signage was erected at the edge of the landing pier to inform on CCTV being present and also that drone usage was prohibited. Both are required by law. As the signage was inserted into the concrete of the pier, there was no requirement for archaeological input.

4.1.5 C001189 Ext: Undertaking annual sweep of loose rocks.

As per each year to ensure smaller loose rock can be gathered and safely removed, a 'sweep' of the slopes immediately above the lighthouse road is carried out. It is preceded by archaeological inspection of the areas to ensure no archaeology is there, and thus can be avoided. The archaeologist also maintains a watching brief during the sweep, as does a consultant ecologist, whose remit is to ensure no impact to nesting birds or their habitats occur. No new discoveries were made archaeologically during the 2025 sweep, which was undertaken successfully.

4.1.6 C001081: Installation of temporary toilet at Lower Lighthouse

A consent was issued to OPW in 2022 for the installation of a temporary toilet in an area of the Lower Lighthouse, specifically for OPW and NMS staff. This was not completed until 2025. No ground works were involved.

4.2 Maintenance works

OPW, as managers undertook the following as part of their annual maintenance works.

- Cleaning of the Lighthouse Road to ensure any moss, debris, etc. was cleared; sandbagging to ensure water flow was directed so as not to impact into the road surface. No ground works were involved;
- Continued survey of the wall up at the monastery by the Discovery Programme to map movement and inform on future conservation works at that location;

- Enlargement of safety signage in two area of the South Steps, as per discussions in 2024. The two areas in question are particularly precarious as they turn at right angles. The signage, comprising yellow arrows to guide the visitor, are essential to visitor safety. No ground works were involved as the signage was inserted in pre-existing supports;
- Digital survey of South Steps, to inform a safety audit. No ground works involved.

4.3 NMS Archaeological inspection

NMS inspections, undertaken by Dr Connie Kelleher, NMS Senior Archaeologist and advisor to the WHP, were limited this year due to a combination of inclement weather delaying works and OPW colleagues focusing on safety measures, surveys, etc. with minimal works undertaken warranting archaeological input.



Figure 6. View of North Steps and damage immediate to lower right corner Elevation and complexity of site is apparent.

While the impact to the crash deck was minimal – and confirmed that the decking was doing its job in protecting anyone travelling underneath, the damage to the steps was much more extensive. An inspection was carried out in June, to view the damage and

come up with a plan on how to repair and conserve the steps. A section of about 10 steps had been completely take out by what appeared to be a small landslide of rock and earth. The steps had been pushed over the side of the steep incline. A safety rope was set up and we were able to inspect the full length of the area but it was clear that the original steps were now gone.

Discussions on how best to do the repair took place on site, as did the need for a pre-and post-impact archaeological survey, accompanied by onsite monitoring during the works. A similar approach was put in place with the resident ecologist by the NPWS. It was agreed that suitable stone would need to be brought in, which added to the complexity of the work. Following the inspection, OPW submitted their application for Ministerial Consent and all proposed methodologies were approved by NMS. The work was undertaken in July, though delayed intermittently by bad weather. Stone was sourced locally, from loose rock and lowered down the slope before being put in place by the OPW onsite staff. A pre-and post-works plan was made of the works and steps.

An archaeological report has been submitted on the works.

The temporary composting toilet works were also inspected at the same time in June to coincide with the meeting for the North Steps works.

5 Climate Vulnerability Assessment Report Publication

Funded by the National Geographic Society and Manulife, the **Preserving Legacies Project 2023** involved ten heritage sites including two primary sites, the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras and Petra, Jordan and eight observer sites: Angkor Archaeological Park; Cambodia; Border Fields, USA and Mexico; Historical Mosque City of Bagerhat, Bangladesh; Nan Madol, Micronesia; Levuka, Fiji; Koutammakou, the Land of the Batammariba, Togo and Benin; Sceilg Mhichíl, Ireland; and Port, Fortress, and Group of Monuments at Cartagena, Columbia.

Sceilg Mhichíl was the only WHP chosen in Europe. As part of being a selected participant, and as a deliverable of the project, in partnership NMS and OPW undertook a Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment. Carrig Conservation Ltd. were engaged to undertake the CVA and to generate a report on same. In November 2023, our OPW colleagues organised an Expert Group met for a workshop in Dublin. Following on from that, NMS organised a CVA workshop, held with the local community in Portmagee, in Co. Kerry, on 27 April 2024. The latter was preceded by an Information Night in Portmagee on the 8 April. The Information Night included short presentations by all key stakeholders (OPW, NPWS and NMS) and enabled a Q&A. It was very well attended.

The draft CVA report was issued in July 2024 and went through the process of peer review and editing. Completion of the delivery under the Preserving Legacies Project was the publication of the CVA report on Sceilg Mhichíl WHP and the launch event took place in November 2025 in Valentia, Co. Kerry.

The results of the CVA identified five primary areas for ongoing discussion and collaboration in regard to climate adaptation options:

1. Visitor management;
2. Human resources;
3. Monitoring & Research;
4. Experimental options;
5. Climate Action.

Figure 6: Impacts of most concern based on technical stakeholder surveys (n=28)

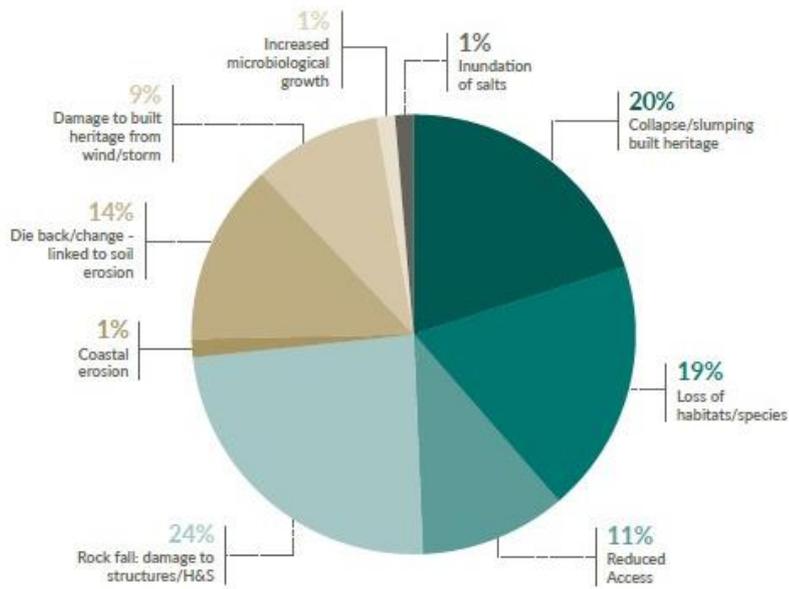


Figure 7: Visual representation of interacting climate hazards and impacts for Sceilig Mhichil

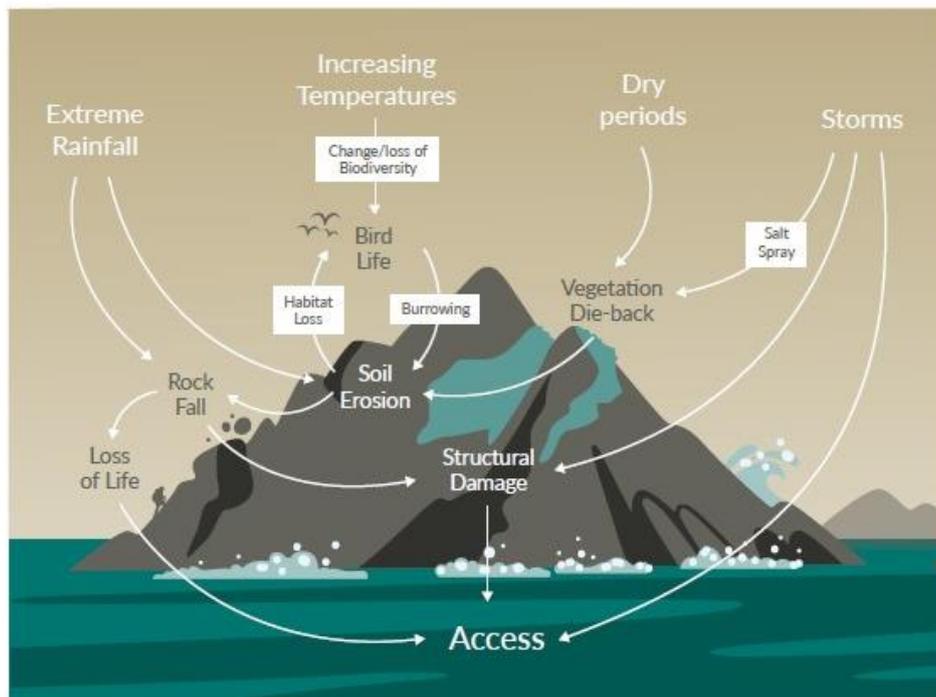


Figure 7. Diagram of primary findings from Sceilig Mhichil WHP CVA Report.

The launch was well attended and received good overall community support, as well as being highlighted nationally. More than anything it highlighted the critical need for all stakeholders to work together in addressing the growing threat of climate change to Sceilig Mhichil WHP.

6 End-of-Year Works Meeting

The final year works meeting between NMS, NPWS and OPW was held on the 10 December 2025. The 2025 season of works were recapped and priorities identified for 2026.

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