

St. Kilda (United Kingdom)

No 387 bis

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: United Kingdom

Name of property: St. Kilda (Hirta)

Location: Western Isles, Scotland

Date received: 29 January 2003

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. In terms of *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* this is an organically evolved *relict cultural landscape*. The property has already been inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1986, under the natural criteria iii and iv.

Brief description:

This volcanic archipelago, comprising the islands of Hirta, Dun, Soay and Boreray, with its spectacular landscapes along the coast of the Hebrides, includes some of the highest cliffs in Europe, which provide a refuge for impressive colonies of rare and endangered species of birds, especially puffins and gannets. There is evidence of human occupation from over 2,000 years, who have left the built structures and field systems, the cleits and the traditional stone houses of Highland type. The remaining islanders decided to evacuate St. Kilda in 1930.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The archipelago of St. Kilda, the remotest part of the British Isles, lies 66 km west of Benbecula in Scotland's Outer Hebrides. Its islands, with their exceptional cliffs and sea stacs, form the most important seabird breeding station in north-west Europe. There is archaeological evidence of habitation from over 2,000 years. The islanders evacuated St. Kilda in 1930.

There are some medieval structures left, but most of them have been lost over time, possibly also because the material was reused in new constructions. Important changes came in the 19th century, when most of the earlier residential buildings were replaced with new structures. The first new constructions were the two-storey Store (or Featherstore) ca 1800-18, and the church and manse. The Church is a relatively plain two-bay oblong structure built in 1826, a schoolroom being added on the Northwest side in 1898/1900.

The most common traditional structure on St. Kilda is the **cleit**, of which about 1260 have been recorded on Hirta, distributed all over the island, and more than 170 others on the outlying islands and stacs. Cleits are small drystone structures of round-ended rectilinear form, with drystone walls and a roof of slabs covered with earth and turf.

Within this basic plan are numerous variations of door position and some examples even include integral adjoining cells. Cleits were usually used to store materials, and their generally open wall construction was designed to allow a through-flow of air. They were used to store birds, eggs and feathers, and harvested crops as well as peat and turf which were both used as fuel.

The protected settlement areas on St. Kilda are:

- St. Kilda Village, the largest settlement, on the south side of the island, overlooking the Village Bay or Loch Hirta;
- Gleann Mor settlement, on the north side of the island, on the Glen Bay or Loch a' Ghlinne;
- Geo Chrubaidh settlement, north-west of the previous;
- Claigeann an Tigh Faire, faire platform and cleitean, a small site on the west coast.

The present-day *Village* results from the 19th-century effort to provide more up to date accommodation. A new village core consisted of a laid-out string of **blackhouses**, mostly end-on to what is known as *The Street*. These structures, 24 of which survive fairly intact, were mainly built in the 1830s. They were of the usual Hebridean plan, being rectangular, thick-walled and with rounded external corners. The roofs were thatched with barley straw, some later gabled, and if they had windows they were glazed. There was a single entrance, used by both animals and people, and the lower end was used as a byre. At the same time, the fertile plain of Village Bay was divided into numerous **radial plots**, most of which are still evident in the ground. Around the blackhouses are **enclosures**, some of which may define small gardens. Small circular gateless enclosures within the head dyke form 'planticrues', used to shelter growing crops of kail or cabbages. *The An Lag* enclosures, the date of which is unknown, might have been enclosures to grow vegetables in a sheltered location.

After a damaging hurricane in 1860, a row of 16 'white houses' were built along the Street, fitted into the gaps between the blackhouses. These were of a standard Scottish north-west Highlands three-roomed design. They were different from the previous type; they face seaward and have a hard rectangular outline of mortared stone and chimneyed gables. The roofs were first covered with zinc plates nailed down to sarking boards as a security against the wind. The zinc was later replaced by tarred felt, and the external walls were rendered. In 1898 the houses were provided with new floors, concrete or timber. Most of the houses have a revetted drainage ditch at the rear, a common Highlands feature.

Following the evacuation in 1930, the buildings of St. Kilda began to deteriorate fairly rapidly, and within ten years most were roofless. In 1957 the Air Ministry re-occupied the manse and Factor's House, repaired the church, and built a block of Nissen huts. At about this time the road to the top of Mullach Mór was built, using material quarried from the side of the hill. The present Ministry of Defence buildings were occupied after 1966, and the radar facilities on Mullach Mór and Mullach Sgar have gradually developed over the last 35 years. There are several remains of aircraft, crashed on the islands in the 1940s, now treated as archaeological remains.

History

The origins of the name St. Kilda are uncertain, as there has never been a saint called Kilda. *Skildar* is the Old Icelandic word for 'shield' which would describe the shape of the islands as they appear to rest on the surface of the water. Archaeological evidence suggests that Hirta has been occupied, almost continuously, for well over 2,000 years. It is certain that the Vikings visited and may have settled the islands. The place names on the islands reflect both the Norse and Gaelic influence.

The first comprehensive account of life on St. Kilda was provided by Martin Martin, who visited the islands in 1697. At this time, St. Kilda was owned by the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan, and would remain with a branch of the family until the time of evacuation in 1930. At the time of Martin's visit there were approximately 180 people on Hirta, living in a main settlement in Village Bay. They kept sheep and cattle and grew crops, but mainly used the products from seabirds and their eggs. They caught the birds by either scaling the cliffs from the bottom, or by lowering themselves down to the cliff ledges where the birds nested. The birds provided them with oil and feathers, which they collected and used as payment in kind for their rent.

In 1822, the Reverend John MacDonald, a renowned evangelical preacher, the 'Apostle of the North', visited St. Kilda. He set about the foundations of a puritanical religion, built upon by the Reverend Neil MacKenzie who arrived as resident minister in 1830. He decided to try to improve the standard of living of the St. Kildans. The traditional 'run-rig' system of agriculture was now replaced by a permanent allocation of land to each family. The old village houses were demolished and replaced by a line of black houses on Village Bay. In 1861, MacLeod paid for a new set of cottages, which were built by his masons from Dunvegan. These were erected alongside the black houses, many of which were retained as byres.

In 1865 the Reverend John Mackay was sent to St. Kilda and set about imposing a strict rule over the islanders. By this time, much of the tradition of music and poetry on the island was forgotten and now it was replaced by the requirements of this strict faith. Other factors in the history of the St. Kildans were the diseases. A smallpox epidemic in 1724 killed most of the population. The population never again exceeded 110, and the traditional economy began to falter. From the 1870s, visitors started coming to the Village Bay. Money was introduced and the St. Kildans came to rely on the tourists for income. By the beginning of the 20th century this uncertain source of income also began to decline. Communication with the mainland was difficult though a post office was opened in 1899.

During the First World War, 1918-9, a naval unit stationed on the island bringing radio communication, regular mail, employment and supplies. The naval gun and ammunition store were added in 1918 in response to a German U-boat attack which destroyed the communications mast, the Store and some other buildings. By 1928 the population had fallen to 37. In 1930 the remaining islanders signed a petition requesting evacuation, which was granted. On 29th August 1930 they left the islands. The majority settled to work for the Forestry Commission on the mainland. In 1931 the islands were sold by the MacLeods to the Earl of

Dumfries, later to become the 5th Marquess of Bute. He retained the property, unoccupied and managed as a bird sanctuary, until his death in 1956. In January 1957, it was acquired by the National Trust for Scotland.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The site has been designated as a National Nature Reserve and a National Scenic Area from 1957. Selected areas of Hirta are included on the Schedule of Ancient Monuments, and are protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.

Management structure:

The National Trust for Scotland (The Trust) owns the archipelago of St. Kilda. A linear management relationship has been established between the Trust, the Scottish Natural Heritage (earlier Nature Conservancy Council for Scotland) and the Ministry of Defence (earlier Air Ministry). The three organisations liaise informally at the local level and meet at an annual Tripartite meeting, to review the previous year's activities and plan for the year ahead.

In 2003, the Trust took the management of St. Kilda National Nature Reserve in-hand from Scottish Natural Heritage as an 'Approved Body'. The recently formed integrated team of conservation professionals in the Trust's Highland and Islands Region will support the line management of the property. The Trust has the expertise in the Region to take on the direct management of the islands' natural heritage.

There is a St. Kilda World Heritage Site Management Plan 2003-2008, agreed by the National Trust for Scotland with its partners.

Resources:

The expertise and other resources are guaranteed by the National Trust for Scotland and the partners who have agreed to implement the management plan.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The key aspects of the tangible cultural heritage of St. Kilda are the structures and field systems that provide immediate, visible evidence of aspects of over 2,000 years of human habitation. Hirta in particular has a tangible sense of time-depth to its historic landscape.

Criterion iii: The islands bear an exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition which has now disappeared, namely the reliance on bird products as the main source of sustenance and livelihood and of the crofting way of life in Highland Scotland. St. Kilda also represents subsistence economies everywhere – living in harmony with nature until external pressures led to inevitable decline;

Criterion iv: The village is an outstanding example of a type of building ensemble or landscape, which illustrates a significant stage in the human history of Scotland; the establishment of crofting townships and land allotment, and the restructuring of communities by remote higher

authorities which often led to the mass emigration of Scots and establishment of Scottish enclaves around the world;

Criterion v: Similarly, the village and associated remains are the most complete example of a traditional human settlement and land-use which is representative of 19th-century rural Highland Scottish culture which, in 1930, became the victim of irreversible change.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the nominated site in October 2003.

ICOMOS has also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Gardens / Cultural Landscapes.

In its report of April 1986 to the World Heritage Committee, ICOMOS supported the inscription of St. Kilda on the basis of criterion v. The Committee noted that 'St. Kilda, though being recommended for inscription as a natural site in the World Heritage List, also had supportive cultural values as evidence of man's harmonious interaction with nature over time'. (CC-86/CONF.001/11)

St Kilda was inscribed as a natural site in 1986. In 2004 the World Heritage Committee approved an enlargement of the boundaries. It also agreed to defer the nomination to inscribe St. Kilda as a cultural site in order to allow the State Party to carry out a more comprehensive comparative evaluation. A revised comparative evaluation was submitted to the World Heritage Centre at the end of December 2004. The supplementary material has been incorporated into this revised ICOMOS report.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The traditional use of the built structures and the land continued until 1930 when the last islanders decided to move to the mainland. In 1957, the islands came in the ownership of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS), and it was protected as a National Nature Reserve. It has been an open-air museum from 1975. Since the 1950s, the conservation policies by NTS working parties have evolved as far as techniques are concerned. The early use of cement has been replaced by lime mortar and the use of traditional techniques, e.g. rebuilding fallen dry stone walls and using grass turf on top of the roof slabs in the traditional way. The techniques are being tested for their resistance to erosion by strong rain and winds, as well as grazing and climbing of sheep. NTS will also continue its tradition of voluntary work parties carrying out the bulk of maintenance work each summer under the guidance of the St. Kilda archaeologist and various experts.

State of conservation:

As a whole, and taking into account the natural processes of decay, ICOMOS considers that the current conservation and management policies are reasonable and contribute to maintain the authenticity and integrity of the St. Kilda.

Management:

With the adoption of the revised management plan, the National Trust for Scotland has the overall management responsibility of St. Kilda, working jointly with partner organizations. The recently formed integrated team of conservation professionals in the Trust's Highland and Islands Region will support the line management of the property and means that the Trust now has the expertise in the Region to take on the direct management of the islands' natural heritage. The Ministry of Defence base secures monitoring and a limited access for visitors to the islands all the year round. Special winter inspection trips would be too expensive for the Trust. The existing medical centre, the radio/telephone/e-mail service, and the existing helicopter service at the base are also of advantage to the work of the Trust in the active summer months. The Management Plan prepares for action if the MoD base should be closed down, though this is not foreseen for the time being.

The zones protected as cultural heritage under the 1979 act are limited to specifically identified settlement areas rather than taking into account the whole cultural landscape.

The question of a buffer zone was discussed during the re-nomination process by the authorities, who concluded not to suggest such a zone. For the physical cultural heritage on land the sea in itself serves as a protection area around the islands, and therefore an additional buffer zone was not found to be necessary. There are risks e.g. in connection with gas and oil exploration west of Shetland and related tanker traffic. However, since the whole of the nominated site is regulated by a large range of conservation measures under both British and European laws, it was concluded that no buffer zone could add to that.

Risk analysis:

The St. Kilda management plan analyses the potential risks that the island environment might face, and identifies actions to prevent, monitor and mitigate such risks, as well as eventual response in the case of a disaster. The risks to the environment in general include problems such as those caused by oil spills, coastal erosion, the impact of eventual shore-based or offshore developments, unauthorised flying activity, and the possibility of closing the MoD radar base. Considering the particular climatic and geological nature of the islands, visitors must be carefully controlled not to face the risk of accidents.

Authenticity and integrity

St. Kilda, also due to its difficult access, has retained its overall historic authenticity and integrity. The conservation and management are in line with these conditions. It is noted that the objective of the National Trust for Scotland is to keep the remains and other man-made structures on the islands in such a condition that the buildings and the past cultural tradition can be understood. Five of the sixteen houses in the Village have been re-roofed and made habitable for working parties, using original building materials in the roofs and windows. The interiors are mainly modern, except for one house which is presented as close to its 1930 state as possible. The majority of the cleits have survived to this day without any maintenance, but they are too numerous for the Trust to

take care of all of them (nearly 1,300 on Hirta and some 170 on the other islands). Therefore a number of these structures, unique for St. Kilda, will eventually fall apart. The challenge for future conservation will be to keep a balance between the principle of minimum intervention and the active conservation work to stop decay, while keeping records of all the work that is done. The modern installations, the radar base and related new buildings, make relatively little impact on the landscape. This is partly due to their fairly small size, but also due to being painted in dark colours rather than white as earlier.

Comparative evaluation

The revised comparative evaluation considers the cultural qualities of the landscape of St. Kilda, and then compares and contrasts these, first with other remote islands in the same geo-cultural area, and then with possible comparators elsewhere in mainland Europe and further afield.

The cultural qualities of St. Kilda have already been established in this report; they are connected with its remoteness and harsh physical environment; the long time depth of its occupation allied with the good state of preservation of its remains, the self-contained, communal and egalitarian nature of its communities, the harsh, visual beauty of its cultural landscape, and the dramatic end to its occupation, all of which have combined to give it an iconic status as a place that represents the nobility of island life.

St. Kilda and the scattering of islands around the north and west coasts of Scotland, and the Atlantic coast of Ireland, can be considered to be a geo-cultural region. Across these islands much archaeological evidence survives, but as the study of remains shows, none compares in time-depth and density with that of St. Kilda: in many instances early settlement remains have been incorporated into later settlements. And none compare with St. Kilda in terms of remoteness and cultural intensity. In the less remote islands, the culture was more similar to that on the mainland, as the communities were linked to it socially and economically; in the remoter islands there was not the intensity of settlement found on St. Kilda, nor have they achieved iconic status in contemporary culture as exemplars of island life.

Thus, although St. Kilda was part of the overall social and economic pattern that emerged on these islands, for reasons of remoteness and particular geological characteristics, its culture was differentiated from other islands: St. Kilda reflects the most intense and extreme manifestation of island culture in this locality, having tangible qualities in abundance as well as evocative spiritual qualities associated with its aesthetically beautiful landscape that is frozen in time.

Looking at comparators in the northwest seaboard of mainland Europe, off the shore of Norway, it can be seen that islands such as the Faeroe Islands, in spite of their apparent remoteness, were tied into long distance fishing and other trade routes and had regular contact with the mainland. On Vega, and its neighbouring islands, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2004, the distinctive way of life is associated with the harvesting of duck down, a valued commodity, which tied the islands into the trade of the mainland Hanseatic towns. Fishing off these islands

was also part of long distance forays into the Arctic Circle producing fish for trade.

Vega is still a living landscape: on those islands that have been abandoned the nature of the building material, timber, means that very little survives in the long term, so no fossilised landscapes exist that display a long time frame of settlement.

If St. Kilda is compared on a global scale with other remote and comparatively self-contained island communities such as Glacier Bay, Alaska, Tristan da Cunha and Haiwar Island, and including those inscribed on the World Heritage List, such as Pico, and Rapa Nui, few convincing parallels emerge. There are no obvious comparators on the World Heritage List, as cultural landscapes such as these can be seen to be geo-culturally specific.

Cultural landscapes, particularly those associated with rural societies that have evolved over centuries or even millennia, are firmly rooted in their own regions and are reflections of the cultures that created them. What distinguishes those places of high value from other places is the scarcity, rarity or distinctiveness of what has survived, or their peculiar or very local response to circumstances, or their strong intangible associations.

The extensive and detailed revised comparative analysis has confirmed the high value of St. Kilda as representing the remote island culture of the northwest Atlantic seaboard of Europe. But it also shows it to be an exemplar of that culture, in terms of the intensity of its physical remains, and in terms of its existence value as the perceived spiritual home of noble island life.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The cultural landscape of St. Kilda developed over more than two millennia in relation to an exceptional geological and natural context, forming a spectacular landscape, characterized by sublime beauty and a sense of remoteness.

In terms of culture, the outstanding universal value of St. Kilda is in bearing exceptional testimony to a way of life and economy based particularly on the products of birds, which developed over more than two millennia. As a result, St. Kilda developed into a cultural landscape, which is rather unique taking into account its spectacular natural setting.

This particular cultural and social organism was subject to change in the 19th century, resulting in the construction of the Village and a new land division in that area, and finally in the 20th century when the islanders departed. This period forms the final phase in the long development.

It is noted that the nomination document provides more detailed information on the natural aspects of the site rather than on the cultural landscape. There is relatively little information on the archaeological evidence of the land use and cultural landscape development in the different parts of the islands. More attention however is given to the 19th-century village.

Evaluation of criteria:

Criterion iii: St. Kilda bears exceptional testimony to over two millennia of human occupation of distant land in extreme conditions, discontinued in 1930 when the islanders decided to leave for the mainland. The economy was primarily based on bird products and farming small plots of land ('crofting' in Scotland). The elements documenting such activities include the dry-stone structures, the cleits, which are numerous around the islands. A living testimony to this economy are the Soay sheep, descendants of the most primitive domestic form in Europe, which resemble the original Neolithic sheep first brought to Britain ca 7,000 years ago.

Criterion iv: In the nomination, this criterion is referred to the Village as an illustration of a significant stage in the human history of Scotland, and the establishment of crofting townships and land allotment. Nevertheless, this is only the last phase in a long development, which had created the cultural landscape of St. Kilda with its typical dry-stone structures, the so-called *cleits*. The outstanding universal value of St. Kilda is considered to be mainly based on this ancient culture and the related landscape, referred to in criteria iii and v, rather than the new constructions of the 19th century.

Criterion v: St. Kilda represents a type of subsistence economy that evolved over centuries using the products of the birds in different ways, cultivating small plots of land and keeping sheep. Over the centuries, the island community has thus produced a cultural landscape that results from age-old traditions and land uses. Changes to this system were introduced starting in the 19th century, when the main village on the island was subject to restructuring and new land division. In the early 20th century, the islands were finally abandoned. The ancient cultural landscape has however preserved its integrity and is an outstanding example of a traditional land-use which is representative of the particular culture that developed in this distant land.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

Taking note of the limited protection areas indicated in the Management Plan, and considering that the traditional land use and the construction of dry-stone structures concerned the islands in their integrity, it is recommended that a systematic archaeological survey be undertaken as the basis for the future management policies of this cultural landscape.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the World Heritage Committee adopt the following draft decision:

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B,
2. Recalling its Decision 28 COM 14B.19 adopted at its 28th session (Suzhou, 2004),

3. Inscribes the property on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria iii and v:***

Criterion iii: St. Kilda bears exceptional testimony to over two millennia of human occupation in extreme conditions.

Criterion v: The cultural landscape of St. Kilda is an outstanding example of land use resulting from a type of subsistence economy based on the products of birds, cultivating land and keeping sheep. The cultural landscape reflects age-old traditions and land uses, which have become vulnerable to change particularly after the departure of the islanders.

4. Requests the State Party to undertake a systematic archaeological survey to underpin future management of the cultural landscape.

ICOMOS, April 2005



Typical example of the rugged coastline



An Lag, the hills of Mullach Sgar and Ruaival in the background