

## S.K.W.P.2.

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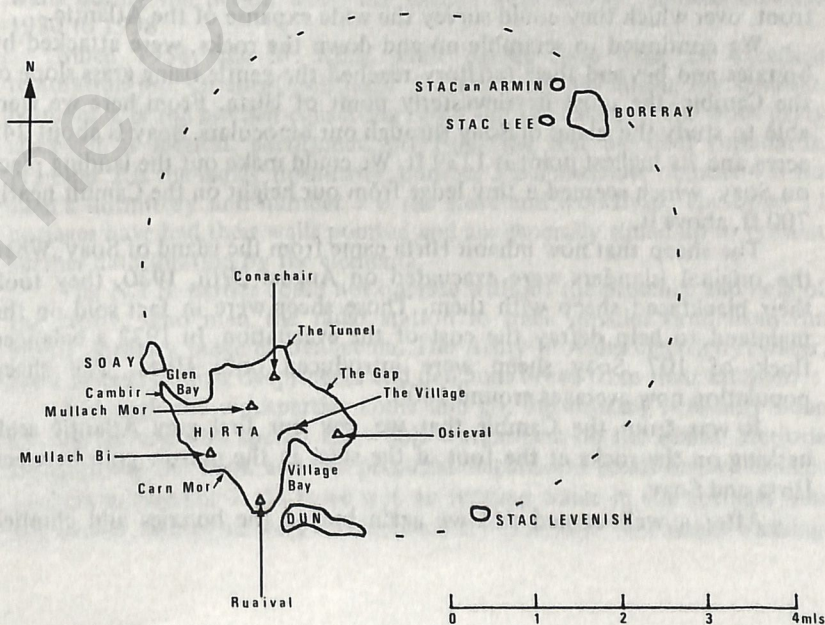
To be a member of a N.T.S. workparty on St. Kilda is a memorable adventure. Everything is totally different from what one has been used to.

Twelve of us sailed from Oban in the good ship Charna on a brilliant day in early June. The Charna is an experience in her own right. She is a converted fishing boat. Sailing through the Sound of Mull and up the Minch was great, we all sat on deck, enjoyed the views of the different islands and started to get to know each other. We had retired to our bunks sometime before we reached the Sound of Harris. Many of us woke up then as the movement of the ship changed somewhat. The constant swell would last all the way out in the Atlantic till we reached St. Kilda.

We were lucky and did the 150 mile trip in less than 24 hours. At about eight o'clock in the morning our leader Richard Castro encouraged us all to get up and stagger on deck. The island of Boreray and her stacs were looming above us, wrapped in cloud and mist. Although Hirta was only about 4 miles away as the puffin flies, it was impossible to see her cliffs.

After a very short while we were in Village Bay, still going up and down and sideways, but not with quite the same intensity. All of us were extremely grateful to see land again. To reach it we had to disembark from the Charna into a Gemini craft, which quickly deposited us at the pier.

The St. Kilda islands are approximately 50 miles west of the Outer Hebrides and are the remains of a volcano. The centre of the crater is somewhere between Boreray and Hirta.





Hirta covers nearly 1600 acres with 3 peaks over 1000 ft., the highest being Conachair at 1396 ft. All hills on the island have steep slopes, covered in short grass or heather with rocks all over the place. The seaward sides of the hills are sheer cliffs and birds nest on every available ledge, nook and cranny. Many seabirds also nest in amongst the rocks on the landward slopes. In many places walking up-hill is in fact easier than going down as one is really on a kind of steep grass ladder, the steps made by all the different sheep tracks. A complete circuit of the island involves some 8 miles of walking and over 3000 ft. of climbing.

We explored the island in a more leisurely fashion. On our first afternoon we walked across to Ruaival (584 ft.), then up to the old Decca station where we picked up the road all the way to the new radar stations on Mullach Mor (1185 ft.) passing the top of the road from the Village at about 700 ft. From Mullach Mor we descended about a hundred feet and then climbed to the top of Conachair. From here we made our way down to the Gap, the top of yet another sheer cliff at 736 ft. and from there went all the way downhill to the Village.

The next day was magnificent too, so it was decided to work extra on another day and take the opportunity to investigate the rest of the island, in case the weather should change. So we all toiled up the road, past the quarry, to the saddle rising over 700 ft. in less than a mile. We passed the bus stop and the Zebra-crossing and got our first view of Glen Bay a few yards beyond the letterbox. These signs of modern life were put up by persons unknown sometime prior to 1965.

Our next objective was Mullach Bi (1182 ft.) with spectacular views down on our left. The kittiwakes and fulmars had lovely homes on little ledges with the cliff at their backs and a beautiful clump of sea-pink in front, over which they could survey the wide expanse of the Atlantic.

We continued to scramble up and down the rocks, were attacked by bonxies and beyond their territory reached the gentle rising grass slope of the Cambir, the most northwesterly point of Hirta. From here we were able to study the island of Soay through our binoculars. Soay is about 245 acres and its highest point is 1239 ft. We could make out the landing place on Soay, which seemed a tiny ledge from our height on the Cambir nearly 700 ft. above it.

The sheep that now inhabit Hirta came from the island of Soay. When the original islanders were evacuated on August 29th, 1930, they took their blackfaced sheep with them. Those sheep were in fact sold on the mainland to help defray the cost of the evacuation. In 1932 a balanced flock of 107 Soay sheep were introduced onto Hirta. The sheep population now averages around 1400.

It was from the Cambir that we saw our first grey Atlantic seals basking on the rocks at the foot of the stacs in the narrow gap between Hirta and Soay.

After a well earned rest we again braved the bonxies and climbed



down into Glen Bay, where we could see more Atlantic seals from a good deal closer. We inspected some of the prehistoric dwellings in this area and then set off for the Tunnel, a very large spectacular arch about 300 ft. long. The sea sloshes in and through and out, more Atlantic seals are playing in the waves, while razorbills and guillemots sit crowded on the ledges. The rocks are pretty slippery, but one can walk right through to the other end and get a magnificent view of Boreray, Stac Lee and Stac an Armin 4½ miles to the N.E.

We returned to the Village by climbing out of Glen Mor, following a row of cleits which took us back to the roads to the radar station. It was a stiff climb and we thought of the St. Kilda women who walked twice a day from Village Bay over the saddle down to Glen Bay to milk the cows which were grazed in this area. The women used to pick dockleaves on the way up, as the cows only allowed themselves to be milked while munching dockleaves. The women and girls then carried the full milk pails up again and then down to their houses in the Village.

Cleits were stores for anything from nets to dried seabirds. The dry stone walls of the cleits allowed the wind through the storage space while the large stone slabs of the roof, covered with turf, prevented the rain from getting in. Cleits are found all over the island and now give shelter to the wild Soay sheep during the gales, particularly in the long winter months.

The Village consists of the Street, approximately 100 ft. above sea level, with 16 cottages built in 1861-62. These replaced the old black houses, which became stores and stables. Although most of the cleits are still in very good condition, all the houses lost their roofs and parts of the walls during the period when the islands were totally uninhabited from 1930 to 1958.

Since 1958, the St. Kilda work parties have done an excellent restoration job. Of the 16 cottages, 5 are now in use during the summer. Number 1 is the kitchen cum living room and the leader of the work party sleeps in a section, partitioned off from the rest by steel cupboards. Number 2 is the ladies' dormitory, number 3 is a museum, number 4 is the men's dormitory and number 5 is the store and workshop. The other 11 cottages have had their walls pointed and are generally tidied up to prevent further deterioration by the elements.

The N.T.S. parties could not operate without the presence and help of the Army, who man the radar station to track missiles fired from the Royal Artillery range at Benbecula. The Army provides electricity, water, food storage in their deepfreezes and delicious bread from their kitchen.

Although the workparties come and go, the cooking is usually done by one person who spends the whole workseason on the island. Marjorie Douglas was our cook and she prepared magnificent meals on two electric cookers in number 1. As there was no running water in the cottages, nor any drains, two of us were on kitchen-duty each day. This meant washing-



up after all meals, fetching water in buckets from the standpipe, emptying the slop-pail, scrubbing the tables after breakfast, sweeping out the cottages 1 to 4 and cleaning the ablution block. This building is a few 100 yards down the Street, opposite the Factor's house. It contains 2 toilets, 1 bath, 1 shower, 2 sinks and a heated towelrail. There is always hot water, except in times of drought when the water may be rationed.

The dormitory cottages are furnished with army beds and mattresses plus army blankets and a pillow. Shelves are planks hanging from the rafters and there is a good supply of nails on which one can hang all manner of things. Certainly not 3 star hotel accommodation, but perfectly comfortable and completely in keeping with the surroundings.

The Factor's house, the only two-storied building on the island, is now used by the Nature Conservancy Warden, who is stationed on the island from about March to September. The island group belongs to the National Trust for Scotland, who have leased it to the Nature Conservancy Council, who in turn sub-let a small area to the Army.

Wally Wright, the Warden, told us how St. Kilda is the only place in Great Britain where no chemical pollution has been found, as yet, on analysing eggs or dead birds and sheep. While St. Kilda was inhabited the Factor's house was used by the Factor on his yearly visit to Hirta to collect the rent, in the shape of feathers, fulmar oil and tweed. In the last few years before the evacuation, the nursing sister lived in the house.

Set completely apart from the Street and the Factor's house are the Church and the Manse. The minister and his family were never really part of the community and must have led a rather isolated existence. When the harvest of seabirds or eggs was shared out amongst the inhabitants, the minister would get some as a gift, but never as a share. The Manse is now part of the Sergeants' Mess. The Church and adjacent schoolroom have been restored and while I was on St. Kilda we had a service in the Church. On one wall is a plaque commemorating the crews of 3 aircraft which crashed on the islands during World War II. It is known who were in the Beaufighter and Sunderland, but the identity of those in the Wellington on Soay has not been established with absolute certainty.

Beyond the Church and Manse are the Gun and Featherstore. The Gun is an old Navy gun, placed there in 1918 and never fired in anger. It was brought to Hirta after the island had been shelled by a German submarine from Village Bay in 1917, when the Navy had a wireless station on St. Kilda.

The Featherstore is very tumbledown and plans are under foot to restore it in 1983. It is very near the shore and gets the full brunt of the gales in winter. Enormous waves then come through Dun gap, while rain and spray make everything very wet and the wind blows incessantly.

Fortunately we were there from June 6th to 20th and had only one day of rain, but there was nearly always a breeze. Lenticular clouds would form near the top of Conachair and over Boreray.



Our workparty did maintenance on the drains round the cottages, varnished an original wooden bench which had been returned to the island, and built the coping at the top of the chimneys of cottages 3 and 5. There was masses of stone, but it wasn't easy to find stone of the right shape and size.

We all got very involved with the history of St. Kilda. There is a good library box in number 1, which includes a number of photocopied rent reports, schoolregisters etc. We also were lucky enough to see a silent film, made in the 1920s, which showed the cottages and their inhabitants and the cultivated fields, a strip running down to the beach from each cottage on which the St. Kildans grew barley, oats, potatoes etc. Quite often the crop was spoilt, or greatly reduced, by high winds and salt spray.

Behind the 1860s cottages are the remains of the old black houses and also many cleits. The graveyard is a little way behind cottages number 10 and 11. The whole village area had a dry-stone wall along its landward perimeter to keep the sheep and cattle out of the cultivations. Now the gates in this wall have gone and the Soay sheep wander everywhere. Beyond this wall, on the way up to the Gap, are several sheepfanks. Further up on Osieval (948 ft.) there is an old wall running down hill to stop the sheep falling into the sea down the steep cliffs.

It is hard to convey the enormous numbers of sea-birds one sees on every cliff, rock and stone. These huge colonies of breeding sea-birds are forever busy. This is not surprising, as it has been estimated that the puffins and gannets alone could consume 250 tonnes of fish each day in the breeding season, some birds go up to 80 miles away to get their fish suppers.

We spent a night on Carn Mor, first to see the puffin flypast which is a wonderful sight – thousands of puffins flying round and round in a huge cloud. They look like a gigantic mass of bees dancing in front of their hive. After the puffins settled down to sleep, we waited till it was really dark, when the Manx shearwaters came in. One shearwater sits on the nest, in a burrow under a rock, while the other goes far out to sea for food. It returns in the dark and the bird on the nest calls to direct the returning mate. This noise is very weird and eerie. One minute you are sitting in silence on the rocks in the boulderfield and the next minute you are surrounded by this plaintive crying. In June when it doesn't stay dark for very long, or if there is a full moon, the feeding shearwater may not dare to land and scuttle to it's hide-out for fear of attack by other birds, so sometimes the sitting bird is not relieved for several days – their cries are very haunting.

The greater blackbacked gulls prey on puffins on the island of Dun, but the gulls on Stac Levenish feed on fish. On Hirta these gulls have been seen killing new-born lambs. When a greater blackback kills a puffin, it opens the puffin's back and eats all it's insides, more or less turning the puffin completely inside out. Gannets are very large birds – they dive



straight into the water for their fish, fascinating to watch from the top of one of the cliffs.

In the summer there is never a dull moment, either working for the N.T.S., walking up and down the hills, watching all the different sea-birds, trying to take photographs of the St. Kilda mouse or just sitting in the sun somewhere along the Street. Winter is a very different scene — dark, but not very cold, lots of rain and always wind, frequently getting to 'severe storm' or 'hurricane' force. This in turn whips up the sea, the waves pounding on the cliffs and beaches.

On our last but one day we all went across to the island of Dun, just across the bay from the Village, but separated from Hirta by the 150 foot wide Dun Gap. We went across the bay, in groups of about four, in the Gemini inflatable craft. When we got to the landing place, a rocky ledge, we stood, one by one, right in the bows of the Gemini, grabbed hold of a rope, which is firmly secured to the rock much higher up, and jumped onto the ledge as the Gemini goes up on a wave. As the boat goes down in the next trough, you are left to haul yourself up the rock along the rope. Going back is even more sporting as you descend to the ledge along the rope, stand with your back to the Gemini and simply let go of the rope and jump backwards into the craft when the boatman calls as the Gemini rises on the crest of a wave.

Dun is quite different from Hirta as there are no sheep on the island and therefore the vegetation is thick and lush. Walking is further made difficult by the thousands of puffin burrows. About 40,000 to 60,000 puffins nest on Dun. We climbed up to the highest point and through our binoculars could actually see the houses on the Long Island, 50 or so miles away.

The whole fortnight was a most memorable holiday, not only because of the unforgettable landscape and the splendid isolation of the islands. Sharing all this with a dozen people who have been brought together more or less at random, was an experience I will always remember.

Sources: N.T.S.: A St. Kilda handbook.

David A. Quine: St. Kilda revisited.

R.A. Spackman: Soldiers on St. Kilda.

