

Archaeological Impact Assessment
of the
Proposed Construction of a Barrier
on the South Steps,
Sceilg Mhichíl, Co. Kerry.



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Introduction

The island of Skellig Michael (townland *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 adjacent store which are owned by the Commissioners of Irish Lights (CIL). Skellig Michael is a National Monument in state ownership, 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 remained in the hands of the Augustinian monks 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. The Skellig islands thus passed into secular hands and eventually to the Butler family. Although the monastery ceased to exist, the island continued to be used as a place of pilgrimage.

In the early 1820s the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin (the predecessor of the Commissioners of Irish Lights) purchased *Sceilg Mhichíl* from John Butler of Waterville under a compulsory purchase order for the purpose of erecting two lighthouses on the Atlantic side. These were made accessible by an improved landing on the east side and a road that was blasted out on the precipitous southern and western sides of the island. During the period of construction, the lighthouse-builders occupied many of the beehive cells within the monastery, and the structural modifications carried out at this time have had a significant impact on areas of the monastic settlement. Both lighthouses and their associated domestic quarters were completed by 1826. The upper lighthouse went out of use in 1870 but the lower lighthouse was continuously manned until it was automated in May 1987.

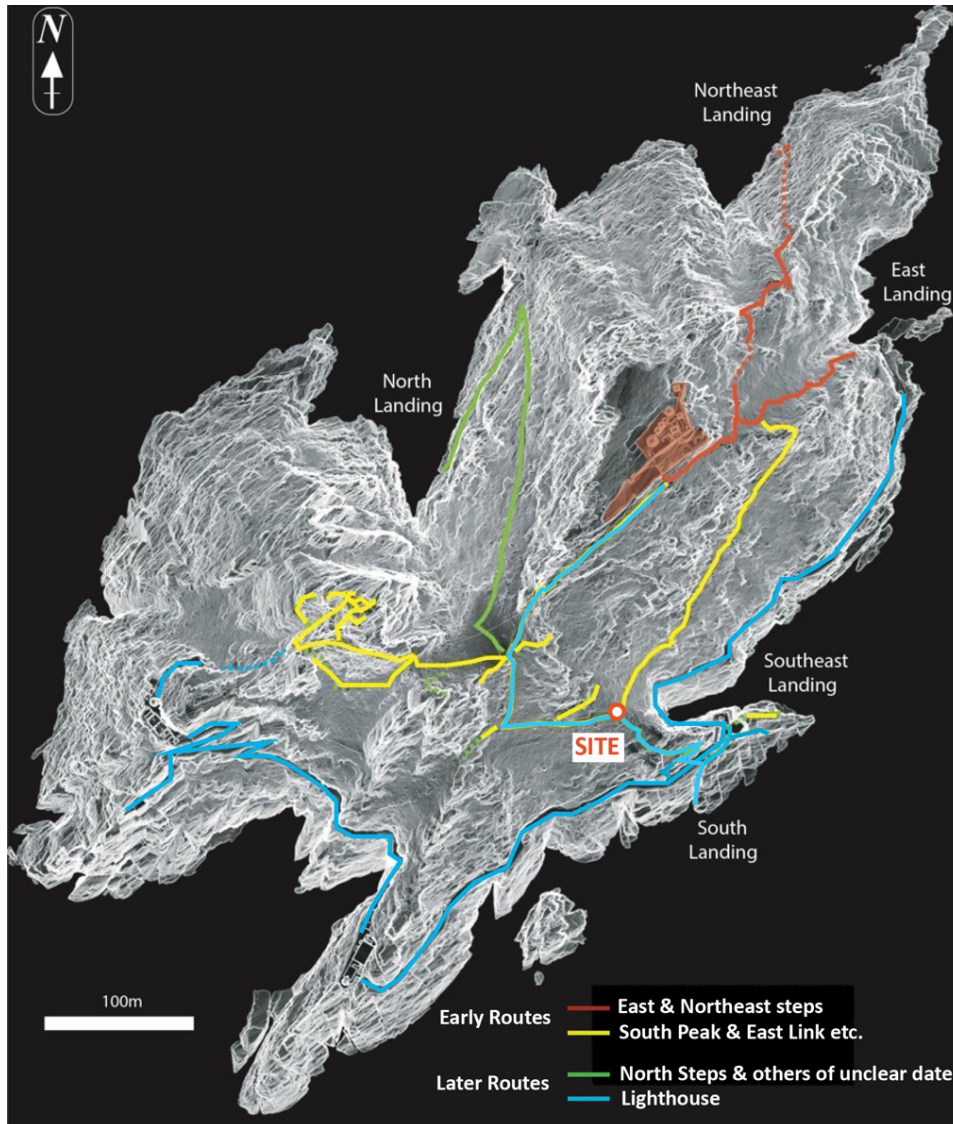


Fig. 1. Sketch plan of the known routeways on Sceilg Mhichíl, with suggested dates of surviving structures, showing the location of the site of the proposed barrier (base map LiDAR survey).

Routeways on Sceilg Mhichíl and the archaeological background to the location of the proposed barrier

There are quite a number of routeways, which were known to have been used on Sceilg since it was first developed in the seventh century (fig. 1). They have not all been surveyed or explored and the date of many remain uncertain or unproved. However, the Northeast Steps are certainly the earliest known, with the East Steps (which superseded them), the routes on the South Peak, the East Link pilgrimage route, a run of five steps below the helipad close to the Southeast Landing and a route from the ‘Crocodile Rock’ area north-eastwards up to the monastery also being clearly of early-medieval date.

Several of these certainly-early routes display evidence of a progressive development with initial runs of rock-cut steps (at least two in the case of the East Steps) being replaced by masonry steps at a later stage.

The site of the proposed barrier lies on an abrupt 90-degree turn on one route, the South Steps, less than five metres from where it joins the line of the early-medieval East Link pilgrimage route. While part of the route the present South Steps take in the area under discussion may be of early origin -viz. the early rock-cut steps below the helipad

leading to the Southeast Landing, the intersection of this route with the clearly early East Link route and the route upwards from the 'Crocodile Rock' to the monastery- there is clear evidence (for example Crofton Croker's account of description from a man who was familiar with *Sceilg* before the lighthouse builders arrived, on seeing the new South Steps they had constructed¹) that today's South Steps are of early nineteenth-century date, and were built by the men who constructed the lighthouses on the rock between 1821 and 1826. Both in their width and the greater height of the risers, the South Steps are also markedly different to those we know of on the rock which certainly predate the nineteenth century (the Northeast Steps, East Steps and the routes on the South Peak for example). No archaeological excavations have been undertaken on the South Steps and the area around them, so we also lack any evidence (such as rock-cut steps) of the line of any earlier route that might have lain here predating the current steps.

At the base of the east side of an abrupt 90-degree turn on the South Steps, where it is proposed to erect the barrier, there is a clear c. 1.5m wide flat area, which gently slopes upwards to the north. It does not look natural. While it might be no more than the result of material backing up behind a large rock on its south side, it conceivably could be the remains of a terrace, either built to facilitate the construction of the South Steps in the nineteenth century or made much earlier as part of a path linking the early East Link route to the early 'Crocodile Rock' building to the southwest.



Fig. 2. The unnaturally looking flat area to the east of the corner of the South Steps (left) where it is proposed to erect the barrier. Could this be an early terrace? The puffin in the picture was guarding his / her nest in the base of the walling supporting this corner of the South Steps.

¹ Private research by the writer

The Proposed Barrier

It is proposed to erect a barrier above the top of a right angled turn in the South Steps, which has heretofore been marked by a small arrowed sign (fig. 3). There have been to date no known accident nor fatalities at this point.

For the barrier to be effective it will need to stand approx. 1.25 metres or more above the level of the steps. A mock-up was constructed on site (figs. 3 and 4).

The pair of uprights supporting the barrier will have to descend down outside the east face of the walling beneath the corner and hence will have to be approx. 2.5m in height (fig. 4).

Given the natural tendency for persons descending to lean on the proposed barrier (note the tempting view down over Cross Cove) and also of persons ascending to hold onto it (fig. 3), the uprights will have either to be attached to the walling supporting the steps or anchored into bedrock and braced from the east.

It seems unlikely that the uprights could be anchored into the walling supporting the steps, as it is of loose and open drystone construction, and likely also provides nesting spots for storm petrels. There is also at least one active puffin nest in the base of the walling (fig. 2). It is therefore more likely that the uprights will have to be anchored into the bedrock below and east of the wall and braced by raking braces (also anchored into bedrock) on its outer side, to support it (fig. 4).



Fig . 3. Mock of the proposed barrier from the west illustrating the natural tendency for persons descending to lean on the proposed barrier (note tempting view down over Cross Cove) and also of persons ascending to hold onto it.



Fig. 4. Mock-up of the proposed barrier from the east with added yellow lines indicating base of uprights and possibly required raking braces and red lines showing likely area required to be excavated to accommodate anchoring of uprights and braces into bedrock.

Archaeological Impact Assessment

The need to anchor the base of the uprights (and also the braces- if required) of the proposed barrier into bedrock will require an area measuring around 1 metre square or more (the east-west extent will depend on the depth at which bedrock lies) adjacent to the base of the east face of the masonry steps to be cleared to bedrock. It is not known at what depth bedrock lies in this area and so the depth of material to be excavated is unknown.

If the flat area east of the steps was a man-made terrace, excavation potentially could reveal walling supporting its east side. If such walling survives it is unlikely National Monuments Service (NMS) will allow it to be removed, which could limit the area in which the bases of any possible braces could be installed and hence influence their angle.

The flat step where it is proposed to erect the barrier is much used by puffins for take offs and landings, indeed it is one of the best places to watch their comings and goings on the island. The proposed barrier above the step might interfere with this activity. The probably-required raking braces east of the barrier are also little different to those used to secure the recently erected sections of crash decks on the Lower and Upper Lighthouse Roadways, to which the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) objected so strongly, fearing they would impact on petrels etc. arriving after dark. It is therefore clear that an impact assessment will also be required from the NPWS in advance of the proposed construction of the barrier.

Archaeological Impact Mitigation

Given the possible existence here of a man-made terrace, and the location of the site on a potentially early-medieval routeway on the Rock, the material overlying bedrock will clearly have to be removed in a controlled and archaeologically acceptable way, which in effect means that an archaeological excavation of the area to be opened and exposed to bedrock east of the wall will be required. This will necessitate application for Ministerial Consent for the work. What can be removed in the course of the excavation will also be subject to approval from the NMS.

The clear presence of nesting birds in the area will also mean that any required excavation would be best undertaken outside the nesting season, that is in September.

Conclusion

It is clearly evident that if the proposed barrier is to be erected, in an area where there have to date been no accidents necessitating such a barrier, it will require an archaeological excavation of the area at the base of the east side of the masonry steps to facilitate the anchoring of the vertical poles (and any required braces) supporting the structure into bedrock.

Any proposed archaeological excavation to facilitate the construction of the barrier will of course require Ministerial Consent and what can be removed in its course will also be subject to approval from the NMS.

Given the clear presence of nesting birds in the area, any such excavation will have to be undertaken in September.

The proposed construction will also likely require an impact assessment from the NWPS due to its potential impact on birds in the area.