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World Heritage in Ireland

Sceilg Mhichíl Annual Report
Archaeological Review

2024 Season

Prepared by the National Monuments Service
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Executive Summary

The following brief report provides an overview of works that necessitated archaeological oversight only 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) and under a registration number as issued by the National Monuments Service (NMS) within the Ministerial Consent process.

A rockfall during the off-season period damaged the safety crash deck at Cross Cove, and the need to repair the damage was identified as a matter of priority in advance of the visitor season commencement.

A Community Climate Vulnerability Assessment (CVA) Workshop was organised by the National Monuments Service in Portmagee, Kerry in April 2024 under the Preserving Legacies Project,. This was preceded by an information night, also held in Portmagee, to ensure the local community have a full overview and understanding of the works taking place on Sceilg Mhichíl, the governance structure, and the studies that have commenced on climate change impact on the island.

1 Management and Governance

Detailed discussion among all relevant stakeholders precedes the undertaking of any works on Sceilg Mhichíl WHP. The NMS, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the OPW constitute the Sceilg Mhichíl Implementation Group (SMIG). They meet twice a year to discuss the implementation of the Sceilg Mhichíl Management Plan and its actions. Areas or structures that require works are set out and mechanisms are agreed to ensure best practice and preservation of the Outstanding Universal Value of the island, both natural and cultural.

Two annual meetings similarly take place with the Expert Advisory Committee (EAC) to discuss research topics and to advise on elements of research that may need to be addressed. Part of this may be a site visit by the EAC to maintain a familiarity with the WHP and any works taking place there.

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 set out.

2 Sceilg Mhichíl WHP – an Island Apart

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.

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.

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 2 Sceilg Mhichíl, known locally as 'The Rock'.

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.

The earliest documentary reference for a settlement on Sceilg Mhichíl is contained in the eight century **Martyrology of Tallagh** which refers to the death of a monk from Sceilg 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 Sceilg 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 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

[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.

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 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]

[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.

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

Figure 3 The Lower Lighthouse at Seal Cove

3 2024 Season

The pre-season began with the identification of rockfall damage at Cross Cove during the first inspection by the OPW in April. It was clear also that several other rocks were precarious on the upper slopes and would have to be either secured or removed under controlled conditions, before the visitor season, to ensure the walkways and lighthouse road was secure and safe to travel.

3.1 NMS Archaeological inspections to WHP

Two inspections were undertaken by Connie Kelleher, NMS Senior Archaeologist in 2024 as archaeological advisor to the WHP. These occurred in June, July and August. Weather was particularly challenging in the summer of that year, with scant windows of opportunity to access the island and the impact on the boats able to land visitors to the WHP was evident of this frequent inclement weather.

Figure 4 Crash deck at Cross Cove with replacement timbers on roof.

The June visit in partnership with our OPW colleagues enable inspection of the damage done by the rockfall at Cross Cove and the repair work to the crash deck there that was ongoing. A discussion also took place on the possibility of placing a larger sign at a certain location on the south steps, that turns acutely and which has been identified as potentially hazardous. We discussed a single handrail and OPW

colleagues set up a template in timber. In principle it was agreed that such a structure would not be wholly visually impacting but it could only be erected prior to the nesting period. Subsequent engagement when looking at more detailed plans resulted in identifying that there would be a need to place much longer support legs on the structure and thus it would or could have, potentially, significant archaeological impact. It was therefore agreed to increase the existing signage at the location, rather than the erection of any additional steelwork.

Figure 5 OPW personnel using a timber template to assess potential for handrail at location on south steps.

In July a dedicated inspection by Connie Kelleher looked at a stone engraved cross slab at the monastery. The slab is showing abrasion due to possible climate impact or it could denote tampering. Certainly, there is a specific area that has been cleaned. Subsequent discussion with OPW colleagues focused on whether there was a need to take the cross slab into care but the logistical reality of carrying it down the southern steps would be significant. It could be brought inside one of the huts but this would mean it was in darkness and not readily viewable, plus information as to its new location would have to be erected. It was concluded that a

wider assessment of all the cross slabs at the monastery would be commissioned to determine the extent of impact and degradation, to view previous photographic and descriptive evidence as comparative analysis, with the results informing better the requirements for the cross slab and perhaps others also.

Figure 6 Cross slab that lies horizontally beside St Michael's Church, with distinct wear evident at lower,

3.2 Ministerial Consents

Two Ministerial Consents were approved by NMS to OPW and NPWS for works and survey respectively and one Ministerial Consent Extension was approved by NMS to OPW. Archaeological monitoring was carried out by a suitably qualified archaeologist. This ensured the preservation of known or previously unidentified archaeology. Similarly, the works were monitored by an ecologist to ensure the natural heritage was protected.

The Ministerial Consents/Extensions approved by NMS to OPW were:

- MC001189 for sweep of loose rocks and shale over areas of lighthouse road. This was archaeologically supervised under register number E005547.
- MC001386 for digging of shallow holes for a spider trap survey by NPWS. The digging of the holes to house the traps was supervised by an archaeologist under register number E005798.
- MC000819 Ext for works to reinstate stone drains along lighthouse road that were archaeologically dismantled in 2022 in advance of the erection of crash decks. The crash decks were required following a serious rockfall. The drains and culvert were archaeologically reinstated under register number E004885.

The sweep was undertaken in May by OPW and a controlled removal of lose rocks formed part of the approved methodology, with the need to break up some larger rocks prior to removal from the slopes. The timbers that had been damaged in the crash deck at Cross Cove were also replaced. During the course of replacing these, which were about 20 years old, it was identified by the OPW that many were showing signs of rot and a more extensive replacement of timbers would be needed on safety grounds. More extensive replacement then took place of the remaining timbers, all of which has no impact on any cultural element and did not require archaeological monitoring.

A separate report will be issued on the spider survey by NPWS as part of its annual reporting responsibilities. Archaeological monitoring did not identify any cultural material during the digging or back-filling of the trap holes.

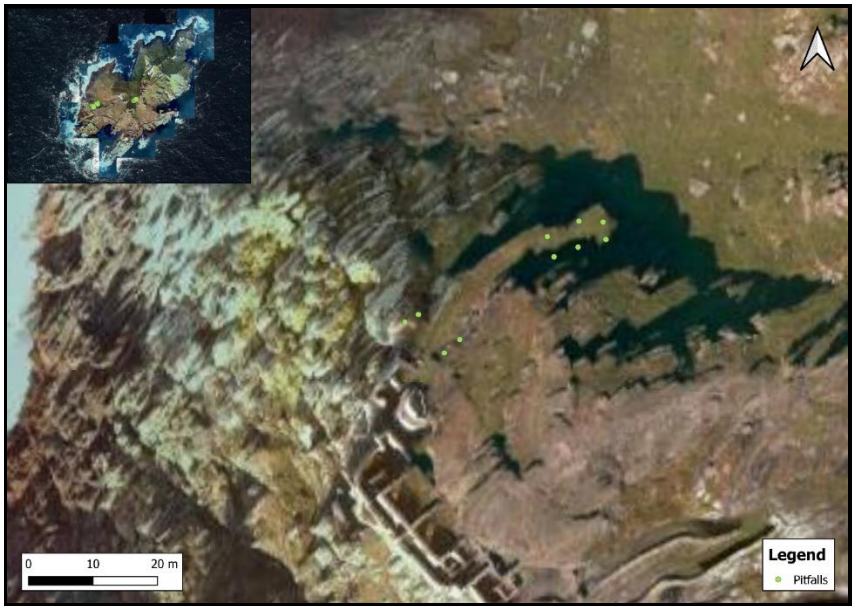

Figure 7 Location of pitfall traps set as part of a spider survey of Sceilg Mhichíl behind the Upper Lighthouse.

The reinstatement of the stone drains and culverts was reported on by the archaeologist, Mr Alan Hayden, as part of a more extensive report submitted in early 2025 on the results of his excavations at the Upper Lighthouse (MC001045), Lighthouse Road (MC000819) and spit at Upper Lighthouse (MC001210). The latter was a rescue excavation undertaken of a discrete area of dumped material beyond the upper lighthouse and undertaken under registration number E005529. The final report will be submitted, once reviewed, as part of the 2025 Annual Reporting to UNESCO.

3.3 Climate Vulnerability Assessment – Community Engagement

Funded by the National Geographic Society and Manulife, the **Preserving Legacies Project** involved ten heritage sites including two primary sites, the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras and Petra, Jordan and eight observer sites: Angkor Archeological 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. The programme integrated scientific, local, and Indigenous knowledge to identify sustainable and culturally appropriate solutions to the long-term preservation of cultural heritage sites. This integration of different knowledge systems supports developing better approaches to adaptation, learning from past ancestral practices to safeguard values for the next generations.

It was the aim of this pilot project to inspire the public to take climate action and provide confidence to local leaders to adapt and manage places of cultural significance. Sceilg Mhichíl was chosen as one of the Observer sites due to its remoteness, uniqueness and susceptibility to climate change impacts. The management of the WHP is, without doubt, a challenge and even more so with the changing climage.

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 by both OPW and NMS 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 was 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.

Figure 8 Some of the local attendees at the Portmagee community CVA workshop in April 2024 organised by NMS.

The community CVA workshop was also a success, proving to be productive by way of mapping the impact of climate change in areas of boat hire, access to island, impact to local tourism, concern by locals of loss of culture on the island, and by extension a loss to their own sense of being and place. A final report is currently being drafted on both workshops and will be launched in March 2024 and then presented to the **Preserving Legacies Project** as a key deliverable.

3.4 Marine Survey – asking research questions

Sceilg Mhichíl World Heritage Property is of international importance, and while we know much about the archaeology on the island itself, we know very little about what lies beneath the waves in the water that surrounds it. Colleagues in the Geological Survey Ireland were in the area of Dingle to complete seabed mapping, as part of their seabed mapping project with the Marine Institute INFOMAR. NMS partnered with them when they were mapping the area around the WHP and more detailed multibeam and bathymetric survey, as well as laser survey was carried out.

Figure 9 Hull mounted laser scanner on INFOMAR's survey vessel RV Keary undertaking a survey of both islands.

The impetus for the project was to engage with research questions, as per actions from the SM Management Plan, particularly to do with lesser features on the WHP, and begin to understand better their maritime context. The variety of stone steps that lead down to the water's edge from the monastery, or from the lighthouses, have been recorded but their positioning within their coastal setting has not been studied – whether, for instance, they are low, medium or high water steps. Similarly, these steps have been used over time to access the island, and as such, material may have been lost overboard or fallen off the island that now lies on the seabed beneath the steps in the water. Dive survey can identify such material but the geophysical survey will firstly provide an overview of the context of all features, both above and below the water and that in turn will inform more fully any subsequent archaeological dive surveys.

Sceilg WHP has been mapped using LiDAR, but by doing marine geophysical mapping as well, then a seamless overview that joins both the island with its submerged landscape can be achieved to provide a full map of the island within its marine setting. Sceilg Bheag or Little Skellig Island, tends to be the forgotten island though we know there are early structures on the island associated with the

monastery on Sceilg Mhichíl. While it has its challenges by way of recording due to the gannet populations on it, there is no impediment to undertaking marine geophysical survey. There are known wrecks around Sceilg Bheag too, including the 1807 wreck of the Lady Nelson and geophysical survey has the potential to return evidence for the site in its data.

The INFOMAR mapping and laser survey was undertaken in July and the entire perimeter of both islands were mapped. The laser sought to map the area just above the waterline and thus to address the 'white ribbon' or area between land and sea that multibeam could miss.

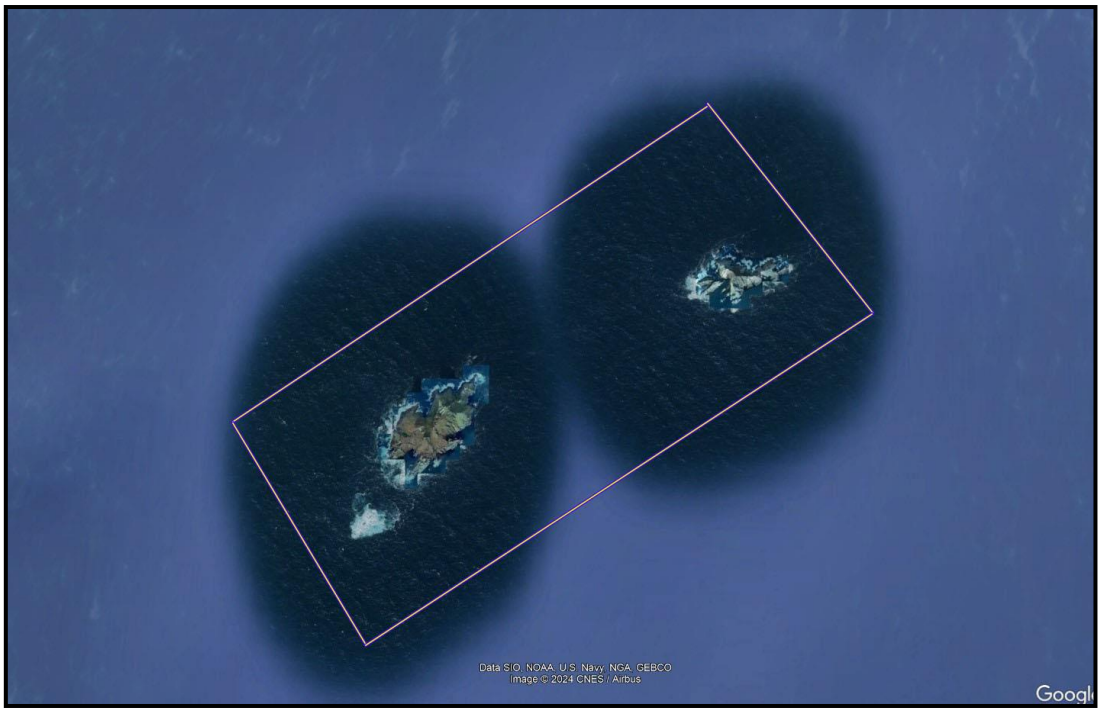

Figure 10 Marine mapping areas.

The data is being assessed currently, but it is hoped that some useful outputs from the survey could include information on sedimentation and the sedimentation transport processes at play which can indicate if scouring is occurring around the islands, and if increased storminess is impacting the steps on the WHP or the wreck at Sceilg Bheag. This information can indicate if sites are under threat from erosive processes or storm damage and can inform further archaeological intervention to protect them.

The information acquired from the seabed mapping and laser survey will link into and build on particular elements of the Research Framework for Sceilg Mhichíl and can

be used as a baseline study to the maritime context of the WHP itself. This is a key action of the Sceilg Mhichíl Management Plan.

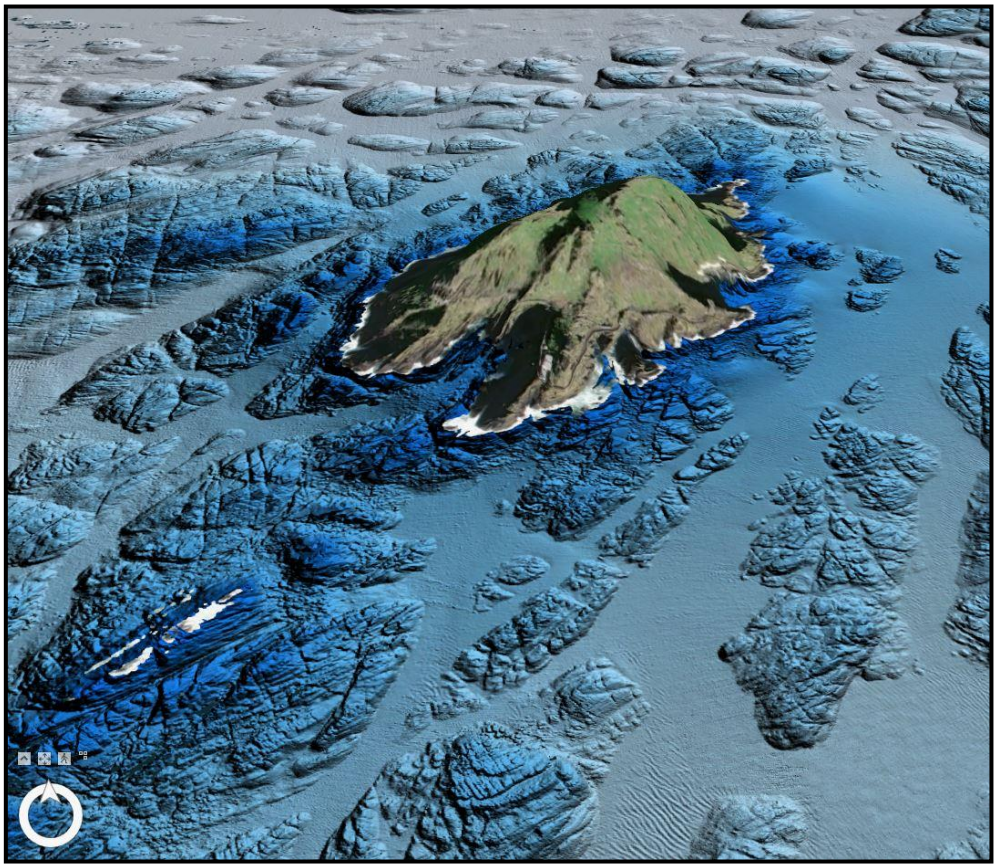

Figure 11 3D multibeam view of topography of seabed around Sceilg Bheag.

3.5 End-of-year works meeting

The final year works meeting between NMS, NPWS and OPW was held on the 10 December 2024. Recap discussions on works done took place, and future works were highlighted. In particular, the wall up at the monastery was consider, including the annual movement studies that indicated that there slight but consistent movement. It was agreed that a dedicated meeting would take place in early 2025 to discuss it in detail but that it would be prioritised as part of the proposed works for the WHP in 2025.

Works to the wall have the potential to have significant natural and cultural implications, so a decisive strategy on how to address its movement and mitigation is needed.

Other areas discussed were natural heritage studies, including completing the vegetation study, continuing the puffin and cliff nesting bird studies, as well as the invertebrate and lichen surveys.

Figure 12 Upper Lighthouse

Following attendance at a second World Heritage Capacity Building workshop organised by NMS and ICCROM in November 2024, the need to consider undertaking a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) of proposed works at the wall in the monastery as well as the proposed lighthouse project was discussed. Screening in or out the need for a HIA, and how to approach it. More detailed discussions will be tabled early in 2025.

4 Pairc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí (Kerry National Marine Park)

In April 2024 the Minister for Heritage announced the establishment of a new national marine park in Kerry – **Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí**. The new marine park encompasses over 70,000 acres of land but predominantly of sea and is Ireland's 8th and largest national park. Within it is located Sceilg Mhichíl WHP. The waters around Sceilg Mhichíl are now afforded greater protection, with a key aim of the new park being the protection and restoration of its internationally significant biodiversity and archaeological heritage.

The development of the new park will raise awareness of the WHP within its boundaries, and the natural and cultural heritage of the island and its Outstanding Universal Value adds a significant international element to the new park.

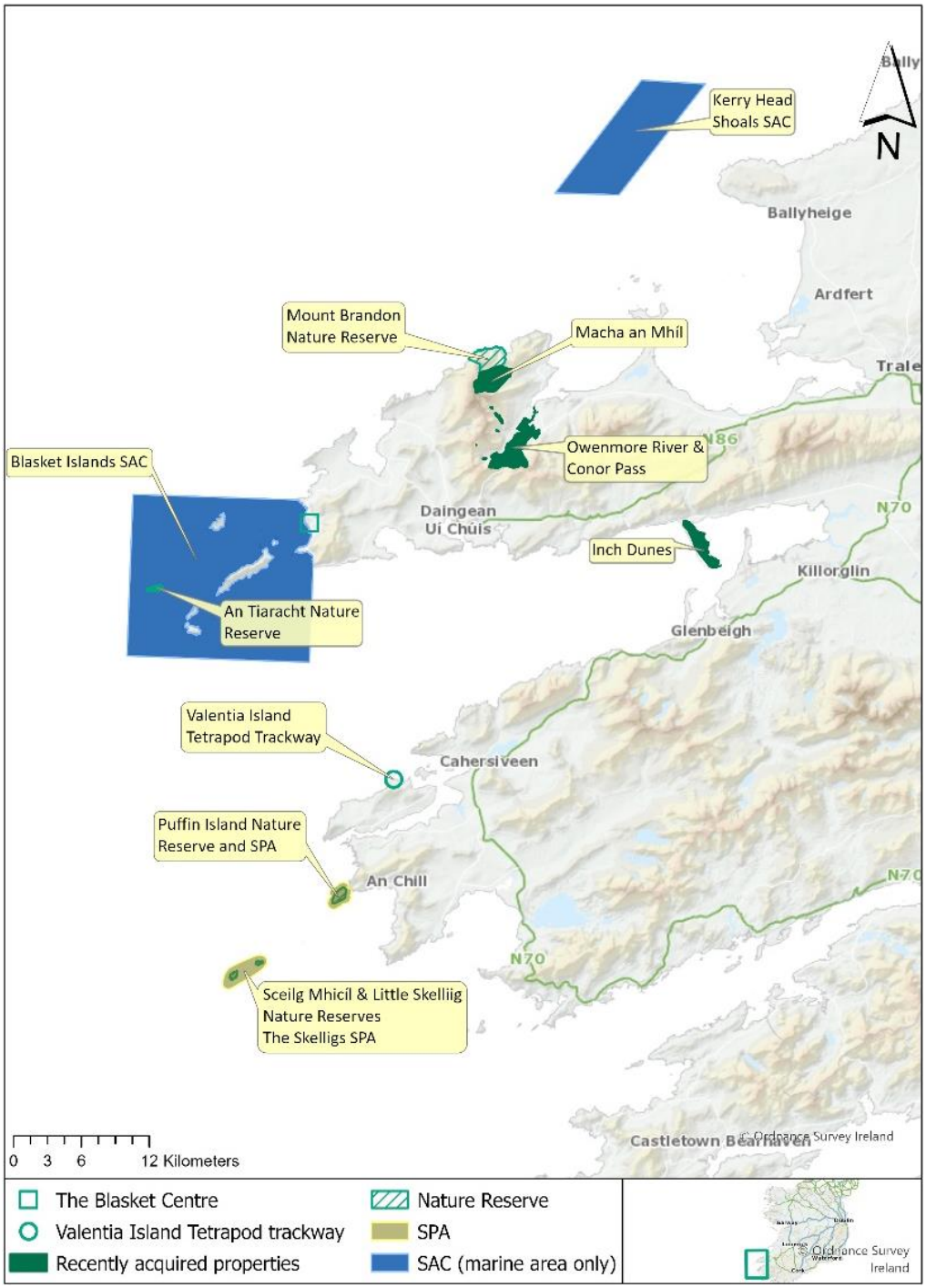

Figure 13 New Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí.

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