

Interpretation In a remote archipelago

Very few people will ever get to visit St Kilda, yet it is a World Heritage site and seen by many as a national treasure. How can interpretation overcome this? Jill Harden of the National Trust for Scotland explains. St Kilda is one of only 24 sites across the globe that is a dual World Heritage Site, recognised for both its natural and cultural heritage. This is an amazing accolade for a small archipelago that lies 100 miles west of mainland Britain and 45 miles west of the Western Isles – part of the Gaelic heartland. However, even in today's age of globalisation St Kilda is seen as remote, apart, on the edge of the world. Only 2-3,000 people manage to cross this stretch of the Atlantic each summer, a voyage that is often less than comfortable.

Before the evacuation of the population in 1930, those who wanted to find out more about St Kilda, but could not afford the journey to 'see' the islands, could only read books and articles, or study the range of postcards and photos taken by the privileged few. Since then more books have been published, more photos taken, research projects have been reported on and, occasionally, museum exhibitions organised to reflect a mediated understanding of St Kilda. Nowadays, the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) and others are attempting to address the need to share the archipelago with the many more people who want to experience St Kilda.

Virtual access offers such an opportunity to many people across the globe. Over the past seven years NTS has established two websites about the archipelago. One provides information about the islands in English or Gaelic, www.kilda.org.uk or www.hiort.org.uk. Written in the main by NTS staff, it reflects their intimate knowledge of the archipelago today, but perhaps offers all-too-brief information on a hugely diverse range of subjects – for example a page on how people lived there a century ago, and a regular news page. It provides a useful indication of the demand for information on St Kilda, with well over 2,000 hits a week at the English and Gaelic sites. The site guestbook is well used and enables discussions that would otherwise be extremely difficult. However, if a web site is to be virtual then it needs to reflect continuing changes in understanding. I would like to see this site as a living entity with more regular updates and reversionings to reflect developing thoughts and new interpretations.

The other website – the Wee Kilda Guide – also in English or Gaelic, was created for kids, but you get the impression that numerous adults use it too – as indicated in the guestbook. The site answers some of the questions that P4-7 pupils in Benbecula asked, such as 'what did children wear?' and even 'where did they go to the toilet?' Quizzes are an integral part of the site, enabling us all to find out more. But to make this site worthwhile, sufficient resources will need to be found to get regular feedback from teachers and pupils, and to interact with them via the website and ensure the site grows – something which is not guaranteed at present.

Enabling people to experience a multi dimensional St Kilda from afar is obviously a challenge. How can those who do not physically visit the archipelago touch the place? Exhibitions of photos, artworks, 'museum' objects, sound and film, either individually or combined, have been organised over the past few years by various bodies based in the Western Isles and on the mainland. Some have given information from the curator's or artist's perspective¹. Others have enabled today's St Kildans to speak about their experiences and knowledge. Only 'Mac-talla nan Eun – The Echo of Birds; a European Opera of St Kilda', staged in the summer of 2007, has been solely in the medium of Gaelic, told from a Gael's perspective². It provided interpretations of the past, and it is hoped that the project will have an island legacy for the future. Presumably there will be other innovative approaches to interpreting St Kilda from a distance in the coming years.

In an increasingly challenging world we will all interpret a place quite differently, varying according to our upbringing, our understandings and our culture. Possibly all that this reinforces is that, whatever the interpretation, community involvement is needed to touch the present or remember a past, no matter how close or how far away.

Jill Harden, National Trust for Scotland

To find out more visit:

www.kilda.org.uk or www.hiort.org.uk

www.kilda.org.uk/weekildaguide or www.hiort.org.uk/weekildaguide

¹www.cnesiar.gov.uk/museum/sgoil/previous.htm or www.claireharkess.com/st_kilda.htm

²www.stkilda.eu

Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts

Albert Einstein