

St Kilda: the pre-Improvement *clachan*

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological studies of Hirta, the main island of the St Kilda archipelago to the west of the Western Isles of Scotland, have debated the location and character of the settlement demolished during the Improvement phase of the 1830s. This paper argues that archaeological evidence for the clachan is recoverable, and that it is in very good agreement with the drawings made by Acland and Atkinson in the early 19th century.

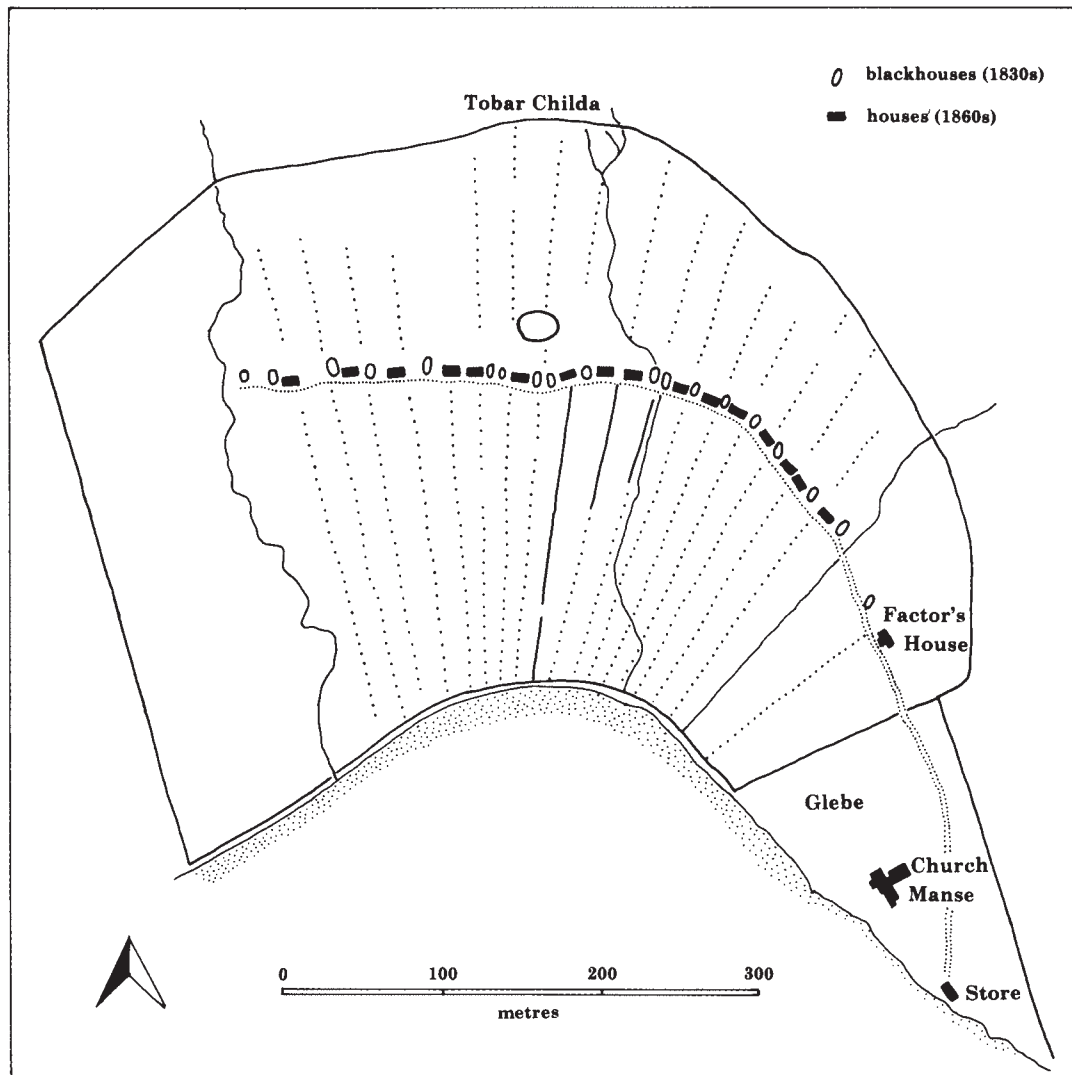
INTRODUCTION

The most significant event in the recent landscape history of Hirta, the main island of the St Kilda archipelago in the Western Isles of Scotland (57° 49' N, 8° 34' W), was undoubtedly the arrival of the new minister, Rev Neil Mackenzie, in 1829. Mackenzie encountered a group of people whose houses were clustered closely together, with their arable land scattered patchwise around them. As an Improver, he deplored this state of affairs; by the time he left the island in 1843, the houses were dispersed, and cultivation was practised within individual crofts. Mackenzie had persuaded the islanders to build a large stone head dyke around the best land at Village Bay, within which 21 or 22 crofts were laid out side by side (illus 1). Each contained a newly-constructed 'blackhouse', as well as gardens and storehouses; the blackhouses were built along, and end-on to, a gently curving, paved and stone-edged 'street' running through the middle of the enclosed land. To the east, also within a head dyke, were the newly-constructed manse and church, as well as the Glebe, and the Store – where some of the St Kildans' (non-cash) rents were housed – and

(later) a house to accommodate the Factor on his annual visit. In the early 1860s, after a hurricane, each croft (there were now only 16 of them) was provided with a 'modern', single-storey house facing onto the street; the blackhouses mostly became byres. In 1930 the island was evacuated, to be bequeathed to the National Trust for Scotland in 1957 (see Harman 1997 as a basic reference source for this brief account). The conserved buildings which greet the visitor today, some still in use, others roofless, reflect this essentially 19th-century layout very well; its plan, published in the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland volume, *Buildings of St Kilda* (Stell & Harman 1988) has become familiar to many.

In the later 20th century, a recurrent debate among St Kilda experts has been: where was the pre-Improvement 'village', and what was it like? It seems that no-one has tried to answer this question by asking the St Kilda evacuees. In 1957 two naturalists, Kenneth Williamson and John Morton Boyd, visited the archipelago with Operation Hardrock, the RAF expedition which established the radar station and support facilities. Their attention was captured by a group of about half a dozen

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ILLUS 1 General map to show the layout created by Mackenzie (Based on a Crown copyright RCAHMS drawing)

distinctive structures at Village Bay, of which 'Calum Mór's House' is the best known (Williamson & Boyd 1960, 54–66). These buildings are constructed like the well-known *cleits*, which are stone-built semi-corbelled store-houses, roofed with stone slabs and topped with turf. But they are larger than cleits, more ovoid in plan, and they tend to possess small side-cells. Williamson and Boyd assumed that they were medieval. Noting Macaulay's comment (1764, 101) that the Tobar Childa spring

was 'near the heart of the village', they suggested that the settlement would have been located on what I will call the Conachair spur, the low stony ridge extending south from the foot of Conachair, where building stone was available and the deeper soils need not be built upon. Seven out of ten 'Calum Mór's House' type structures are located near Tobar Childa (Stell & Harman 1988, 22). Observing a robbed-out head dyke which approaches from the east, to end 'in a cluster of *cleitean* and

stone-walled enclosures at the foot of Conachair', Williamson and Boyd (1960, 55) mistook it for a road, the 'tolerable causeway. . . which they call the Street', in Macaulay's words (1764, 42). They put these observations and ideas together to suggest that 'the medieval village' – which in their view was also the post-medieval, pre-1830 village – was close to Tobar Childa, and was represented by a group of distinctive buildings approached from the east by a long, terraced 'trackway'.

In the text of the RCAHMS survey, Stell and Harman discussed documentary evidence for the pre-1830 village. They noted considerable variations in the descriptions of the village, and suggested that some of this was caused by changes in the village itself over time, or 'processes of renewal'; Mackenzie indeed had recognized that some houses were more ancient than others. Their most significant contribution to the debate, however, was the publication of drawings made by Sir Thomas Dyke Acland in 1812, showing a view from the sea – which confirmed that the early 19th century 'village' was indeed somewhere in the middle of the Village Bay occupation zone – as well as a closer view of the 'Principal Square in the Capital of St Kilda' featuring a close-packed cluster of thatched buildings.

In 1997 Mary Harman published *An Isle Called Hirte*. She asserted that 'there is nothing now which is readily recognizable as belonging to the pre-1830s village'. She concluded that 'the precise location and form of any earlier village must remain a matter of conjecture' but, influenced by Acland's general view of Hirta, she also supported the Williamson and Boyd thesis that the general location was 'below Conachair and near Tobar Childa' (1997, 142).

Recently, attention has been focused on the sketch of the pre-Improvement 'village' made by George Atkinson when he visited St Kilda in 1831. It was reproduced in his journal, edited by David Quine and published in 2001 as *Expeditions to the Hebrides*. (Perhaps it was a naturalists' friendship that led to the earlier

publication of a miniature version in a book about crustacea: Bate & Westwood 1863, 46.) The houses in the sketch are sub-rectangular or boat-shaped and their long axes run mostly north/south, Atkinson's view being from the west. As Turner has recently pointed out (1999), the Atkinson drawing suggests that the settlement was somewhere near the zone where the modern Street winds its way over the Conachair spur, and/or a little south of the Street – in any case, significantly further south than suggested by Williamson and Boyd or Harman.

FIELDWORK IN 2002

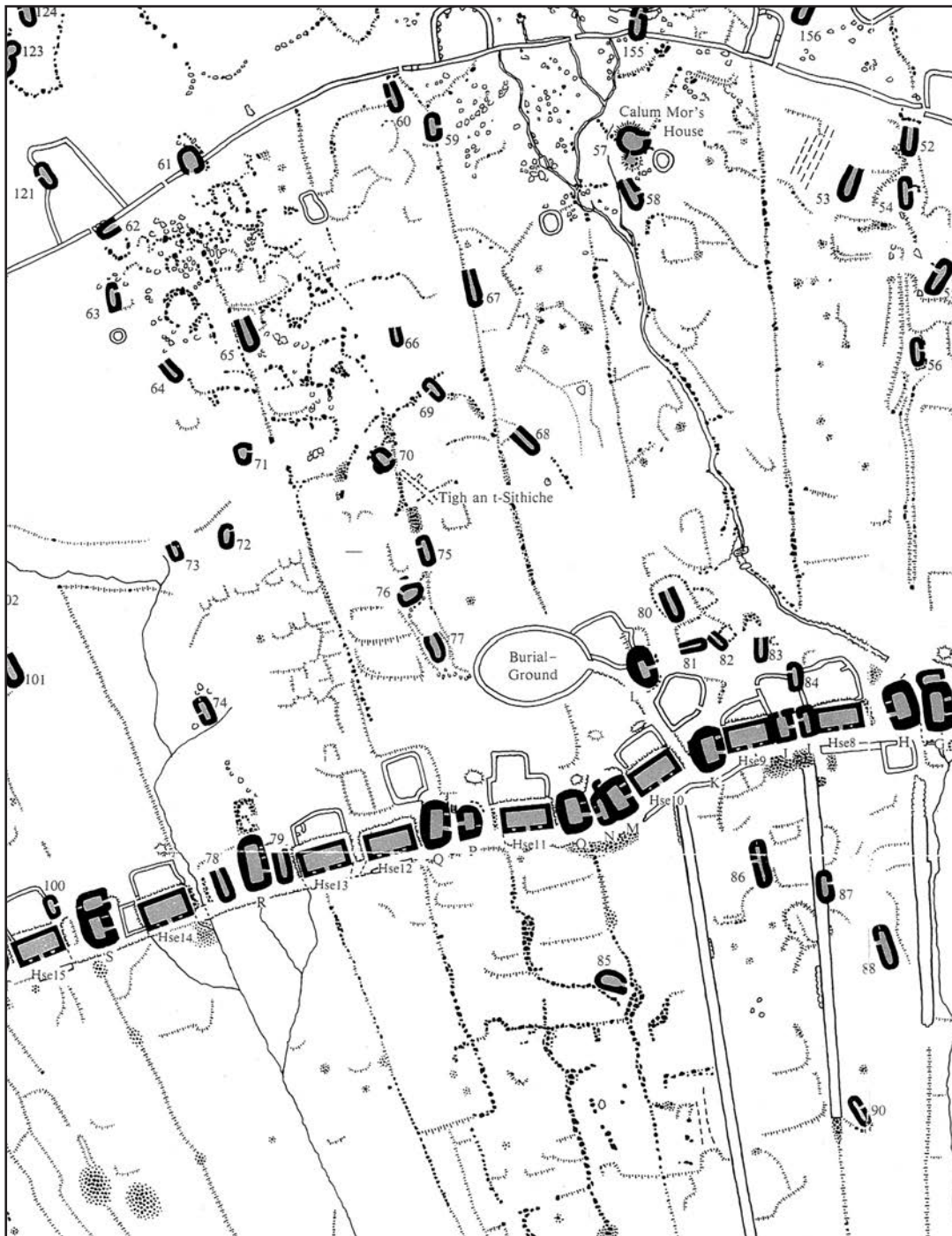
In principle it is unlikely that no trace whatsoever has survived of the pre-Improvement *clachan* (we really should stop calling it a 'village'). The *clachan* reportedly contained between 20 and 30 houses and a population of somewhere around 110 (Harman 1997, 125, 144). After all, it is agreed that it was built on a low stony spur, where the destructiveness of less than a century of subsequent cultivation would have been limited in extent and intensity. Mackenzie the Improver encouraged 'clearance', as is shown archaeologically by the presence of three consumption dykes on the Conachair spur, as well as by the evidence for the destruction of the massive walls of an old field system in the zone between the Street and the head dyke (Fleming & Edmonds 1999, 135, 146–50). However, cultivation in the last few decades of the community's existence mostly involved the creation of well drained and manured raised beds and rigs, a process in which stone clearance was not very important. Archaeological evidence for such clearance within the crofted landscape in the post-Mackenzie era certainly exists, but it is quite limited in scale. Within the half dozen crofts potentially containing remains of the *clachan*, most cultivation would have taken place on the lower lands to the south, away from the rocky ground and the frequented areas around the houses and byres.

In September 2002 I started to look for archaeological evidence for the pre-Improvement *clachan*, in the belief that it would have been located where Atkinson's drawing implies, and would have consisted of long, perhaps somewhat 'boat-shaped' houses whose predominant trend was north/south. I noted that the Street, the blackhouses, the houses and their back gardens form a narrow zone of near-total destruction, where it is often hard to be sure of the profile of the natural ground surface. The search therefore commenced to the north of Houses 8–11. It soon proved possible to assemble a convincing array of evidence, much of it already visible on the RCAHMS plan in some form (Stell & Harman 1988, endpapers). Illus 2 reproduces the latter, illus 3 a slightly simplified, enlarged and amended version which illustrates the discussion which follows. The starting point (a) is the building east of the burial ground, marked as the 'Village Barn' on the Sharbau/Thomas map of 1858–60 (reproduced in Stell & Harman 1988, 5). This building has an inordinately thick north end-wall – suggesting that it may be set within an older structure – and behind *this* thickening protrudes the rounded end of an earlier building on the same alignment. Furthermore the wall of the enclosure immediately east of the burial ground is perched on top of the west wall of this ruined 'pre-barn' structure, which would have been approximately 12m long if it included the whole of the area covered by the barn. A little further east, the RCAHMS plan records a crescent-shaped mound just north of Cleit 83 (b on illus 3). This too looks like the northern end of a long building, with a 'dished' interior, an otherwise unexplained orthostat near the north-east corner of the cleit (x on illus 3), and signs of a little stone robbery in its western wall. The situation at the giant Cleit 80, to the north-east of the Village Barn, is also interesting (c). Sharbau's map shows a small garden here; the cleit was erected later (after 1886: Stell & Harman 1988, 7) putting the garden out of use. The edges of the garden are clearly

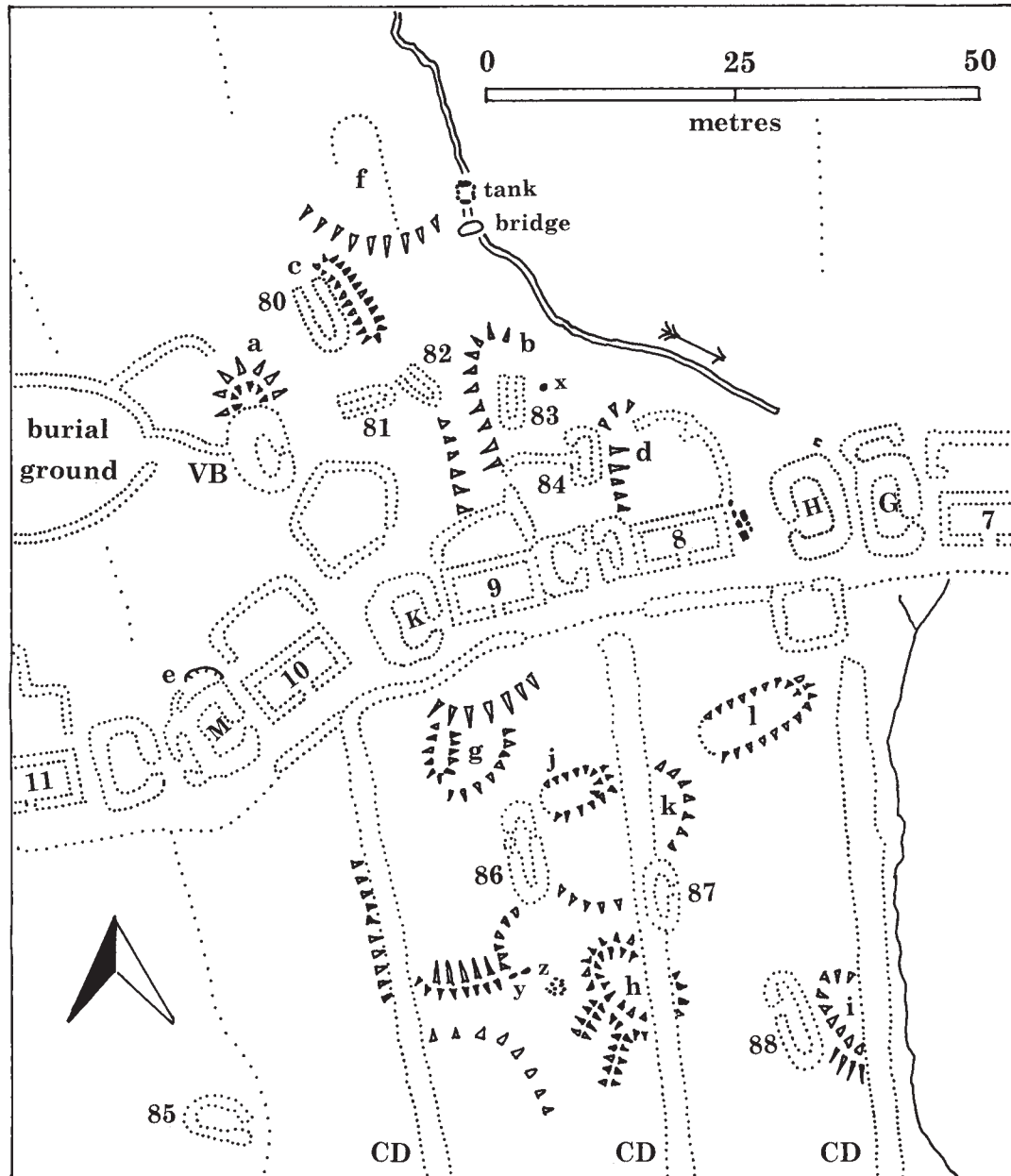
discernible; its east wall is considerably thicker than the boundary around the rest of the perimeter. I suggest that this was once the east wall of a building, left in situ to serve as part of the garden wall when the rest of the building was demolished in the 1830s.

Two other structures may contain evidence for the incomplete eradication of earlier buildings. Cleit 84 – also marked on Sharbau's map – is perched on a bank, as is the eastern side of the garden wall which runs south from it (d). It is possible that this bank, under the wall and the cleit, plus the crescentic slope marked by the RCAHMS to the north-east of Cleit 84, are all that remain of another building oriented north/south. Blackhouse M, which is free-standing at the rear, has a crescentic revetment wall behind its north end, suggesting that, like the Village Barn, it may be a modification of an older structure (e). In this area, then, there is evidence for five buildings of roughly the same type, oriented roughly north/south like those drawn by Atkinson – or six if one adds the very faint feature to the north-east of Cleit 80 (f), the outline of which I believe RCAHMS has recorded accurately.

If this was the north end of the *clachan*, there are other features which would go with this layout. It seems as if there was an entrance coming in from the north-west, running past the building just east of what is now Cleit 80, and turning to run south as a hollow way. (Note that the apparent 'structures' marked by the RCAHMS to the east of Cleits 80 and 82 are reinterpreted here as simply the product of stone robbery.) Not very far east of Cleit 80 is a single slab bridge over the Tobar Childa burn (marked but not identified on the RCAHMS plan). This bridge would make little sense in a post-Improvement croft, and indeed it was supplanted by a wider slabbing-over of the burn just to the north of Blackhouse H (see illus 3). Just beside and to the north of the slab bridge is a rectangular setting of eight upright stones, two sets of three facing each other across the burn and revetting its edge, and one at each end – evidently a small



ILLUS 2 RCAHMS plan of central zone of Improved 'village' (Crown copyright: RCAHMS)



ILLUS 3 Part of illus 2, simplified and enlarged, to show traces of pre-Improvement *clachan*. CD = Consumption Dyke; VB = Village Barn (based on a Crown copyright RCAHMS drawing)

water tank in which bigger containers could be dipped, or larger objects immersed, than would be possible in the unmodified burn. It is hard to envisage the slab bridge as intended

for adults, who could step over the burn with ease, at any rate before arthritis set in; in an area frequented by small children, however, it would make perfect sense. One is tempted to

put the evidence of children's bridge and water-tank together and suggest this zone as predominantly a social and working space for women – though perhaps not the only one, if we take literally Martin's statement, made at the end of the 17th century, that 'the women have their assemblies in the middle of the village' (1753, 63). There are apparently no traces of potential *clachan* structures to the east of the burn.

To the south of the Street, the two best examples of sub-rectangular or slightly boat-shaped houses are in the croft to the south of House 9. Just south of Blackhouse K is a slightly dished platform of the right shape and size (g), its northern end invaded by a grassed-over midden or pile of rubble (illus 4). A stretch of west wall is clearly visible between this mound and the place where it has been robbed out, further south; the remaining walls on this platform – which looks very convincing from the south-east – have been cleared away. The other well-defined building (h) is to the SSE of Cleit 86; it has been drawn on the RCAHMS plan. This is slightly boat-shaped (illus 5) with a quite deeply 'dished' interior and walls whose outer and inner slopes are everywhere visible, although there is a small robber pit on the west side. A fragment of the end of the building, in the current position, is visible on the other side of the consumption dyke (this was also indicated by the RCAHMS surveyors). It is not clear how to interpret the two short stretches of 'walling' which climb onto the wall of structure h to the south-west.

During my initial fieldwork, my attention was attracted by a larger 'dished' zone immediately to the west and north-west of this structure, which leads into a short hollow way which heads west and then sharply north so that it underlies the long consumption dyke and apparently fades well to the south of House 10. This 'dished area' (illus 6) looks like a well-frequented zone at the entrance to a settlement, the kind of muddy public space where people meet or hang around to talk, and animals may loiter at milking-time, or in the

hope of food. There are many nettles to the SSE of this zone, though the shelter afforded by the consumption dykes may have attracted sheep here in the period since the evacuation in 1930.

Shortly after making these observations, I realized the close correspondence between this interpretation and the drawing made by Thomas Acland in 1812, already mentioned (reproduced by the RCAHMS and entitled 'Principal Square in the Capital of St Kilda': Stell & Harman 1988, 3). In this drawing (illus 7), it is clear from the positions of Oiseval and Conachair that the view is from the south. To the right is the house at h. Near the middle are two orthostats, side by side (y and z on illus 3). These can still be seen today; the relative positions of the pointed one and the roughly square one are not the same as in the drawing, which implies that the latter was done from memory. Immediately to the west of these stones, Acland's drawing shows a short length of wall which partly conceals two houses; this too is now preserved as an earthwork, with a line of stones representing the bottom course of its south face. This has been drawn on the RCAHMS plan. Finally the 'principal square' in the foreground of the drawing – evidently much frequented, and containing what look like puddles, trickles of water, patches of bare soil and mud – is well represented on the ground here, albeit grassed-over. It is hard to interpret the postures of the human figures depicted on the drawing; they may have come here simply to meet the visitors from Acland's yacht. But it may also be the case that this ground was also used as the men's social space, where the 'Parliament' met – well away from the women (see above) and their reproachful glances and potential for intervention on those occasions when parliamentary business was protracted or disputatious!

In the southern part of the area, there is evidence for up to four other potential buildings. That labelled (i) is just east of Cleit 88. It is an ovoid hollow, oriented roughly north/



ILLUS 4 One of the better-preserved remains of the *clachan*: Site g, from the north-west



ILLUS 5 One of the better-preserved remains of the *clachan*: Site h, from the north-west



ILLUS 6 The area to the south-west of site h



ILLUS 7 Acland's illustration of the 'Principal Square' (1812) for comparison with illus 6 (*National Trust*)

south, with a relatively well-defined west side, and a plausible if well-spread bank at the south end. It is filled with yellow flag and its east side is obscured by the consumption dyke. The northern end is less clear but a low break of slope is visible from the south. That labelled (j) is a neatly shaped platform, trending east/west (as Acland's drawing shows, not all the *clachan's* buildings were oriented north/south) with quite a steep, high fall at its southern edge and a consistent, well-maintained rear edge, a slight notch in the slope. There is a suggestion of a slumped, very low wall at the back of the platform, which curves back at the east end well short of the edge of the croft here. At approximately 6m by 3.5m, this would represent a smaller building; it is surely too small for a garden patch, which is the alternative explanation. Another building may be represented by an ovoid mound half under a consumption dyke, partly obscured by Cleit 87, and marked by the RCAHMS (k). All that can be said is that this feature displays roughly the right shape, size and orientation, though there is no sign of a dished interior. Finally there is a possible platform (l), its long axis roughly east/west, just south-west of the walled enclosure to the south-west of Blackhouse H. Seen from the south, this flattish area, about 10m long, does not look particularly convincing, although a very short stretch of wall at the east 'end' can be discerned. However, from the north the whole of the southern 'wall' displays a consistent line, and a back-slope is visible.

The large, ovoid, cleit-like building (85) known as 'Lady Grange's House', named after a woman 'banished' to Hirta for about eight years from 1734, also falls within the area of the *clachan* (illus 2, 3 & 8). Stell and Harman (1988, 23) suggest that its association with Lady Grange is problematic, although there is no obvious reason to postulate a post-1730s discontinuity in Hirta's oral history. In 1838 visitors were shown 'the ruins of the hut' in which she was said to have lived (MacLeod

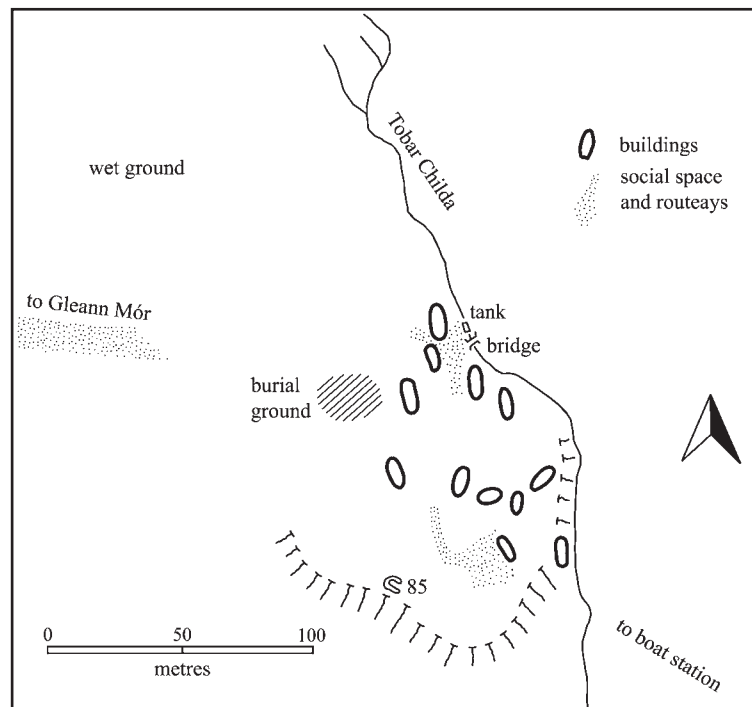
1898, 164). According to Mathieson (1928, 132):

the original house was roofed with timber, and when it fell in it was rebuilt as a cleit. I am told the doorway and the left-hand [south] side are the same as when her ladyship lived in it.

This story is supported by the RCAHMS plan (Stell & Harman 1988, 45) which shows marked asymmetry between the north and south walls, the latter being straight and of a consistent thickness in comparison with the former. As in the case of 'the old village' (see below) not all accounts of the character and fate of Lady Grange's lodging are consistent (see Harman 1997, 143–4). But is it a coincidence that oral tradition places it not only in the area already suggested for the *clachan*, but also in the kind of exposed, edge location entirely suitable for an aristocratic guest who has been described (Grant 1981, 401) as 'a woman of an insanely violent temper, eccentric, drunken and ill-balanced'? On balance, the evidence suggests that the predecessor of Cleit 85 was also part of the settlement under consideration here.

THE *CLACHAN* RECONSTRUCTED

Putting all the probable and possible structures together, they total 12 (13 if one includes the very indistinct site (f) at the very north end of the area). Where measurement is possible the structures are usually around 11m in length, and display a good deal of mutual similarity; one recalls Mackenzie's frustration with the St Kildans' strong tendency to collective conformity, as he saw it (Fleming 2000, 360). There is some variation in the recorded number of houses, and families, in the early 19th century (Harman 1997, 125, 144). The population at this time was between 90 and 110, living in between 20 and 30 houses; it is not difficult to envisage an extra dozen or so houses, plus ancillary buildings, occupying the spaces between the probables and possibles described



ILLUS 8 Outline of the post-medieval *clachan*, showing all structures for which there is archaeological evidence, and an indication of the southern extent of the Conachair spur. 85 = 'Lady Grange's House' (Based on a Crown copyright RCAHMS drawing)

above, as well as in the zone to the south-west of them.

The character of the pre-Improvement *clachan*, then, seems to have been as follows (illus 8). It covered an area measuring about 120m from side to side and end to end. Twenty to 30 buildings, predominantly but not always orientated roughly north/south, stood in a cluster on a stony, raised tongue of land, to the west of the Tobar Childa burn; Martin Martin (1753, 17) noted that 'there is a rivulet running close by the town'. The land sloped gently eastwards from the relatively high western edge of the knoll; garden earthworks make it hard to estimate the original height of this edge. Atkinson's picture suggests that it afforded little 'shelter' from the westerlies, although most of the houses in the *clachan* would have been protected to an extent by their fellows erected along this western fringe.

To the north-west, the graveyard and whatever remained of Christ Church were very close. It is easy to envisage coffins being carried, to quote Mackenzie (in Harman 1997, 139) 'in the course of the sun round the gardens with which the group of houses which form the village are surrounded' before burial of the dead in a walled cemetery auspiciously located to the west (and, if Martin's measurements (1753, 44) are taken literally, rather smaller than the present one). Mackenzie's description suits a *clachan* near Tobar Childa much less well, given the rougher ground in that area. Seen from the bay, the *clachan* would have looked broad, indeed diamond-shaped, its upper and lower ends narrowed by the Tobar Childa burn, the position of the graveyard, and the configuration of the lower end of the Conachair spur; this is exactly the impression given by Acland's more distant view. Within

the *clachan* there would have been narrow passages between the houses, respecting their dominant north-south orientation.

A trackway left the north end of the *clachan*, heading north-west. After an interval its apparent edges can be seen on the ground (and on the RCAHMS plan) near Cleits 72 and 73 and further west; it looks like a broad driveway, although appearances may be deceptive. This route started from what I have tentatively suggested was a women's space and led to Gleann Mór, also a female zone, where women and girls occupied a shieling in the summertime. A critique of this 'gendered', structuralist model of the Hirta landscape (and see Fleming 2001) might point out more prosaically that this exit from the *clachan* would have kept livestock away from crops growing in the lower grounds. At the lower end was perhaps the men's assembly place, facing the boat station, an important starting point for some male activities. One wonders about the role or function of the line of three or four low orthostats, apparently erected across the main entry to the *clachan*, which are visible on Acland's drawing of the 'principal square'; two have apparently survived, as already noted. This zone was also the obvious 'liminal' place, in more than one sense, for people to interact with visitors (on those occasions (Fleming 2000, 361) when they had not hidden in specially constructed chambers in the Mullach Sgar screens!).

Only six or seven generations separate Neil Mackenzie's sojourn on Hirta from Martin Martin's visit in 1697. It is reasonable to suggest that the maps and descriptions produced during this period relate to the *clachan* identified above; if the building which preceded Cleit 85 was occupied by Lady Grange (see above), it would suggest that the *clachan* was certainly here in the 1730s. There seems no compelling reason to assume that this was also the medieval settlement. One might perhaps expect the site to have been relocated following the devastation wrought by the epidemic of the 1720s and the subsequent

repopulation of Hirta; however, other potential locations for a pre-1720 nucleated settlement containing, according to Martin, some 180–200 persons, are distinctly limited.

The references brought together by Harman (1997, 142–7) do not help very much; both on maps and descriptions houses are depicted either in a cluster or arranged in rows, with mention of up to four 'streets'; in one account the 'street' was 'a tolerable causeway'. Some of this lack of unanimity must have been caused by differing perceptions. How does one count 'streets' in a warren-like cluster of houses with a tendency towards a dominant orientation? It is possible that rebuilding and modifications changed the configuration of the *clachan* over time, so that visitors in 1700 may have come away with different impressions from those who came to Hirta a century later.

I believe that the most substantial objection to the hypothesis put forward in this paper is that, according to Mackenzie, the walls of the pre-Improvement houses were 'seven or eight feet [c 2.5m] thick' – a phenomenon which does not seem to be visible in the case of the archaeological features described above. But Mackenzie also described the walls of the 'older' buildings which he encountered as six or seven feet thick, which, as Harman notes (1997, 148), is incorrect if, as she suggests, he was referring to 'early' structures such as Calum Mór's House. It is not clear that we can take the measurements quoted by Mackenzie (and other writers) literally. Mackenzie the Improver stressed the unsavoury and 'primitive' character of the dwellings which his reforms had abolished, and thick walls may have formed part of this characterization. In any case it seems more reasonable to assume that Mackenzie exaggerated wall thicknesses than to dismiss the evidence presented here on the basis of this single anomaly.

In the context of the hypothesis put forward here, the excavations carried out in 1986 at House 8 are of considerable interest (Emery 1996, 39–105). Just east of the house, Emery

identified the fragmentary remains of the 'living' end of a mostly-demolished 1830s blackhouse, along with a hearth and what was interpreted as a *talan* or sub-dividing wall (these features were reconstructed in situ and are now visible). In phase 6, well before the blackhouse, there were 'land drains' and 'stone lines', which preceded the 'elaborate network' of phase 9 drains which Emery took to represent the initial phase of blackhouse construction (1996, figs 34, 37; plates 8, 9). Emery implied that the phase 6 features might relate to agriculture, but one wonders what his comment might have been if he had not been assuming that the pre-1830 *clachan* was 'further upslope'.

THE NEW VILLAGE

Although the people had agreed to the destruction of their *clachan*, the sudden change to a 'street village' with individual crofts (illus 1) must have been traumatic in terms of the lived experience of the people, and for the Hirta community as a social body. This is not the place to explore this theme, although it is worth considering briefly how the new settlement 'worked', in comparison with the old. The effect of the changes was to replace the inward-looking huddle of dwellings with a line of houses apparently more open to the outside world, even more so after the blackhouses were supplanted in the 1860s by houses whose windows looked directly onto Village Bay. The new layout perpetuated a marked spatial dichotomy between the crofters' houses on the one hand and the church and manse, completed early in Mackenzie's incumbency, on the other. The other buildings which symbolized interaction with the outside world – the Store, which had been there since the late 18th century, and the Factor's House, which was probably built in the late 1860s – were also set apart from the crofted land. An interesting goal for future research would be to use photographs and documentary sources to study how encounters with visitors, including

boatloads of tourists, worked out spatially in the post-1830 configuration.

In some respects, the problem for Hirta's inhabitants was how to perpetuate the core features of their community. Despite the institution of individual crofts, there seems to be no recorded decline in the people's preference for being able to lock their doors (see Fleming 2000). If, as suggested above, the *clachan* featured distinct gathering places for men and women, how did male and female companionship work out in the new configuration? Part of the answer may be provided by the best known of the old St Kilda photographs, the one taken in 1886 which features the 'St Kilda Parliament' (seen for example in Steel 1965, plate 16, and on the rear cover in subsequent paperback editions). A dozen or so identically-dressed, heavily bearded, redoubtable-looking men stand outside House 9, occupying a 35m section of the street which has a distinctively secluded atmosphere. This is created mostly by the projection of Blackhouse K into the street to the west, and that of Blackhouses H and G to the east; along the southern edge of the street, an unusually high wall closes off the scene. (Before the 1860s the southern end of the demolished blackhouse excavated by Emery (see above) to the west of H would have projected at least as far south as the ends of G and H.)

This seems a logical place for the men's assembly, since it is exactly half way along the Street, although not halfway along the original street, which was intended also to serve the five or six crofts to the east of House 1. What may be more significant is that the position taken by the 'Parliament' in the 1886 photograph is at the centre of the old *clachan* as reconstructed in this paper; if there was an axial 'main street' running north/south, as the field evidence may suggest, it would have run through this very spot (see illus 3). It is hard to avoid the suspicion that, in choosing to meet here, the men of the Parliament were reconnecting with the old *clachan* and its more secluded ambience.

CONCLUSION

This kind of fieldwork requires the creation of a happy medium between over-caution and over-enthusiasm; doubtless others might disagree with particular inferences drawn here. For instance, the additional revetment at the rear of Blackhouse M might simply have faced a pile of surplus stone, and the platforms at (j) and (l) might be interpreted as tiny garden plots. In the field, sites are encountered one by one, each presenting as an individual puzzle, interpreted mostly in its own terms. When these individually assessed 'structures' are brought together on one plan (as in *illus 8*) it is, however, possible to discern something of the spatial regularity which one might expect. Even in this highly nucleated form of settlement – perhaps *especially* in such a settlement – each household needed its own space. Individual interpretations may be disputed; to refute the hypothesis put forward in this article, however, it is also necessary to dispute the collective and qualitative strength of the *clachan* which is modelled here as rather more than the sum of its individually interpreted parts. Furthermore, there is good agreement between the field evidence and contemporary drawings of the pre-Improvement *clachan*; we can use both a view from the west and one from the south, each drawn by a different artist. Finally, virtually every archaeological feature considered significant here was marked on the plan created by the RCAHMS surveyors – which is why a slightly modified version of their plan (*illus 3*) may be used to illustrate this article. I would argue that the problem of the whereabouts of the immediately pre-Improvement *clachan* has been definitively solved, although its origins and internal chronology remain to be established.

POSTSCRIPT

Further fieldwork in July 2003, after this article had been revised for publication, led to the discovery of three 'modern' rotary querns incorporated into the fabric of Cleit 84 – one

in the doorway, the others on the external face of the south wall. A further piece of rotary quern was found loose on the top of the west wall of Blackhouse G. Cleit 84 is marked on Sharbau's plan of 1858/60 (reproduced in Stell & Harman 1988, 5); given its conformity to the croft boundary, and its general appearance, it is likely to have been built in the period between the demolition of the *clachan* and the making of Sharbau's plan, although it might be earlier. If it is accepted that these small pieces of stone would not normally have been carried very far before being reused as building materials, these discoveries strengthen the case put forward above.

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