

ST KILDA



unesco

World Heritage Site

World
Heritage
Site

A Short Guide

April 2023



CONTENTS

Introduction	1
St Kilda: Key Facts	2
The World Heritage Site	3
Statement of Outstanding Universal Value	4
Managing St Kilda	6
Legislation, Protection and Planning	8
Further Information and Contacts	10

INTRODUCTION

This short guide is an introduction to the St Kilda World Heritage Site (WHS), its inscription on the World Heritage List, and its management and governance. It is one of a series of Site-specific short guides for each of Scotland's six WHS.

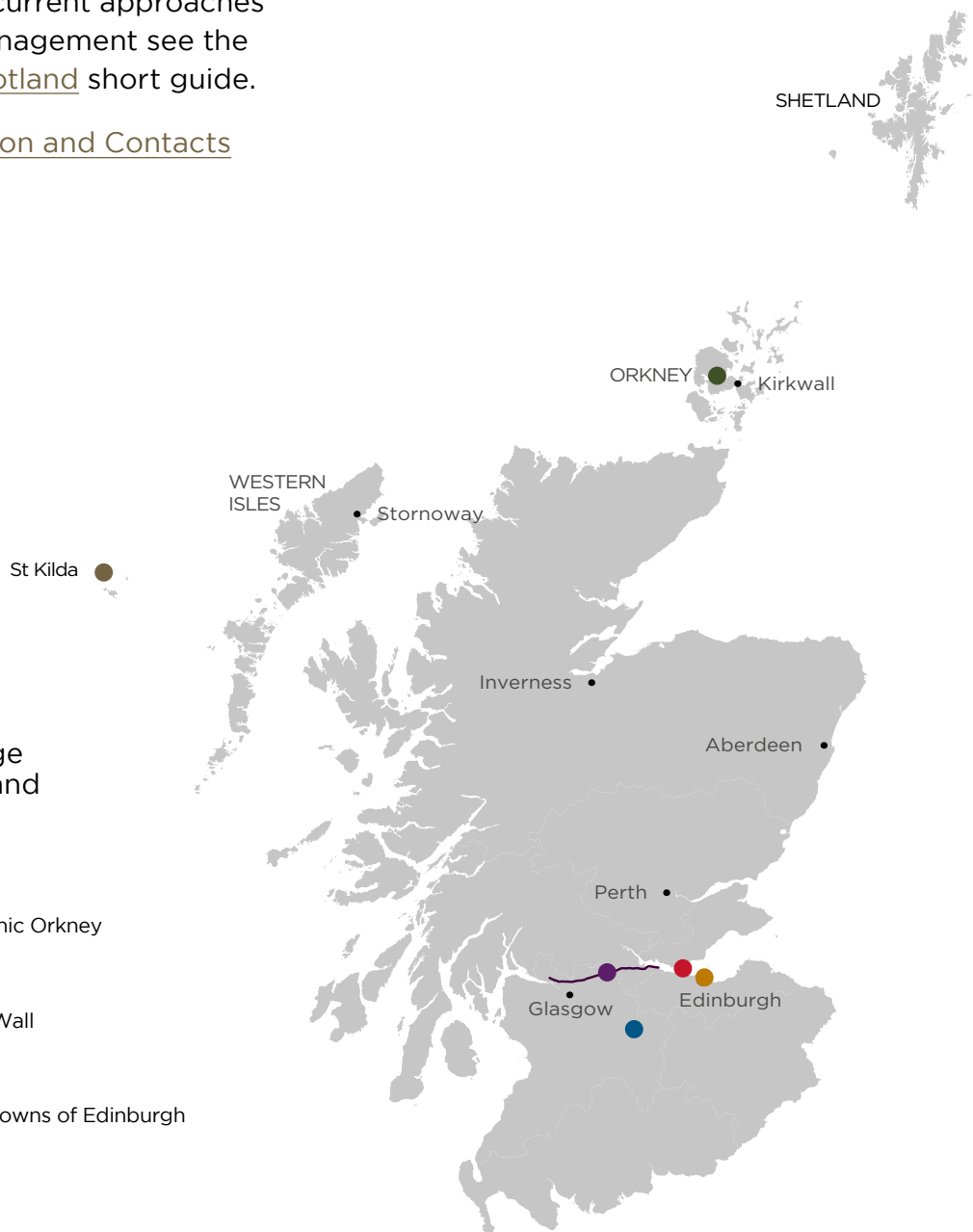
For information outlining what World Heritage status is and what it means, the responsibilities and benefits attendant upon achieving World Heritage status, and current approaches to protection and management see the [World Heritage in Scotland](#) short guide.

See [Further Information and Contacts](#) for more information.

World Heritage Sites in Scotland

Key

- 1 Heart of Neolithic Orkney
- 2 **St Kilda**
- 3 The Antonine Wall
- 4 New Lanark
- 5 Old and New Towns of Edinburgh
- 6 Forth Bridge



THE WORLD HERITAGE SITE

ST KILDA

The tiny archipelago of St Kilda, lying off the Western Isles of Scotland, has some of the highest sea cliffs in Europe. Exposure to some of the greatest wave heights and strongest wind speeds in Europe plays a major role in shaping the coastal ecology. St Kilda supports the largest seabird colony in the north-east Atlantic, which is of global significance. The islands' isolation has led to three outstanding examples of endemic sub-species, the St Kilda wren, the St Kilda fieldmouse and an endemic sub-species of dandelion (*Taraxacum pankhurstianum*) which was identified in 2012. Feral Soay sheep represent an ancient breed, descendants of the most primitive domestic sheep found in Europe.

The combination of oceanic influences and local geology around the archipelago has created a marine environment of unparalleled richness and colour. The seabed communities are outstanding in terms of biodiversity and composition, including 'northern' and 'southern' species at the extremes of their range.

Recent research indicates that the archipelago has been occupied on and off for over 4,000 years. The landscape, including houses, large enclosures and cleits, culminates in the surviving remains of the 19th and 20th century cultural landscape of Village Bay. External pressures led to abandonment of the islands in the 1930s.

The WHS and the Special Protection Area share the same boundary, encompassing c. 29,000 Ha, the majority of it sea. This forms a *de facto* buffer zone for the cultural heritage which is confined to the terrestrial part of the WHS.



St Kilda residents © NTS.

STATEMENT OF OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE

Each WHS has a Statement of Outstanding Universal Value (SOUV). This provides a clear understanding of the reasons for the Site's inscription on the World Heritage List, and details what needs to be managed in order to sustain the OUV for the long term. The SOUV describes the WHS and its importance, lists the Criteria for inscription on the World Heritage List, explains how the WHS satisfies UNESCO's requirements for Authenticity and Integrity, and summarises the management requirements.



Precipitous slopes and cliffs characterise the islands; © Crown Copyright HES.

*Soay sheep roam the landscape;
© Crown Copyright HES.*



CRITERIA

To be included on the World Heritage List, Sites must meet at least one out of ten selection criteria, as explained in UNESCO's [Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention](#). The Criteria under which St Kilda is inscribed on the World Heritage List are:

Criterion (iii): *Bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.*

St Kilda bears exceptional testimony to over two millennia[†] of human occupation in extreme conditions.

Criterion (v): *Be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.*

The cultural landscape of St Kilda is an outstanding example of land use resulting from a type of subsistence economy based on the products of birds, cultivating land and keeping sheep. The cultural landscape reflects age-old traditions and land uses, which have become vulnerable to change particularly after the departure of the islanders.

Criterion (vii): *Contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.*

The scenery of the St Kilda archipelago is particularly superlative and has resulted from its volcanic origin followed by weathering and glaciation to produce a dramatic island landscape. The precipitous cliffs and sea stacks, as well as its underwater scenery, are concentrated in a compact group that is singularly unique.

Criterion (ix): *Be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals.*

St Kilda is unique in the very high bird densities that occur in a relatively small area which is conditioned by the complex and different ecological niches existing in the site. There is also a complex ecological dynamic in the three marine zones present in the site that is essential to the maintenance of both marine and terrestrial biodiversity.

Criterion (x): *Contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.*

St Kilda is one of the major sites in the North Atlantic and Europe for seabirds with over 1,000,000 birds using the island. It is particularly important for gannets, puffins and fulmars. The maritime grassland turf and underwater habitats are also significant and an integral element of the total island setting. The feral Soay sheep are also an interesting rare breed of potential genetic resource significance.

[†] Recent research indicates that St Kilda has in fact been occupied on and off for over 4,000 years, not 2,000 years as thought at the time of inscription.

MANAGING ST KILDA

KEY MANAGEMENT PARTNERS

The Partners in managing St Kilda WHS are the [National Trust for Scotland \(NTS\)](#), [Historic Environment Scotland \(HES\)](#), [NatureScot](#), [Comhairle nan Eilean Siar \(Western Isles Council\)](#) and the [Ministry of Defence \(MoD\)](#).

NTS own and care for the WHS. A Strategic Management Group and an Operational Management Group, composed of representatives of all the Partner organisations, coordinate and implement the aims and objectives set out in the WHS Management Plan. Effective coordination between the Partners is achieved through the NTS, who lead on the implementation, monitoring and revision of the Management Plan and associated action plans and objectives.



Visitors explore the village.



A cleit; © Crown Copyright HES.



THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

The St Kilda WHS Management Plan is a framework document for the preservation of the OUV of the WHS. It sets out how the Site will be managed by identifying a series of key issues and devising specific objectives or actions to address these issues. It is developed consensually by the Partners, bodies who have a role in actively managing the Site and access to it.

ICOMOS advises that Management Plans for WHS should be based on a strategic view over 30 years. The vision provides the basis to develop long-term aims. These in turn inform the priorities for the medium term.

The Management Plan sets out a series of outcomes and operational objectives. Together they provide the framework for long-term management of St Kilda.

THE VISION

St Kilda World Heritage Site will be an awe-inspiring landscape and healthy marine environment, supporting thriving colonies of seabirds and unique island wildlife. A well-conserved cultural landscape will interpret the history of the communities that lived on this remote edge of the Atlantic. It will have an international reputation for conservation, research opportunities and sustainable tourism, and be valued and supported by all who take pride in this spectacular archipelago.



*MoD base in Village Bay;
© Crown Copyright HES.*



*Middle: Early Christian carved cross;
© Crown Copyright HES.*

LEGISLATION, PROTECTION AND PLANNING

World Heritage designation does not result in additional direct legal protection. Instead, St Kilda is protected through a range of policy and legislation.

Scotland's National Planning Framework 4 requires planning authorities to only support development proposals where the Outstanding Universal Value of a WHS or its setting is protected and preserved.

The Historic Environment Policy for Scotland sets out a series of principles and policies for the recognition, care, and sustainable management of the historic environment.

A series of thematic Managing Change Guidance Notes produced by HES provides best practice advice to help guide changes to

the historic environment. One of the guides focuses on [World Heritage](#). It should be used to inform planning policies and help with decisions relating to planning applications affecting the WHS.

The Site is covered by a variety of conservation designations – particularly the National Nature Reserve (NNR), Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), National Scenic Area (NSA), Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), and a number of Scheduled Monuments. The Management Plan suggested the creation of a Marine Environment High Risk Area (MEHRA) to provide protection against oil spills. MEHRAs have since been created to the north and south of the archipelago.



Village Bay seen from the slopes above.



Cruise ships visit St Kilda in the summer.



The Street



SUMMARY OF RELEVANT LEGISLATION, POLICY AND GUIDANCE:

- Our Place in Time – The Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland (March 2014)
- The Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 as amended by the Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006
- The Conservation (Natural Habitats, & C.) Regulations 1994, as amended
- The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
- The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004
- The Marine (Scotland) Act 2010
- National Planning Framework 4 (2023)
- Planning Advice Note 2/2011
Planning and Archaeology
- Historic Environment (Amendment) Scotland Act 2011, which amends three pieces of primary legislation
 - The Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953;
 - The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979; and
 - The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997
- Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (HEPS) (2019)
- Managing Change in the Historic Environment Guidance Notes, HES
- Outer Hebrides Local Development Plan (OHLDP)

*Village Bay*

FURTHER INFORMATION AND CONTACTS

WESTERN ISLES MANAGER
NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND

Email: sbain@nts.org.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1463 732 645

KEY LINKS

St Kilda on the NTS website:
[www.nts.org.uk/Property/St Kilda World Heritage Site/](http://www.nts.org.uk/Property/St_Kilda_World_Heritage_Site/)

UNESCO World Heritage Centre
– World Heritage List: St Kilda WHS:
whc.unesco.org/en/list/387

St Kilda WHS on the HES website:
www.historicenvironment.scot/st_kilda

