

**REPORT ON A COASTAL ZONE  
ASSESSMENT SURVEY OF  
I S L A Y**

**Hazel Moore & Graeme Wilson**

**Commissioned by  
The SCAPE Trust**

**Supported by**



**Heritage  
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**Historic Scotland**

**Argyll & Bute District Council**

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# Report on a Coastal Zone Assessment Survey of Islay

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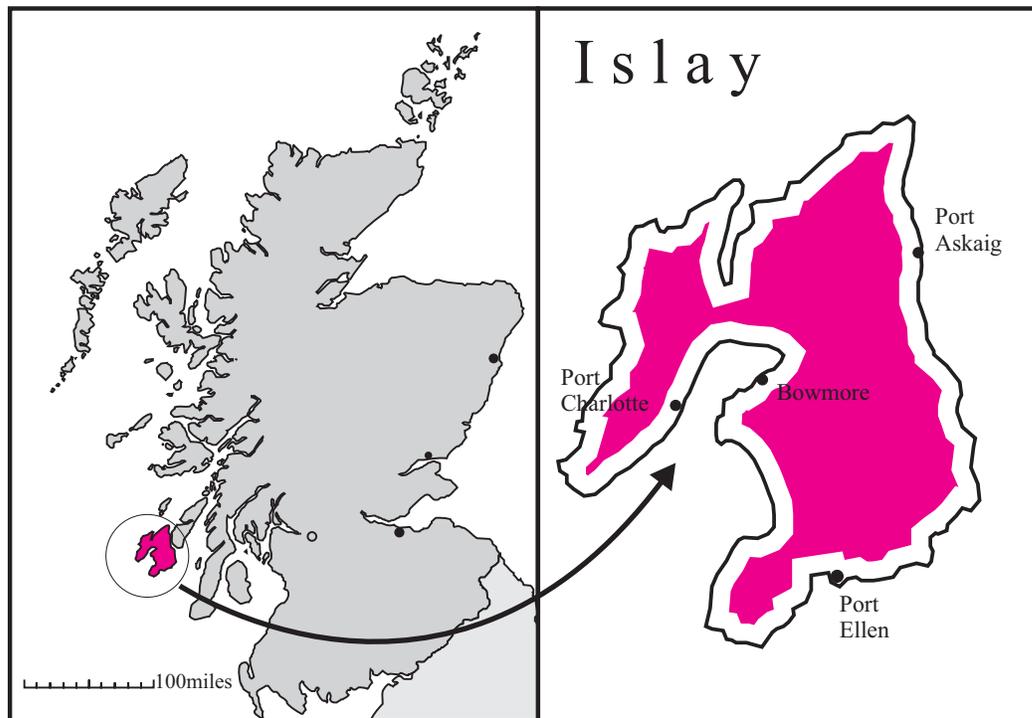
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## **Introduction**

This report documents the findings of a coastal zone assessment survey carried out on the island of Islay in 2002 and 2003. The survey was carried out by Graeme Wilson and Hazel Moore (EASE Archaeology) with public outreach assistance from Tom Dawson (SCAPE) and Julie Franklin. The aims of this work were to gather specific data on the location, nature and condition of the coastal archaeological resource and to assess the nature and degree of future risk to these sites. Similar programmes of work are being carried out along other coastlines in Scotland and it is hoped that the combined results will inform a national coastal management strategy for archaeology in the future. This report adheres to the format and specifications set out in Archaeology Procedure Paper 4: Coastal Zone Assessment Survey (Historic Scotland, 1996).

A further aim of the work was to engage with the local community in an effort to raise awareness of the rich coastal heritage of Islay and of the threats to its survival. During the course of this survey an archaeology group was set up by interested local people. This provided a forum for the sharing of information which led to joint participation in a range of archaeological activities.

The project was commissioned by the SCAPE Trust and was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland and Argyll and Bute District Council.

## **The Survey Area**

The survey area comprised of some 93.75% of the coast of Islay. The 6.25% not covered includes one area where access was not granted and one remote area. Offshore islands, such as Texa Island and Nave Islands were not surveyed and neither was marine survey carried out. Measured at a scale of 1:25,000, the survey area extends to 219.1 km; at a scale of 1:10,000 the length is calculated as 280 km.

## **Desk Based Study**

A desk based study was carried out prior to fieldwork. This investigated existing records to determine the sites known to exist within the coastal zone. A total of 134 sites were found to have been previously recorded. The majority of these sites were revisited during the fieldwork, although some could not be located again and others, where access was considered too difficult or dangerous, were not revisited. Where they were found, sites were assessed to determine their condition and to ascertain if this had changed since they were last surveyed. In a few cases, previous interpretations were questioned and sometimes alternative interpretations were put forward.

## **Fieldwork Conditions and Site Visibility**

The survey was carried out in three stages. The first stage was conducted in June 2002 under good weather conditions but at a time when the vegetation was particularly dense. The second stage was conducted in January 2003 under poor weather conditions but with low vegetation cover. The third stage was conducted in May-June 2003. At this time the weather conditions were good and vegetation cover not excessive.

The coastal terrain of Islay varies widely, comprising of both low-lying and accessible areas and high, remote and densely vegetated areas. While much of the coastline from Portnahaven in the south west to Kintra in the south east is readily accessible from public roads and tracks, there are expanses of rugged land on the west and north coasts which lies far from any track or road. In these areas the time taken in a day to get to and from the coast edge often took longer than the time spent walking the actual coastline.

Site visibility was an issue in many areas, not only in remote places, where the vegetation was often dense, but also in areas where the coast edge was fringed with scrubby woodland, rhododendron or coniferous tree plantations. This was particularly prevalent along the east coast. In such places, the coast edge was not always clearly visible and thus few sites were recorded.

Perhaps surprisingly, another area where site visibility was poor was among sand dunes, such as at Ardnave and Sanaigmore. In these places, tantalising evidence in the form of mainly *ex-situ* deposits indicates that there are, or were, archaeological remains nearby but few *in-situ* remains could be found. It is likely that these areas are rich in archaeological remains, hidden under substantial sand deposits and occasionally exposed due to wind erosion. The sporadic appearance of sites within these areas means that they are likely only to be found through constant monitoring.

## **Aims**

This project had two clear and equal aims. The first of these was to identify and record archaeological remains of all type and dates within the coastal zone. The second was to work with local people to raise awareness of the archaeological resource and assess how it might best be looked after.

## **Methodology**

The first aim was realised through the programme of coastal survey. This was conducted solely by professional archaeologists. The survey involved walking along the entire coastline and examining a 50m- 100m wide strip extending from the intertidal zone into the hinterland. Sites found within this area were visually assessed and a written record was made. In many cases, a sketch drawing was produced and photographs were taken. Where artefacts were found these were left in place rather than taken away, although a descriptive note and a grid reference was recorded.

Site locations were determined using a hand held global positioning system (GPS) providing a national grid reference with accuracy to within 3m. The approximate location of each site was also marked on a 1:25,000 scale ordnance survey map. Each site was given a unique number and was assessed under a variety of headings. The terminology and criteria used are described in more detail under **The Survey Report** section below.

An assessment of the hinterland geology, coastal geomorphology and erosion was conducted in tandem with the archaeological survey. This examined the nature of the geology and geomorphology within the coastal zone to provide a detailed context into which the archaeological data could be set. An assessment of the degree to which the coastline was prone to erosion was also carried out. The information gathered will assist in determining localised dynamics within the coastal zone and will be of assistance in determining the areas most at risk from erosion. The terminology and criteria used is described in more detail under The Survey Report section below.

The second aim, public outreach, was achieved through a variety of activities ranging from public meetings to site visits and basic training activities. The survey team together with the newly formed Islay Archaeology Group undertook numerous site visits to raise awareness of what to look for along the coast edge and how to identify archaeological sites. This was a two-way process: the members of the archaeology group provided a wealth of information on local sites and history, while the survey team took group members to visit sites and demonstrated how they could be recorded. Details of the specific activities undertaken are described below.

## **Public Outreach**

Prior to the start of the survey, initial contacts were formed between local people with an interest in archaeology and the SCAPE Trust. The aims and objectives of the survey project were outlined by Tom Dawson in a public meeting in Bowmore in 2001. Following on from this Mary MacArthur, a local volunteer offered to liaise between the survey team and the local community. A date was agreed for the project start and a second public meeting was held by the authors in Bowmore. At this meeting the team gave a presentation about the project then answered queries and addressed concerns regarding issues such as the dissemination of information, the way in which any artefacts discovered during the survey would be treated and how local people could become involved with coastal archaeology. The outcome of this meeting was the scheduling of a number of site visits and walks. The aim of these activities was to allow the survey team and local people to meet up informally and to provide opportunities to examine a range of sites around the island. The itinerary was put

together on the basis of suggestions put forward by both the survey team and local people. Mary MacArthur acted as the public outreach co-ordinator, keeping us all in touch with each other.

During the first season of survey, a number of walks were undertaken. These included visits to Kilchoman chapel and cemetery, Dun Chroisprig, Ardnave (on several occasions) and Smaull.

A training session was undertaken at An Sithean to demonstrate how to identify, record and plan topographic remains and local volunteers also assisted in the rescue excavation of a probable Bronze Age pyre site at Ardnave.

In the interval between the first and second season of survey, the local people decided to set up an archaeology group. They undertook numerous walks to visit archaeological sites which were known to individual members or which had previously been identified by archaeologists. They also monitored stretches of coastline and discovered a number of potential new sites.

By the time of the second season of survey, the group was more firmly established and had more suggestions as to places which they wished to visit and activities which they wanted to undertake. During this period much of the public outreach was carried out by Julie Franklin. Activities included visits to Uiskentuie, Grobolls, Finlaggan and Ardnave as well as a visit to the Museum of Islay Life in Port Charlotte. There were also opportunities for visits to a pre-development commercial archaeological assessment in Port Charlotte and a memorable evening hosted by Mary MacArthur during which the survey team were shown artefacts and photographs recorded by the local group. During this meeting issues such as the proper reporting of archaeological sites and finds were discussed and the survey team attempted to identify some of the finds brought along by local group members.

During the third season of survey opportunities for public outreach were limited, mainly because many of the local group members were away on holiday or busy on the land. Tom Dawson, the SCAPE Trust, undertook site visits with individual group members, including visits to Sanaigmore.

The programme of public outreach demonstrated that there is much local interest about archaeology on Islay and that many people would like the opportunity to become involved in archaeological recording and research. The formation of a local group bodes well for the future and provides a new point of contact and for the dissemination of information between locals and archaeologists. To help this group to succeed in its aims will require regular input from professionals and bodies concerned with archaeology. While many of the individuals within the group are extremely knowledgeable about archaeology and local history, they have as a group expressed a desire for more information from specialists in all fields of archaeology. In particular, they would welcome more opportunities to visit sites in the company of archaeologists to help develop skills in the identification and interpretation of archaeological remains. They would also like public lectures and meetings with archaeologists visiting or working on Islay. The potential good to archaeology that local groups can bring should encourage all archaeologists, particularly those within statutory bodies, to engage with and encourage them in their endeavours.

## **Islay Background**

### **Geography, Geomorphology and Land Use**

Islay, the most southerly of the main Hebridean islands, lies at the entrance to the Firth of Lorn to the west side of the Kintyre peninsula. With its neighbouring islands of Colonsay and Jura and smaller isles, it forms the Islay group; a distinctive set of islands which share cultural and historical as well as geographic links.

The island measures some 40km in width by 25km in length, but with a heavily indented coastline and the deep bays of Loch Gruinart and Loch Indaal, the land area amounts in total to about 600km<sup>2</sup>. These bays, arranged back to back, almost divide the island in two.

Much of Islay is low-lying and fertile although it also has high moorland and hills, the highest of which is Beinn Bheigeir at 491m OD. The variety evident in the Islay landscape is due to its underlying geological structure. Hard quartzites form the rugged uplands while the lower lying, more fertile land is underlain by limestone and mica schists. There are extensive