

**The SHIP Project**  
**The Archaeology of the Shiant Isles**  
**2007 Interim Report**

by

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## 1.0 Introduction

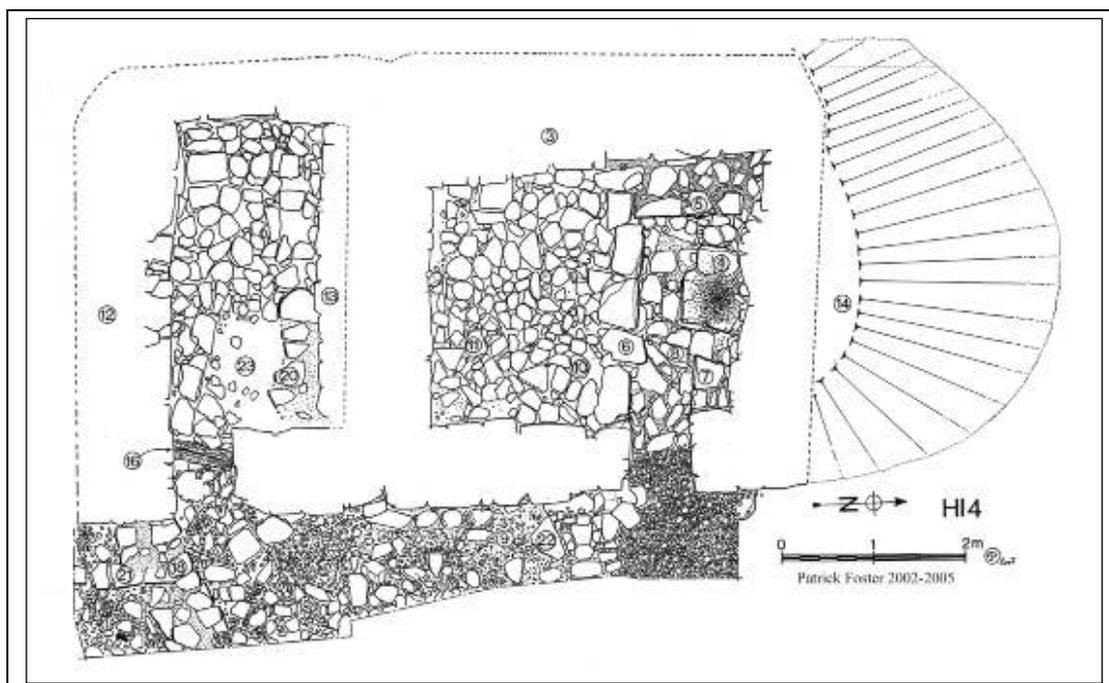
The 2007 season of archaeological work on the Shiant Isles took place during the first two weeks of August. This season's programme focused on completing a range of tasks, intended to allow this phase of excavations on Eilean an Tighe to be drawn together and the surveys of Eilean an Tighe and Garbh Eilean to be revised in light of greatly increased knowledge of the islands built up during the preceding six seasons. These tasks included drawing stone-by-stone elevations of the blackhouse HI 15 and selected elevations of the fishermen's huts HI 4 and HI 5, checking and expanding site descriptions on Garbh Eilean and Eilean an Tighe, prospecting for new sites in the screes on Garbh Eilean, mapping and describing the visible agricultural remains on both islands and continued monitoring of coastal erosion. The annual task of cleaning up the lobstermen's bothies and the blackhouse complex on Eilean an Tighe - the monuments most visited by tourists, particularly day visitors, but also those most susceptible for use as convenient toilets and for garbage disposal, was undertaken. Various small repairs were made to the walls of buildings around the cottage, necessitated by campers removing stones to place around their tents and exacerbated by rats. The collapsed arch over the winnowing hole in the south barn of the blackhouse HI 15, which had been undercut by rat burrowing, was also rebuilt. This year we were joined by John McKinney from Michigan and three archaeology students from Plzen and Brno Universities in the Czech Republic. As usual, the weather played a major role in the fortunes of the project, with rain and high winds being the dominant factor.

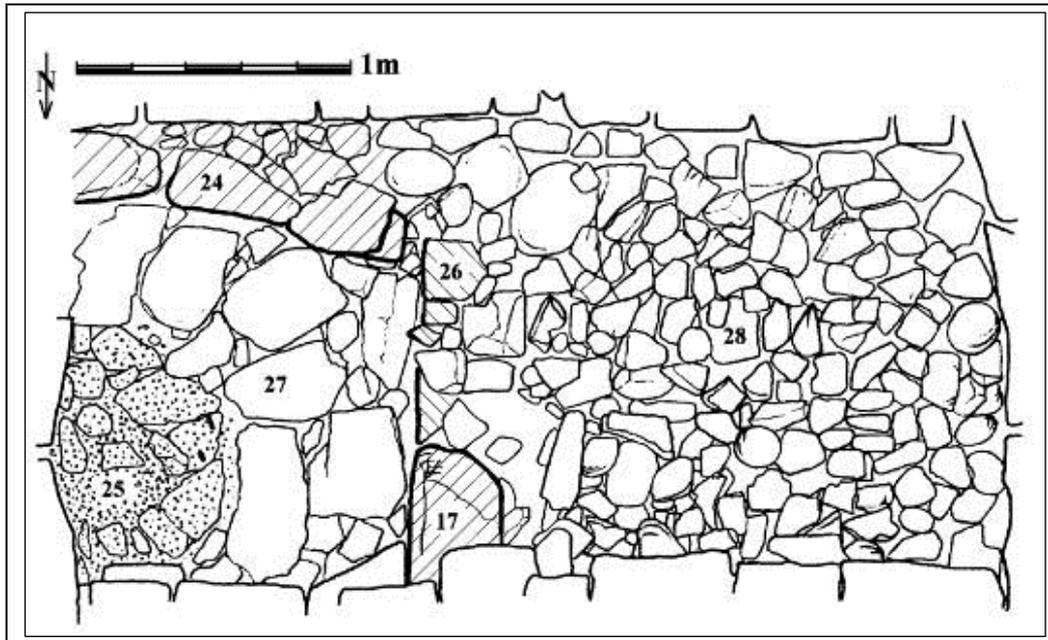
## 2.0 Lobstermen's Bothy, HI4

As part of ensuring that the most visited buildings on Eilean an Tighe remain presentable - and stable - as well as to enable the upstanding elevations to be drawn, the interiors of the lobstermen's bothies, HI 4 and HI 5, were tidied up. During the cleaning of room B of HI 4, it was noticed that there were glimpses of earlier cobbling underneath the loose rough cobbling, assumed to be the latest floor level. Since the upper stones appear to be loosely placed, overlying an earlier floor which might be a contemporary surface related to the initial construction of the room it was considered appropriate to remove the loose material and expose the earlier phase.

### 2.1 Continued Excavation of Room B

The removal of the remaining peat soil (4023), presumably the residue from the storage of peat during the last phase of occupation, in the north eastern part of the room revealed that it had built up in a hollow in this corner. The excavation of this soil also revealed that, with the exception of one block of basalt [4017], the stonework which had been interpreted as a possible seating arrangement [4020] was in fact 'floating' in the upper levels of the peat soil; it may therefore represent wall collapse, or be a relatively recent creation by campers who regularly appear to use the building. The exception, the large basalt block [4017], standing 0.30m above the floor surface, did indeed appear to be a seat, clearly predating the inserted wall face now forming the north side of the room [4013].





Floor area of room B, following excavation in August 2007

In the north east corner below the peat deposits, a flagged floor [4027] ran up to a thin deposit of burnt peat ash covering further heat fractured flagstones [4025]. This area was defined by thin flat stones forming an edge [4026] in line with the east side of the seat [4017]. The southern side of the area was bounded by a bench seat formed from three large stone blocks [4024] set in a curving line. To the west of the hearth, the rest of the floor area had been cobbled (4028). In contrast to the upper cobbling, these appeared to be firmly set (except where rats had burrowed), consisting of a mixture of smaller beach cobbles and more angular blocks than those utilised for the upper floor surface (4015).

## 2.2 The Finds

Only a few fragments of pottery were recovered from this limited investigation and they are mainly composed of mid- to late-19th century factory-made wares. A few fragments of spongeware were accompanied by two saucers with underglazed transfer decoration (Vessels **17/18/19**). One of the saucers has a manufacturer's mark from the Bell's Pottery, Glasgow. The pottery was all found pressed down between the packing stones of the stone bench seat (4024). With them was a plain clay tobacco pipe bowl (**SF 677**), which would appear to be of similar date to the ceramics. There were also a number of unidentifiable iron objects, most probably nails, welded by rust to the hearth stones. Removal of turf along the eastern side of the hut in order to connect the two areas excavated in previous years produced the greater part of a tea cup (**16**) with an underglazed transfer floral pattern of the late 19th century.



Cup from the path (16)



Clay pipe bowl



Saucer from Bell's Pottery, Glasgow



Underglazed transfer and spongeware decorated saucers



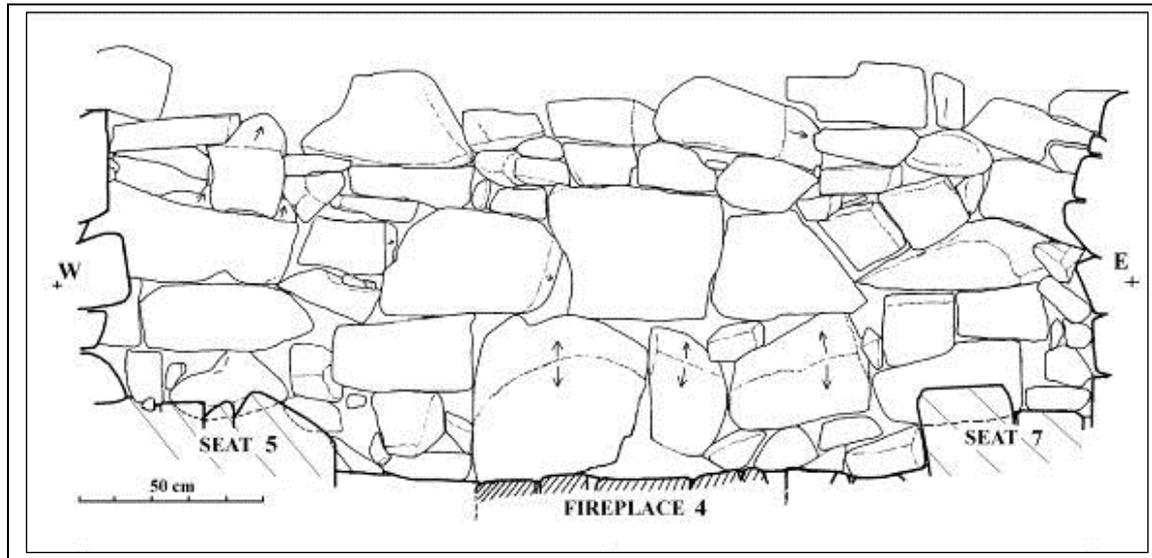
### 2.3 Discussion

The internal layout of room B is very similar to that of the much larger Room A, which lies to the north. The entrance to room B lies immediately adjacent to the doorway in the east wall, suggesting that the close proximity between fireplace and doorway may have been a practical way of ventilating the open fire. Unlike the other hearths in the lobstermen's bothies, that in room B was not set on a raised stone base, but consisted

of fire cracked stone slabs set into the floor, level with the other flagstones surrounding the hearth. The hearth area, including the bench seats surrounding it, occupies almost a third of the floor space in the eastern room. The other two thirds of the room is paved with smaller stone blocks and beach cobbles, which presumably provided a dry surface for sleeping or storage. Why this extra accommodation was thought necessary is not clear. Without further excavation, it is not known whether both hearths were in use at the same time or whether this room was only used occasionally.

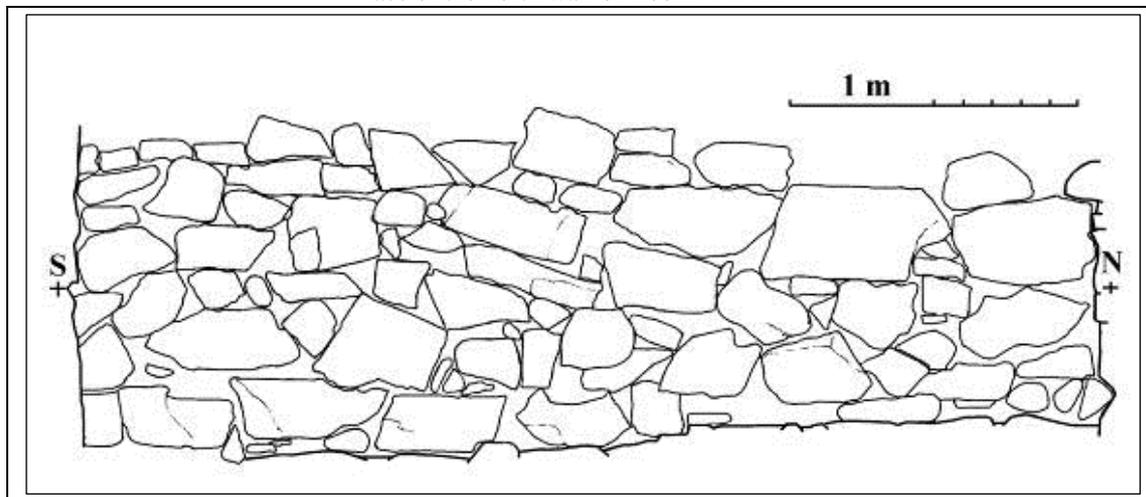
### 3.0 Other Work on the Standing Buildings, Eilean an Tighe

One of the aims this year was to complete the recording of the buildings in the lower settlement, as well as of HI 15 in the upper settlement. To this end, stone-by-stone elevations were drawn of HI 4, 5 and HI 15. Profiles across HI 5 and 4 were also drawn, to complement the levels taken in 2006.



Inside

face of the north wall of Room A in HI 4



Inside face of the west wall of Room A in HI 4

### 4.0 Foreshore Investigation: Lower Settlement Area, Eilean an Tighe

Days of inclement weather, while reducing the amount of measured survey work which could safely be undertaken, allowed for the recovery of a large collection of pottery fragments from along the foreshore below the lower settlement area, mostly from below the high tide line. It is assumed that the sherds result from the general tipping of rubbish into the sea below the dwellings, but, though the action of the sea will have dispersed these sherds along the foreshore, distinct concentrations were still apparent. The collection has not yet been analysed in detail, but initial inspection suggests that there appears to be a broad range of factory wares, the earliest being plates decorated only with a blue scalloped edging and the most recent being fragments of a mug probably used and discarded by the Nicolson family. A number of colourful spongeware

sherds were recovered. No handmade wares were recovered, possibly simply because these would be harder to spot, although they are less likely to have survived long immersion in the sea. It is hoped that such a large collection will provide a much more representative picture of the chronological range and provenance of the imported factory wares in the 19th and 20th centuries than the few sherds recovered from archaeological contexts.

## 5.0 Garbh Eilean Survey

### 5.1 Reconnaissance

The walkover survey of Garbh Eilean was completed this year, when a short spell of fine and settled weather towards the end of the fortnight, combined with favourable tides, allowed access to the scree slopes on the east side of the island and along the north shore. A number of small artificial platforms and sections of low rubble walling were identified high up on the southern edge of the eastern screes. These have been provisionally interpreted as puffin hunters' stances, the platforms providing a secure lodgement on the dangerous loose screes and the low walling providing a degree of concealment. The method of puffin hunting is presumed to be by using a narrow, triangular-shaped net attached to the end of a long pole (*G. cabar-stearaidh*) to catch the birds as they fly past, although the simple use of an oar or fishing rod to strike at passing birds was also known. Although there are no known eye-witness accounts of birding on the Shiantas, Osgood MacKenzie relays an account by Leumrabaigh fishermen, dating to about 1850:

They choose a day when there is a strong breeze blowing against the steep braes where the puffins breed, and the lads then lie on their backs on these nearly perpendicular slopes holding the butt-ends of their fishing rods. These stiff rods would be about nine or ten feet long. Holding them with both hands, they whack at the puffins as they fly past them quite low in their tens of thousands... (MacKenzie 1949 (1995), 67-8).



Location of the puffin hunters' stances at the edge of the screes on Garbh Eilean

As these were visitors to the islands, it can be assumed that the inhabitants of the Shiantas, taking the birds regularly, would have taken the time to construct stances for use year after year. Similar stances had previously been noted at the north end of the screes on the east side of the island, but no further stances were located around the north side of the island, where the puffins are less common. It was noted that where the puffins formerly seemed far more numerous, they now pass in mere hundreds, and chicks which had died of starvation or choked on pipefish lay outside the burrows.

An interesting outcome of the survey work on the eastern screes is that a relatively safe route down from the central plateau of Garbh Eilean was found. Previously, access to the screes from Eilean an Tighe depended on scrambling round the base of the cliffs at the south east corner of the island; this is only possible at low water and, if cut off by the tide, the only return route is to climb laboriously up and over the north east

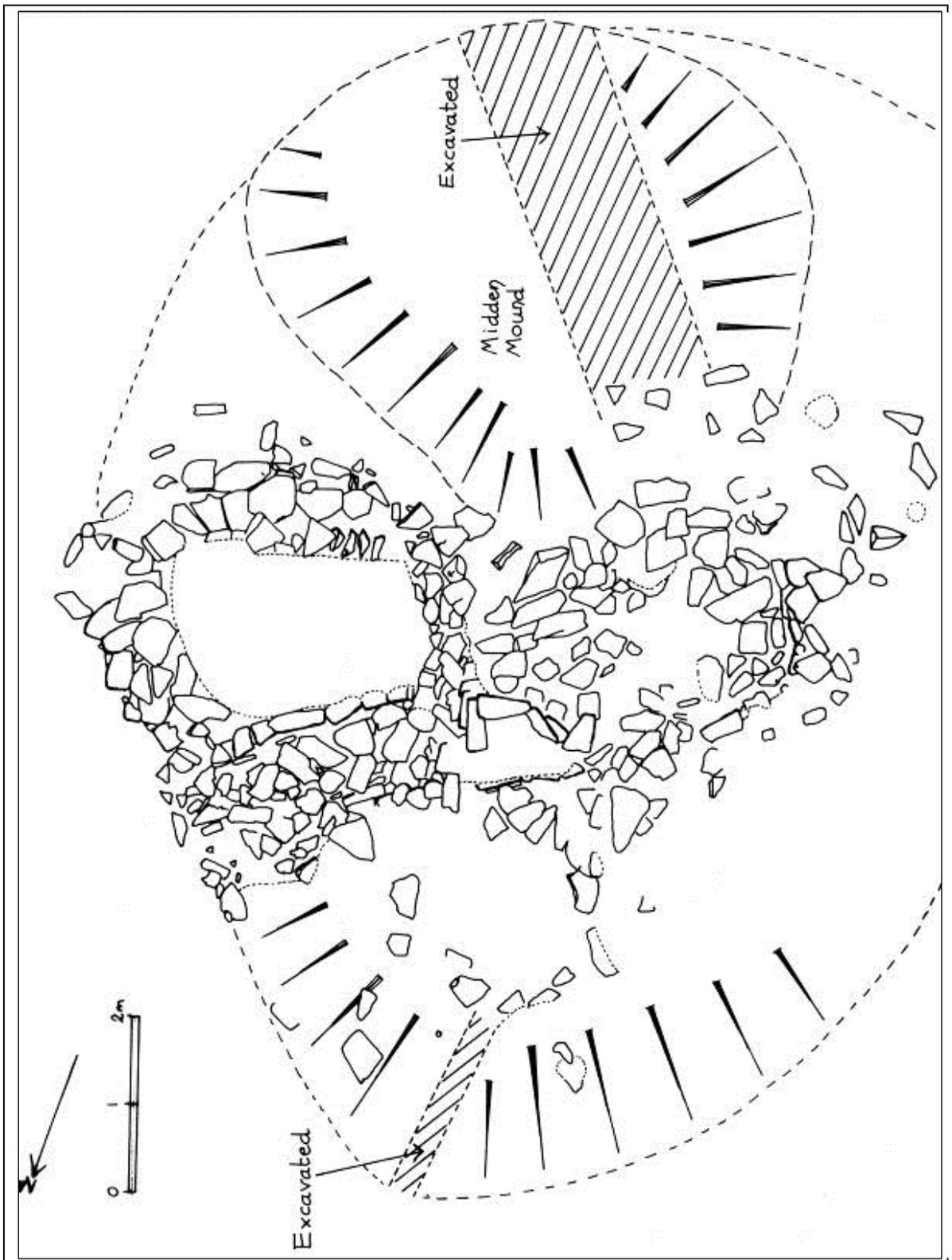
corner of the island. The discovery of a (relatively) easy route from the bird and egg hunting grounds to the settlement structures on the plateau makes the exploitation of this important food source a practicality. The only site identified on the north side of the island was another possible rock shelter, just above the shoreline.

## 5.2 Measured Survey

On Garbh Eilean, measured plans of the more complex archaeological features continued in 2007 with the recording of two sites on the plateau. Though considerably hampered by strong winds, the students were introduced to surveying techniques while producing an offset plan of site RI 7 (see cover photo). A plane table survey of RI 2 was also completed, following clearance of the nettles and rushes obscuring the features on the east side of the mound on which the later shieling hut sits. In spite of this vegetation clearance, these features continue to defy interpretation. Though initially considered to be a large drying kiln surmounted by a small shieling with a mounded midden deposit on one side, one of the two suspected flues was revealed to be a well-built stone lined channel or passage, c1m wide and 3.10m long. The second, more southerly 'flue' was less clear, but appeared to be of similar size. The outer (eastern) edge of the mound had been revetted, making the structure approximately 12m in diameter. This implies that there is a fairly massive original structure underlying the later shieling, which only further excavation can uncover.



Plane table surveying at RI2



Plane table survey of RI2, showing the shieling hut on the right and the 'flues' on the left



RI2, following removal of vegetation from stone lined 'flue'

## 6.0 Conclusions and Future Plans

Despite the short season and the wet and stormy weather, nearly all the goals for 2007 were achieved, allowing the survey and excavation data for Eilean an Tighe and Garbh Eilean to be finalised. An assessment of the faunal remains by Jacqui Mulville is being published on the web home site along with this report and analysis of the worked flint (Chris Barrowman), coarse stone (Ann Clark), factory made ceramics (David Barker) and the Iron Age crucible (Justine Bailey) are in progress. The completion of these specialist reports will mean that all the material from the first seven years of work on the Shiant Isles can be drawn together into a final report for this phase.

It is unfortunate that the inaccessibility of Eilean Mhuire does not allow us to complete survey work there in the level of detail achieved for the other two islands. This is unlikely to be remedied in the near future, so any discussion of the economy and infrastructure of the Shiant Islands at this stage will of necessity be based on incomplete data. We hope to include Eilean Mhuire in plans for the next phase of archaeological work, alongside investigation of sites such as RI2 which have so far provided more questions than answers and HI 60, which is in imminent danger of destruction during winter storm surges. No archaeological work is planned for 2008. However, it is hoped that a short visit to the islands planned for May, to carry out maintenance and repairs on the cottage, will allow continued monitoring of coastal erosion after the 2007-8 winter storms and the impact of increased tourist pressure on the standing buildings of Eilean an Tighe.

## 7.0 Acknowledgements

Firstly, we thank the Hunter Trust for their continued financial support, which makes the whole project possible. We would also like to thank the CBA Challenge Fund and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Research Fund, whose contributions have been utilised principally for post-excavation analysis. Thanks again to Woody, Willie and Footloose for getting us there and back despite difficult landings, and for not missing the Ullapool ferry! Particular thanks are due to Adam Nicolson and last, but not least, to all our friends, family and supporters for their help, encouragement and tolerance.

## 8.0 References

Mackenzie, O. H., 1949 (1995). *A Hundred Years in the Highlands*. Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited.



Surge through the arch on Garbh Eilean, following high winds