

## ACCORD collaboration with the Access Archaeology Group, the Uists: Summary Statement of Social Value

Co-Authored by the Access Archaeology Group and the ACCORD project.  
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### Introduction

The ACCORD team worked with the Access Archaeology Group from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2014, who are based in the Uists, Western Isles. Together we recorded and modelled the Grimsay wheelhouse, North Uist, and an Early Medieval chapel and cross-slab at Howmore, South Uist. We used the techniques of photogrammetry and Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI). There is a brief discussion of the historical value of the monuments with reference to wider sources. The main focus of this document is to describe the social value of the monuments for the Access Archaeology group and wider community. Social value refers to a collective attachment to place that embodies meanings and values that are important to a community or communities (Jones and Leech 2015: paras 1.5 and 1.6; see also Johnston 1994 and Byrne et al. 2003). The role of 3D recording and modelling in expressing the value of the monuments and in creating value, is also summarised.

### The Access Archaeology Group

Five members of the Access Archaeology group took part in the ACCORD project. Access Archaeology are an informal group of enthusiastic and motivated individuals, the majority of whom met through an Introduction to Archaeology evening course organised by Rebecca Rennell, an archaeologist at Lews Castle, University of the Highlands and Islands Uist (UHI). The course inspired the group to actively get more involved in researching their “fantastic” and “unique” local heritage. The group meets irregularly and has open membership. In their own words taken from their Facebook page; “Access Archaeology is a group set up by local people in North Uist who aim to encourage the interest of the local people in the rich Archaeology that is on their doorstep.” Working both together and individually, members in the group explore the landscape of the Uists, mapping, recording and researching their local heritage. For some members of the group there is a particularly strong emphasis on discovery and the sense that the Uists offer a “pristine” historic landscape, almost a *terra incognita*. Indeed, one member of the the group described their desire to identify and research the landscape as “obsessive”.

Rebecca Rennell is an invaluable source of support for the Access Archaeology group. Members of Access Archaeology take part in archaeological activities and workshops organised by the UHI and regularly volunteer on SCHARP (Scotland’s Coastal Heritage at Risk) projects in the Uists They have also worked with professional archaeologists from CFA Archaeology (Johnson et al 2003). They were consulted on the St Andrew’s University 3D visualisation of the abandoned township on St Kilda, an island situated 40 miles off the west coast of the Uists. More information on the St Kilda project can be found here at <http://blogs.cs.st-andrews.ac.uk/openvirtualworlds/>.

Everyone in the group lives on the Uists. Most moved there recently since retiring, although there are two group members who have long-term connections (one to the nearby island of Harris), who referred to themselves as “sort-of locals”. In terms of socio-economic background, the members of Access Archaeology who worked with the ACCORD team were well-educated, middle-class, retired or semi-retired, professionals. Their professions ranged from teaching, architecture, librarianship

and dentistry. A number had a longstanding passion in archaeology and history, having studied history at University, and in the case of three members, having participated in excavations when they were young. One of the group had worked briefly as a site assistant with the Ministry of Works on rescue digs. A 16 year old from the local school also participated in the ACCORD project through his connection to one of the ACCESS archaeology members. His motivation stemmed from his interests in computer gaming, science and art.

### **Wider Landscape Setting**

The Uists are renowned as an area of archaeological importance. There are numerous upstanding prehistoric remains built in stone which have in part survived due to not being subject to the farming pressures of the mainland of Scotland. There are also many remains dating to later historic periods (pre and post clearances), although the Access Archaeology group note that this recent history does not get as much attention as the prehistory. Indeed, the focus on prehistoric monuments in the 2,373 Canmore entries (the national online database of monuments maintained by the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland) listed for the Uists reflects this. The archaeology has a unique character; for example duns/brochs and wheelhouses are Iron Age types of structures specific to the Western Isles, Caithness and Sutherland (the majority of wheelhouses are found on the Uists and Barra). There have been some notable excavations of these structures in the Uists; including Kilpheder excavated by Lethbridge 1950-51, Dun Vulcan and Cladh Hallan excavated by Mike Parker-Pearson, and the structure we chose to record as part of ACCORD at Grimsay, originally excavated by amateur archaeologist Roy Ashworth in the years 1993 to 1997. There is further information on this wheelhouse below. Generally, the Access Archaeology group limit their explorations to the Uist islands. One member of the group, having family ties to Harris, is interested in certain monuments on that island located in the vicinity of where her family come from.

### **Significance and Social Value**

The visible archaeological remains are a distinctive part of this Hebridean landscape. A number of people in the group expressed an emotive relationship to place, and the archaeological remains were an important feature in this. For the members who have moved here more recently the landscape “has re-ignited interest [in archaeology]”, whereas for those who grew up here, the archaeology has a more implicit but seemingly intrinsic value in terms of identity and belonging. One member of the team expressed the great significance of historic and archaeological remains because of their constant presence in her “home landscape”. Individuals in the group expressed a strong connection to the past. Some suggested that the feeling of connection was stronger in relation to the recent historic past, since you can “make direct contact” via oral history. In contrast “prehistory is only an intellectual question”. However, others felt that remains that had lain undisturbed for millennia made you feel a proximity to the past in the present, a sense that certain elements in the landscape had remained untouched and unchanged. Social distinctions also informed their relationships with the recent and distant past. A couple of participants had joined the local history society when they first moved to North Uist, but had felt isolated because of the emphasis on Gaelic heritage. Here the social distinction between “locals” and “incomers” is significant in the perception of the group; as one noted, “It’s the incomers who focus on the archaeology”. At the same time, there was a desire to overcome this compartmentalisation and a number of participants expressed a frustration that the continuity of the recent and distant past was not more widely recognised.

The Access archaeology group also expressed a strong sense of pride, ownership and “responsibility” in relation to the archaeological heritage. This is manifested in their desire to record, rescue and communicate the heritage of the Uists to a wider audience. The feeling that large-scale

archaeological projects in the Uists had given little back to the community reinforced their sense of attachment and ownership. “Universities came and left” and ownership was often taken out of the hands of the local community. Furthermore, all the finds and resources seemed to go to Lewis, something that a number in the group felt to reflect the wider relationship between the Uists and Lewis (the largest of the outer Hebridean islands and seat of local government). Much archaeology is disappearing through coastal erosion, or lies investigated in the landscape. The work of the group is thus informed in part by a desire to promote a sense of heritage and community. Some also noted that the archaeological heritage is important in economic terms. As one member expressed “I want to see these [archaeological] sites exploited [for tourism]!” The wider community of the Uists was described as a community in decline. Ultimately these factors influenced the decision to record the Grimsay Wheelhouse. Wheelhouses are considered iconic of the Uists and it is one of the few that is reconstructed and therefore accessible. Recording it was motivated by a desire to strengthen a sense of what is distinctive about the Uists as well as to entice people to visit, for the benefit of the wider community.

The group thus express a strong sense of stewardship in relation to the heritage of the Uists. It was generally felt that their familiarity with the landscape as local residents places them in a better position to both understand and look after the heritage than external research teams, heritage organisations and universities (all of which the group see as “outsiders”). At the same time there some in the group also expressed a frustration that outside organisations failed to take note of the work they are doing and integrate it into wider records and inventories. Thus issues of “authority” and who had the right to record the heritage of the islands were hotly debated, although at the same time they did desire and value the “verification” of professionals working in heritage. In this regard the forms of landscape survey and archaeological investigation that the group engage in are about knowledge-production, but they are also involved in the creation of a sense of place. It was generally felt that ACCORD would give them a sense of ownership over the results and, ultimately, an enhanced sense of belonging constructed through recording their heritage.

### **The ACCORD Project Monuments**

**The Grimsay Wheelhouse, Iron Age structure (NGR NF 86720 57315).** The wheelhouse, which is of a later prehistoric date, is located on the northern coastline of the island of Grimsay at a place called Bagh nam Feadag, situated between North Uist and Benbecula. The site can be visited by car over a causeway, although not visible from the road it is only a short 15 minute walk over the machair. In its immediate vicinity, overlooking the sea inlet at Baymore, Bàgh Mòr, are four other roundhouse structures, which are obscured under mounds of sand and vegetation.

The site has a partial event entry on Canmore (Event ID 969085) where it is stated that the “site would merit further study” and that it “has not been consolidated and is slowly degrading.” It was last visited in 2005 by the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments. It is also listed in the Scottish Monuments Record maintained by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, local authority for the Western Isles. This site is not a Scheduled Monument.

This site was excavated by an amateur retired engineer, Roy Ashworth, between the years 1993 and 1997. There are 8 internal aisles, which in places stand at over 1 metres high, and a well-preserved hearth in the centre of the roundhouse. The external roundhouse wall survives up to one metre tall and one metre in thickness in places, and there are adjoining out-structures (with internal wall divisions) which may or may not be contemporary. As it was not professionally excavated, there are few records. Stratigraphic information was not recorded and whilst finds were kept and deposited with the museum in Lewis, associated contextual information was not kept.

The site was chosen to be recorded as part of ACCORD, because, as a result of Ashworth's reconstruction, it is regarded locally as the best visible example in the Uists. The wheelhouse as a type of site has an "iconic" status, being distinctive to the Uists. There was some discussion about the appropriateness of the site, given that heritage professionals question the authenticity of the reconstruction. Nevertheless, the group agreed that this gave the best impression of what a wheelhouse would have been like in prehistory, allowing an immersive experience of the past.

Since the ACCORD project in the Uists, we have been in touch with Alasdair MacKenzie (who now works for the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments) who examined the assemblage uncovered here, produced detailed plans and conducted a structural survey of the site in 2004, available as a PDF download here <http://grimsaywheelhouse.weebly.com/field-survey.html>. Alasdair is keen to promote this site and maintains a blog which provides background information on the excavation, its wider context and illustrates the wide range of finds (<http://grimsaywheelhouse.weebly.com/index.html>).

We recorded the site using the technique of photogrammetry. The focus was on modelling the wheelhouse structure itself, and it was clear this would be a challenge. Additionally during the ACCORD work, one member of the team discovered an inscribed stone at the entrance to the wheelhouse with what looked like initials and dates. We decided to record this using the technique RTI to aid interpretation, but also because it seemed likely to be associated with the excavator and therefore part of the biography of the site. The RTI allowed the team to decipher the inscription as 'RA 1993/7'.

**The Howmore Chapel and Cross-slab, early medieval origins (NGR NF 7581 3647).** This site, which originally occupied a small islet, continued in use throughout the medieval period and while the chapels fell out of use, people were still buried here up until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. A cross-slab here supports origins earlier than the 13<sup>th</sup> century for religious activity here. The site which includes two small churches, two burial enclosures and two chapels (and a probable third which was gone by the mid. 19<sup>th</sup> Century), are situated enclosed by a low dyke on a mound, now part of the mainland. All the structures are now in ruins. The site has its own Canmore entry (Canmore ID 9869) in which it states "the monument is of national importance as one of the chief ecclesiastical establishment of the Western Isles in the later medieval period." The whole mound and all the buildings upon it are also listed as a Scheduled Monument (a list maintained by Historic Scotland) and therefore recognised as a site of National Importance under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 (listing number 948). The site was subject to structural, topographical and geophysical survey in 2003 and 2004 carried out by the Hunter Archaeological Trust, University of Glasgow and Institute of Archaeology, UCL. This confirmed complex phasing and activity at this site.

The site was chosen for recording and modelling because the group considered it as "equally iconic" as the Grimsay Wheelhouse. Situated in an atmospheric location, it is representative in their view of another characteristic and important type of archaeology, the Early Medieval Christian era. We chose to record Caibeal Dubhghaill (Dugall's Chapel) (as named in the latest archaeological work conducted here 2003 and 2004) using the technique of photogrammetry. This is the best-preserved structure on site, with walls approximately 2.5 feet thick (0.75 metres) and both gable ends with splayed jams upstanding. The adjoining walls survive but are more ruinous. Additionally we recorded an RTI of the cross-inscribed slab. This was of particular interest to the team because it is evidence of the earlier activity at the site. It is also at risk of erosion in its current location so there was a desire to make a record of it.

### **The Impact of 3D modelling and recording**

Individuals in the Access Archaeology group had not engaged practically with the digital techniques used as part of ACCORD previously, but were interested in both the technical aspects and the potential they offered for pursuing their wider interests. For some it was primarily an intellectual engagement focused on how the techniques might help them to record sites more effectively and efficiently. There was also an interest in using the visualisations for communication, promotion and tourism. Others were also interested to see whether the visualisations might capture a sense of “being there” and the “atmosphere” of the heritage places that were modelled.

As highlighted above, the ethos of coproduction was a strong motivation for the Access Archaeology group to get involved in ACCORD. Indeed, a strong sense of ownership in relationship with the sites recorded was generated by the project and added value to the results. As was stated by one member of the group, this also came with responsibility and a desire to do more; “the fact you’ve been so involved makes you want to get more out of it!” The group clearly valued the practice of coproduction as part of ACCORD, since autonomous practices of knowledge-making are an important aspect of their work.

The results were met with general exclamation; “phenomenal”, “exciting”, “useful”. Although the group felt that the technologies were a useful “technical exercise” for capturing what is there, it became clear that the models also played a transformative role. Achieving “convincing realism” and “accurate” results was repeatedly voiced as a necessary requirement. In the Final Focus Group it became evident that the results incorporated both analytical and emotive qualities for them. For photogrammetry in particular the detail, framing (for example allowing a birds-eye plan-view) and focus on particular structures or details provided a different experience of the monuments. This was highly valued as “it makes you look at the monument with new eyes” and “brings clarity to the site”, as expressed by one group member. At the same time the recording process itself “stimulates your intellect”, as voiced by another. The models were also thought to be useful for communication; you “can explain a site much better with this technology”, while somehow “it makes it more interesting”. For one member, a school teacher, RTI is a “tool for the imagination”. However, it was not only the intellectual stimulus encouraged by the process and the accuracy of the results which was valued, it was exclaimed by another member that the results incorporated “extra atmosphere”, “opening up a whole new world”. Both RTI and photogrammetry were therefore valued for their interpretative and immersive potential, enhancing the original.

Despite this, the group agreed that the records do not replace the original. Nevertheless, the power of creating the 3D visualisations as part of ACCORD for legitimising a monument was noted, adding authenticity to the original monument in its landscape, especially in the instance of recording the Grimsay wheelhouse. The 3D models were considered “authentic because they are accurate” by the some of the group, although others stressed the contrast with the monuments themselves. As one person put it, whilst looking at the Grimsay Wheelhouse model, “it’s still a representation.... It doesn’t have atmosphere, the landscape, the weather”. For another, in contrast, “it is a visualisation, but it is a real site, it is the stone, it is the site”. For some, the authenticity of the model was also derived from their relation to the site and their role in its production, “the end result is based on the photographs we took”. This also tied in with feelings of attachment explained in contrast to other visualisations, like the St Kilda model: “I’m involved with this one so it’s more important to me”. Two members of the group also felt that photogrammetry, in particular, facilitated a bit more creativity in the actual process and interpretative freedom when viewing and experiencing the results; it’s “a bit like art”.

The technologies themselves were generally regarded by the group to be “surprisingly user friendly”. However, the group did feel “overwhelmed” and the barriers to access (hardware requirements and

cost implications) were discussed as an issue for using these technologies in future work. There is limited internet access on the islands which prohibits the use of software programmes, which rely on this. Despite these barriers, the group are confident in taking both techniques forward into their future work. 3D modelling was enticing as a “cost-effective”, “portable”, “accessible” and “manageable” way of publicising and communicating their work. Since the ACCORD collaboration with Access Archaeology, the group have employed photogrammetry for recording new sites (e.g. the exciting discovery of a bronze age basket, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-30055116>) and are helpfully passing on their expertise (<https://accordproject.wordpress.com/2014/10/27/how-to-build-3d-models-using-aerial-videos-the-access-archaeology-group-pass-on-their-experience/>).

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