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A LOGISTICAL MARATHON: CONSERVATION TEAM BRAVES THE ELEMENTS TO PROTECT ST KILDA KIRK

- **National Trust for Scotland starts complex project to repair impacts of weather and time on historic Kirk**
- **Project designed to take account of weather, wildlife and the risk of alien species**
- **Work made possible with generous support from funders, including Historic Environment Scotland**

Gales, rough seas, nesting birds and the risk of non-native species arriving are just a few of the challenges National Trust for Scotland staff and contractors have faced during work on a major project to conserve the St Kilda Kirk, as its 200th anniversary approaches.

Extensive repairs to the roof and the replacement of gutters and rhones are required as a first urgent phase of conservation, to make the Kirk and adjacent School watertight and windtight, in a location where peak winds can reach 144mph. Due to the St Kilda archipelago's location in the North Atlantic, the islands face gales approximately 75 days a year, with the recent Climate Vulnerability Index assessment for St Kilda showing that storms are likely to become more frequent and more severe as a result of climate change.

With support from Historic Environment Scotland (HES) grant funding, the project to weatherproof and conserve the Kirk is being managed by the National Trust for Scotland, which cares for St Kilda, the UK's only dual UNESCO World Heritage site. Specialist contractors, Laing's Traditional Masonry, have been working on Hirta over the summer, making the building more resilient to the effects of climate change while retaining its historic character.

In addition to the support from HES, this first project phase, costing over £200,000, has been made possible through funders including the St Kilda Club, the NTS Foundation USA, the Noble Caledonia Charitable Trust, and McCorquodale Charitable Trust.

The St Kilda Kirk was constructed in 1827-28, to Robert Stevenson's 1826 design, after a visiting minister, Rev Dr John Macdonald, commented that the islanders were 'ignorant of the leading truths' of Christianity. Though ministers and missionaries had visited St Kilda since the 18th century, the first resident minister was the Revd Neil Mackenzie, who lived there with his wife and family from 1830-44.

After the last islanders left St Kilda in 1930, the Kirk fell into disrepair, but it was restored by the Trust in the 1970s. Marking the 50th anniversary of the evacuation, the Kirk was re-dedicated at an interdenominational service in August 1980.

Susan Bain, the National Trust for Scotland's Property Manager for St Kilda, said: "The National Trust for Scotland is privileged to care for and share St Kilda's natural and cultural heritage, including the Kirk and School, but our stewardship also brings with it great practical complexities. The project to repair the roof and replace the rainwater goods of the Kirk not only requires specialist heritage conservation expertise and skills, but also involves a gruelling logistical marathon.

"Even transporting the materials for the project has taken months in planning, with initial shipment to storage in South Uist needed in good time for transfer to a landing craft, which sails when sea conditions are right. The materials are all checked prior to loading and during the voyage for signs of non-native rodents and the vessel is also inspected before anything is landed on St Kilda. Working in the middle of a dual World Heritage Site has its challenges and noise must be kept to a minimum to avoid disturbing wildlife or visitors.

"While the Church and School are not open to visitors for the duration of the work, visitors can see traditional skills in action and a key building made safe for the future. We're grateful for the resourcefulness, attention to detail and resilience of our contractors, staff and volunteers who are making the work possible."

Clea Warner, Highlands & Islands Regional Director at the National Trust for Scotland, added: "The Kirk and School are a key focal point on St Kilda, offering a very evocative window into its social and cultural history in the 1800s and early 1900s. They're an integral part of the archaeology of St Kilda and remain an important place of reflection for the islands' visitors and people who work on St Kilda, surviving not just time and climate but other challenges such as a U-boat shelling in May 1918.

"The conservation of their fabric and history – along with St Kilda's wider landscape and heritage – is vital work for the Trust, as we deliver our nature, beauty and heritage for everyone strategy, and we are profoundly grateful to our members and supporters, along with HES, the St Kilda Club, the NTS Foundation USA, the Noble Caledonia Charitable Trust, and McCorquodale Charitable Trust, whose generosity has made this project possible. With the Kirk watertight, we can then embark on raising funds to secure the second phase of conservation, which will focus on the interior of the Kirk, repairing timber and plasterwork and refurbishing it to its former glory. The support of funders, philanthropists and others will once again be vital in making this possible."

Dr Susan O'Connor, Head of Grants at HES, said: "St Kilda has a distinctive story to tell in Scotland's history and these buildings are testament to a unique way of life. HES grant funding in this case is helping to conserve not only the tangible fabric of the Kirk and School buildings, but also to safeguard the island's invaluable cultural heritage, ensuring that its stories and significance continue to be shared with the world."

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Notes for Editors

1. Donations to support the conservation of the St Kilda Kirk can be made to nts.org.uk/campaigns/caring-for-st-kilda
2. The Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI) assesses the historic and predicted changes to climate in World Heritage Sites and the potential impact on these important places of historic and natural significance. The report was conducted through a partnership between Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and James Cook University (Australia), and is available on the HES website at <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/?searchPubText=cvi>
3. A video about the project can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx0ozskfuLU>

About the National Trust for Scotland

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit www.nts.org.uk.

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.