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female burial as well as steatite pots have been found. Many of the placenames are Norse, in particular those of the hills and stacks.

Village Bay, on the east side, is well sheltered from the prevailing winds. The Street was built in 1860, and the ruined blackhouses behind about 1830, replacing earlier houses which were considered too primitive. The hillsides are dotted with nearly 1,300 *leitan*. These small drystone sheds were variously used to wind dry and store birds, fish, dung, hay and peats, preserve eggs and to protect lambs. There are also a large number of walls and enclosures.

Chapels Three chapel sites are recorded but nothing now remains. Christ's Church was in the graveyard, St Columba's to the west of the village, and St Brendan's below Ruaival. A Viking female burial was also discovered, but the artefacts which were found have been lost. Two

ST KILDA (ON *Skjoldr*, shield) is a fascinating and beautiful archipelago 66km (41mi) WNW of North Uist which was formed by volcanic action about 60 million years ago. It is one of the ultimate destinations for island lovers. The main island is *Hirta* (ON *Hirtir*, deer; *G Hirt*), which was populated from at least 1850BC until 1930, when it was evacuated.

Today the National Trust for Scotland owns the group. It is managed by NTS, Scottish

Natural Heritage and the MoD in partnership. St Kilda is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of its natural and cultural heritage as well as the marine environment. A warden, researchers and visitors are present in summer. Missile Range radar staff may be present all year.

Bronze Age burial cists have been found in Village Bay as well as an Iron Age souterrain, suggesting that people were here at least 4,000 years ago. Norse brooches from a

Village Bay from Conachair (426m) with Dun in the background



The Village Street, Hirta

early Christian stone crosses are the only physical evidence. One is in the wall of house 16.

Hills The steep hills offer exhilarating walks which are rewarded by dramatic views, if the tops are clear. Hirta tends to produce its own weather. The main hills are Oiseval (290m), Conachair (426m), and Mullach Mor (361m).

The jagged island of Dun protects Village Bay from the south and west. It is home to huge numbers of Puffins in the Summer, and has a ruined dun on its south eastern tip. Soay is separated from Hirta by the narrow Sound of Soay with Soay Stac and Stac Biorach in between.

Stacks About 7km (5mi) to the northeast, Boreray, Stac an Armin and Stac Lee rise steeply from the sea. They are part of the rim of the huge volcano that was here nearly 60 million years ago. Together these stacks host the world's largest gannetry with over 60,000 pairs nesting. St Kilda is one of the world's largest seabird colonies

with well over 250,000 breeding pairs of all species.

Wren The St Kildan Wren, a subspecies, may be seen around the Village area, but seems to pre-

fer the Puffin areas to breed. Their shrill calls make them easy to spot in the old stonework. They are larger than those from the Mainland and breed on Hirta, Dun and Boreray. There is also a



The Street



WWI gun emplacement

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Dun from the southwest

St Kildan subspecies of the Field Mouse which only lives on Dun.

A boat trip around Hirta and the stacks during the breeding season is an unforgettable spectacle. The jagged cliffs, lush grassy slopes,

thousands of seabirds, and, above all, the sheer scale of the place can only be described as awe inspiring. The long trip over the open Atlantic offers the chance to see cetaceans such as Minke or Killer Whales, and various species of dol-

phins, as well as sea birds such as Gannets, Storm and Leaches Petrel and Manx Shearwaters.

Underwater, St Kilda is a sub-aqua diver's paradise, as the volcanic rocks erode into wonderful submerged shapes and caves. The clarity of the water means that visibility is often exceptional, while divers may be accompanied by curious Seals or Puffins.

Survival The St Kildans survived by using Nature's bounty to the full, harvesting thousands of Gannets, Puffins and Fulmars every year. They also kept the primitive Soay Sheep and later, Blackfaces. Although there would have been plenty of fish available, it did not feature much in the people's diet. Perhaps they preferred it after avian processing.



St Kildan "Parliament" on the late 1800s

One of the many cleits



Soay Sheep

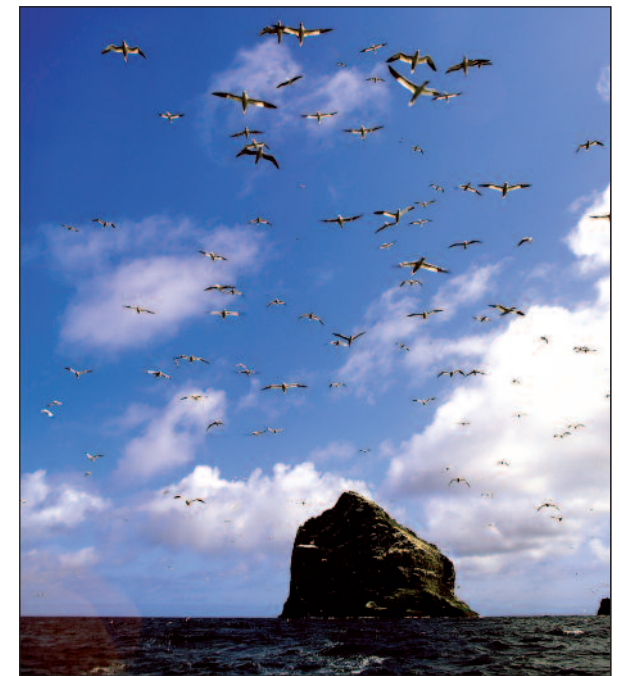


Stac an Armin (191m), Boreray (384m) and Stac Lee (165m)

To catch the birds the men had to be very agile climbers. They were on the craigs from a young age and developed particularly strong feet. Before a young man could marry, he had to show off his prowess by balancing on one foot atop the Lover's Stone. One leg was outstretched over the edge and the suitor had then to bend over and touch his toes with his fist.

Mortality There was a very high infant mortality rate which was previously thought to have been caused by typhus. Recent research has shown that the high consumption of seabirds, including their livers, resulted in a toxic overload of heavy metals. This was made worse by the fields and gardens being contaminated by discarded carcasses. The islanders were also prone to imported diseases such as smallpox and measles.

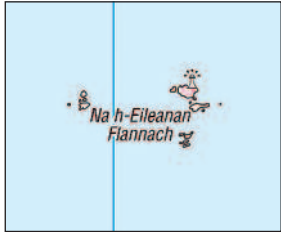
Ultimately, the St Kildans decided that life was no longer tenable and they asked to be evacuated in 1930. Today many people visit by yacht, motorboat or cruise ship. Few leave disappointed and most have a yearning to return one day to this unique and fascinating volcanic archipelago.



Stac an Armin (191m)

Natural arch in Glen Bay





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The **FLANNAN ISLANDS** (after the 8th century St Flann) are situated about 33km (21mi) WNW of Gallan Head on Lewis. Also known as the Seven Hunters, they are another bird paradise in summer, with many breeding seabirds, including Puffins, Fulmars, Gannets, Storm and Leaches Petrels. Minke, Killer and Pilot Whales, as well as Risso's and other Dolphins frequent this area.

The lighthouse was first lit in 1899. It has an especially large lamproom

to house its equally impressive lens. The shore station was at Breasclete in the west of Lewis. But for the events soon to unfold, it would be a quite obscure light.

On 15th December 1900 SS *Archtor* noticed that the light was not in operation. A few days later the tender *Hesperus* made a routine visit only to find all three keepers were missing. They were assumed to have been washed away by extremely large waves piling up at the West Landing.

The official explanation was less fanciful than many of the theories put forward. Robert Muirhead of the NLB reported, "From evidence which I was able to procure I was satisfied that the men had been on duty up till dinner time on Saturday the 15 December; that they had gone down to

secure a box in which the mooring ropes, landing ropes etc. were kept, and which was secured in a crevice in the rock about 110 ft (34 m) above sea level, and that an extra large sea had rushed up the face of the rock, had gone above them, and coming down with immense force, had swept them completely away."

The lighthouse was automated in 1971, and has now been converted to electric power with a large bank of photocells ranged along the south side. The accommodation block is well appointed to cater for visiting engineers and NLB staff.

On *Eilean Mor* (G, Big Island) below the lighthouse, there is a small stonebuilt chapel, dedicated to St Flann, and on the western headland a series of bothies (*Bothain Chlann 'ic Phail*, (G McPhail's Bothies) attributed to the Clan MacPhail. There are remains of a possible domestic building on the top of *Eilean Tighe* (G House Island).

The gannetry is on the south end of *Roareim*, and should not be closely approached to void disturbance. Between *Roareim* and *Eilean a'Ghobha* (G Blacksmith's Island) there are rock stacks and natural



St Flann's Chapel (8th century) and the lighthouse (19th century)

The West Landing where the keepers may have been lost



The Lamphouse is spacious to accommodate the large lens



The Flannans from Gallan Head in Lewis

arches eroded into fantastical shapes which can be observed from a boat in settled weather.

Geology The islands are volcanic and consist of Gabbro and Dolerite which have intruded the basal Lewisian Gneiss. These rocks have eroded into fantastic shapes, but are hard on the hands. The soils are fertile and there is a rich covering of grass, with a carpet of wildflowers and lichen in summer.

Getting Ashore on *Eilean Mor* is possible at either the East or West Landings, though care must be taken on the slippery steps, many of which have been washed away. All of the other islands are easily accessible in fine weather. Various boat operators run trips to the Flannans, which are very subject to weather and sea conditions.



The East Landing



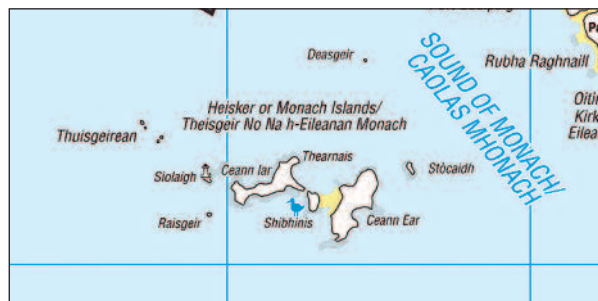
The lighthouse on a midsummer night

Roareim has a fine stack and arch



Eilean Mor from Eilean Tighe



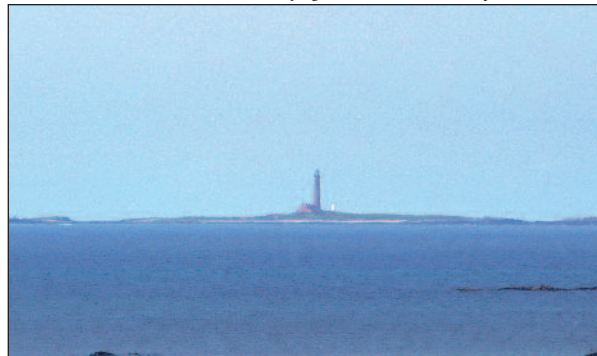


The **MONACH ISLANDS** (G *Manach*, monks) are about 10km off the west of North Uist. They comprise a series of small sandy islands and low skerries. Legend has it that up to the 16th century a sandbank connected the islands to North Uist, until a huge storm swept the sand away. The last inhabitants left in 1948, but until 1810 there were around 100 people here.



Shillay coastline on a rough day

Old lighthouse before cleaning up



Shillay lighthouse on the Monachs from North Uist

A small new light was installed in 1997 after the loss of the *Braer* in Shetland in 1993. In company with similar installations on Haskier to the west of North Uist and Gasker off North Harris, it marks the Deep Water Route recommended for large laden tankers.

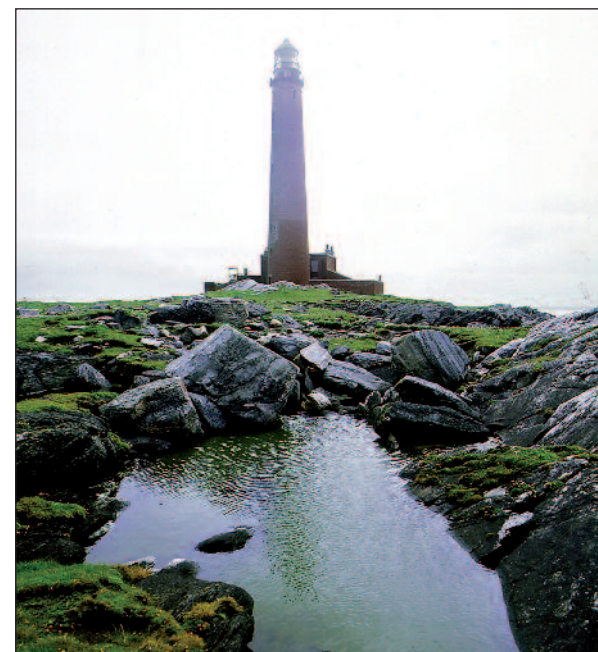
In 2005 it was decided to fit a more powerful light here and in July 2008 the original tower was brought back into use. Despite being abandoned for 60 years the tower remains in good condition and required very little repairs.

Ceann Ear (G East Island) was also known as *Heisker nan Cailleach* due to the nunnery there which may have been established in the 13th century. At low tide *Ceann Ear*, *Shivinish* and *Ceann Iar* are joined by sand bars.

Nature Today the islands are a National Nature Reserve. The undisturbed machair has a particularly rich flora here. About 10,000 Grey Seals now come ashore here each autumn to have their pups and mate, making it one of the largest such colonies in the world. Their dung helps fertilise the machair.

Many Waders, Terns, Eider Ducks, Shelducks and Fulmars breed on the islands. There is a very large colony of Black Guillemots which especially like the storm beaches. Barnacle Geese also overwinter. Over 200 species of flowering plants grow here, making early summer a wonderful time to visit as the machair becomes a sea of colour.

Access From seaward on a dull day the Monachs present a forbidding air, with sea breaking on the many sandbanks, rocks and skerries. All of the area in the vicinity is a maze of hazards, but navigable with care. The best anchorage is under the lighthouse at Shillay, where there is a jetty. Boat trips are run from North Uist occasionally.



The lighthouse reflected in a rock pool



Grey Seal mother and pup



Temporary 1997 lighthouse

Black Guillemots



Sound of Shillay with the lighthouse in the distance





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RONA (ON *Hraun-oy*, rough island) is a small isolated island about 70km (44mi) NNE of the Butt of Lewis. The people of Ness knew it as *Ronaìdh ant'Haf* (ON *Haff*, ocean) which is an apt description. The northern and southwestern peninsulas are quite rough, with bare rock and storm beaches, but the rest of the island is covered with luxuriant grass and wild flowers.



Fianuis and Sgeildige from the southwest

Feannagan or lazybeds surround the settlement



St Ronan The hermitage is one of the oldest remote Christian sites in Scotland and is said to have been founded by St Ronan in the 7th or 8th century. The oratory may be the oldest part. It has shell sand mortar and was once limewashed white inside. One small window high in the east gable provides some light.

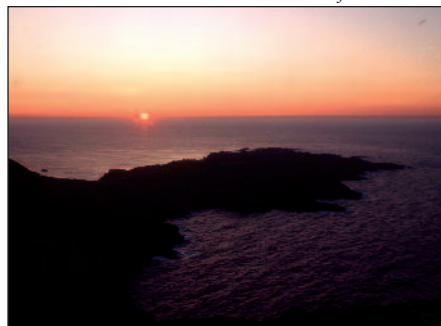
The roofless chapel has one doorway and is surrounded by an oval

earth and stone wall, which encloses an ancient graveyard. There are a number of cross-inscribed and cross-shaped grave markers which may date from the 7th to 9th and from the 12th or 13th centuries. The best known one, said to be St Ronan's own, is in the Ness Heritage Centre, Lewis.

Population A complex group of domestic buildings to the west of the chapel was occupied until the early 19th century. There are sub-rectangular living rooms, small oval side chambers with corbelled roofs and porches as well as byres, a kiln and a barn. Extensive field walls and *feannagan*, or lazybeds, surround the settlement.

Up to five families lived here. Periodically people left the island for Lewis, and resettlement also came from there. There are several records of catastrophe when the

Sunset over Fianuis from Toa Rona



Approaching Rona from the east. Toa Rona (108m) is the highest point and has a small lighthouse

residents were wiped out. Infections borne by incomers and rats from wrecked ships which ate the food were two. Perhaps the saddest is the story that some fishermen landed and stole the only bull. This meant no calves and no milk, an important part of the diet.

Like the St Kildans the Rona people depended on seabirds for part of their diet. They are said to have caught Gannets on Sula Sgeir as well as Puffins and other auks, on Rona. Unlike the St Kildans they were also fishermen and are said to have driven whales ashore on the rocks. They doubtless utilised the large Grey Seal population also. Thus, although isolated, they had access to a wide variety of resources.

Nature Reserve The island is a National Nature Reserve on account of its importance as a seabird and seal breeding area.

One of the domestic buildings



There are large numbers of breeding Puffins, Guillemots, Kittiwake and Fulmars, as well as both Leaches and Storm Petrels. In autumn up to 8,000 Grey Seals come ashore to calve. The lush grass of summer is partly a consequence of their dung.

Landing is possible in several places, at Geodha a'Stoth in the



Cross slab in the Chapel

east, Sgeildige in the northwest, or in several places on the south coast. A visit is well worthwhile as, although small and remote, Rona has a character all of its own.

Wartime U-boats are said to have regularly stopped off at Rona to steal sheep and take fresh air. U-90 regularly stocked up with fresh mutton during WWI in this way.



The Oratory interior

St Ronan's Chapel interior with entrance to the Oratory





Sula Sgeir from the southeast in winter

SULA SGEIR (ON *Sula Sker*, Gannet Skerry) is a small narrow rock, about 17km west of Rona. In summer it is home to large numbers of Gannets, Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags, Fulmars, Eider Ducks and Puffins. Both Storm and Leaches Petrels also nest here.

Gugas Each August, the Men of Ness come to harvest up to 2,000 *gugas*, the plump young Gannets which have not quite fledged. The birds are salted on the island, and are considered a delicacy by everyone from Ness. Indeed they can grace tables all over the world. Despite the cull, the Gannet population remains stable at about 9,000 pairs.

The Gannetry covers the whole southern end of the island. During

the breeding season the cacophony, smell and presence of the wheeling Gannets is most impressive.

Brenhilda Although seemingly very inhospitable to humans, there is a ruined stone bothy called *Tigh Beannaichte* (G Blessed House) on the east headland, Sgeir an Teampall. St Ronan's sister, Brenhilda, is alleged to have stayed here for some time, leaving him on Rona, only to be found dead in a bothy with a Shag's nest in her ribcage.

Her brother is said to have admired her beauty while they were climbing the hill on Rona. Apparently he especially remarked on her shapely legs as she ascended in front of him. As result she decamped to Sula Sgeir where she eventually died.

Bothies There are a total of five bothies on Sula Sgeir, which are still used by the Men of Ness when they come to harvest the gugas. These circular structures are undoubtedly ancient, but it seems unlikely that they were ever occupied for long periods.

Geology The hard Lewisian Gneiss rock splits into long pieces, which are excellent for building bothies and cairns. The rough boulders and sharp rocks make for tough walking, but their hardness has resisted erosion for perhaps 3,000 million years. The sea has burrowed right through the southern part of the island in a series of interconnected and spectacular caves. They may be explored by inflatable during calm weather.

One of several bothies



Gannets and Guillemots



There is a small lighthouse on the south end at *Sron na Lice*, the highest point of the island (74m). It is regularly damaged by the huge seas which break right over the rock during Atlantic storms.

Despite this there is a surprising amount of vegetation. The Thrift is especially luxuriant and colourful in June, which is probably the best month to visit. Scentless Mayweed, Orache, Scurvy Grass and Sea Spurrey are a few other salt tolerant plants which grow here, along with several species of lichens and even some grasses.

Landing There is a good anchorage at *Geodha a'Phuill Bhain*, where landing is not too difficult in settled



Approaching Sula Sgeir at dawn in midsummer

weather. It is sheltered from the east by the rocky islet of *Thamna Sgeir* (ON *Hamma Sker*, Harbour Skerry). Care should be taken to avoid disturbing the birds during the breeding season. A visit to Sula Sgeir is an experience not to be missed if the chance arises.



Guillemots with Rona in the distance



Sron na Lice in the mist from the south

Geodha a'Phuill Bhain from the south



View from inside a cave

One of the many spectacular caves





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The **SHIANT ISLANDS** (G Na h-Eileanan Seunta, The Enchanted Islands) lie between Skye and Lewis at the south end of the Minch and are about 18km (11mi) east of Scalpay. The rocks here are volcanic and, at 60 million years, very young by Hebridean standards.

Geology The Dolerite columns on the north side of Garbh Eilean (G Rough Isle) are over 100m tall and about 2m across. Similar to those at Staffa and the Giant's Causeway, they were caused by the slow cooling of volcanic rocks deep underground. In some places the basalt is overlain by Jurassic mudstone, which weathers to form much more fertile soil than elsewhere in the Western Isles.

Eilean Garbh in 1815 by William Daniell



The previously inhabited and cultivated areas of Airihghean a'Baigh and Airihghean na h-Annaid on Eilean Garbh and most of the top of Eilean Mhuire (G The Virgin's Island) are unusually fertile land for this reason. Feannagan may still be discerned in these areas.

Apart from the 19th century house and adjacent ruins on Eilean an Tighe (G House Island) there is additional evidence of human occupation. It seems that the islands were inhabited up until the late 18th century, when changes in land ownership and society made the old way of life no longer viable.

Chapels There are several possible chapel sites. The first may

have been dedicated to St Columba and have been sited on the west side of Eilean Garbh, perhaps at Airihghean na h-Annaid, as the name Annaid means Old Church. There is also evidence of a more recent church, dedicated to the Virgin, near the present cottage.

Finds During excavations on the farmstead on Eilean an Tighe an interesting round stone with a cross surrounded by a circle was found. This type of stone is common in Ireland, but unusual in Scotland. It was perhaps buried by the builders for good luck, and probably came from a much earlier church site.

Another interesting find was a gold torc which was dredged up by some Scalpay scallop fishermen southwest of the islands. This beautiful object dates from around 1200BC and, while similar torcs have turned up elsewhere in UK, this is by far the furthest north. It is possible to speculate endlessly about the provenance of such a find, and whether it got there by shipwreck, or as a votive offering.

Seabirds The Shiant Islands are a major seabird breeding site due to their location next to good feeding grounds and the lack of predators, except for Black Rats. Huge numbers of Puffins breed in burrows on the slopes of Garbh Eilean, as well as significant numbers of Guillemots, Razorbills, Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Shags, Gulls and Great Skuas. Although St Kilda has more Puffins, the sheer density on the Shiant Islands is greater.

Sound of Shiant The Sound of Shiant or Sruth na Fear Gorm is said to be inhabited by the *Blue Men of the Minch*, who must be treated with the greatest respect by mariners. Certainly the strong tides, uneven seabed and many hazards make the area dangerous in rough conditions. The offshore rocks and stacks to the west of the Shiant Islands are called the Galtachan (which may derive from ON Goltr, boar). Their basalt columns are beautiful on a calm day, but fearsome when the sea is rough.

Landing The best landing is on the shingle and boulder beach at Mol Mor on the east side of the isthmus, between Eilean Tighe and Garbh Eilean.



NMS

Golden torc

Feannagan (lazybeds) on Garbh Eilean



Approaching the Shiant Islands from Skye



Cross incised stone



Dolerite columns of Garbh Eilean



Eilean Tighe and Garbh Eilean from Eilean Mhuire

Eilean Garbh from Eilean an Tighe with Mol Mor





Richard Jones

Rockall with the Hasselwood Rock in the background

ROCKALL (ON *Hrukka*, a fold or wrinkle or *Rok*, foaming sea) is a very remote volcanic plug located 300km (187mi) west of St Kilda at 57°35'N, 13°41'W. It is about 21m high and rises sheer out of the sea. It is situated on the Rockall Bank. Helen's Reef is one of several nearby skerries and is about 2km to the northeast. These reefs and the nearby Hasselwood Rock are normally only visible at very low tides.

SS Norge which foundered on Helen's Reef in 1904 with great loss of life



Geology The Rockall Bank was formed about 55 million years ago as a result of volcanic activity. Rockall and the nearby shoals are formed of granite.

Landings In August 1810 the frigate *HMS Endymion* sailed to Rockall and plotted its position. The ship returned in July 1811, to survey the Rockall Bank. A landing was effected on 8th September, the first to be recorded.

On 18th September 1955 the rock was annexed for the British Crown by a party from *HMS Vidal*, who landed by helicopter. A plaque was affixed, which read, "By authority of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other realms and territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, and in accordance with Her Majesty's instructions dated the 14th day of September, 1955, a landing was effected this day upon this island of Rockall from *HMS Vidal*. The Union flag was hoisted and possession of the island was taken in the name of Her Majesty. [Signed] R H Connell, Captain, *HMS Vidal*, 18th September 1955."

Shipwrecks have occurred here, the most serious being the *SS Norge* on 28 June 1904. This 3359GRT Danish

owned steamer was *en route* to New York with 727 passengers and 68 crew when it hit Helen's Reef in fog at 7:45am. The ship reversed off the rock, but was badly damaged and sank within 20 minutes.

Unfortunately the 8 lifeboats could only carry 251 survivors. As a result 635 people died and only 160 were saved. The captain was exonerated, but the lessons were not learnt. A similar, but much greater, lack of lifeboats was to result in a much severer loss of life only 8 years later when the *SS Titanic* sank, also in fog.

Other documented losses include a French or Spanish fishing vessel in 1686, from which survivors reached St Kilda, reported by Martin Martin. The brigantine *Helen* from Dundee, headed for Quebec, went aground on a rock here in 1824. The crew abandoned ship with the only boat, and left the passengers to their fate.

Basil Hall from "HMS Endymion" landing on Rockall in 1811



RAF Coastal Command picture taken in March 1943

Territorial Claims This isolated rock has been claimed by United Kingdom, Eire, Iceland and Denmark. It was formally annexed by Great Britain in the *Island of Rockall*

Act 1972 and is within the Exclusive Economic Zone claimed by UK. Negotiations regarding the exploitation of possible oil and gas reserves continue.

Royal Navy landing in 1955

