

14. Two of Scotland's more remote burial grounds

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As the genealogist and local historian on board the research ship "Polar Pioneer", for a 12 day cruise with 48 passengers from various parts of the world, all anxious to see where their ancestors originated, I was able to visit several remote islands and the burial grounds which had been in use for generations.

The archipelago of St Kilda, "the islands on the edge", some 40 miles west of the Outer Hebrides and constantly battered by the Atlantic gales, are now inhabited only by the men at the occasionally-used army rocket range and by some temporary conservation volunteers on short-term visits. But the main residents are the innumerable, inquisitive, and very comic puffins. It was quite interesting landing on the island in a 10ft swell in Zodiac inflatables, but well worth the effort despite a thorough soaking.

There are only 6 inscribed tombstones in the cemetery which lies at the back of the ruins of the village on the main island of Hirta. These seem to be dedicated to individuals and families who were able to trace their ancestry back to a time before the island was evacuated in 1930, and may not represent actual interments, except possibly of ashes. Due to the very shallow soil in the cemetery, in most cases the bodies were laid in a shroud, on the rock, and the soil and sand was formed into a mound above the body, as is clearly visible in the photograph. Local rocks, uninscribed, were used as headstones and footstones.



The Cemetery on Hirta, St Kilda.

Another site which was visited was the Old Farm at Jarlshof, on Shetland. The burial ground here occupies what was the courtyard of the old farm. The old farm associated with the 'Earl's House' went out of use in the first decade of the 19th century, so the burials there must date from sometime after about 1810. There are two suggestions as to why these burials did not take place in the local churchyard at Dunrossness, one is that they were victims of a shipwreck on the shore beneath the old 'Earl's House', and it was convenient to bury them there, the other is that they may have been burials following an outbreak of Cholera in the area, probably in the 1830's.

There are no written records which can either confirm or deny either of these suggestions, but the lack of any inscriptions or even initials on the rough stones maybe suggest that the former reason for the burials is the most likely.



The burial ground in the courtyard of the old farmhouse at Jarlshof, Shetland

There were also many more similar sites which may have indicated earlier burial grounds, on Lunga, on Staffa and on several other islands, but time and tide prevented a more detailed examination of these places.