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02 November 2009

Ronald G Lansley
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Dear Ronnie

OLD SCHOOL, LOCH CROISPOL

Further to the meeting in Durness last Thursday I am writing to confirm my thoughts as to how you might consider proceeding in the light of the wealth of information uncovered about the site as a result of the recent archaeological investigations. Even though it may not have been the SSPCK school as had been thought originally it is undoubtedly a site of considerable significance and I would doubt that there are many of the old parochial schools of the eighteenth century in remote rural areas that are still in an identifiable state with the passing of the successive Education Acts of the second half of the nineteenth century. If these structures do survive elsewhere they are likely to have been modified to suit other uses. Understanding the significance of the site will hold the key to how the site should be designated and protected, in the knowledge that this is one of your aims to ensure its long term preservation.

Condition

The structure is vulnerable in its current state. The excavations have revealed that the collapsed east gable may have been of a different construction to the rest of the building which has been unusually well built with a lime mortar of some strength, no doubt due to the extensive supplies of limestone in the immediate vicinity of the site. As we observed when on site, the structure had been harled in its original state. It appears that the walling of the collapsed east gable may have a clay core which has weathered away leaving a number of voids and the tumbled masonry may be applying pressure on what survives of the outer face of the base of the wall.

The other vulnerable area is what has survived of the west gable. Further loss of the masonry of the chimneyhead and of the crowsteps will result in some loss of the architectural importance of the building and will diminish the understanding of future generations as to how it may have appeared originally.

I consider that it would be sensible to proceed on the basis that the ruin should be consolidated as an ancient monument, using well established techniques which involve minimal intervention to the existing fabric and which will protect the exposed wallheads by 'rough racking' where these may be sound to prevent water penetration, and by applying protective turf layers.

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While I understand why it may have been thought necessary to consolidate loose sections of masonry with pointing for health and safety reasons, the application of such a dense cement mortar applied in such an apparently unskilled way can only be considered detrimental to the appearance of the ruin. Repairs should be carried out in a matching lime mortar based on analysis of the original mix by a specialist body such as the Scottish Lime Centre Trust.

Professional and craft skills

If you were to adopt a conservation-based approach to the preservation of the ruin it will be important to ensure that appropriate specialist skills are engaged for identifying the works required to consolidate the ruin based on scheduling the fabric on a stone-by-stone basis, and I can only suggest that an accredited conservation architect be appointed to administer the work. A list of RIAS accredited architects can be found through the link on http://www.rias.org.uk/content/default.asp?page=s3_5 but it is important to bear in mind that not all of them will be experienced in the care of ancient monuments. I can help you with making the choice when the time comes.

Equally, it will be important to ensure that the craft skills engaged on the project are appropriate for the standard of work to be undertaken – it may well be the case that an element of training is built into the programme in order to leave behind a legacy of growing skills for the needs of the area.

Designation

In order to maximise the opportunities for grant aid for the project it seems to me that it is inevitable that you should pursue with Historic Scotland the possibilities for scheduling or listing the structure. I gave you the name of John Malcolm, Inspector of Ancient Monuments for the NW Highland area. An approach would, in my view, be more effective once you have the archaeological report in your hands.

Funding

It appears to me that there could be a choice of routes to follow, irrespective of whether the structure is listed or scheduled. In order to maximise the opportunities for saving the ruin it will be necessary to determine whether it is a stand alone project or whether a part of a wider programme of work. On every occasion I come to Durness I am struck by the fact that the historic environment is unusually rich and each element forms part of a remarkable cultural landscape. A more ambitious project may attract wider funding as well as providing greater opportunities for skills training and interpretation. Graham took me to see the old parish church site and this only served to reinforce this view and that the monument was very much at risk.

I would very much to see a copy of the report on the archaeological excavations once it has been published, and in the meantime I wish you well with the development of the project and hope that these thoughts have been helpful to you in planning ahead.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely



Andrew PK Wright