



Newly hatched oystercatcher chicks nest on the floor of the ruined Factor's Store



A ruined cleit in the village area. There are over 900 cleitan, or food-stores, dotted all over the island

could stop them were planning our accommodation. Apparently the schoolboys had been almost blown away in the gales and had lost most of the Trust tented camp (we groaned inwardly at the lost opportunity to have filmed the incident) so that the new Trust Working Party were now housed in the church where we had been planning to sleep. However, an experimental aluminium hut, being tested for weather resistance on St. Kilda, and only partly in use as a bedding store, was offered to us, together with a couple of spare beds and about five dozen mattresses. That night, while *Meteor* lay in a blaze of lights in the bay before her departure, we were established in comfortable quarters with electric light, with all our film and camera gear safe from the weather and with a pied à terre in the Factor's House, where we shared cooking and dining facilities with the Nature Conservancy.

The picture of wild, wet, comfortless St. Kilda was further dispelled the next day when the sun shone and the wind dropped to a light breeze. We headed straight for Conachair and had an immediate reminder of some of the problems involved in film-making in a place where every other subject is the other side of a col 1000 ft. high which has to be re-climbed on the way home in the evening. Even 16mm. gear can be quite heavy and it all had to go in packs on our backs, tape recorder and all. But the sweat was worth it when, on the very first

morning, another key shot was scon in the can. It stayed clear all day and while Keith climbed to the summit I searched for a place from which I could take in the tiny human figure on the cliff-top and then pan down, down, down to the sea below. The chosen spot was precarious and I roped up, tying the camera and tripod to myself, and belaying myself to a large rock before I dared risk the unpleasant sensation of looking over the edge through a viewfinder, a sure method of losing one's sense of balance. The 20-second run of the Bolex mechanism was only just long enough to record the shot.

The problem of carrying the equipment was sometimes helped by hitching a lift in a Land-rover to the top of the hill but the other chief problem was, of course, the weather. I remember my earlier visit in 1957 when I only had one day of sun out of 16. St. Kilda weather can change so quickly that plans have to be completely altered in half an hour, and the time taken to reach most of our film subjects, such as the famous tunnel on the north coast of Hirta, was at least an hour's hard slog.

Surprisingly, however, the problem changed as the days of sunshine followed and the first anticyclonic spell following our arrival merely heralded another about a week later. We got all the light and colour we could have wanted in some almost Mediterranean weather and we began to pray for wind, a prayer probably

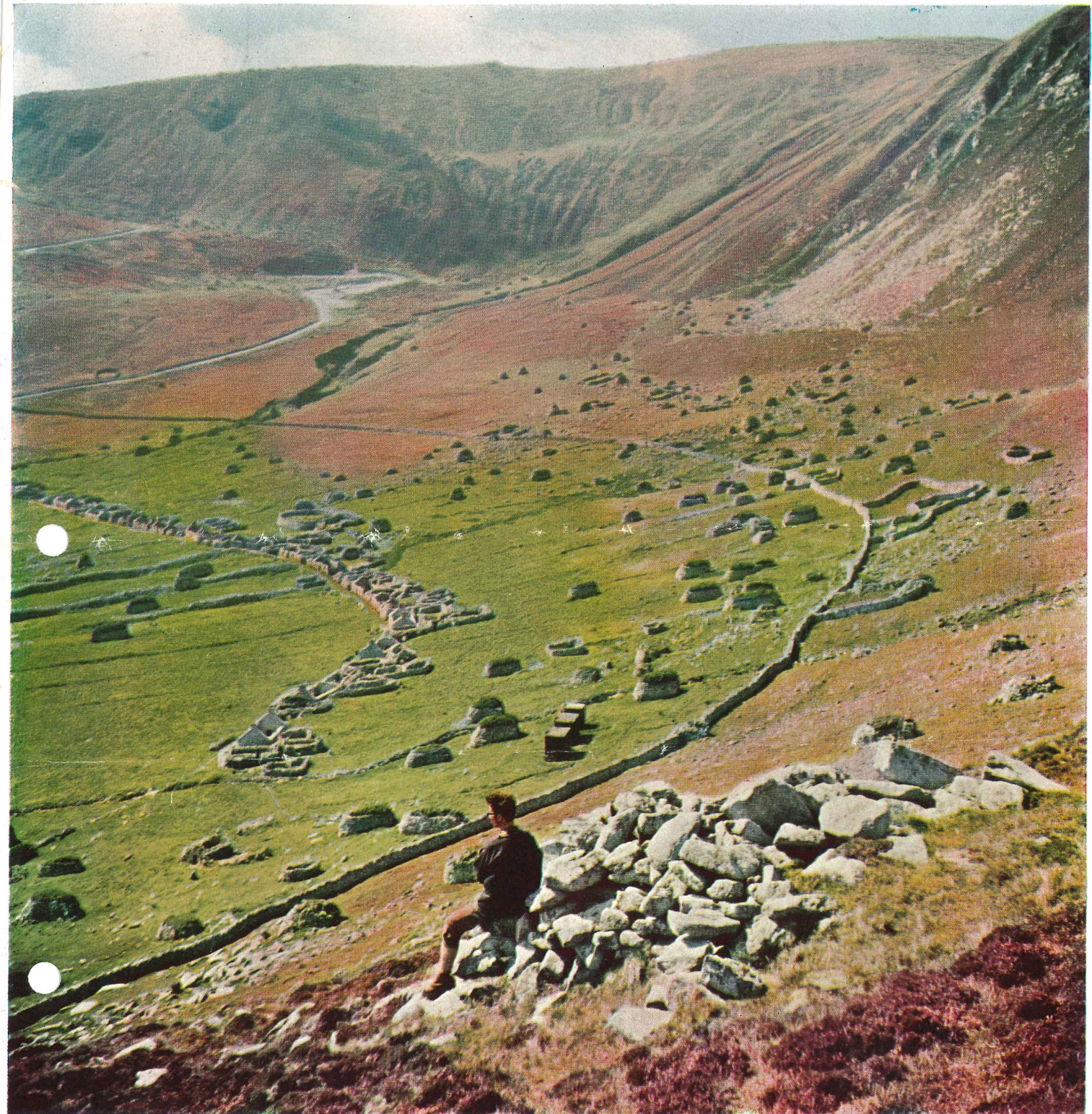


A young shag rescued from Village Bay waits to return to the sea



St. Kilda's distinctive species of mouse still survives

unprecedented in the island's history. It was impossible to show the true St. Kilda when midges were the chief trouble on a day's outing and sunburn the greatest discomfort. We listened with smug satisfaction to weather reports of thunder and rain in England, floods in Glasgow, and gales on the south coast which we hoped would soon shift farther north. They never did. We landed twice on Dun, the island which shelters Village Bay to the south, and is probably the best, even if the most awkward, bird island in Britain. We sweltered there among a plethora of colourful subjects, razor-bills on huge lichen-covered boulders, fulmars spitting at us from grassy ledges, puffins galore at their burrows, and lush clumps of thrift and sea campion on the guano-rich soil. We waded knee-deep in sorrel and ungrazed grass in an orgy of camera work, trying to exercise the strictest selection from an endless supply of



Looking down on the crescent of houses that forms the village street, and the numerous cleitan that were used to store food

photogenic subject-matter in a June paradise of colour and movement. And yet in the end we had only sun-drenched pictures of a tame St. Kilda under blue skies. We still needed a storm to enable us to give anything like a true picture of the place.

Of course, we had our bad days, when cloud and mist made any colour film impossible and when we turned to recording some of the many atmospheric sounds that are such a dominant part of the experience. The singing of the seals beneath the cliffs and the endless cackling chatter of the thousands of fulmars are part of the music of the wild places. The constant drone of the Army generator is a sound we would rather forget. It made the recording of the shrill song of the wrens almost impossible anywhere in the village area.

In the end we had exposed well over 6000 ft. of film and covered far more subjects than

we had ever dared hope for. We had even secured close-ups of most of the really difficult subjects — the large grey-brown wrens, the russet field-mice, the varicoloured sheep—with a remarkable consistency in colour conditions.

It was not till the day of departure that the long-awaited gale struck. At 10.30 a.m. the Army trawler *The Mull* was reported due at mid-day and the wind was freshening. Everything was packed in polythene bags in roped-up boxes. We were ready to go. Within half an hour the wind rose from a breeze to a Force 8 gale, a midsummer north-westerly creating a dramatic downdraught on the surface of the bay, with the gusts picking up the water in sheets of white spindrift.

I started hastily to unpack the camera but was still loading it with film when the scene I had been waiting five weeks for was enacted before my eyes. A gust hit the hut with a

bang. Men who had come running to tie down all moveable objects and who had started to secure a great pile of corrugated iron with heavy baulks of timber, fled for their lives. Sheets of metal six feet long flew round the buildings like pieces of burnt paper and one was whisked sky-high over Oiseval and out to sea. The whirlwind passed the camp, ripped across the grass and ploughed a white furrow across the water, whisking the spume upwards in a funnel of travelling spray.

I watched fascinated and helpless. It was all over in half a minute and none of the shots I secured in the next five minutes was half as exciting. As I struggled to steady the camera inside the shelter of the ruin of the Factor's Store near the pier, I wondered what a full midwinter gale must be like. I decided that there had been compensations in our failure to meet the full challenge of St. Kilda. □