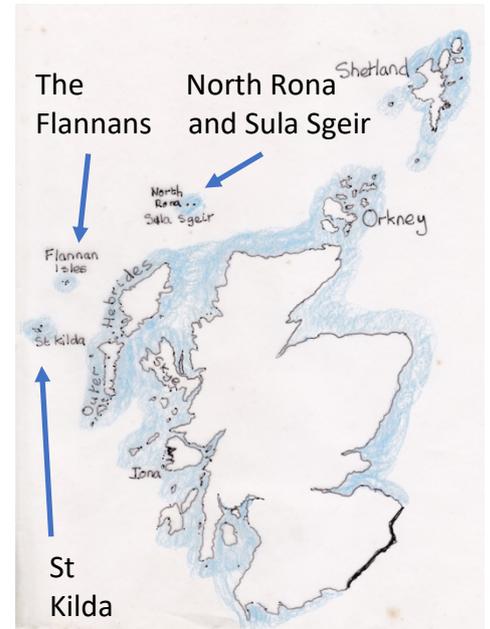


The Flannans: sanctuary

Lockdown life may feel restrictive, separated and prohibitive, and if confined, heartache and stress may bubble. But if space is available; a courtyard, garden or quiet corner of a park, sanctuary may be found. A sanctuary may include a place of safety or refuge, for people retreating from political oppression, or the demands of a stressful life. It may also be understood as a haven for nature, free from intrusion, disturbance or destruction by humans.

Lockdown has given something of a respite for much wildlife, allowing nature to bloom anew. But, some places are so rarely visited, that they have a near permanent air of natural sanctuary. Amongst these number the Atlantic outliers. Set in the ocean beyond the Outer Hebrides chain, their isolated and geographic remoteness amidst the sea's swell and storm, renders them challenging to reach, and harder still to land.

Arguably best known is the St Kilda archipelago, a double UNESCO World Heritage Site for culture and nature. More remote is North Rona and its westerly twin Sula Sgeir, visited annually by men from Lewis, the so-called guga hunters, who undertake an annual ritual harvesting young gannets.



In-between is a cluster of 7 isles, known as the Flannan Isles, or Seven Hunters (left & right). A Site of Special Scientific Interest, they host a summer melee of breeding seabirds, with whirr of wings, stench of guano, and squawk of territory, attraction and hunger.



The last resident left in 1971 when the lighthouse (right), on Eilean Mòr, the largest isle, was automated. The beacon harbours a Marie Celeste type mystery. Following the report that the light was out by a passing steamer in mid-December 1900, a relief boat was despatched. It finally landed on Boxing Day, found evidence of a storm, but no sign of life. Doors were shut, beds unmade, oilskins hanging on their pegs. Theories abounded. Had the 3 keepers hurried out to secure equipment near the landing stage, and then be caught by a freak wave? The mystery remains unsolved.



Amidst a range of scattered stone structures on Eilean Mòr is an early stone-corbelled chapel (left) dedicated to St Flannan.



Entering, I found a cool calm, lit by thin shafts of light piercing the stone roof (left). A 'sanctuary' encapsulating the earliest meaning of the term, imbuing the isle with a sense of sacred place.



Looking out through the opening, I wondered who had sat in this sacred space before me. Amidst the vastness of the ocean, I felt utterly insignificant, and yet known by the ground of our being.

The lighthouse at the end of Whitby Pier, and a clifftop spot on Beachy Head, have an identical plaque with words from Psalm 93:

Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on High is Mighty. Under, there is a commentary, 'God is always greater than all our troubles'. I thought of the lost lighthouse keepers, and my own proportionately insignificant concerns, and felt a perspective wash over me; whatever assails in life, God is beyond. I knew deep, holy peace. Sanctuary.