

# BLOCKHOUSE COTTAGES, TRESCO

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

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llewellyn  
harker  
lowe

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# I. The Existing Building and Setting

## I.1 Introduction

This document outlines the history and significance of Blockhouse Cottages, it has been composed by Gabriella Herrick (RIBA CA and AABC) to support the application P/21/018/FUL at Blockhouse Cottages, Tresco. It is drafted in response to consultation comments dated 19th March 2021 provided by the Local Planning Authority's Development Management Archaeological Advice Officer (DMMAO).

Blockhouse Cottages are a row of unlisted, mid-19th century cottages. They are located within the Isles of Scilly Conservation Area and the setting of the grade-II listed Old Block House. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, this report has been drafted based on a desk-based research and on-site survey work. Therefore, it may be possible to accumulate further evidence as Covid restrictions are lifted and access to local archives is restored.

## I.2 Brief History of the Old Block House and Old Grimsby Bay

The Old Block House was built between 1548 and 1554 as a defensive fort to protect the adjacent harbour of Old Grimsby. The structure is one of a number of forts built on the Isles of Scilly during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I. However, the fort was not in active use until the English Civil War in the 17th century, when a Royalist garrison was defending the islands against attack by Parliamentarians, led by the famous Admiral Blake. Tresco was the first island to be attacked and taken with relative ease and was successively used as a base to attack the remaining islands.

Ordnance Survey Maps demonstrate that the settlement around Old Grimsby Bay was established by 1888 and has changed very little since **[Figure 1]**. The buildings in the bay are mainly located to the north of the central quay, which sits at the end of the road to Dolphin Town, forming a cluster of buildings. The remains of the Old Block House are not labelled, and the adjacent land at this time was used as a quarry. The Blockhouse Cottages are labelled and are shown as having a series of outbuildings to the south. By the 1906 Map, the remains of the Old Block House area clearly labelled, as are the Porth Mellin Carn and Middle Carn to the north, demonstrating a rise in interest and recording of antiquity towards the end of the 19th century **[Figure 2]**. The Blockhouse Cottages are labelled to the west but the series of outbuildings to the south have been removed. The settlement to the north of Old Grimsby Bay and towards Dolphin Town, remain largely unchanged, as is shown in the 1980s Ordnance Survey Map **[Figure 3]**.



Figure 1 - 1888 Ordnance Survey Map

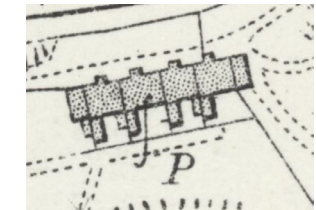


Figure 2 - 1906 Ordnance Survey Map

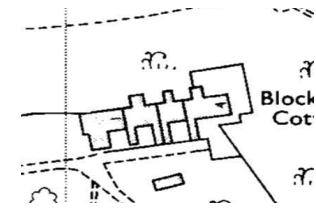


Figure 3 - 1980 Ordnance Survey Map

### 1.3 History and Development of Blockhouse Cottages

The conservation area appraisal describes the common and traditional form of this type of building across the archipelagos as *'isolated terraces of houses...usually late-19th century and are built straight, along the contour, usually below the skyline.'* Blockhouse cottages are a row of granite cottages characterised by their traditional linear form with two gable ends, projecting service extensions and a single storey lean-to at each end. The slate roofline is punctuated with five regular chimney stacks, externally the row has predominantly been encased in C20th cement render.

As is often the case for buildings of low status, hard historic information regarding the Blockhouse Cottages is scant. The Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Record (HER) records the Blockhouse Cottages as *'a row of cottages west of the blockhouse built originally for the crew and their families of the Seven Stones lightship - first anchored on the Seven Stones reef in 1841. A notable feature of the cottages is the fact that all their windows face inland away from the sea'* (MCO30191). However, it does not necessarily follow that the buildings were established at the same time as the light ship. Evidence such as the original window and door joinery has been removed and masonry details obscured by cement render. However, the overall character is consistent with other mid – late C19th properties on the island.

The Sevenstones reef has been a hazardous area for ships for centuries, as the rocks are only exposed at low tide. There have been seventy-one named wrecks and an estimated 200 shipwrecks overall. A lighthouse was not a feasible option, so a permanently moored lightship was first introduced in 1841, provided by the guild, Trinity House, which was established by Royal charter in 1514. The Sevenstones Lightship was first moored off the Sevenstones reef (approximately 15 miles to the west-north-west of Land's End and 7 miles to the east-north-east) of the Isles of Scilly in 1841. There have been various iterations of the lightship and since 1987, the Sevenstones Lightship has been automated and unmanned, also acting as an automatic weather station.

The row was originally built as 4 modest cottages, each internally around 6.5m wide x 4.2m deep (with the exception of the western central unit that is substantially wider than the other 3 units).

The internal plan is consistent across the row. Each cottage has; two ground floor rooms; a hall with rustic stair leading up to the first floor (small kitchens have since been installed in these spaces), and a larger, though still compact in scale, primary living space arranged around a tall granite fireplace hearth. The first floor plans replicate the ground, a small bedroom is partitioned from the stair above the hall, and a larger bedroom above the living space.

The two end units have an additional lean-to room formed against the gable end. Due to the cement render concealing any construction joints and the lack of clarity in the 1888 map it is unclear whether these were a later addition. However, they are also granite built and are clearly delineated on the 1906 map. The eastern end has been extended further with an uPVC lean-to conservatory.

Internally, the spaces retain little of their original character. Key features like doors and windows have been replaced with uPVC units. They have been lined with gypsum plaster and wood chip wall paper; finishes are modern and non-breathable.

The northern elevation is lightly fenestrated punctuated by only a few slit windows. Local speculation asserts that after long shifts at sea on the lightship, the cottage residents did not want to be reminded of their work by views over the bay. The veracity of this is not backed by any written evidence and it is equally likely to be a functional measure to protect the dwellings from cold and exposure to particularly violent northerly storms.

The northern elevation is punctuated by a series of 4 lean-tos. Three of these are clearly of late C20th construction with thin block walls, built to house new bathrooms for the dwellings. The western lean-to is smaller with thicker granite walls and appears to be an original porch. The 1906 map indicates 4 small and regularly sized porches. It therefore appears likely that the small western lean-to was a feature present on each dwelling. Small storm porches that provide a draft lobby between the outside and the dwelling interior are a common detail across the island; often featuring side entry doors to provide protection from the full force of the elements.

The southern elevation is more extensively fenestrated. Though window proportions are irregular and often squat in proportion. This elevation features a series of small attached granite outbuildings arranged perpendicular to the row with diminutive twin-pitch roofs. Combined with low granite walls these create a small enclosed yard for each property. Some of these have been extended with additional lightweight lean-tos on their western side, which encroach on the ground floor windows.

The roof is slated and is shallow pitched at just 30 deg. This is another characteristic of development on the Scilly isles developed to reduce wind load and the consequent risk of storm damage due to the extreme marine environment. The chimney stacks are rendered and terminate with deep tapered granite caps. They are unusually tall for Tresco, and give the row its distinctive silhouette from across the bay. This height may be to ensure sufficient draw in the swirling winds created by a hollow site adjacent to the blockhouse promontory.

## 1.4 Map Regression

The cottages are shown on the 1888 Ordnance Survey Map, the map lacks some accuracy and clarity but does indicate a linear row with a series of outbuildings to the south elevation **[Figure 1]**. Porches are not discernible on the north elevation, but given the accuracy of the mapping this is not considered to be conclusive evidence of their absence. There are a series of outbuildings and an enclosure a short distance to the south of the cottages, which were likely for animals.

The 1906 Ordnance Survey Map clearly shows a series of porches to the north elevation which are consistent in size **[Figure 2]**. Additional lean-tos have been added to the existing south elevation outbuildings. The two gable lean-tos are also clearly depicted.

The cottages have remained in a similar form throughout the 20th century **[Figure 3]**. The 1980 Ordnance Survey Map shows 3 larger lean-tos on the North elevation, replacing the smaller porches present in the 1906 map. Two small outbuildings have been constructed to the south of the cottages.

The cottages are now in a poor condition, the full state of their disrepair is highlighted in the Curry and Brown condition survey that accompanies this application. Their appearance has been altered throughout the 20th century, with the removal of original joinery, the addition of cementitious render to the exterior elevation and chimney stacks, and an ongoing cycle of patch repair and the replacement of elements with modern, inappropriate materials.



West and east elevations of Blockhouse Cottages



North elevation of Blockhouse Cottages



llewellyn  
harker  
lowe



South elevation of Blockhouse Cottages

## 2. Assessment of Significance

### 2.1 Introduction

This assessment responds to the requirement of the National Planning Policy Framework to 'recognise that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserve them in a manner appropriate to their significance'. The NPPF defines significance as;

*'The value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological (a potential to yield evidence about the past), architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting'.*

Although the cottages are not listed, this assessment of significance has been carried out with consideration given to the The Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings document produced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2010), in accordance with the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservations Areas) Act 1990, which outlines that the special interest of a building stems from two key elements –

**Architectural Interest:** To be of special architectural interest a building must be of importance in its design, decoration or craftsmanship. Special interest may also apply to particularly significant examples of building types or techniques (e.g. buildings displaying technological innovation or virtuosity) and significant plan forms.

**Historic Interest:** To be able to justify special historic interest a building must illustrate important aspects of the nation's history and / or have closely substantiated historical associations with nationally important individuals, groups or events; and the building itself in its current form will afford a strong connection with the valued aspect of history.

These two areas are informed by Historic England: Conservation Principles and Assessment (2008)

**Evidential Value:** Evidential value derives from the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity.

**Historical Value:** Historical value derives from the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present. It tends to be illustrative or associative.

**Aesthetic Value:** Aesthetic value derives from the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.

**Communal Value:** Communal value derives from the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory. Communal values are closely bound up with historical (particularly associative) and aesthetic values, but tend to have additional and specific aspects.

### 2.2 Blockhouse Cottages

Blockhouse Cottages are a row of un-listed mid-19th century buildings. Originally built to house the crew and families of the Sevenstones Lightship, the cottages have been extended and altered since being built, particularly throughout the 20th century, which has had a detrimental effect on their fabric and appearance.

The evidential value of the cottages has been compromised by the unsympathetic maintenance of the cottages. Layers of cement render and paint, have considerably changed the external appearance of the cottages and negatively impact on the setting. Historic windows or doors have been replaced with modern units and internally, all finishes are modern and non-breathable. The materials are not in accord with traditional Scilly Isles vernacular for this building type. Therefore, the evidential value remains in the form of the cottages, particularly its linear arrangement with a series of chimneys and the rear outbuildings.

Historical and communal value can be found in the fact that the original use of the cottages was to provide accommodation for the crews and their families of the Seven Stones lightship in 1841.

The aesthetic value of the cottages is principally found in their exterior form and how their silhouette is perceived in the landscape, from a distance, against the Old Block House. The modern materials and alterations to the cottages compromises their aesthetic value in the immediate setting and obscure the function and age of the building.

### 2.3 The Conservation Area Setting

Significance is found in the pleasing form and materials of the traditional two storey largely granite houses across the conservation area. The use of local Cornish granite in particular complements the landscape, bedding the buildings into the wider setting, and contributes to its unique character.

Significance is also found in the pattern of development with cottages set informally around Old Grimsby Bay behind the dunes, or aligned on axis with the projecting quay in the centre of the bay. This arrangement communicates how the settlement has developed around the natural resources intrinsic to the setting, with the quay offering safe harbour and access to the sea.

Significance is present in the setting of Old Grimsby Bay, through the picturesque natural character of the bay, particularly its vegetation and geology with white sand beaches and marram grass dunes punctuated by expressive rocky outcrops at the headlands.

The significance of the Old Block House is found in its built form as a raised gun platform, with adjoining living quarters and its strategic positioning at the south east of Old Grimsby Bay. Significance is found in the use of the building, which was initially built between 1548-52, in response to threats from French invasion forces. However, the fortification was first used in action during the English Civil War and is recorded to have been in use until 1750. This significance of the Old Block House is intrinsically linked to its setting; only through the relationship of building, the sea and the surrounding landscape, it is possible to understand the original purpose of the building.

The significance of the Old Grimsby bay area can be perceived from the surrounding upland landscape, which includes views to and from the Old Block House and Blockhouse Cottages. The cottages sit within a number of key views towards the Old Blockhouse and Old Grimsby Bay, which have been described and assessed in the Heritage, Setting and Visual Impact Assessment. The cottages principally contribute to the views described in this assessment through their exterior form; particularly the silhouette formed by the 5 chimneys and linear ridge. However, the cement rendered elevations and uPVC windows and doors detract from the setting of the Old Blockhouse and Old Grimsby Bay.

The area surrounding the Blockhouse Cottages is described in the Conservation Area Appraisal as being located in a character area of *'low lying dunes and heath.'* To the north east, the ground level increases to the site of the Old Blockhouse, which is located in a character area of *'headland and hilltop heathland,'* and it is a dominant feature in the landscape. From this site, Old Grimsby Bay curves round to the north east and is characterised as a *'sand and shingle beach.'* The land to the south of Blockhouse Cottages is *'open pasture fields.'* These character areas come together at the site of Blockhouse Cottages.

### 3. Justification of the Proposals

This short assessment has identified the significance of the un-listed cottages and their contribution to the conservation area setting and the setting of the grade-II listed Block House. The NPPF requires heritage assets to be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance. The particular significance of Blockhouse Cottages is primarily attributable to their exterior form and how this is viewed in the landscape setting of the Old Blockhouse and Grimsby Bay. Also of moderate significance is their historic use as homes for the crew and their families of the Seven Stones lightship. However, the overall significance of these buildings has been compromised through the addition of cement-based render and a series of unsympathetic repairs, which are all indicative of a longer-term issues with the building.

There are 16 listed buildings on Tresco; that Blockhouse Cottages is not among them supports this assessment. The unlisted status of this building should be a material consideration when determining the appropriateness of the proposals. Given that the building is not listed the estate could make substantial and extensive changes to the property, particularly throughout the interior, without the need to seek consent for doing so.

Of further consideration is the condition of the cottages, which have deteriorated beyond habitability and are only in partial occupation as a result. The costs of the works necessary to undertake a refurbishment are prohibitive, as established in the Currie and Brown condition survey.

Even if a refurbishment was financially affordable, the refurbished accommodation would have below average energy performance, a cramped and inconvenient layout which would be impractical for occupants, granite walls with no DPC prone to damp, and not be compliant with current building regulations including: Part B; means of escape from fire, Part K; protection from falling, and Part L; Energy efficiency in dwellings.

Without a viable use there is no incentive to undertake repairs or maintain the buildings, which will otherwise continue to fall into further disrepair and eventually ruin. Rebuilding the cottage row would provide the building with a viable function and justifies the expenditure required to undertake the works and safeguard maintenance into the future.

The proposals have been developed to replace the existing buildings but retain the characteristics that contribute to the conservation area setting and to the key views towards the Old Blockhouse. It is considered that rebuilding the cottages generally and maintaining their external form would retain their modest contribution to the setting and its significance.

The appearance and significance of the cottages buildings has been heavily compromised through the addition of cement-based render, a series of unsympathetic repairs and inappropriate replacement joinery, all of which detract from the setting. Where possible existing materials including granite masonry and roofing slates will be reused. The reinstatement of exposed traditional granite elevations, using reclaimed material where possible, replacing the existing C20th cement render, and appropriate traditionally detailed timber sash windows would provide enhancement to the setting.

Our clients have undertaken to commission a Historic Building Record prior to any works starting on site. The principal aim of the study would be to gain a better understanding of the buildings. Work undertaken would include an accurate record of the building and its external and internal features (Level 2 as defined by Historic England 2016). The record would also catalogue the function and historic development of the building and outline and record key features and fittings which are of particular significance. (it may be possible to accumulate further evidence as Covid restrictions are lifted and access to local archives is restored, and also in the dismantling of the existing building).

Full details of this proposal and its dissemination are available in Written Scheme of Investigation for Archaeological Recording. The provision of this documentation safeguards the understanding of the sites historic use and evolution.

In summary, the heritage assets would be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance. It is therefore considered any perceived harm from the removal of the cottages would be mitigated by the material improvements and the recording work undertaken to preserve the history of the site.

This assessment is corroborated by the response to the proposals from Historic England, who raised no objections:

*'Thank you for your letter of 19 March 2021 regarding the above application for planning permission. On the basis of the information available to date, we do not wish to offer any comments. We suggest that you seek the views of your specialist conservation and archaeological advisers.'*

## Conclusion

Blockhouse Cottages are not listed and therefore the protections afforded to the building are limited to the conservation area status that covers the archipelago in its entirety. The significance of these buildings is found in their exterior form and how this is perceived in the conservation area setting and the setting of the grade-II listed Old Blockhouse. Significance is

also found in their location on the Island, their form and their relationship to Old Grimsby Bay, as it is through these elements that the historical relationship with the Sevenstones Lightship can be established.

The work carried out to the exterior of the cottages throughout the 20th century has considerably altered the appearance of the cottages in terms of material and details, which are no longer characteristic of the local vernacular. This has compromised their contribution to the setting and provides an opportunity for enhancement. The proposals provide a use for the site, which would otherwise continue to deteriorate.

The design of the building has taken into account the characteristics and historic context of the area, including; the relationship of the site to the Old Block House; the landscape character of the setting and the conservation area. The form, scale, massing and character of the proposed building, are a facsimile of the buildings that it would replace, preserving the vernacular character of the building in the immediate setting. In this respect, the appearance of the heritage assets in the setting would be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, which accords with the terminology of the NPPF and are therefore considered acceptable in heritage terms.

In accordance with the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act, the significance and characteristics of the cottages that contribute to the setting in the conservation area and the setting of Grade-II listed Old Blockhouse, would be preserved and modestly enhanced by the proposed scheme through the improvement of the appearance of the cottages in the setting.



## Appendix 1 - Listing Description - The Old Blockhouse

*Heritage Category: Listed Building*

*Grade: II*

*List Entry Number: 1219196*

*Date first listed: 14-Dec-1992*

*Statutory Address: THE BLOCKHOUSE*

TRESCO

SV81NE The Blockhouse 1358-011119

II

*Blockhouse. Probably 1548-52. Roughly coursed granite rubble. Rectangular plan. Top of the platform is enclosed by walls, originally surmounted by a parapet with embrasures. Stairs to east. Winder stairs to original lean-to in south-east corner, with plain granite open fireplace; remains of later room constructed in south-east corner of platform. Covers Old Grimsby Harbour, and is probably one of the blockhouses built on Treco under Sir Francis Fleming, and later John Kiligrew, captain of Pendennis Castle, between 1548 and 1552. Scheduled as an Ancient Monument. (P Laws: The Buildings of Scilly: Redruth: 1980-: 6; B.H. St.J.O'Neil: Isles of Scilly: London (HMSO): 1950-: 20).*

*Listing NGR: SV8973015462*

## Appendix 2 - Sources and Bibliography

National Library of Scotland - Historic Maps

English Heritage, Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Research Framework (2012)

Council of the Isles of Scilly, The Heritage and Cultural Strategy for the Isles of Scilly (2004)

## Appendix 3 – Planning Policy and Guidance

Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

The National Planning Policy Framework (updated 2019)

Historic England: Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning (March 2015) Historic England: Conservation Principles and Assessment (2008)

The Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings document produced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2010)

Isles of Scilly Local Plan (2015-2030) *Historic Environment Topic Paper*