

2016 SVBWG Conference – review

The 2016 AGM of the SVBWG was held at John Sinclair House, Edinburgh on 12th October and was followed by the Group's Annual Conference, with the theme *Building Types and How to Read Them*. Danny Dutton (Scotland's Urban Past Training Officer, HES) opened proceedings with an account of 'Scotland's Urban Past', a five-year nationwide community engagement project that seeks to discover and celebrate the history of Scotland's towns and cities. It builds upon the success of the earlier Scotland's Rural Past project. He demonstrated the diversity of activities that the project encompasses, including initiatives in education, drawing attention to buildings at risk, and unravelling the histories of some oft-overlooked high street buildings. This initiative is a welcome stimulus to the study of the urban vernacular, a field that does not always receive the attention it warrants. Ian Temple (formerly Landscape Architect with Edinburgh City Council; now retired) followed with many illustrations of doocots in and around Edinburgh, revealing a wide range of building styles – from vernacular to polite – and their present states of preservation; this presentation chimed with the SVBWG's long-standing interest in these structures. Following discussion and lunch, Mark Watson (Deputy Head of Industrial Heritage, HES, and SVBWG Council member) asked: 'Where are the Weavers' Windows?' He challenged the widely held view that the rooms with long windows that are often seen just below the eaves of weavers' houses represent weaving galleries; instead he suggested that these were originally not windowed but well-ventilated storage lofts – perhaps with wooden louvres – and that the weaving shop was actually in the basement and lit by a window at pavement level. His theory was supported by photographs of examples, from Scotland and the north of England. George Geddes (Archaeological Investigator, HES) then presented a series of ravishing photographs of buildings on St Kilda, some of them in staggeringly vertiginous sites. Closely following the day's theme, he summarised a thorough and up-to-date re-evaluation of St Kilda archaeology, speaking about the forms, functions and probable ages of the archipelago's numerous man-made structures – the outcome of a collaborative investigation by NTS and RCAHMS. He argued that the history of the islands should be considered within the broader context of the Western Isles, and concluded that the story of St Kilda was one of connection with other parts of Scotland, rather than one of isolation. Niall Logan (Chairman, SVBWG) brought us back to the mainland with a consideration of the long-house plan form in the pre-Improvement Lowlands. Using contemporary written accounts, images, and published surveys of buildings, he demonstrated that chimney-backing-on-entry arrangements and cross passages – characteristic of longhouses in England and Wales – may have been commoner in Scotland than previously believed. He thus questioned whether the distinction of terminology between byre-dwelling and longhouse is appropriate. Finally, Jessica Snow (Senior Technical Officer, HES) and Zoe Herbert (SPAB Scotland Officer) focused upon thatch, with the launch of Zoe's photographic survey of thatched buildings across Scotland, carried out between May 2014 and August 2015. The book, *A Survey of Thatched Buildings in Scotland*, is available to download as a pdf from the HES website.