

Historic Scotland podcast:

Series 2, Episode 8 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah's intro:

Hello, it's Sarah. Here we are, the final episode of the season. Recording this series has been so fun, and I hope we're reunited with you again soon.

I hope you enjoy listening to this one. And remember, as an Historic Scotland member, you've got access to this exclusive member-only version, which includes some behind-the-scenes content at the end. Thanks for being here.

Hello and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name's Sarah MacGillivray. I'm an actor and writer with a passion for people, place and story.

Each episode we travel to a different site, chat to the people that take care of it and uncover its surprising story.

We're finishing up this season on the Isle of Lewis at one of Scotland's most enigmatic monuments, the Calanais Standing Stones. This cross-shaped ring of stones has stood on a ridge for nearly 5,000 years. To find out more, we meet local historian Ian McHardy.

Ian:

Only at this latitude, the southern extreme of the moon rolls across the horizon. It's just above the horizon. I saw this in 2006-07. It happens a few times over about a two-year period. I had pretty high expectations and I was still blown away. It was incredible.

Sarah:

We're also chatting to Malcolm Maclean, who took one of Calanais's most iconic photographs.

Malcolm:

I was really curious to find out more and went to the Stornoway Library and was astonished to find out almost next to nothing. An awareness that the church disapproved of the stones and the pagan connections.

Sarah:

We're also meeting Dr Cat Dunn, who's curated an exhibition featuring work from Lewis with Historic Scotland.

Cat:

Yeah, the exhibition is on now. Go and see it. It's going to be travelling, which I'm really excited about. It starts at Stirling Castle. It's going to go to Lewis, to Orkney, to Dumfries. So it's really, I'm so pleased that they've decided it's going to be a travelling exhibition and I hope that everybody goes and sees it. Write me and tell me what you think.

Chapter 2

02:16

Sarah:

The road to Calanais winds west from Stornoway. You walk up a gentle slope with the wind in your ears and suddenly you're standing inside the circle. Some are thin, others blocky and broad-shouldered. The tallest, at the heart of the ring, rises nearly five metres above your head.

Thirteen stones form a circle and radiating out from it are rows. A long avenue marches to the north. Shorter lines reach east, west and south. Seen from above, it forms a rough cross. The stones take us back to the Neolithic, to a time before writing, before metal, to when islanders hauled three-billion-year-old Lewisian rock across the moor by hand and laid it out in such a way that even today we're asking why.

This is Ian. He is an archaeologist and has written a guide to the Standing Stones called *Contemplating Calanais*. I started by asking Ian what Calanais actually is.

Ian:

You don't look at the monolith and say, 'What is it?' or 'What does it do?' That's the million dollar question, isn't it? What are they? I mean, the local people told Martin Martin in 1695 that they were a place appointed for worship in heathen times. I think that's kind of...

Sarah:

In 1695, that's what locals said?

Ian:

Yeah. I mean, a place appointed for worship, I think, would be a way that you could see it. It wouldn't be too far. I mean, we don't know, but that's one way to see it. They could be representing the island that, you know, the island as a whole. They could be to do with astronomy. They could just be to do with celebration. It could be to do with just purely the time of year and agricultural cycle. They could be to do with the moon. They could be to do with the sun. It could be both. You know, I think all of these things, to some degree, are going on.

Sarah:

So you notice when you're standing here, it's very open and it's an incredible landscape. Are we right in thinking that there are other sort of Neolithic structures in this landscape, and how would they sort of connect with each other? How do they speak to each other?

Ian:

Yeah, well, you're right, there's lots depending on how you count them, but you know at least 10 other stone circles in this little area.

Sarah:

Is there 10?

Ian:

Yeah. There's definitely a concentration. So there's various thoughts about that. There are other places in Britain and Ireland where there's concentrations of monuments and people have noticed that they seem to be where, not in concentrations of where people would live, but where people can easily get to. Sort of like a crossroads.

Sarah:

Right, okay, like travel routes.

Ian:

And Calanais is exactly that. Locally, for the island of Lewis, it's very central. If you want to go from the north of the island to the southwest, you have to go past Calanais and you go across where the loch is very narrow here. Otherwise, you have got to go miles around, you know. And also if you want to go east to west that's where the road is now. It's the same thing. So it's almost like a central roundabout. So it is very central. So you know the reason why there's so many could be different communities coming and building their own little sort of mini ones around. So that's one explanation.

Chapter 3

05:52

Sarah:

This is Malcolm.

Malcolm:

This is the most complex of all the sites.

Sarah:

Oh is it?

Malcolm:

All the stone sites, the cruciform shape is just kind of, you know you get circles and you get aisles and you get variations in that, but this is the most complex.

Sarah:

Is there like connections there between them?

Malcolm:

Oh without a shadow of a doubt.

Sarah:

They were communicating with each other.

Malcolm:

Yes, absolutely. You can always tell that a standing stone, a megalith, from the way it's embedded in the ground. They had very specific ways of securing them. When you think about it, this has stayed vertical to multiple winds, storms, hurricanes, five thousand years. Right?

So the way that that's happened is because they had a very specific way of embedding them in the soil. The particular means of packing the base with stones. They would dig the trench, insert the standing stone, and then they would pack the base of it with stones. So one of the things that got me involved here in the first instance with Margaret Ponting was to help her map the various sites in the area. I think there's 23 or 24 different sites here, all kind of within sight of where we're standing. And this is just one of them. This is the main one by a mile. The others are all circles or individual stones. But they're scattered all about this whole area, as far as the eye can see.

Chapter 4

07:18

Sarah:

We owe a lot of what we know about Calanais today to a woman called Margaret Ponting. Margaret became deeply associated with the stones at Calanais. Working first with her husband Gerald and later with her second husband Ron Curtis, she helped build a vast archive of observations on the landscape and the astronomical alignments surrounding Calanais. It's research that Historic Scotland still regards as an important and valuable body of knowledge today.

Malcolm:

My lovely friend Margaret, because she was so obsessive an amateur, had been collecting every picture of Calanais that she could get her hands on pre-photography, right? And then she ranked them in order of accuracy. The right number of stones, the right shapes, the right spaces between them, etc. And then going back centuries – drawings, engravings, various different things – and ended up with a few that were actually remarkably accurate, right? Most of them, or many of them at least, were artistic licence. When she looked at them, she realised, hang on a second, that arm of the cross and all of the old accurate ones was showing an additional stone. So she climbed over the fence into the farmer's, into the crofter next door, prodded around under the ground and found the last stone in that arm of the cross, just six inches under the earth.

Sarah:

Really? That one right at the end there?

Malcolm:

The last one. They had to move the fence.

Sarah:

Wow! So she found it just sticking up?

Malcolm:

No, it wasn't sticking up. It was six inches under the ground. Because it had fallen over and earth had accumulated on top of it. And the only indication that there was anything there was her obsessive study of all these old drawings.

Sarah:

And it's actually a really inspiring story to hear about someone who lived locally, who was so passionate about the stones, and she'd obviously, she'd done so much work, and like dedicated herself to it, and then to make that discovery.

Malcolm:

Yeah, that's wonderful, exactly, I completely agree. One of the things that we did together was attempt to find different alignments for midsummer/midwinter sunrises/sunsets. You know, Margaret was fascinated by the idea of astroarchaeology and the emerging observations that standing stones were often aligned with the movements of the sun and the moon.

Sarah:

And there's been studies done, right, on the sort of astronomical line-ups that occur.

Ian:

Yeah, it's been a long-running discussion for hundreds of years.

Sarah:

And will continue to be moving.

Ian:

Yeah, probably, yeah.

Sarah:

Right, where do you start on this one?

Ian:

Where do we start on this one? I think you'd probably start with the central stone.

Sarah:

And that's this massive central stone. And would that have been the first stone that was put here?

Ian:

Probably just from a practical point of view, but it's quite a statement. And the thing about it is, it's got these big, broad, flat faces, as you can see. It's almost perfect, well, it's pretty much perfectly north-south. Now, we think we're dead used to north-south today, but north-south is actually, it's not an obvious thing. So, you know, direction-wise, you have to be looking to the sky, to understand north. So north is where the North Star is, so all the stars rotate around that one North Star, which was a different star then, but there still was a North Star. So you know like the Bedouin apparently call it the top of the tent. So all the stars go round and round this one star, so that's a way to know north. Another way is the sun or the moon at zenith when it's the highest in the sky. That one central stone to me tells you that they were looking up to the stars and the sky.

Sarah:

Because they've got it on north-south.

Ian:

Yeah, we're on this ridge. It's a crag and tail, a bit like Edinburgh Castle's on a crag and tail, so it's like a crag and tail, and we're just off the summit of the crag of the highest point and this, the tail, the ridge, sticks out into this huge bowl of land with like high hills all the way around on the edge.

Sarah:

You can see for miles, yeah.

Ian:

So that's the perfect place for an astronomer because you've got a really indented, characterful horizon, like a distance with which you can measure or observe the sun and the moon. So that could be another big thing. On top of that, right, so the next biggest bit of information for me to say there's astronomy something to do with it, is there's this stone here. Number nine, right? It's the only one that's outside of the pattern. So there's a pattern, there's a circle, and then there's rows and including the avenue in the rows, or whatever, so there's lines and there's a circle. And then there's this sitting outside of that.

Sarah:

And it's the only one that sits outside of that.

Ian:

That little one there is the broken top of that stone that's been cemented in so that's not actually...

Sarah:

That's not part of the original...

Ian:

I can't remember, but that's not part of the original design. This one here is the only one that's outside of that whole design.

Sarah:

Circle and cross and avenue design.

Ian:

Now it was in the 70s, a local worthy photographed the sun rising. See from this stone, that stone and that triangular stone there. In a perfect line on the horizon. So three stones and the point of the horizon was where the sun rose at solstice.

Malcolm:

So we would check out, we would agree who would go where at midsummer to try and identify where, if there was an alignment.

Sarah:

So between the two of you, you would do that to decide who was going where to check out.

Malcolm:

We did that for two or three years and then this particular midsummer, the mist was so thick out here that Margaret just didn't bother getting up. She got up and looked out the window and thought there's no point in going out looking for an alignment. You can't see past the end of her garden. But for myself and two friends who were up here, they were both actually very sceptical about the whole idea of midsummer. And one of them, we weren't going to be able to see anything because of the mist, and one of them, who was a climber, climbed to the top of the stone behind me here. And he stands sitting on the top of that, and we're chatting away, and there was a little whisky involved as well.

Sarah:

Keep you warm.

Malcolm:

Keep us warm. And the next thing, the mist suddenly started to clear. And my friend Jim at the top of the stone says, "Oh, I can see the first flash of the sunrise." I'm handing him my camera. I'm saying, "That's great – photograph." So he's looking through the lens and then he says, "Oh, hang on a second. It's rising right up above that sharp pointy stone there that looks just like an arrow." And then he said, "Oh, hang on. There's another one here. There's two of them in a line with the midsummer sun rising." And he said, "Is that an alignment?" And I said, "Actually, you're sitting on the third stone."

Sarah:

Oh, yeah, of course.

Malcolm:

So that's indisputably an alignment. For God's sake, photograph it, Jim. And so he's then saying, "I can't work my camera because it's too simple, right?"

So I'm getting it focused and so on and it's quite a wonderful shot and then we realised what we'd done because whoever had designed Calanais in the first instance, that they had built this into the layout of the stones quite deliberately, and the last person to have that knowledge, to know that that was the viewing stone, was dead, and could possibly have been dead for 2 or 3,000 years. Here's us in the early morning mist here. The first humans to see it since that time, which was a real kind of 'hair standing up on the back of your neck' moment.

Sarah:

That's amazing to think that you'd been there at that moment to discover that alignment. That's a really special thing to link you with someone.

Malcolm:

Just to stumble into it. Having been looking. And I love the fact that my two friends were so sceptical about alignments with the sun. "Don't be ridiculous."

Sarah:

But they were there with you.

Malcolm:

They had to. They became complete converts instantly because they saw it with their own eyes, you know.

Chapter 5

16:27

Ian:

The sun, back in the Neolithic, the sun rose about a sun's width difference from what it does now. That's a caveat to you. Slightly different. But when you're in the landscape like this, you can kind of see, it's not going to make a huge amount of difference. I think it's still valid.

Sarah:

Yeah, it's not a massive difference.

Ian:

My friends, just the other solstice, friends of mine witnessed it and took another video of exactly the same thing. And it rises. Exactly those, the edge of those three stones, or if you were, Malky was actually still on top of that stone. So we have lots of evidence that that is an alignment. And I think that's significant because this stone number nine is the only one that's outside of the pattern.

Sarah:

Right. So it must have been serving some sort of function for it to be put outside the pattern.

Ian:

It's a bit like the Heel Stone at Stonehenge. Which is set outside of the circle. But then there's another alignment from this stone. So the first stone of the avenue is a really broad, flat one.

Sarah:

Is that the one we can see?

Ian:

Yeah, that one it's like straight ahead of us. Sort of perpendicular onto it. And it's the first one on the east side of the avenue. It's a totally different angle from the rest of the avenue. But from this stone, through that stone is the northernmost moonrise. So the moon does a thing like, it's a complicated thing, the moon does lots of things. But the northernmost moonrise is that. So this stone is outside of the pattern, the rest of the pattern has the sun and the moon extreme into the monument.

Malcolm:

Once we'd established that this was the viewing stone for the midsummer alignment, then Margaret was checking out various possibilities and she became fascinated by the stone that you see through here.

Sarah:

The big one or the smaller one?

Malcolm:

The little one. The little one behind it, right? There are three anomalous stones here. Okay? You have the overall cruciform shape. You've got the aisle at the foot of the cross, circle in the centre across, two arms. Now there are three anomalies in this layout, in this design. One of them is the stone behind us, which is the viewing stone, which we only became aware was the viewing stone in the 1980s. And then that was resisted by the archaeological establishment for a long time. But that's a specific anomaly. The fact that it didn't form part of the circle or the cross was put down to the fact that it could have been the beginnings of a second circle, or the remains of another circle which had maybe the other stones had been removed to build buildings or whatever, but they had no explanation for why that one was anomalous. And we now know that one to be the viewing stone for the midsummer sunrise.

The second anomaly is the one in front of us here. Now that's a very curious one and Margaret became very fascinated by that one in particular, because all of the other stones in the aisle there at the foot of the cross, they're in parallel alignment. That one, the one closest to the circle is out of alignment. Quite significantly out of alignment by more than a metre from the others. But not only that, it's twisted round, in the sense that from here what we see is simply looks like it's about 9 or 10 inches thick. Right? If you move round to the side, however, that stone is a full metre across.

Right? So it's a very broad stone. So why is it angled in that particular way? So Margaret became convinced that that one was indicating some, this horizon viewed from the viewing stone, the horizon immediately above that particular stone had something significant about it which she saw as lunar, but died before she had a chance to actually confirm it.

Ian:

Everyone's got their own opinion and ideas about it. Some people would say, oh you've got so many stones that you know you can get whatever angle you want, but to me that's ignoring the fact that there's a pattern and this is outwith that pattern that seems to be significant.

Chapter 6

21:16

Sarah:

Whatever Calanais was, observatory, tomb, temple, gathering place or all of those, it was built to matter. And 5,000 years later, it still does.

This is Dr Cat Dunn.

Cat:

I'm an independent curator and I'm creating the exhibition *Archaeology and Empire* for Historic Environment Scotland.

Sarah:

Cat's exhibition launched at Stirling Castle in April. She was actually just putting the finishing touches on it as we spoke and explores how the legacy of empire shaped Scotland's history. It's part response, part collaboration to a report published by Historic Scotland that looks at exactly that.

Over a third of the sites in the care of Historic Scotland have this link and Calanais is one of them. Cat's exhibition explores these scenes and is touring, coming to Lewis sometime soon.

Cat:

We really wanted to bring all of our own research into the exhibition. So, for instance, the report starts for me, especially, as a jumping-off point. But then I did my own research, myself and the artists, we went around to each site. And I think that the artists then responded to the site. So for instance, Dr Alberta Whittle has responded to Lewis. Matthew Arthur Williams responded to Orkney. Tilda Williams-Kelly responded to Ayrshire, and Graham Fagen responded to Dumfries.

And in each place, not only myself but the artists, we've all done this amazing amount of research which we then got together, spoke about, and which I then interpreted and I've laid it through the actual exhibition. So it's not, we are very proud to be Scottish, we are proud to live here, but we also have that other identity where we come from these colonised places, where we have a different understanding. I think that especially today where there's the rise of the far-right, the education system, when I read a history book for Scotland, I normally

laugh because when we're young people, we get put on a bus, we get taken to enslaved plantations, we get taken to enslaved plantation burial grounds. And so there's history right in our face. And 400 years is actually not that long. And so for me, what I really wanted to do was not only to have this idea of academia, but I really wanted to have lived experience and what it felt like for us to be in these places that were obtained through empire and transatlantic slavery.

Sarah:

Going back a little bit, so there was obviously this report created, and as we've sort of talked about, it's very academic, so it's about bringing this report really to life and interpreting it.

Cat:

Yeah, definitely. I think that it's really important, as I said, especially now I speak to so many people that I know who are really scared of what's happening, who don't know if they should be here, if they should go back. If they go back... because your country doesn't, the land of your birth doesn't wait for you to come back home, you know, it continues and it grows and Barbados itself is now a republic. But again, we have this history. And so for me, I'm concerned in the academia part of it as in making sure we have the dates right and the names right.

But for me, it's very much about the lived experience. How do we take the, how I've taken the report as a jumping-off point, come to these places and can stand up and be like, oh, wow. For instance, Lewis was bought based off of the Barbados Slave Code, of the money that was being made. And I think it's not just that. It's about honouring these people who had that done to them.

So, for instance, you know, being four or five years old, being put on a bus and being taken to an enslaved burial ground. As a kid, it doesn't really penetrate that much. But as an adult going back, you know, when I was doing my PhD and I was trying to work out why it was so important to me to be this kind of curator of community, of people, to going back and knowing what was coming. You know, you drive through the construction companies, you drive through sugarcane fields and boom, you're right there on an enslaved burial ground. I didn't want to get out of the bus. It was just this very visual thing of, I am standing up on my ancestors. I'm standing up on these people who had no remit.

And also, you know, the Newtons, who still own Newton Burial Ground, are refusing to have anything done to it. So there's no, like, radar, ground-penetrated radar. There's nothing like that that can tell us how many bodies are in each mound, really. And then that, of course, then goes on to things like Drax Hall Plantation, where they're refusing to give that plantation back to the people of Barbados. But again, how many people are buried there?

And so I find all this interesting, considering that, you know they still owned it, even though they don't live there, they live in England, and yet they were still refusing to give this back. And for me, it's like saying that I think that this exhibition can hopefully allow people to understand that it's not just about what is written in an academic tone, it's about people who are from these places coming to this exhibition and hopefully seeing a little bit of themselves or their ancestors within the exhibition.

I think that the artists have done this amazing job. If we, for instance, take Dr Alberta Whittle, who wanted Lewis, you know, her installation is magical. It's got seawater from Barbados, which I maintain, I don't really want to know how she brought that back. But it's also got seawater from Lewis. I know this because we nearly drowned getting it. You know, but again, to incorporate all of that again into like with rum and whisky. And so you've got that being built into the exhibition. You've then also got a library for people who want to know a little bit more, written by different authors and not necessarily Scottish authors.

Sarah:

I'm so excited to go and experience the exhibition. It sounds like such brilliant work that you're doing in collaboration with these brilliant artists and the other partners that you've mentioned there. I mean it just sounds brilliant. I'm very excited.

Can I ask how you came to work with the different artists involved and then what that process was? So you said you all went round to the different sites, and were those sites already chosen with Historic Scotland?

Cat:

No, so basically the sites came from the report, so I mean at the end of the day the report I guess is like the core of it, where I went through the report and then I worked out the sites and I kind of created a list. And so we then, each artist, said to each other, I really want you to respond to just one thing. And so that's where we decided to kind of go around to see what we would be responding to. And it was really interesting because some artists I thought

were maybe going to fight for more than one thing, but everyone was very clear-cut on exactly what they wanted to do from the get-go.

Sarah:

And was it all different?

Cat:

It was all very different. And I was like, you know, for instance, I literally thought that Dr Whittle would maybe have chosen Ayrshire because I know that she's done some filming and something. But instead, something about Lewis called to her. For Matthew, something about Orkney called. And these are not easy places to particularly get to.

Sarah:

No, they're not.

Cat:

So being able to, I guess, for part of it was very much about honouring the people who came before and trying to take that knowledge of heritage and ancestry and bring it into the here and now. And I think that was maybe the connecting point of being able to see different aspects of each site, but being able to also then look back at the heritage of Barbados or Jamaica or Trinidad and Tobago and going like, okay, I want this site because this for me is resonating something.

Sarah:

Like you were saying, there's so many layers within the artwork. There's also so many layers to what you're doing and how do you look after yourself in that process? I suppose that's what you're talking to already and look after the artists.

Cat:

I think for me, I always kind of put myself last, for me, it's very important that the artists feel nurtured and taken care of because the work that we're all doing is so insane, but again that's where collaboration comes back in because I will literally call each one up. We will sit down together, we will talk together, we will have a cup of tea together, we will scream if we need to. I tend to go off and want to punch people. And then I take a moment and then come back. But I think that what gets me through it is seeing the final, you know, the weaker install will be insane. You will be seeing the archival material going up, you will be seeing the installations and the paintings going in, and then you'll be seeing it as a whole.

I've lived with this exhibition, as I said, for like two and a half years. And so I understand where each piece is going to sit, where it's going to speak to other pieces, where it's going to be a conversation with the archival work. It's kind of living rent-free in my head. And I think that that's the thing that probably gets me through the harder bits is concentrating on who's going to be educated by this exhibition. Also, who's going to feel proud by going in and understanding the different layers and the different signifiers.

And also the people who will then go and take photos and then go and buy the books and read the books to educate. And I think that that's the thing that gets me through. So even though there's been many moments where I've either been in tears or been really angry, I think that that's the thing that gets me through it. It's the at the end what will people get from this and it's not just a report that they don't particularly want to read. It's an actual, I feel it's like a living, breathing envision of an exhibition and hopefully everybody gets that. And I think that, for me, it's that hope that people understand that I'm not taking a shot at Scotland. I love this country, but I also love my birth land, and we understand how we started and where we are now. And I think that that's really important.

Chapter 7

32:40

Sarah:

The people who raised these stones are gone. Their names, much of their language, their culture and their way of life, all of it lost. Empires have risen and fallen since they walked this ridge. Languages have been born and forgotten.

Malcolm:

The truth is that we still really don't know that much, about the people who built them. The builders, anyhow, have created something very, very special here that has stood the test of time and has seen various empires come and go. It saw the arrival of Celtic Christianity. They were here before Iona and St Columba and the Book of Kells. Here, when the Norse arrived in the 9th century, and this place was a Norse dominion for more than 300 years. The place is still full of... Uig in particular. Uig is seen by some scholars now as the centre of the Norse occupation of the Hebrides. But the Norse were only here for 300 years, and although they assimilated to a remarkable extent, most of the place names here are, a huge number of place names here are Norse. And when they left, they left us the Lewis Chessmen on another beach in Uig just a few miles down the coast. So they survived that empire and they were still standing.

Then you get the golden age of Gaelic culture with the clan system, which then come the Battle of Culloden falls into the black abyss of the British empire. And they have now even survived the British empire as the last embers of our imperial ambitions smoulder away. They're still standing here and they will be here for centuries to come. They'll be here long after we're gone.

Sarah:

That's so poetic. I like to think that, you know, these were erected thousands of years ago. Exactly like you're explaining, like they've seen it all come and go, and they will continue to see it all come and go. But they will remain.

Malcolm:

The different communities through all of those centuries that have survived around about here have all had their own relationship with it and placed their own interpretation on what it is, what it was for, or how it began. But the truth is we don't know. Which I love. I love the fact that it is a mystery. It's a mystery. What's wrong with mystery?

Chapter 8

35:43

Sarah:

There's a moment when you stand inside the circle at Calanais and realise just how far west you are. By any measure, this is the farthest reach of Scotland. It feels like the edge of the world. For 5,000 years, people have walked up this ridge and stood where I was standing. Neolithic farmers, Bronze Age mourners, medieval shepherds, Victorian antiquarians, you and me.

We don't know exactly why this monument was made, but we do know why people still come here. To mark the seasons. To poke at the more curious and mysterious parts of our history. And to be in each other's company beneath an enormous sky. Five millennia on, that's still what Calanais does. It gathers people in. It turns out that the edge of the world might just be where we find each other.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

It was produced and edited by Adam Stoner. I'm Sarah MacGillivray.

Thank you for travelling with us this season. We've uncovered the truth about Scotland's witch trials, gone hunting for a monster in Loch Ness, traced the birth of steam power and a whole lot more.

Every site we visited has had a story to tell and, importantly, someone who loves it enough to tell it well. If these stories have stirred something in you, come and see them for yourself.

Historic Scotland membership gives you free entry to over 70 sites across the country – castles, abbeys, brochs, battlefields and, yes, a certain stone circle on the Isle of Lewis. You'll find the link in the show notes. And if you've liked this episode, please follow the series and review it. Give us five stars. Tell us what you liked and where it has inspired you to travel. We hope to see you soon. Until then.

Chapter 9

38:18

Adam:

Hey, my name's Adam, producer of the Historic Scotland podcast. We made it. This is the last episode of this season. Thank you so much for joining us on all of these wild adventures.

When we sat down, I think it was maybe October, and put together the locations that we were going to visit in this season, I sort of piped up and said, 'do you know what would be really cool? Going to your most remote location.' I don't think this is Historic Scotland's most remote location, but we certainly didn't get far from it. You would be hard pushed to find one, I think, more remote than here. It is such a beautiful place. Absolutely stunning. Sarah, what did you think of it?

Sarah:

Adam, I absolutely love a stone circle. Luckily, Scotland has a few of these, quite a lot actually, but I absolutely love them. I think there's something about the mystery, like you can't pin down exactly why they were built like this, even quite how they were constructed really and what people used to do here and how they were used originally when first built and then probably over the hundreds of years from then. And I just love the mystery. I love the conjecture. I love us coming up with our ideas and I think, like we say in the episode, that is a big part of it – it's about bringing people together to talk, to discuss, to experience and to speculate. And it's so fun.

Adam:

Yeah, I think when you make something like this, you want to leave people sort of better than you found them, even if you don't have any of the answers. So I hope that in listening to this and in listening to the story of Margaret and in listening to the story of Malcolm and his photograph and how that was taken, you feel like you've gone on a journey somewhere, even though we sort of know, the same amount of information that we did at the start?

Sarah:

Sometimes it also makes me think about, you know in the cities, when we're normally in our cities or towns, the light pollution, you don't always have a clear view of the sky, unless you're lucky to live somewhere a bit more rural and you've got a good sky view. But I sort of think about the people who constructed these stone circles and how they do seem to have a strong connection, as they've proved there at Calanais, with the sun and the moon and the stars, and just how alive that cosmos would have felt and being part of the stars and constellations and everything. I just absolutely love that.

I mean, my dad is a retired astronomer who worked at Edinburgh. And so it's almost like, I don't know, our first version of an observatory, potentially, maybe. But I love exactly what we said there, that it gathers people in, like it always did. And the people we have met, I mean, we are so privileged and honoured to get to speak to Ian, to Malcolm, to Cat about this place. I mean, for those amazing people to share their expertise and their passion and their knowledge with us was a total privilege and honour.

Adam

Listen, this is it. The end of the season, the end of the line. Thank you so much for listening to all of the episodes. I hope that you have come away from them learning something new, perhaps something that you can tell somebody else, or being inspired enough to visit one of these historic Scotland locations in person.

Thank you again for listening and hopefully we'll see you soon.