

Geograph

Roger Butler goes island-hopping on the internet

We all have our own favourite websites and, while some seem to come and go with startling regularity, there is one I have been happily dipping into for many years now. I am certainly not the type who enjoys computer games (there's a real world out there that's waiting to be explored!), but something called Geograph does almost verge on the addictive.

This is a website which allows users to upload their photographs of the British landscape onto a virtual map divided into the individual kilometre squares used by the Ordnance Survey. The project has been running since March 2005 and continues to develop into a burgeoning photographic archive: countryside, cathedrals and canals; post boxes, power stations and pubs.

Users even compete to grab the first photo in a particular square and can gain points for pictures they have added to the site. Many grid squares have become populated with hundreds of images, taken in all seasons and all weathers, and Geograph is now both a marvellous lucky dip and a valuable reference tool. Photos have even been added which date back to the 1950s.

Hard-to-Reach

The advanced search button offers much fun and members take great delight in posting and sharing images taken in out of the way places. These usually occupy awkward and hard-to-reach kilometre squares. There are not too many empty squares left but, as you might imagine, parts of wildest Scotland still have plenty of blanks.

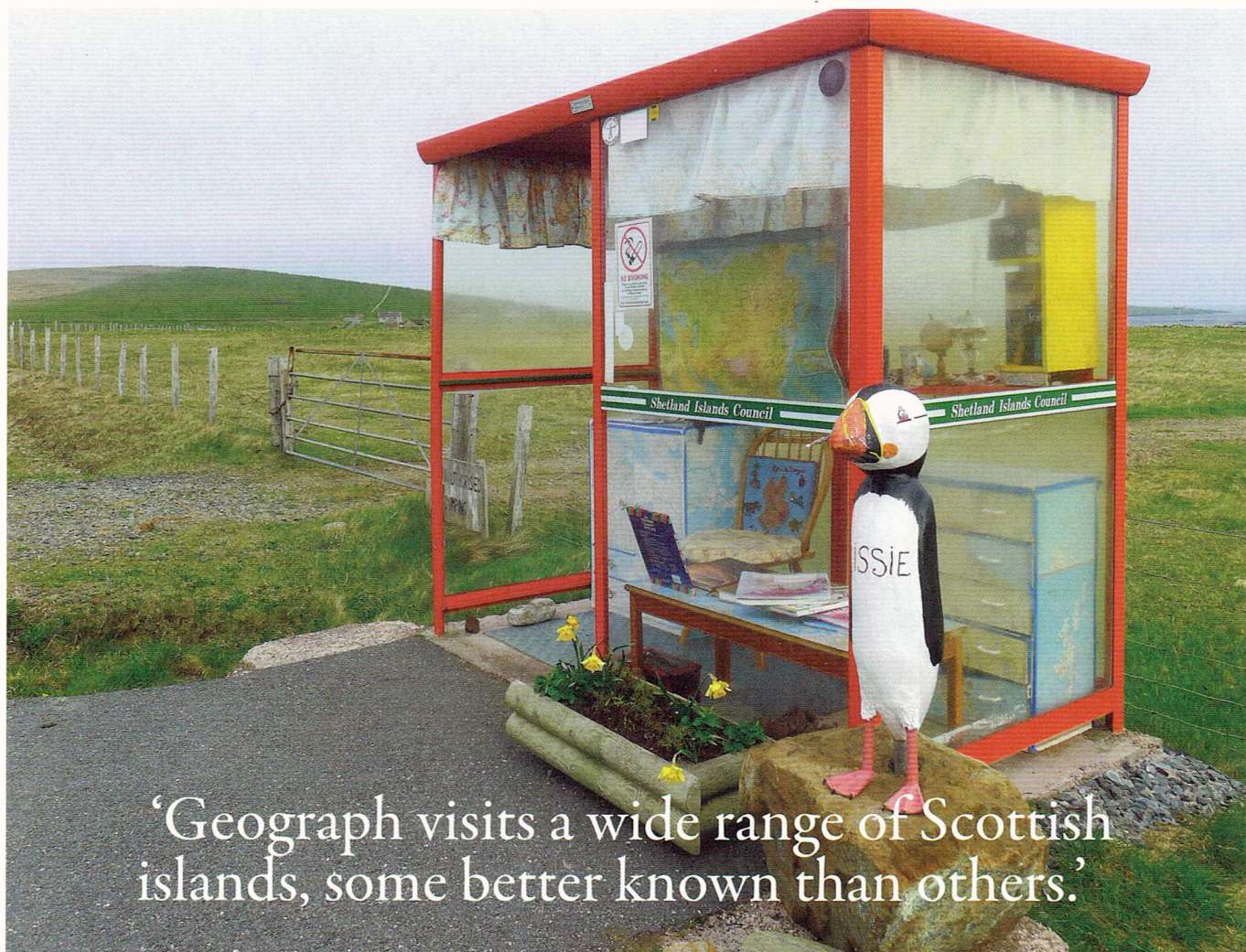
Not surprisingly, one of the biggest concentrations seems to be on the inhospitable moors on Lewis, but a recent look at the map also shows dotty gaps on Mull and the Uists, a few out on Orkney and quite a scattering across Shetland. The wilds of Jura have been completely covered but, if you fancy joining the fun, one empty square remains on Tiree.

The website is certainly an excellent way of looking at remote islands and rough skerries which, in all likelihood, most people will never have the opportunity to set foot on. The desire to snatch a few Geograph points has seen me scramble down inaccessible cliffs on Eigg, wait for the tide to reveal seaweed-strewn rocks on Skye and take a detour into an empty square when climbing the mountains on Mull.

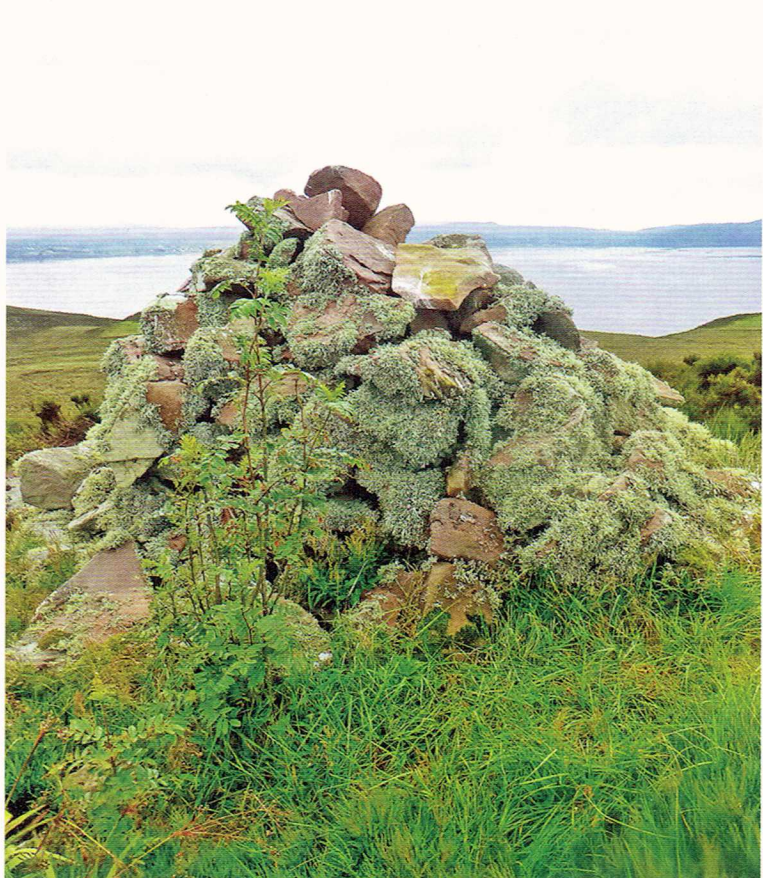
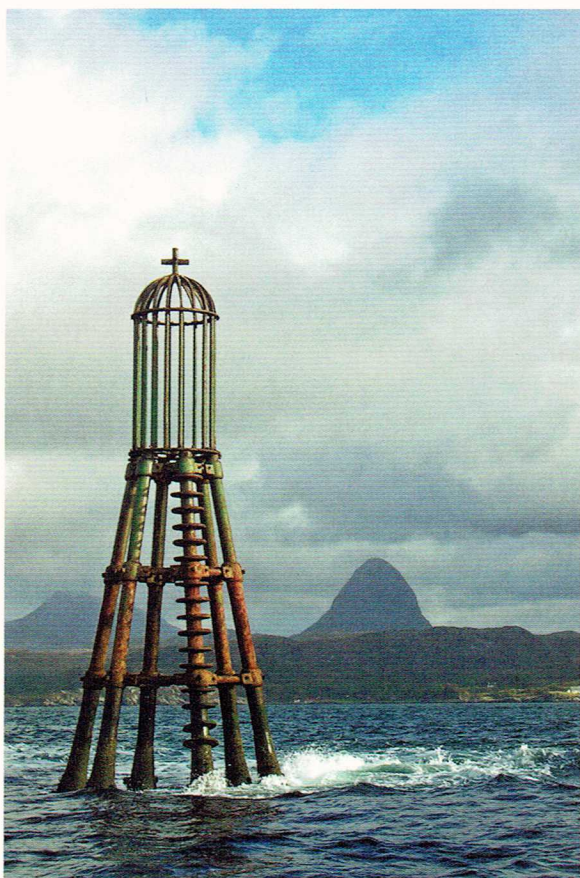
Fractured Coastline

Sea-kayakers are well placed to visit hidden islets and forgotten inlets and their photos are often accompanied by descriptive text. The glorious fractured coastline on the south side of Ulva might be difficult to access without a paddle, but the website takes you straight there with the citation that follows.

'In rather windy conditions, we had retreated from Eilean Dioghluim, by the west end of Gometra, along the south coast of Ulva to a camping spot in a sheltered lagoon. It must be a popular spot for sea-kayakers for, despite the number of fish-boxes we had seen littering the shores, I only found a limited number in well over an hour's searching. Previous visitors had clearly burnt them!'



'Geograph visits a wide range of Scottish islands, some better known than others.'





Geograph gives Eilean Dioghluim its 15 minutes of fame. This heathery, tidal hump lies at the north end of Gometra and provides protection to the island harbour at Acairseid Mhòr, but the website proudly portrays it from out at sea as choppy waves cascade over its low precipitous cliffs. Not many people will have taken that picture, or seen the goats which cling to its steep rocks.

Almost Impossible

One click moves the map one kilometre into the open ocean, where squares normally remain pale blue, and here we find that a kayaker managed to get up close and personal with a seven-metre basking shark. In the days before the internet it was almost impossible to find a photo of little-known islands such as Gometra, let alone some of its smaller satellites.

Sites like Geograph have changed all that, although I would still choose to march along the rough track over Ulva to cross the little bridge onto the far-flung isle. Others make the walk too and someone with the online nickname, Rude Health, has posted pictures on the website, showing many of the summits

and minor tops on the two islands and form part of a campaign to tick-off every 'Tump'.

This abbreviation stands for 'Thirty & Upward Metre Prominences' and more than 17,000 of these are sprinkled across Britain. Head to Shetland for a trip around isolated bus shelters and phone boxes. Some of these come with stories, of course, and there is even a specially titled gallery of pictures which aims to record every single post box on the archipelago. Historic photos allow comparisons to be made.

Changed Times

Nothing is more striking than the picture of the former post office on Foula - captured against a jet black hillside in 1964 - when matched with the similar scene today. The roofless ruin and derelict phone box are signs of changed times. Someone writes: 'We noticed a lot of traffic going to a nondescript location above the island airstrip. This was probably the place to go to get a mobile signal.'

The Baltasound bus shelter Unst features prominently, showing how a utilitarian structure became a decorative landmark. Home comforts include a sofa, carpets, net

Further Information

Geograph is a web-based project presenting a freely accessible archive of geographically-located photographs of Great Britain and Ireland. Images are submitted to illustrate significant or typical features of each 331,957 1 km x 1 km Ordnance Survey grid square. By July 2017, more than five million images had been submitted by 12,500 contributors, covering over 97% of Great Britain and over 40% of Ireland. It includes photographs of many lesser-known islands. Geograph Project Limited is a charity. Visit www.geograph.co.uk to begin your journey, then search, sign up and, perhaps, start to submit photos.

curtains, a television and regular fresh flowers. The shelter gets regular makeovers, with annual colour schemes, and one contributor muses: 'In England some jobsworth would have tried to fine the person responsible.' Another quips: 'I don't know how much more elaborate it would need to be before it qualifies for Council Tax.'

Geograph visits a wide range of Scottish islands, some better known than others. Gruinard, only half-a-mile off the coast between Gairloch and Ullapool, gained notoriety when access was forbidden after anthrax spore testing during the Second World War. A declassified film shows how the detonation of a bomb, fixed to the top of a tall pole supported by guy ropes, released a brown cloud over 80 unfortunate tethered sheep.

Cautious Visitors

The island was eventually declared free of contamination in 1990 and, since then, a number of cautious visitors have made landfall. One includes our friend 'Rude Health', who added pictures to the website and has continued to travel to other small islands. A photo showing a landing at nearby Priest Island, owned and managed by the

RSPB, is captioned: 'Only one casualty at this tricky landing point.'

Sometimes Geograph features what is hardly an island at all. A navigation beacon marks a shallow reef between Soyea Island and the mainland at Rubha' a' Bhacain, near the fishing village of Lochinver in Sutherland, and rises from the rocks like a torpedo. Fishing boats, however, still hit the rocks and a couple have done themselves damage in the last few years. In the background, the stately mountain of Suliven mirrors the shape of the imposing lattice work structure.

Contributors to the website offer all sorts of shots and, in time, many will have historic interest. Grainy pictures of old ferries and rickety piers can be found next to recent photos of island shops and rusty road signs; archaeological digs might appear in one online search and peat-digging in the next.

The picture of a wrecked trawler, ablaze on North Rona in 1995, deserved to make the front page of a national newspaper. Yet at the end of the day, it is the boundless images of cliffs, beaches, mountains and moorlands which are guaranteed to make you ache for the islands. ●

Page 29 Top: Many Geograph contributors have photographed the well-known bus shelter at Baltasound on Unst, which is given a colourful annual makeover. This picture was taken in 2016 - visit www.unstbusshelter.shetland.co.uk for the full story of this little red structure. Photo credit: Julian Paren - Creative Commons Licence ©

Below left: Geograph takes you to some unusual islands - this striking navigation beacon marks the shallow reef between Soyea Island and Rubha' a' Bhacain on the approach to Loch Inver on the west coast of Sutherland. The unmistakable peak of Suliven rises in the background. Photo credit: George Brown - Creative Commons Licence ©

Below right: Not many people visit Gruinard Island, despite it now being declared free of contamination. Geograph reveals all and a cairn marks the summit of An Eilid, 104 metres above the surrounding sea. Photo credit: Rude Health - Creative Commons Licence ©

Left and Below: 50 years separate these two Geograph pictures of the old Post Office on remote Foula. The first photo, set against the dark shadows of Hamnafjeld, dates from 1964, but the second picture, taken in 2016, shows the sad decay which has occurred since it closed. Photo credit: Julian Paren - Creative Commons Licence ©

