

Robbie conquers “The Thumb” on St Kilda

Edinburgh climber, Robbie Phillips, 33, has led the first ascent in 133 years of an infamous St Kilda Sea Stack known as “The Thumb”.

Robbie, who attended George Watson’s College and who crafted his techniques at the Edinburgh International Climbing Arena, Ratho, headed a team who conquered a pillar which has captivated explorers since 1890, although it had been climbed previously by inhabitants of St Kilda.



In the care of the National Trust for Scotland since 1957, the St Kilda archipelago is one of the most remote in the UK,

located 110 miles from the Scottish mainland deep into the Atlantic Ocean.

'The Thumb' was first documented by Gaelic speaker and writer Martin Martin in 1698.

In his book 'A late voyage to St Kilda' he vividly describes the terrifying feat young men would undertake to climb the rock to catch birds and claim their eggs, without the security of any modern safety equipment. The 70m climb towers above the Atlantic and young men would scale the rock face with only a thin rope made of horse hair to pull them back to the boat should they fall.

Describing the sequence of moves needed to summit, Martin wrote: "Of all the parts of a man's body the thumb only can lay hold on it...during which time his feet have no support, nor any part of his body touch the stone, except the thumb, at which minute he must jump by the help of his thumb."

Robbie said: "Climbing 'The Thumb' was like walking in the footsteps, or climbing in the fingerprints of the St Kildans. It's a testament to their bravery and mental fortitude, to climb onto that seastack 70m above the raging Atlantic without even shoes is wild to imagine. The St Kildans didn't just survive out here, they thrived with the skills they honed and the traditions they upheld."

With no resident St Kildans remaining today after the island's evacuation in 1930, the legend of 'The Thumb' threatened to disappear into history, until this recent ascent brought it back to prominence.

Robbie added: "This is hugely significant as an example of highly technical rock climbing in a time well before the Victorian era, which is when most climbing historians say that technical rock climbing began.

"They didn't just climb for survival, but it was an important

part of their culture, where they climbed for enjoyment as well as status amongst their peers. To have such a critical piece of climbing history in Scotland as well is hugely special to myself as a Scottish climber. This is a unique glimpse into the past that connects us in a meaningful way. That's why climbing is special, you can experience things exactly as the St Kildans did, albeit hundreds of years apart."

Susan Bain, the National Trust for Scotland's Property Manager for St Kilda, said: "As a conservation charity, we are focused on protecting the wildlife and culture of St Kilda and we were very happy to work with Robbie and his team to make sure that the climb didn't disturb any nesting seabirds or impact the landscape in any way.

"As a professional climber Robbie had the skills and the back-up to attempt this climb safely, but it's important to emphasise that the landscape of St Kilda can be very challenging and everyone should be very mindful of its dangers as well as its beauty.

"It is humbling to think about the St Kildans climbing this stack without modern equipment and communications."

The team have documented their adventures and will be publishing films of their ascents on Robbie's Youtube Channel and [on his website](#).

Robbie Phillips is pictured with team member Will Birkett.
PHOTOS: Ryan Balharry



