

= Staffa =

Staffa (Scottish Gaelic : Stafa , pronounced [s t afa]) from the Old Norse for stave or pillar island , is an island of the Inner Hebrides in Argyll and Bute , Scotland . The Vikings gave it this name as its columnar basalt reminded them of their houses , which were built from vertically placed tree @-@ logs .

Staffa lies about 10 kilometres (6 mi) west of the Isle of Mull . The area is 33 hectares (82 acres) and the highest point is 42 metres (138 ft) above sea level .

The island came to prominence in the late 18th century after a visit by Sir Joseph Banks . He and his fellow @-@ travellers extolled the natural beauty of the basalt columns in general and of the island 's main sea cavern , which Banks renamed ' Fingal 's Cave ' . Their visit was followed by those of many other prominent personalities throughout the next two centuries , including Queen Victoria and Felix Mendelssohn . The latter 's Hebrides Overture brought further fame to the island , which was by then uninhabited . It is now in the care of the National Trust for Scotland .

= = Geology and pre @-@ history = =

In prehistoric times Staffa was covered by the ice sheets which spread from Scotland out into the Atlantic Ocean beyond the Outer Hebrides . After the last retreat of the ice around 20 @,@ 000 years ago , sea levels were up to 125 metres (410 ft) lower than at present . Although the isostatic rise of land makes estimating post @-@ glacial coastlines a complex task , around 14 @,@ 000 years ago it is likely that Staffa was part of a larger island , just off the coast of mainland Scotland , which would have included what are now Mull , Iona and the Treshnish Isles .

Steadily rising sea levels then further isolated this little island , which is entirely of volcanic origin . It consists of a basement of tuff , underneath colonnades of a black fine @-@ grained Tertiary basalt , overlying which is a third layer of basaltic lava without a crystalline structure . By contrast , slow cooling of the second layer of basalt resulted in an extraordinary pattern of predominantly hexagonal columns which form the faces and walls of the principal caves . The lava contracted towards each of a series of equally spaced centres as it cooled and solidified into prismatic columns , a process known as columnar jointing . The columns typically have three to eight sides , six being most common . The columns are also divided horizontally by cross joints . These columnar jointed sections represent the tops and bottoms of individual lava flows . Between these sections lie regions of much more chaotic jointing , known as the entablature . The origin of the entablature is unknown , but could be due to flooding of the lava flow , causing much more rapid cooling , or the interaction of stress fields from the two regions of columnar jointing as they approach one another .

Similar formations are found at the Giant 's Causeway in Northern Ireland , on the island of Ulva and at Ardmeanach on the Isle of Mull . Grooves in the roof of MacKinnon 's cave indicate either a pyroclastic flow or a series of eroded ash falls in the rock above the columnar basalt . The ' Staffa Group ' is the name given to the series of olivine tholeiite basalts found in the vicinity of Mull which erupted 55 ? 58 million years ago .

= = Geography = =

Staffa lies about 10 kilometres (6 mi) west of Mull , and 9 km northeast of Iona . It is longitudinally oriented north @-@ south , and is a kilometre long by about half a kilometre wide . The circumference is about 3 @.@ 8 km in extent . In the northeast the isle shelves to a shore , but otherwise the coast is rugged and much indented ; numerous caves have been carved out by rain , streams and sea . There is enough grass to feed a few cattle , and the island has a spring .

On the east coast are Goat Cave and Clamshell Cave . The latter is 10 m high , about 6 m wide at the entrance , and some 45 m long , and on one side of it the ridges of basalt stand out like the ribs of a ship . Near this cave is the pyramidal rock islet of Am Buachaille (' The Herdsman ') , a pile of basalt columns seen fully only at low tide . Other outlying rocks include Eilean Dubh to the north @-@ west and a series of skerries stretching for half a kilometre to the south @-@ west . On the

southwest shore are Boat Cave and Mackinnon 's Cave (named after a 15th @-@ century abbot of Iona) , which has a tunnel connecting it to Cormorant Cave . These caves lie to the south @-@ west and can be accessed from the bay of Port an Fhasgaidh at low tide . In 1945 a mine exploded near Boat Cave , causing damage to the cliff face which is still visible . Mackinnon 's Cave is 107 metres long .

Staffa 's most famous feature is Fingal 's Cave , a large sea cave located near the southern tip of the island some 20 m high and 75 m long formed in cliffs of hexagonal basalt columns . This cliff face is called the Colonnade or The Great Face and it was these cliffs and their caves that inspired Felix Mendelssohn 's *Die Hebriden* (English : *Hebrides Overture* opus 26) , which was premiered in London in 1832 . The original Gaelic name for Fingal 's Cave is *An Uamh Bhin* ? " the melodious cave " ? but it was subsequently renamed after the 3rd @-@ century Irish warrior Fionn MacCool . Mendelssohn was nonetheless inspired by the sound of the waves in the cave and waxed lyrical about his visit , claiming that he arrived in Scotland " with a rake for folk @-@ songs , an ear for the lovely , fragrant countryside , and a heart for the bare legs of the natives . "

Staffa is part of the Loch Na Keal National Scenic Area , one of 40 in Scotland .

= = History = =

= = = 18th century = = =

Little is known of the early history of Staffa , although the Swiss town of Stäfa on Lake Zurich was named after the island by a monk from nearby Iona . Part of the Ulva estate of the MacQuarries from an early date until 1777 , it was brought to the English @-@ speaking world 's attention after a visit by Sir Joseph Banks in August 1772 . En route to Iceland in the company of the painter Johann Zoffany , the Bishop of Linköping , and a Dr. Solander , Banks (later a president of the Royal Society) was entertained by Maclean of Drummen , on the Isle of Mull . Hearing about Staffa he resolved to visit and set out from Tobermory the next day . The winds were light and they did not arrive until darkness had fallen . Banks wrote :

It was too dark to see anything , so we carried our tent and baggage near the only house on the island , and began to cook our suppers , in order to be prepared for the earliest dawn , and to enjoy that which , from the conversation of the gentlemen we had , now raised the highest expectations of

They were not disappointed . Despite becoming infested with lice during his short stay on the island , he provided glowing reports of his visit . He confessed that he was :

forced to acknowledge that this piece of architecture , formed by nature , far surpasses that of the Louvre , that of St. Peter at Rome , all that remains of Palmyra and Paestum , and all that the genius , the taste and the luxury of the Greeks were capable of inventing .

Samuel Johnson and his protege James Boswell visited clan MacQuarrie on Ulva in 1773 , the year after Banks ' visit . Perhaps aware that Banks considered that the columnar basalt cliff formations on Ulva called " The Castles " rivalled Staffa 's Johnson wrote :

When the islanders were reproached with their ignorance or insensibility of the wonders of Staffa , they had not much to reply . They had indeed considered it little , because they had always seen it ; and none but philosophers , nor they always , are struck with wonder otherwise than by novelty .

Amongst the first eminent overseas visitors to Staffa were Barthélemy Faujas de Saint @-@ Fond , a wealthy French zoologist and mineralogist and the American architect and naturalist William Thornton . Visiting in 1784 , they were suitably impressed , Faujus writing : " this superb monument of nature , which in regard to its form bears so strong a resemblance to a work of art , though art can certainly claim no share in it . "

= = = 19th and 20th centuries = = =

Subsequently a stream of famous visitors came to view Staffa 's wonders including Robert Adam ,

Sir Walter Scott (1810) , John Keats (1818) , J. M. W. Turner , whose 1830 visit yielded an oil painting exhibited in 1832 , William Wordsworth (1833) , Jules Verne (1839) , Alice Liddell (the inspiration for Alice in Wonderland) in 1878 , David Livingstone (1864) , Robert Louis Stevenson (1870) and Mendelssohn himself in 1829 . Wordsworth , however , found the volume of tourism disappointing .

Writing more than a century later the writer W. H. Murray agreed , complaining that the visitors spoiled the " character and atmosphere " , and rather stand @-@ offishly suggesting that " to know Staffa one must go alone " .

Others were more enthusiastic , despite the presence of numerous others . Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were rowed into the cave in the royal barge in 1847 , and The Times correspondent recorded :

As the Royal Squadron cleared out of the Sound of Mull , and round the northern extremity of the island , a noble prospect lay before it , the steep and barren headlands of Ardnamurchan stretching away into the Atlantic on the right , on the left the precipitous cliffs of the Mull coast , and far away and embosomed in the ocean , the fantastic and varied forms of the adjacent islands . The horizon toward the north was a good deal obscured by haze , but , notwithstanding , Skye was distinctly visible ... The deserted and solitary aspect of the island was brought out with a strange and startling effect by the presence of so many steamers ; and as Her Majesty 's barge with the Royal Standard floated into the cave , the crew dipping their oars with the greatest precision , nothing could be more animated and grand than the appearance which the vast basaltic entrance , so solemn in its proportions , presented .

Keats complained about the expense of the ferry , but was captivated by what he saw nonetheless . Displeased with his first efforts to describe this " cathedral of the sea " he finally settled on :

Not Aladdin magian / Ever such a work began , Not the wizard of the Dee , Ever such a dream could see ; Not St John , in Patmos Isle , In the passion of his toil , When he saw the churches seven , Golden Aisl 'd , built up in heaven , Gazed at such a rugged wonder . --John Keats , Staffa

= = = Tenants and owners = = =

However inspiring the scenery , it was not an easy place in which to live . In 1772 there was only a single family , living on a diet of barley oats , flax and potatoes , and whatever their grazing animals could provide . By the end of the 18th century they had deserted Staffa , apparently terrified by the severity of winter storms . Signs of " rig and furrow " agriculture can still be seen on the island but the only surviving building is the ruin of a 19th @-@ century shelter for travellers . By 1800 the island was under the ownership of Colin MacDonald of Lochboisdale . In 1816 it was sold by his son Ranald MacDonald into the care of Trustees . In 1821 these Trustees sold to Alexander Forman as Trustee , the purchase money being paid by his brother John Forman WS . It remained in the Forman family until sold by Bernard Gilpin Vincent " Pat " Forman in 1968 . There were several private owners after that , including Alastair de Watteville , a descendant of Colin MacDonald who wrote a book about the island , until finally it was gifted to the National Trust for Scotland by Jock Elliott Jr. of New York in 1986 to honour the 60th birthday of his wife , Eleanor . A grateful National Trust bestowed upon her the honorific " Steward of Staffa " . In a 2005 poll of Radio Times readers , Staffa was named as the 8th greatest natural wonder in Britain .

During the 20th century there were issues of bogus postage stamps bearing Staffa 's name .

= = Wildlife = =

In 1800 there were three red deer on the island , later replaced by goats and then by a small herd of black cattle . Subsequently the summer grazing was used for sheep by crofters from Iona , but in 1997 all livestock was removed . This has led to a regeneration of the island 's vegetation .

Puffins , black @-@ legged kittiwakes common shags and gulls nest on the island , and the surrounding waters provide a livelihood for numerous seabirds , gray seals , dolphins , basking sharks , minke , and pilot whales .

= = Visiting Staffa = =

Boat trips from Oban , Ulva Ferry and Fionnphort on Mull , and Iona allow visitors to view the caves and the puffins that nest on the island between May and September .

There is a landing place used by the tourist boats just north of Am Buachaille , but disembarkation is only possible in calm conditions . The island lacks a genuine anchorage .