New evidence on the Manager's Villa in Stromness Harbour, South Georgia

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ABSTRACT. In May 1916 Sir Ernest Shackleton and two companions arrived at the Stromness whaling station, South Georgia, after their dramatic boat journey from Elephant Island and traverse of the island's mountains. The Manager's Villa, where they were believed to have been made welcome, became a historic building that has been frequently visited by those journeying to South Georgia. There have been two different manager's dwellings in Stromness through the years, but their history has not been clear. New evidence indicates that the Villa that was assumed to be the one Shackleton reached in 1916, was not erected in Stromness until 1925. In that year it was moved from the abandoned Ocean Harbour whaling station farther south on the island and replaced the original Manager's Villa. This paper reviews new evidence on the Stromness villas and concludes that the historic focus should be shifted to the correct building.

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Introduction

The Manager's Villa of the former whaling station in Stromness Harbour, South Georgia, has for many years been considered an important historic building because of its connection with Sir Ernest Shackleton. It has long been believed that this is where, on 20 May 1916, Shackleton and his two companions, Frank Worsley and Tom Crean, ended the dramatic final leg of their epic journey to reach civilization and rescue the members of the ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, who were stranded on Elephant Island after their ship *Endurance* was crushed in the ice of the Weddell Sea (Shackleton 1919).

As a result of the Shackleton connection, the Manager's Villa became a popular place to visit (until the whaling station was closed for safety reasons), and there has been interest in its restoration. However, new evidence shows that the house in Stromness traditionally connected with Shackleton's visit was not there in 1916. When the Stromness whaling station was built in 1912–13, another building was used as a manager's house, and it remained as such throughout the 1920s. This house, although in bad condition, is still standing in Stromness, and the Shackleton connection should be transferred to it.

Stromness whaling station

It has been known for some time that through the years there have been two different villas in Stromness (Basberg 2004: 143). These have been labelled Villa I and Villa II, and they are located on the map of the station as it looks today (Fig. 1) and are marked on a recent photograph (Fig. 2). An older photograph from the collection of magistrate Edward B. Binnie (Fig. 3) shows beyond doubt Stromness Harbour with only Villa I — the white house in the centre of the picture. Binnie's photographs are from the period 1914–27, when he stayed on South Georgia. They are not dated, so it is impossible to tell exactly when this particular photo was taken. However, several early plans of the Stromness whaling station confirm that Villa I was the one and only manager's house at the time of Shackleton's arrival. Plans drawn in 1912 and 1914 refer to the house as 'Manager Dwelling.' A third plan, dated 30 January 1926, labelled it as 'Bestyrerbolig & kontor' (Manager's house and office). There is no sign of Villa II on these plans.

When was Villa II built, and what is the story behind it? In a letter dated 15 December 1925, from Stromness manager Thoralf Sørlle to the managing firm Johan Rasmussen & Co (Sandefjords Hvalfangerselskab), Sørlle reported on various activities at the station, mentioning that 'Barakke, Hospital og Doktorbolig . . . Er under tag og færdig i løpet av 14 dager' ('Barracks, Hospital and Doctor's dwelling . . . are roofed and ready in 14 days'). This information arrived in Sandefjord too late to be incorporated in the 1926 plan. The reference to 'Hospital and Doctor's dwelling' is to Villa II, which was built to replace the existing hospital with a larger building that would also provide accommodation for the doctor. It was set up on vacant ground at the southern end of the station. (The old hospital, situated behind Villa I, was later connected to the bakery to make an L-shaped building and converted to workshops.) Figure 4 shows Stromness with the new house (Villa II) around 1926.

The new hospital, Villa II, was not a new building, but had been moved from the whaling station at Ocean Harbour. The Ocean Whaling Company of Larvik had stopped operations by 1920, having been amalgamated

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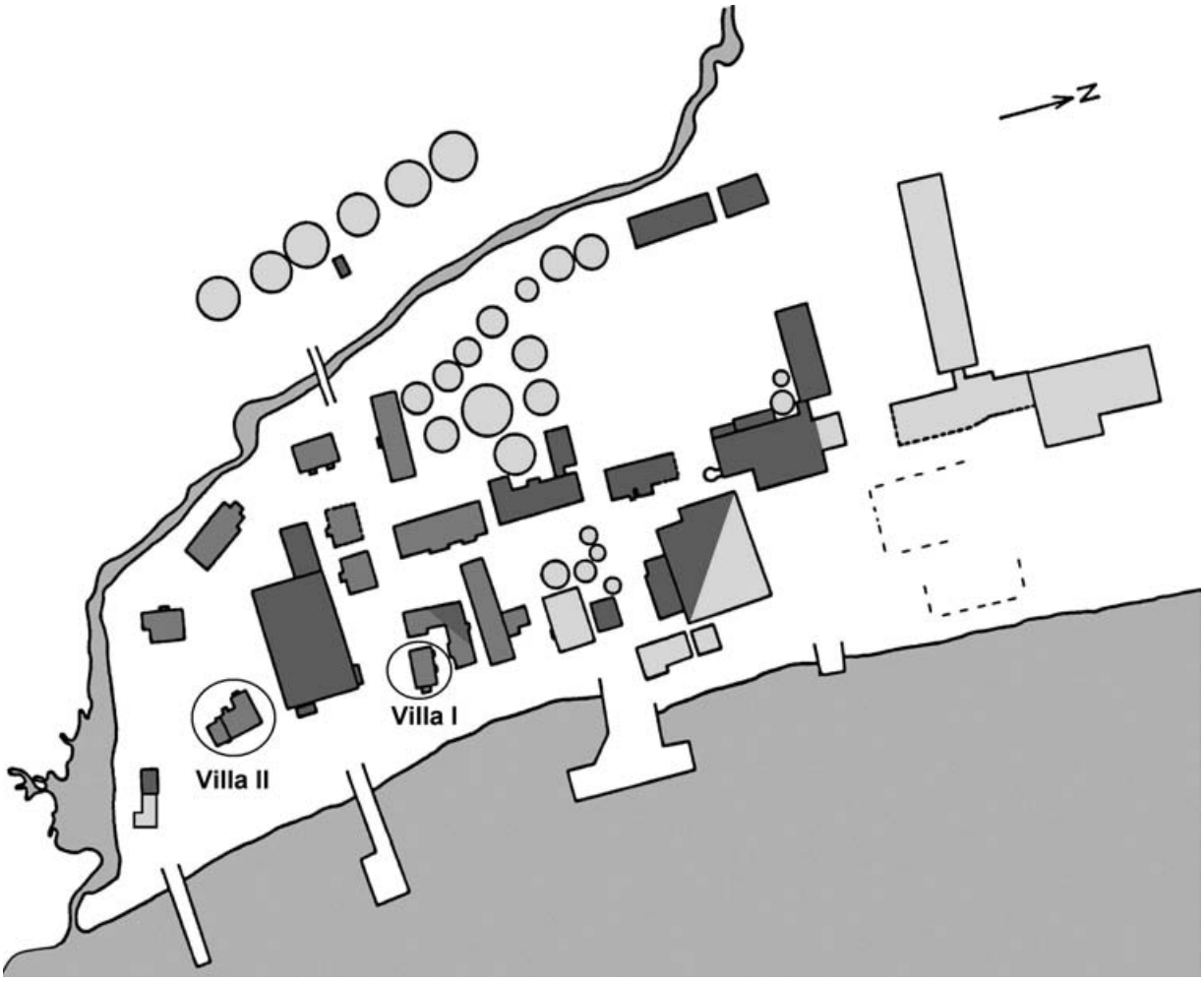


Fig. 1. Stromness whaling station, indicating the location of the two former villas.
Source: South Georgia Industrial Archaeology Project/NARE.



Fig. 2. Stromness whaling station in 2005, indicating the location of the two former villas.
Source: Robert Burton.

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Fig. 3. Stromness whaling station, around 1920. Villa I is the white house in the centre.
Source: E.B. Binnie/T.E. Binnie Jr Collection.

with Sandefjords Hvalfangerselskab the same year. After the station closed, it was gradually dismantled. Machinery, equipment, and even buildings were moved to Stromness. They included the former Ocean Villa, which became the new Stromness hospital during the 1925–26 season. The authors have not been able to confirm this from written records, but photographs again leave no doubt. An unpublished photo (Fig. 5) shows Ocean Harbour with the villa in the centre. It is obviously the house also known as Villa II in Stromness — slightly modified on the west side and extended on the south side. The exact date of the photo is not known, but it must be towards the end of the station's life. It is clearly in operation and fully developed (compared with other photos). It is hardly likely that any buildings would have been moved before closure in 1920–21, so this is further evidence that the building that, until now, has been considered the 'Shackleton Villa' in Stromness, was actually firmly located in Ocean Harbour when Shackleton arrived at Stromness in 1916.

A close-up photo of what was believed to be the Stromness Villa in 1916 has been published (Burton and Venables 2001). Careful scrutiny, however, and a comparison with the known photos of Ocean Harbour, show surroundings that would fit with the building being still at the latter place. Reasons for the difficulties in sorting out the correct history of this building lie in the lack of identification of place and date of many photographs of



Fig. 4. Stromness whaling station, after 1925. The roof of Villa I is seen in the left background (the gable facing the sea). Villa II is the second building from right.
Source: Com. Chr. Christensen's Whaling Museum Collection.

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Fig. 5. Ocean Harbour whaling station around 1920. The Manager's Villa is in the centre.
Source: E.B. Binnie/T.E. Binnie Jr Collection.

this period. For example, the photo of the Ocean station (Fig. 5) is indexed in the Binnie collection as Grytviken.

Later stages

It is not clear when the new hospital in Stromness became a manager's villa. The written records do not give any definite answers. Stromness was run as a whaling station until the 1930–31 season. Sørlle, the manager, was there until the end, and did not mention a new villa in any existing letters. One can assume that it would be unlikely that any major changes would have been made to the station in this period. Throughout the 1930s and the years of World War II, no more than a small group of maintenance workers and caretakers (about six men) remained at Stromness. Only after the war did Christian Salvesen of Leith take over and make significant changes in the station to convert it into a ship-repair yard.

However, the change of villas is likely to have already happened in the late 1920s. One reason for building the new hospital was that in the 1925–26 season Stromness employed its own doctor who needed accommodation. But by the next season plans had changed again. Stromness now co-operated with Leith Harbour, where a single doctor took up residence and performed all major operations. The newly erected building in Stromness became vacant.

In this period the name 'Fattigmannsvillaen' (The Poor Man's Villa) appeared, referring to Villa I (Com. Chr. Christensen's Whaling Museum, interview 39). It indicates that Villa I had been taken over by the lower ranks and turned into the Foremen's Barracks and Mess as we know it from later years.

Villa I was surveyed in 1990 (Basberg and Nævestad 1993). The house was then in fairly bad condition, and it has deteriorated further during the last few years. It should be surveyed again and an assessment should be made as to the possibilities for restoration or preservation. There is most likely little left of the interior of any historical significance. A bathtub is still in place on the first floor. It is indicated on a plan dating from about 1914. However, nothing is known about whether there were later replacements, so further investigations are needed to verify if 'the Boss' took his famous bath in it.

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