

Howmore Church: A Pilgrimage

Hours before high tide, storm swell pushes me off the beach onto the Hebridean Way. With the sea to my left and the hills on my right, a section of machair is fenced off to house traditional haystacks. It doesn't take nature long to find a home; the bases are already pockmarked with field vole holes.

Hundreds of waders congregate at the mouth of the estuary, where the shore bends towards the moors. Oystercatchers stand in organised lines, heads facing into the stiff wind. They each take turns to be the bird at the front, swapping places when they've had enough – a wader peloton. Godwits squeeze between them, like tiny siblings, protected by their bigger brothers in the school playground. Turnstones skim the crests of waves, almost too skittish to land, while sanderlings zip along the frothing surf, darting between the many legs, taking up every inch of space.

Storm clouds linger out to sea, and while the sun sets in the west, the moon climbs above the hills in the east. As high tide covers the last of the shore, the tumble of pebbles claps an enthusiastic round of applause. I am almost there.

The bone-white church at Howmore comes into view; it's a bright porchlight on a dark night. Whatever the weather, it glistens in the distance. As I cross the bridge, the peaty water in the loch reflects the last of the light. This sacred site in South Uist has been a place of pilgrimage since the 9th Century, and I follow in the ancient footsteps of those who have trodden here before me. This pebble in the landscape is tiny and mighty.