

## Renovation of the Seal Station on Gålö 2016-2018

### Report

#### Background



The Seal Station on Gålö holds a special place in military history. It was here that the Swedish armed forces trained seals to spot foreign submarines that were attacking Swedish merchant vessels during the Second World War.

In the autumn of 1941, a number of small buildings were constructed at the site – camouflaged to look like sports cabins – as well as a pool for the seals. The top secret

experiment, codenamed Operation Palmen, was discontinued in 1945.

The City of Stockholm owned the land and gradually took over ownership of the buildings and the pool. For many years, the site was rented out to a sports club, before becoming property of Skärgårdsstiftelsen (The Archipelago Foundation) in 1998.

Over the next few years, the foundation continued to rent the facility out to small groups, but from the start of 2010 the buildings and pools stood empty and increasingly fell into disrepair. In 2016, the EU project Defence Arch was launched, opening the door to a comprehensive renovation and the creation of a museum of military history.

#### Bases for the renovation

Today, the site features two original buildings, two accommodation cabins from 1970–1980 – which probably replaced other original buildings – a composting toilet of more recent date, a small, old store house and the pool installation.

The use to which the buildings have been put has changed over the years, with different owners/administrators making additions and alterations, often with no regard for the historical significance of the site.

When the work to plan the renovation work commenced in 2016, the starting point was to make sure to accommodate and highlight the cultural and historical value of the facility so as to give future visitors the opportunity to experience the history to which the buildings and seal pool testify. Skärgårdsstiftelsen commissioned a building

historian who was tasked with preparing a building description for the renovation of the facilities. The assignment also included a description of the work to renovate the outdoor steps and paths.

The following sections present a description of the practical renovation work, the problems we encountered and the choices we made as the work progressed. We have occasionally made additions or accepted the changes made previously with a view to ensuring that the site is not only usable, but also pleasant and accommodating for visitors.

### Demolition of terrace – unearthing the 1940s



At some point after the military experiment was discontinued, a wooden terrace was constructed in front of one of the remaining buildings. To restore the 1940s exterior, the terrace was demolished along with the wooden walkways between the jetties. Below the planks we found concrete paths from the original seal station, which we carefully restored.

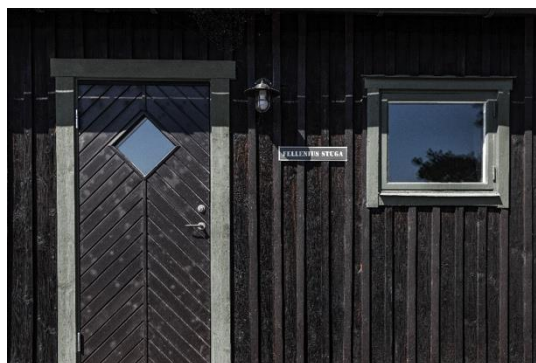
In the spring of 2017, marine archaeologists from Södertörn College completed a marine archaeological examination and a survey with a metal detector. They made an exciting find in front of the house by the water: beneath the soil and rubbish, they



discovered a beautifully laid stone path. And under one of the stones, they found a coin from 1943 – a little greeting from the people who laid the stones. This stone path has, of course, been preserved.



### Small brown sports cabins



The programme of experiments involving the seals was classified as top secret by the Swedish military. So as not to reveal what was actually going on, the kitchen and the camp buildings for the personnel were built to resemble sports cabins. Of all the original buildings, two remain. The building closest to the water was a kitchen in the 1940s, but over the years it has been converted into overnight accommodation.

According to the building historian, the exterior had remained relatively unchanged, however, although in need of some renovation. The façade was coated with “Roslagsmahogny”, which is a kind of tar-based treatment. The window and foot panels had previously been painted and repainted several times and in different colours. The historian managed to uncover the colour of the bottom layer, and was also able to determine the colour code. We presumed that this was the original colour and used it in the repainting work.



The other building remaining from the original experimental station is the one that is used as the kitchen and canteen today. When it was built back in 1941, it was used as a camp building for the personnel. It has probably had an extension added since, given that the southern section – the kitchen today – is clearly built using different techniques to the larger, original part. An examination of the original façade also indicates that the building has been extended. When the renovation work began, there was a strong odour of decaying wood in the building, and to establish where it was coming from, we tore down the interior walls and ceiling. We discovered that the framework that the building stands on had rotted, as had a section of the exterior walls. The roof had been built of



extremely frail wood, using a defective construction; there was no ridge beam, for example.

### Steps in inaccessible countryside

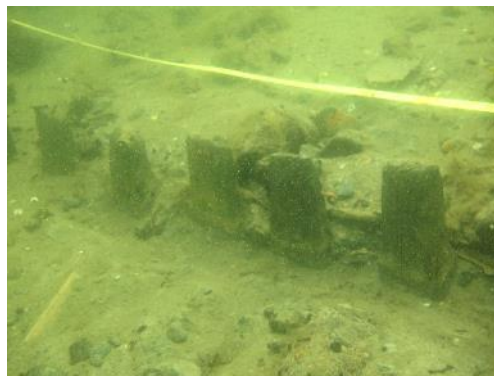
The seal station is set in an isolated location by a cove in Stockholm's southern archipelago. The terrain is steep and inaccessible, and so to make it safe to walk in the area, the military constructed simple steps in the countryside with half logs and gravelled risers. Over the years, these steps have fallen into decay and more or less crumbled away. We restored the steps on the basis of instructions and guidance from the historian. The original pins that held the logs in place were reused in their original positions. We also reused the metal holders for the guide ropes, but the ropes themselves had to be replaced with new ones.





### The seal pool

The seal pool was home to the seals when they were not at sea on training exercises. There were partitions to separate the different groups of seals. Only remains of these partitions were to be found at the bottom of the seal pool.



On the southern jetty, there was also a crane that was used to hoist the seals into a cage for transfer to the transport barge *Palmen*, which moored on the other side of the jetty.

An exploratory dive revealed that the stockade and jetties are still in relatively good condition. According to *Skärgårdsstiftelsen*'s former supervisor, parts of the stockade were replaced in the 1970s. For financial reasons, we chose not to work on the stockade and the jetties within the framework of this project.



Instead, we built a new gangway to the northern jetty as a replacement for the old one, which was on the point of collapsing into the sea.

The long bench on the southern jetty was also replaced. It probably dates from the period after the end of Operation *Palmen*, but we chose to restore it because it adds value for visitors.



The seal basin also contains an old flight of steps built of horizontally laid stones and split logs. We were unable to establish precisely what the steps were used for, but it is likely the facility simply needed an easy way to enter the water from the edge of the pool. The stone sections were intact and did not need any work, but the logs had to be replaced. The top of the steps is not flush with sea level today, due to the fact that the land has risen approx. 25–30 cm since 1940.

### The newer buildings



The newer buildings have no cultural or historical value, and do not make any contribution to understanding the history of the site. These buildings have simply been painted, and a small area of damage to one of the roofs has been repaired.

### Conclusion

The renovation of the seal station has been completed with a view to creating a military history attraction. A digital app relates the history and displays photos and film clips from the seal training programme. On site, there are information boards about Operation Palmen and during the first few years the seal station served as an attraction, guided tours of the station were held. There are three main reasons why it was important to renovate the facility:

**1. Historical understanding.** The exterior renovation allowed us to present an image of how the site looked during the 1940s, when the station was used to train the seals that



were to serve as Sweden's secret submarine spotters. Seeing the actual buildings and the seal pool on site underpins the experience and the understanding of this remarkable story.

**2. Safety.** Several sections of the seal station were dangerous, having not been properly maintained for years. By renovating the steps in the landscape, removing the rotten terrace and building a new gangway to the northern jetty, we have eliminated several accident risks.

**3. Comfort** The seal station is to be open to day visitors and to guests who wish to rent the cabins for meetings, conferences or holidays. In order to keep the installation open, some degree of comfort and well-being is required. We have attempted to achieve this by establishing sitting areas around the buildings and on the jetties, and through fittings and furnishings typical of the time – although this was not a part of the Defence Arch project. In addition, a small service building has been constructed as a part of the project, containing toilets, showers and a sauna.

