



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide

Chapter 4 –Scotland and the Western Isles; July 2023

From Wales, we head north again, this time to Scotland and the islands off its coast. As in Wales, Christianity arrived slowly here, from traders initially and then Roman soldiers. More on its impact in Scotland later. Picking a few of the sites of spiritual significance, we'll look first at Whithorn Priory as we enter Scotland from the south past the Isle of Mann; Val has done some research for us on this ancient site. She follows with some history of the Stone of Destiny, an object of temporal import, but mystical in the obscurity of its origins and destiny. Iona, its name alone almost mystical, clearly cannot be left out. And so we begin ...

One of the earliest Christian sites in Scotland, Whithorn Priory was traditionally held to be founded in the 5th or 6th century when (according to a Northumbrian monk/historian named Bede) Ninian built a white painted stone church, which predictably became known as 'Candida Casa' ('The White House'). The story of Whithorn Priory is inextricably linked with Saint Ninian who has been described in many ways: missionary, saint, mystical healer, bishop, scholar and teacher. Ninian was said to come from the Solway region in the south-west of Scotland. He trained in Rome and returned to Galloway as bishop and missionary. He died around 431 and was buried in his church on the hilltop at Whithorn. His grave quickly became reputed as a place of powerful healing, where the sick and injured came to pray and were miraculously cured of their ailments.

In the 8th century, a monk at Whithorn wrote 'The Miracles of Bishop Nynia', a poem describing wonders performed by Ninian during his life. These included healing a disfigured boy, a man with a terrible skin disease, a blind girl, and two lepers. His miracles also included the skills of 'growing food' and staying dry in the rain while reading his prayer book. In the medieval Christian world, it was strongly believed that pilgrimage to the shrine of a saint benefited the soul and resulted in miraculous cures; handling St. Ninian's bones/relics and even touching dust or earth from the saint's tomb was thought to be beneficial. The pilgrimage journey, long, tiring and filled with hardship, still attracted people from all walks of life. Not everyone who came was cured; Robert the Bruce sought a cure for what was thought at the time to be leprosy, but died 3 months later, probably from a wasting disease. His son however, received a serious arrow wound and was miraculously cured after visiting the shrine. Such stories inspired people to travel to Whithorn, making it



St Ninian (Photo Credit: commons.wikimedia.org)



Whithorn Priory (Photo Credit: whithornpriorymuseum.gov.uk)

one of Scotland's most important shrines

In the 12th century a priory was founded on the site for Premonstratensians (the 'Canons Regular of Prémontré, also known as Norbertines, or White Canons) by St. Norbert. It later became the cathedral church of Galloway.

Pilgrimage remained an important part of Whithorn until the Reformation in 1560, when the new faith rejected such practices and St. Ninian's relics were taken to France for safe keeping. In the late 19th century, St Ninian's Day (16 September) processions through the town were reinstated and whilst little of the Priory survives today, visitors may still follow the pilgrimage route taken by medieval pilgrims to visit the shrine of St Ninian, located in the vault of the Priory.

(whithornpriorymuseum.gov.org/ premontre.org/wiki/paedia.com)



Stone of Scone, Edinburgh Castle (Credit redcreations.com)

Legend says that the Stone of Destiny, also known as the Coronation Stone and the Stone of Scone, was used as a pillow by Jacob. It was believed to have been brought to Scotland in the 9th century, although experts argue that it was actually quarried in the Oban area.

The stone was used as part of the crowning ceremonies of the kings of Dalriada (a kingdom of Pict/Irish origin), in the west of Scotland (now Argyll). When Kenneth I, the 36th King of Dalriada moved his capital to Scone from western Scotland around 840AD,

the Stone of Destiny was moved there too. From then on, Coronations of Scottish kings took place at Moot Hill at Scone Palace, John Balliol being the last Scottish king to be crowned on the stone at Scone in 1292. There is now only a replica of stone there.

Taken from Scone by King Edward I of England in 1296, it remained under the Coronation Throne at Westminster Abbey in London for 700 years, but theories that the Scots did not hand over the real stone abound! On December 25th, 1950 a group of Scottish Nationalists removed the Stone and took it back to Scotland where it remained for four months before being returned to Westminster Abbey. Or was it? There have been suggestions that only a copy was returned, compounding the earlier stories about substitution. The stone finally returned to Scotland on St. Andrew's Day, 30th November 1996, and is housed beside the other 'Honours of Scotland' in Edinburgh Castle. Experts from Historic Scotland examined the stone upon its arrival and pronounced that it was "probably" the original stone from Dalriada. The Stone of Destiny was temporarily replaced under the Coronation Throne at Westminster Abbey for the crowning of King Charles. (Credit: rampantscotland.com)



Coronation Throne without the stone, Westminster Abbey (Credit blog.udn.com)

A small island of peace, the island of Iona (part of the Inner Hebrides islands between Scotland and Ireland), has been recognized as a 'thin place' for centuries if not millennia. There have been religious communities living on or associated with Iona since the Iron Age. Christianity was officially brought to Iona with (now Saint) Columba in 563 AD, when he and a band of supporters fled Ireland (or were banished) for various 'indiscretions' committed during a local war. He committed himself to Jesus Christ, and they began a monastic tradition which has continued in various forms to the present day. The community of Iona has long been instrumental in strengthening and promulgating the variety of Christianity known as Celtic Christianity. This led to both tremendous vibrant intellectual and spiritual

growth for many, as well as ultimately destructive disagreements with the majority “Roman” form of the church. The island community suffered with the Viking incursions beginning in the 8th century, was rebuilt, and expanded several times, with the eventual demolition of most of the architecture during the Reformation of the 16th century. Despite the most tumultuous history of the place, it remains an oasis of peace. At the beginning of the 20th Century, the ruins were transferred to the Iona Cathedral Trust which restored the abbey and founded the Iona Community. This international community is still associated with Iona. John Bell, the prolific hymn writer and an ordained minister of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) is part of the group. Iona is not large (6 x 2 km), has a small resident population of people, and a rather larger resident population of sheep. It’s



Isle of Iona (Photo: pinterest.com)

highest point, a hill known as ‘Dun I’, is a spectacular and awe-inspiring place upon which to pray. It is no wonder that people have responded to God’s presence here for so long.

One of the messages these places and their history have for us is the interplay between the mystical and the temporal, the spiritual and the political. The message of the Gospel propelled some into a life of service or separation, but it also helped pull post-Roman Scotland together into a nation. Before Christianity arrived, the Picts (related to the ancient Caledonians, the Britons, the Scots (originally from Ireland) and the Angles (from whence the names Anglo-Saxon and England) were four distinct racial groups with separate and transitory kingdoms. Saints and monks from each found more in their faith to bring them together than to keep them separate. Stories of miracles brought pilgrims from distant and previously misunderstood places; relics and hopes and traveling and living together brought them into community and led to a measure of understanding. Is this not something the mystical can teach us? In the process of trying to, at least partly comprehend it, we can come together, share our inability to see that which is never fully discernable, become community and find there a “thin place”.

<http://www.scotland.org.uk/history/coming-of-christianity>



Inside of Iona Abbey (raydevlinphotography.com)

Your Mystic Britain travel guides