

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC220, PIC119 & PIC207

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM12992)

Taken into State care: 1908 (Guardianship), 1891 (Guardianship) & 1923 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2005

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

WHITHORN PRIORY, WHITHORN PRIORY CROSSES (AND MUSEUM) & MONREITH CROSS



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

WHITHORN PRIORY, WHITHORN PRIORY CROSSES (AND MUSEUM), & MONREITH CROSS

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The site is located at the end of Bruce Street, and accessed through the original priory gatehouse, located at the south end of the high street of the medieval burgh (now George Street).

The site of an important monastery, and the seat of the bishops of Whithorn, during the first 1000 years of Christianity and beyond.

The properties comprise the remains of the ruined later medieval priory church, crypt and undercroft, together with the adjacent museum which houses the collection of early Christian carved stones, including the Monreith Cross. The PIC also includes the long garden rig to the rear of the museum, as well as a field (known as the Market Garden) to the west of where the 'Whithorn Dig' took place in the 1980s-90s.

Ticketing and introductory displays are provided in the Whithorn Story visitor centre, which fronts the site on George Street.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

4th century AD - Whithorn was already established as a centre of trade and power for the local British population, within the sphere of Roman Carlisle.

431 – the traditional date ascribed to the death and burial here of St Ninian. Legend tells us, created by Bede writing in 731, that he was a bishop who built a famous church here, known as *Candida Casa* ('shining white church'). What is certain is that Whithorn was closely associated with the great scholar and founder of monasteries, Finnian of Moville (the Briton Uinniau) who died in 589. He was St Columba's teacher, and may have come from this area. He may be the historical Ninian, whose name and legend was promoted by the Northumbrians in the 8th century.

c450AD – the oldest Christian monument in Scotland erected on the hilltop by Latinus and his un-named daughter. Several aspects of this inscription demonstrate that Roman culture still had a strong appeal to the upper echelons of Galloway society in the 5th century.

The only possible location of the grave is to the east of the crown of the hill, in the crypt of the later medieval cathedral, and it is entirely possible that this remained constant ever since the 5th century. The development of Whithorn from the 5th to the 16th centuries might therefore have been predicated by this fixed point.

7th century – the 'Peter' stone was erected by a chapel just outside Whithorn.

c 700 - Galloway fell under the control of the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria

They embraced and embellished the cult of Ninian, promoting the importance of the shrine by circulating literature, describing the numerous miracles, written by Whithorn monks during the 8th century. One of these works, a poem entitled *Miracula Niniae Episcopi*, provides a unique contemporary insight into the appearance of the place, describing a (presumably empty) rock-cut grave, as well as Ninian's stone reliquary sarcophagus which rested beside the altar of his main church.

10th-11th centuries – Whithorn School of stone carving, producing large numbers of monolithic stone crosses.

c1128 – Fergus of Galloway appointed Gilla-Aldan as bishop. This was followed by the construction of a large cruciform cathedral church built on the site of the principal older church. At this time the sepulchral church housing Ninian's tomb probably remained as a separate building at the east end of the hilltop.

c1200 – Ninian's tomb was absorbed into the cathedral when the east end was extended. This enlargement was required to accommodate the liturgical needs of the Premonstratensian canons recently introduced to the cathedral priory. The difference in levels between the two buildings meant that they were able to incorporate the west half of the sepulchral church as a crypt. Their needs necessitated the construction of a cloister, which topography determined had to be unusually to the north of the church, as at Melrose.

14th century - Galloway was a traditionally independent province which had long resisted integration with the medieval kingdom, although this was effectively achieved by this time. The crown had persistently adopted and revered the cult of St Ninian, and the personal pilgrimages of the later Stewart kings certainly aided the process of reconciliation.

1329 - cures of leprosy attracted King Robert I (1306-29) to endure a long and painful journey to Whithorn, just 3 months before his death.

c1500 - A large chapel with undercroft was added to the south of the choir during a major rebuilding and restoration programme, which took place around 1500, with indulgences provided in return for offerings. This chapel provided space for further devotional altars as well, and created a grander setting in which pilgrims could observe the activity around the main shrine.

By the reign of James IV (1488-1513) it is probable that only a few bones survived, most notably arm bones which he ordered the royal goldsmith to enshrine in a new silver gilt reliquary. By this time St Ninian was at the height of his popularity, and the subject of national devotion to rival that of St Andrew.

1511 – burgh refounded as a royal burgh by James IV.

1560 – the shrine was destroyed at the Reformation, and the cathedral was stripped of its wealth and estates.

Late 16th century - the church was in ruins. But within a few years repairs had been effected to the nave, probably by Gavin Hamilton, who was consecrated as bishop in 1610. A bell tower was built at the west end. From then on, the east limb was abandoned and robbed of stone.

17th century - economic and ecclesiastical control shifted to Wigtown. In 1690 Presbyterianism was finally stabled in the Church of Scotland, and the church at Whithorn became a simple parish church. A pulpit was placed in the middle of the north wall. Timber galleries were built to east and west, accessed by external stairs.

Early 18th century – the west tower fell, causing the rebuilding of the west gable.

1822 – the present parish church was built.

1886-87 – Whithorn was visited by General Pitt-Rivers, the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments, who sketched some of the stones.

1908 – cottages in Bruce Street were leased from the Dumfries Estate, converted and extended to display the crosses and other carved stones.

Whithorn came into guardianship in three stages between 1891 and 1923.

2005 – early medieval carved stone collection redisplayed, following the principles laid out in the Interpretation Plan for Early Medieval Carved Stones in Historic Scotland Care.

Archaeological Overview

William Galloway 1880s – he was commissioned by the 3rd Marquess of Bute to carry out excavations and restoration. This work focussed on the east end of the church, including rescue work during the construction of the road to the present parish church. This work produced the Latinus stone.

Raleigh Radford 1949-51, & 1953 – his excavation campaigns confirmed that the building found by Galloway to the east of the crypt was the remains of an earlier church. This is now identified as having Northumbrian origins. His trenches in the nave were disappointing, revealing that any traces of earlier medieval remains had been levelled off.

Roy Ritchie 1957-67 – focussed on the east end of the church. A rich collection of liturgical objects were found in the graves of the 13th/14th century bishops and priors. Earlier remains were also identified in these excavations, with reports of long cist and pre-Christian graves, plus associated structures. The Museum of Scotland displays the fabulous gold 12th cent crozier found in the grave of one of the bishops.

Chris Tabraham 1972 & 75 – first excavations in the fields to the south and north of the PIC. Buildings and graves were found, spanning a long chronological period, and proving the high archaeological potential which was then exploited by Hill.

Peter Hill and others 1980s-90s - these excavations were focused on the gentle south slope of the hillside, and not within the area of the PIC on the summit. The excavations revealed that the hilltop was encircled by a ditch allowing sufficient space for more than one church. Outwith the ditch was a settlement of terraced streets of rectangular timber houses. Various phases of monastic precinct ditches were revealed. Some people living in the early town from the late 5th century until around 700 had access to high quality pottery and glass from the Mediterranean and from Gaul. In the later Northumbrian period, the area was developed with funerary chapels and lines of what have been identified as feasting halls for accommodating pilgrims. The early settlement seems to have shifted from here around the time when the new priory was being developed in the 13th century. A large graveyard spread over much of this area, and some 1600 graves were excavated. These excavations were outwith the PIC except for one area between the Museum and the undercroft. Early timber building remains were found, along with the remains of a road. The cemetery was extended here by the later medieval period.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

Carved stone crosses and slabs - the site museum displays the collection of 60 or so complete and fragmentary monumental sculpted stones. This collection has been gathered together by Historic Environment Scotland and its predecessor bodies over a period of more than 100 years.

Latinus stone - dated to around 450AD, and therefore the oldest dated Christian monument in what we now call Scotland.

The 'Peter' stone - proclaimed the apostles' protection of this place. The stone originally stood 0.7km away at Mains Farm on the old road to the Isle of Whithorn. This may be the site of the later 'chapel on the hill' – an outlying pilgrimage site referred to in a 16th century document. This has a later form of the *chi-rho* symbol. The style of the inscription's lettering dates the Peter Stone to the 7th century. There are a handful of other early crosses dating from the seventh and eighth century

'Whithorn School' - most of the collection were carved within a relatively short period in the 10th and 11th centuries. These are a homogenous group, characterised as roughly 2m high monolithic crosses, with intricate repeated patterns of interlace on the shaft which supports a round-headed cross head. These are a pure evocation of the cross of Christ, almost all erected in the open air beside the church as memorials and grave markers. All were carved in one or more workshops at Whithorn.

Some of the crosses were sent out to outlying parishes in this area known as the South Machars of Galloway, to serve as physical reminders of the ecclesiastical authority of Whithorn and its bishops, who were considered to have inherited the authority of St Ninian.

Most were found in the kirkyard just outside the museum, especially during 19th and 20th century excavations of the ruined priory. Others were found during the demolition of buildings in the town of Whithorn. All stood originally within an

ecclesiastical precinct surrounding an early church on the site of the priory. A few others have come from the churchyards of neighbouring parishes elsewhere in the Machars. A group were excavated from St Ninian's Cave in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Monreith Cross – uniquely, this did not come from a religious site, but first stood on the court-hill beside the ancient residence of a local lord, 7km west of here. Local justice was dispensed in the shadow of this cross. This is a PIC in its own right.

The medieval cathedral - we know from excavations that the church had a cross-shaped plan, with north and south transepts and an aisled choir, but now only the much-altered nave is left standing. There was probably a tower above the crossing. The south-west door provides access to the nave, although this Romanesque door was probably moved here from elsewhere in the cathedral. The west end of the nave was extended in the 13th century to double its size, and this fabric still survives. The walls have been cut down in height. The only medieval fittings to survive in the nave are three tomb recesses. The east end wall of the nave is post-Reformation, built on the base of the pulpitum screen.

The east end - although we have hints of the nature of the shrine, its associated altars and even secondary relics such as a miracle-working painting of the saint, almost nothing of the east limb and transepts survives above ground today. The east end of the church was largely reconstructed by Galloway, and is consequently more a product of the late 19th century conservation movement, rather than an accurate reflection of the real layout.

Nevertheless, we can be sure that the choir contained the high altar with the feretory chapel behind. A set of stairs to the north of the altar, leading down to the crypt, were excavated in 1990 and a modern stair provided here to allow visitor circulation.

This small barrel vaulted crypt can still be visited, although the effect is less impressive than when it was originally roofed with a ribbed vault which rested on a central pier.

The large south chapel off the choir, built c 1500, may have been designed as an enlarged shrine chapel. Similar cult arrangements were created at Iona, and in the Blackadder Aisle in Glasgow Cathedral.

The cloister abutted the north side of the nave. Remains of the north claustral range were excavated in the 1970s but no trace of this is now visible. Following demolition after the Reformation, the cloister garth was used as the north graveyard. The parish church of 1822 is built over the site of the east range, which contained the chapter house with dormitory above.

The Premonstratensian cathedral priory and cloister were built from the local greywacke stone, with the dressed work of sandstone shipped here from east Galloway.

Social Overview

The Whithorn Dig of the 1980s and 90s is reputed to have attracted 50,000 visitors per annum at its height.

Many inhabitants are aware of the extraordinary time-depth of the place in which they live. The priory is the physical embodiment of this.

The Whithorn Trust was set up in 1986 to explore the archaeology and history of Whithorn, and to examine its role in the evolution of Christianity in Scotland. The Trust has provided an important focus for a sense of municipal pride in the area.

Spiritual Overview

Whithorn embodies the entire history of Christian belief, power and practice in Scotland.

Veneration and devotion to St Ninian was central to the faith of countless generations in the medieval period. This popular devotion continued beyond the Reformation, up to and including the present day.

Many inhabitants of Whithorn and the surrounding area still feel a tangible bond with the saint.

Many visitors are motivated by a personal devotion to the saint, or else are intrigued to experience for themselves a spiritual ambience residual in a place where Christian worship has underpinned the reason for its very existence.

A Roman Catholic diocesan pilgrimage still takes place every August, from here to St Ninian's Cave.

Aesthetic Overview

The early Christian carved stone collection in the site museum can be viewed as art objects in their own right. The intricate and sinuous panels of interlace decoration at first glance seem homogenous, but in fact contain considerable variation. The quality of craftsmanship is equally varied, but nonetheless extraordinary when taking into account the poor quality and intractable nature of the material.

The approach up the pend, with the Bruce Street cottages on one side and the dig site on the other, is quite attractive, drawing the visitor to the ruined priory on the hilltop.

The immediate setting of the priory is quite wild and windswept, with the skewed ancient gravestones and the gnarled trees. There is a striking evocation of time-depth and *memento mori*.

The exterior of the nave, with the fine Romanesque door is more visually appealing than the interior which has low wall-heads, and high ground level.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What was the form and development of the pre-12th century churches on the hilltop, and how did these develop through time?
- Where were the workshops which produced the sculpted stone crosses?
- What was the layout of the later medieval cathedral and cloister?
- What was the dating of the sequence of burials and structures excavated at the east end of the church by Ritchie in 1957-66?
- How was the nature of the interior decoration, furnishings and fittings of the priory church?
- What was the precise arrangement and form of St Ninian's shrine?
- Was there a matching south stair allowing a one-way circulation route for pilgrims ascending from the crypt?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Whithorn can rightly be styled the *Cradle of Christianity*, based on the 5th century date of the Latinus stone, coupled with the archaeological evidence for the early centre, and in context with the critical mass of associated early Christian sites and monuments in the vicinity.
- This is the only PIC which reveals every phase of development of Christian faith and worship from its origins and throughout the medieval and post-Reformation periods. Here we can interpret the importance of popular religion during a period of more than 1000 years.
- Whithorn developed from a trading centre, populated by Romanised Christian Britons, into a major monastic centre – a veritable school for saints. These changes continued with the arrival of Anglo-Saxon overlords in the late 7th century, followed by a shift towards Scandinavian and Irish political control 200 years later.
- When visiting the quiet town of Whithorn today, it is hard to believe that this was once a famed ecclesiastical centre with strong international links, which grew up around the longest lasting pilgrimage place in Scotland, a focus for devotees of St Ninian for a period of around 1100 years, and still alive today.
- The Whithorn school crosses make a unique contribution to medieval art. This collection is only rivalled at Iona, St Andrews and Govan.

- The carved stones are the only part of the PIC which document the early history of the site, the only visible structural remains of the early monastery being the church remains to the east of the crypt. The carved stones are therefore a uniquely important expression of the lives and faith of the people of Whithorn from the 5th-12th centuries. These can be considered in parallel with the artefacts from the same period which can be seen in the *Whithorn Story* visitor centre.
- Similarly, the architectural fragments from the later medieval cathedral provide much of the evidence of the nature and quality of this much-reduced building.
- The excavation of the east end of the later medieval church produced a uniquely important assemblage of human remains and grave goods. This is the only comprehensive group of such burials recovered from any great church in Scotland, and has the potential to inform an understanding of the life, death and burial practices related to a group of senior churchmen.
- In the later medieval period the cult rivalled that of St Andrew in terms of national devotion. James IV came on pilgrimage at least once a year, helping create the final flourish of the cult.
- 10 years of excavations within the outer precinct during the 1980s and 90s has fundamentally changed and informed our understanding of the place and its people.
- Whithorn is an excellent example of how pilgrimage devotion was managed at a major shrine, with the altars, shrine and crypt providing a heightened dramatic setting for the cult.
- The restoration of the east end by the 3rd Marquess of Bute informs an understanding of the development of the early conservation movement.
- These restoration works have however contributed to a process of degradation during the last 200 years which compromises the ability of visitors to comprehend the monument.

Associated Properties

St Ninian's Cave ; St Ninian's Chapel; Barhobble Chapel; Wigtown Church; Kirkinner, St Kenvera's Church; Kirkcolm; Dumfries Museum; Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; **Laggairn;** Souleseat Abbey; **Glenluce Abbey;** **Dundrennan; St Finian's Chapel; Sweetheart Abbey; Iona Abbey; Glasgow Cathedral; St Andrews Cathedral; Dryburgh Abbey;** Govan Old Parish Church.

Keywords St Ninian; Finnian; carved stones, 3rd marquess of Bute; early Christian; monastery; Northumbrian; pilgrimage; crypt; Premonstratensian; Fergus of Galloway; Reformation.