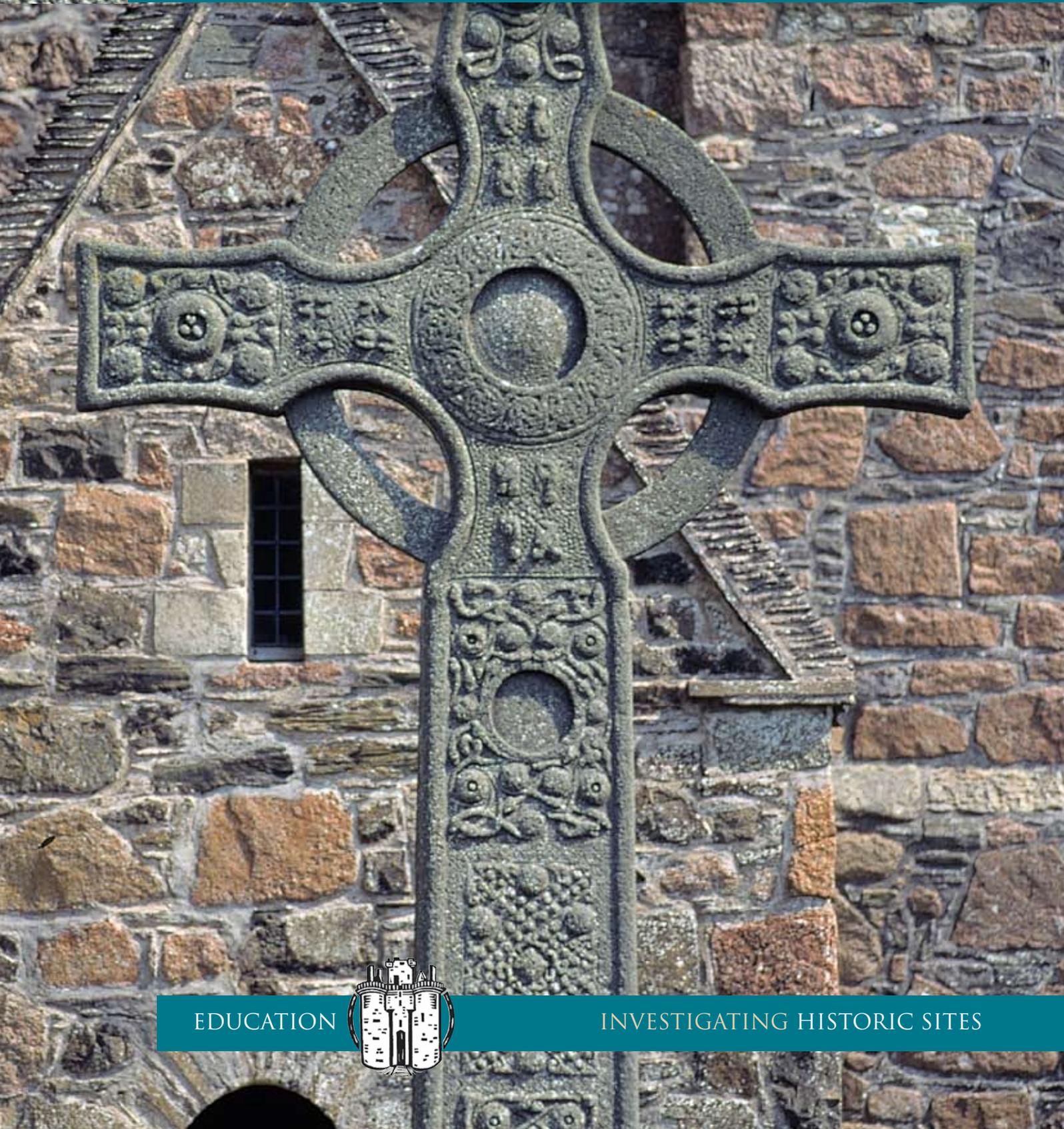


St John's Cross was once one of the widest crosses known in the British Isles. Today the original is in the Abbey Museum and a replica stands outside Iona Abbey.

INVESTIGATING ST JOHN'S CROSS, IONA

Information for Teachers





Iona Abbey

The tiny island of Iona was the heart of the Scottish Church in its earliest years. In AD 563 St Columba and a small group of followers arrived from Ireland and established a monastery on the island. This grew into a noted centre of learning and crafts. Workshops for developing skills such as stone carving were established here. Surviving raids by the Vikings, the monastery flourished but in time was replaced by a Benedictine Abbey. Today Iona Abbey attracts both pilgrims and tourists who are drawn to its peace and beauty.

A few of the remarkable high stone crosses carved over a thousand years ago can still be seen on the island today. One of these is St John's Cross, dating from the 8th or 9th century. The original stood outside Iona Abbey but is thought to have collapsed soon after being constructed. The pieces can be seen in the Abbey Museum, and a replica stands outside the Abbey.

Practical information

- Information and Museum opening times:
Tel. 01681 700512.
- Access and parking:
Coaches may be parked at the ferry terminal at Fionnphort, Isle of Mull. Ferry crossing takes around 10 minutes. Walk 10 minutes to Iona Abbey.
- Toilets: Accessible toilets available.
- Risk Assessment: This is the responsibility of the teacher in charge.
- Recommended adult:child ratio: 1:10

How to use this resource

This resource is designed to enable teachers or parent helpers carry out a simple investigation of St John's Cross. The activities focus on the original stone, which is reconstructed in pieces in the Abbey Museum. We recommend that you also spend time looking at the replica stone which stands outside the Abbey. Simple discussion points focus pupils' attention on what they can see and encourage pupils to interpret this evidence.

This activity guide should be used in collaboration with the much larger full-colour booklet *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009. This is available free of charge to teachers from Historic Scotland and can also be downloaded from the Historic Scotland website. This booklet sets the St John's Cross in the context of other Early Christian stones and provides a wealth of additional suggestions for pre-visit, on-site and post-visit activities.

Call 0131 668 8793/8736 or visit www.historic-scotland.gov.uk for more details.



Suggested activities

The following activities are a few suggestions for additional practical activities relating to the St John's Cross which may be carried out on-site or back at school.

- Estimate or measure the dimensions of the stone or so that back at school you can recreate a life sized or scale drawing or model of it.
- Draw one element of a pattern from the stone. Get pupils to look closely at the lines which appear to 'weave' over and under each other. Back at school pupils can use these drawings as a basis for scale drawings of the stone or to create their own designs based on 'knot work' like this.
- Using clay or other modelling material, pupils could design their own stones with 'carved' patterns or images.

Further reading

Anna Ritchie and Ian Fisher, *Iona Abbey and Nunnery*, Historic Scotland 2004.

Historic Scotland Education, *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009.

Replica cross outside Iona Abbey



Did you know...

St Columba is said to have used a stone for a pillow! You can see it in the Abbey Museum.



Pieces of the original stone in Iona Abbey Museum

Background information

This may be read aloud to pupils either before the visit or on site.

- This stone was carved more than 1200 years ago by craftsmen who worked at the abbey here. It's called St John's Cross.
- The first abbey here was set up by St Columba, who came to Iona from Ireland in the year AD 563. He set up a religious community here and taught people about Christianity.
- After he died, many people used to come to Iona to visit his grave. St John's Cross was just one of many crosses which showed these visitors the way to the abbey. There were probably wooden crosses to begin with, and later on these were replaced with stone ones.
- As well as showing the way to the abbey, the stone crosses were places where people would stop and pray as they passed by.
- As you can see, St John's Cross is in pieces today. The carvers wanted to build a huge and impressive cross – but they overdid it. The arms of the cross were too long, and it collapsed almost as soon as it was built. They tried to fix it by adding the stone rings, but that didn't work for long either. It would have been one of the widest crosses in all of Britain and Ireland!
- In 1927 the pieces were stuck together again, but the intact cross only lasted till 1957. At that point all the surviving pieces were brought into the museum, and in 1970 a replica cross was built instead which you can see outside the abbey today. It's made of concrete, and so far it hasn't blown down!



The original cross in the Abbey Museum



Panel on the replica cross outside the Abbey

Discussion points

<i>Teacher prompts</i>	<i>Pupils responses</i>
Have a quick look at the cross. Look for a symbol or pattern that you like. Show it to a friend.	Pupils' own responses.
Look carefully at the cross. How many different pieces of the stone make up the cross today?	Difficult to say – 12-15 pieces.
Do you think that the people who made it originally carved it out of one piece of stone, or out of several pieces which they joined together later?	Pupils' own observations.
It was originally carved on 8 separate sections of stone which were then joined together. Perhaps that's why it was so fragile.	
What kind of patterns can you see on the cross?	Circles and curves; lots of carved ball shapes. Also one panel with squares and diamonds as well as the round shapes.
The carved stone ball shapes are called 'bosses'.	
Are there any carved people on this side?	No people.
Can you see any animals?	Snakes.
Do you think it's a good idea for this cross to be inside?	Pupils' own responses.
The people who repaired the cross have left the plastic bits showing in the gap. Why do you think they have done this?	Because they can't be sure what it looked like.

On your way home, have a look at the replica of St John's Cross which is standing close to the Abbey entrance.