

THE CARVED STONES OF KIEL, MORVERN



Kiel Church stands high above the Sound of Mull, just a mile west of the village of Lochaline. Although the present building is just over 100 years old, tradition has it that there has been a church somewhere on the site since the time of Saint Columba, in the 6th century.

Visitors are always welcome, and a leaflet giving more information about the church is available inside.

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

Next to the church is a rather insignificant stone building. Inside it, however, is a surprise. This building was originally the Schoolmaster's house, built around 1780. Later, it was occupied by the Beadle, or Church Officer, and, up to the end of the Second World War, it was a family dwelling-house. It was at times used for meetings of the church Elders, or Kirk Session, and now is generally known as The Old Session House.

The outside has been restored to look as much like the original as possible. But come inside . . .

HOUSE OF STONES

Instead of the original but and ben, the inside now consists of a porch and one inner room. On the porch wall is a board with information about the area, and inside another board helps to put this display in its historical and geographical context.

But what exactly is on display?

Around the walls of the main room are set intricately-carved stone slabs, of considerable size and weight. Two more stones are laid in gravel beds on the floor. Both of these have been broken, and the original idea was to place them against the wall with the top part resting on the bottom, as has been done with other, lighter stones. However, these two were so heavy that it would have been impossible to lift the tops into place without a crane, which in turn would have had to be too high to get

into the room. Hence their present position - but please, don't walk over them!

To go back to the main reason for preserving these stones - the magnificent patterns and figures carved on them - questions like What? When? and Why? spring to mind.

WHAT?

What the stones are is perhaps rather obvious - they are grave-stones. Their size and elaborate carving bear witness to the importance of the people whose graves they once marked.

WHEN?

The style of carving is a clue. So, too, is the lack of written inscription on most of the stones. In other words, most people could not read. And in fact the stones date mainly from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries.

At this time, masons, trained in different schools of stonework, travelled round the country, offering their services. They might even be asked to provide a stone as a wedding gift!

WHY?

The elaborate carving bears witness to the importance of the person buried, and possibly tells us something about them. For example, a sword would indicate the grave of a warrior, and might even be carved using the owner's actual weapon as a template. One stone shows three swords, and is one of only two such stones at present known in the whole of Scotland.

Among the carved motifs are strange animals, hunting scenes, trees, flowers, and oared galleys.

How the sails of a boat are depicted – whether they are set or furled – can indicate where the mason who did the carving came from.

For a long time it was believed that one of the figures shown was wearing a kilt. This would have made it the first picture of this garment known. However, closer examination has shown that the “kilt” is simply a short tunic underneath a coat of mail.

Another stone is sometimes said to depict Adam and Eve, but again this seems unlikely, and both figures are probably monks.

WHAT ELSE IS WORTH LOOKING AT?

As well as elaborate pictures, the two stones on the floor both have writing on them. As has been said, this is unusual.

Another two have obviously been “recycled”. The original fine carving has been overlaid with much more crudely carved dates and initials.

The stone set upright in a (modern) block of granite is not a burial slab, but the lower part of a cross shaft. Both sides are carved, one showing a very detailed figure of a bishop. Below his feet is a hound chasing a stag. A Lombardic inscription tells us that “This is the cross of Thomas MacEachan and of his son Donald”.

Perhaps the top part will one day be found. Indeed, several of the stones already here, or parts of them, have been found built into nearby walls – so keep your eyes open in the vicinity!

The very oldest stones of all in the collection are not elaborately carved. Two small simple uprights, with a cross incised, may date back as far as the 8th century. They are probably boundary crosses, used to mark off church land, or a burial ground. Both are from the Drimnin end of the parish. Not spectacular, but surely a wonderful link with our distant history. (These stones may not always be on display, as they are currently waiting for repair and proper mounting with help from Historic Scotland.)

WHY HERE?

Nowadays, Morvern is hardly the hub of the universe. So why should so many fine pieces of stonework have either been produced or finished up here?

From the time of Saint Columba himself, through to the days we’ve been speaking of, much travel was by sea. The Sound of Mull must have been the equivalent of our motorways. As a result, Morvern, so centrally placed along the western seaboard, became an important centre for the church before the Reformation. Kiel would have been one of the “in” places to be buried.

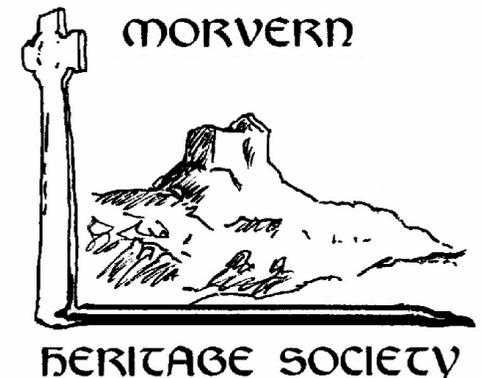
Much remains mysterious about the stones, but we are fortunate to be able to enjoy their beauty. As you leave, visit the free-standing cross to the south of

the church, and look for the dragon standing on its head on the side facing the church. See, too, if you can make out the two dragon heads, also upside down, on the seaward side.

Full details of the stones, including photographs, are included in the booklet *The Carved Stones of Kiel, Morvern, Argyll*, by Iain Thornber. This is available in Kiel Church or from Iain Thornber, Knock House, Lochaline.

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