

Kilnave, Islay: an empty chapel and weather-worn cross



Islay is the southern most of the Inner Hebrides, lying with its neighbour Jura, to the west of Kintyre and the south of Mull.

Known as the Queen, or Jewel of the Hebrides, Islay has a rich cultural and natural history. Today it's world-renowned for whisky, with 8 working distilleries producing distinctive peaty expressions of the *uisge beatha*, or water of life.

In the mid-12th century, Somerled, a warlord, fought and won control of the then Kingdom of the Isles, leading to the establishment of the Lordship of the Isles. Somerled's successors from Clan MacDonald based the Lordship at Finlaggan on Islay, and ruled across the Hebrides through to the 16th century.

Five centuries earlier Islay formed a part of the Kingdom of Dalriada, during which period Christianity was established across the Hebrides. Today this legacy is seen in early-mid medieval crosses and an abundance of mid-medieval chapel remains. One such site is at Kilnave, on the west side of Loch Gruinart, an RSPB reserve.

The chapel and cross are accessed from a minor road leading to Ardnave Point, and overlook Loch Gruinart. Kilnave's name means saint or holy church, *Kil* being Gaelic for church and *nave* from the Gaelic *naomh*, meaning saint or holy.

The now roofless chapel was built c. 1400. The cross comes from an earlier period, testifying that Kilnave has been a sacred site for centuries.

Some early medieval crosses may be kindly described as rudimentary, from the hand of an apprentice or artisan worker. Others have been crafted by skilled masons. The Kilnave Cross is the latter. Formed from local Torridonian flagstone, it stands magnificently over 3 metres high with an original span of just over 1 metre. Its finely-carved motif detail on one side and thinness of just 6 ½ cm, point to skill and vulnerability.



Kilnave Cross, Islay,

Today Kilnave Chapel lies empty, abandoned to the elements, the congregation long since gone. But the two sides of its cross continue to witness to both Good Friday and Easter Day. The bare side symbolising abandonment and suffering, and the finely carved side to, beauty, wonder and new life.

This Easter, chapels and churches across Scotland are likewise without a congregation. They may take heart from Kilnave and the scriptures.

Psalm 137 recalls when many from Jerusalem were led away into captivity to Babylon, leaving behind their ruined temple.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept when we remembered Zion. Psalm 137

In adversity, they didn't forget God and God didn't forget them. They learnt to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.

Pen and ink drawing of Kilnave cross from site visit, an early photograph and contemporary drawing. Today the surface of the cross is worn, with much detail lost.