

A Brief History of The Clachan Church & Burial Ground

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The site of the old parish mission church at Clachan has long been 'holy' ground. As the late Professor J. Kennedy Cameron of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, pointed out in his excellent work *The Church In Arran*: 'The name Clachan indicates that the place, before any Christian house of worship had been erected in it, was a centre of Druidic worship. The term has come down to us from the time when the early inhabitants of the island were wont to assemble there for worship of their gods. To go to the Clachan, or stones, was equivalent to going to worship.'¹

Also of note in this regard, is the fact that the Clachan site is, and always has been, a wooded location, which would make it an ideal 'holy' place in pagan times, when the Druids favoured secluded wooded groves in which to practice their ancient mysteries. That the Clachan Glen continued to be a place of worship after Christianity arrived on Arran during the 6th Century C.E., through the mission of the Celtic church from Ireland, there can be little doubt.² It was common practice for the early missionaries to adopt pagan sites and Christianize them, absorbing the old religion into the new.

A short distance from the present burial ground just below the main road, which now dissects the wooded area around Clachan, are said to be early Christian remains once known locally as *Caibéal Eoin* (John's Chapel). Although no trace of these can now be found, *The New Statistical Account Of Scotland* Volume 5 published in 1845, states: 'The ruins of an oratory or cell belonging to a monk called John, and containing the remains of the saint, stand on the farm of Balnacula' (modern day 'Balnacool').³

Since earliest Christian times in Arran, the Clachan Glen was frequented by pilgrims from as far afield as Ireland, making their way across Arran on their way to Holy Isle, which lies just off the village of Lamlash on the eastern side of the island. Holy Isle has been a much venerated place since it became the retreat of Laisren or Las (566-ca 638), an early Celtic saint, who became Abbot of Leighlin in Leinster. The 'pilgrim way' ran from the Clachan Glen across the hills to Lamlash Bay, from whence the travellers would cross to the Holy Isle to visit the saint's cave, his 'judgement seat', a large rock nearby, as well as to drink holy water from the saint's well below.

In Scotland Laisren was more commonly known by the name Molais(e), which came about when the prefix *mo*, a term of endearment meaning 'my', commonly given to holy men at that time, was attached to his name. In time the name Molaise was given in several written forms including Moloise and even Molios, giving rise to a much discussed historical myth and long held belief in Shiskine, that the saint was buried at Clachan, where there was a carved medieval grave stone of an ecclesiastic in

1 J. Kennedy Cameron, *The Church In Arran* (Edinburgh, 1912), p. 20.

2 By the 6th Century C.E. Arran had been colonised by Celtic settlers from kingdom of Dalriada in northern Ireland. It is a commonly held view by historians that Christianity reached the area of Scottish Dalriada lying nearest to the mother kingdom in Ireland during the mission voyage of St Brendan, said to have begun in 545 C.E. The saint lent his name to the stretch of water between Arran and Kintyre known to this day as the Kilbrannan Sound.

3 J.A. Balfour, (Ed.), *The Book Of Arran* Volume 1 (Glasgow, 1910), p. 230.

eucharistic vestments, now built into the modern day parish church.

However, this stone, largely due to the style of vestments it illustrates, has been dated to the thirteenth century and is thought by many to represent not Laisren or St Molios of the 7th century, but a much later medieval abbot, possibly from Saddell Abbey, just across the Kilbrannan sound in Kintyre, who in time due to corruption of language, also became referred to as St Molios. This is certainly a very plausible explanation, given that when the monastery was founded at Saddell in the twelfth century by Reginald, son of Somerled 'King of the Isles', he gifted to it 'twenty marklands of the lands of Shisken.'⁴ Further, in Gaelic 'Molios derives from *maol*, 'bald', and *Iosa*, Jesus, and denotes a tonsured man of Christ, or simply a monk'.⁵ As holy men were often referred to as 'saints', this medieval cleric over the years also came to be known as St Molios and mistakenly confused with his more celebrated namesake Laisren or Molaise.

Given that Laisren died in Ireland, influential abbot of Leighlin, it seems unlikely that his remains were brought back to Shiskine to be interred. Unlikely, although not impossible, nor totally improbable, the conclusion reached by Dr Colum Kenny of Dublin City University in his fine work *Molaise Abbot of Leighlin and Hermit of Holy Island*. As Dr Kenny points out, there is no conclusive proof that Laisren was buried in Ireland, no significant monument or tomb of Laisren at Leighlin, and even confusion as to his final resting place by way of a surviving belief that he 'was actually interred at Locrum in Co. Carlow.'⁶ Further, it was not altogether uncommon for the bodies of saints to be divided up at death to provide relics for veneration, and these relics subsequently interred at various locations, especially locations associated with the saint. Part of Laisren's bones may indeed lie in the Clachan Glen and have been venerated by generations of Arran locals and pilgrims as they passed on their way to Holy Isle. Perhaps in medieval times, a stone slab with carvings of the period was placed on the spot to highlight its significance by some wealthy benefactor.

No matter how brilliant or well argued the historical hypothesis, we will never know for certain, the truth lies shrouded in the mists of time. The myth however, endures and all myths contain at their core a semblance of the truth. A saint or holy man lies in the old Clachan burial ground and nearby to it a chapel was built for worship.

Exactly when the first chapel on the site was built we cannot date with certainty, but as local architect Colin Mills commented in *The Vanished and Disappearing Churches of Arran*: 'At the Clachan of Pien ... stood a very early pre-Reformation chapel, possibly the earliest on the island'. How often and by whom worship was conducted in it we can only but surmise. Details of the history of the early Celtic Church on Arran, before the ravages of the vikings, who conquered and settled on the island, becoming themselves converted to Christianity, and indeed thereafter of the early Roman Church, are scant. Arran was one parish until around the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, when it was divided into two parishes, Kilmory and

4 W. M. MacKenzie, *The Book Of Arran Volume 1 (Glasgow: 1914)*, p. 85.

5 Robert Mclellan, *The Isle Of Arran (Newton Abbot, 1970)*, p. 93.

6 Colum Kenny, *Molaise: Abbot of Leighlin and hermit of Holy Island (Killala: 1998)*, p. 68.

Kilbride. The parish boundary being the high ground, which divides the island east to west, stretching from Dippen in the south to Lochranza in the north.

From this time it is clear from the knowledge we have of papal records, that the main ecclesiastical centre for the western parish of Kilmory in which Clachan is situated, was further south, in the modern district of Kilmory, probably initially at the site of St Mary's Chapel on the banks of the Slidery Water. How the medieval priests administered to their flock over a huge area we can but speculate. However it seems likely that they made use of existing chapels including the one which stood at Clachan. This was certainly the way of things from the Reformation onwards, when the parish ministers located at Kilmory, preached every fourth Sunday at Clachan.

We know from the Kirk-session records of Kilmory that for this purpose a church was erected in the early seventeen hundreds at or near to the site of the medieval chapel. An extract from the 23rd December 1708 reads "as follows:-

'The Session having seen an address from the inhabitants of the Shisken representing the vast charge & expense they were at in building a preaching house with themselves at a place called the Clachan, wherein they humbly desired supply from the south end of the paroch in regard that all they had according to their ability contribute among themselves was exhausted and that ye had nothing wherewith to finish there begun work unless the Inhabitants of the south would help with supply.' This the Session urged the people to do.'

Presenting his archaeological findings in the first decade of the twentieth century J.A. Balfour writes: 'Of the building erected at 'the vast charge' there is now no trace. Inside the churchyard small portions of the foundations of a building have been got when graves were dug.'⁷

There is of course certainly no trace of the earlier medieval structure. If help was being so earnestly sought from the south end to assist in the supply of stones for the building work, most probably the stones from the old chapel were plundered to build the preaching house.⁸ Such a practice may seem sacrilegious to us, but was very common until even into modern times. As late as 1901, a neolithic burial cairn located not two miles from the Clachan site at Blackwaterfoot, was plundered of stones, indeed completely cleared, in order to build Cairn House Farm.

Therefore when it was resolved to build yet another more modern mission church at Clachan in 1805, the 1708 building suffered a similar fate, being demolished and rebuilt. However again building progress seems to have been slow, the Session minutes of Kilmory Parish tell us that as late as 1820 the church was still not properly roofed.

Local architect Colin Mills describes the mission church as being of a 'simple, unadorned style with round-headed window openings, all of local sandstone.' It 'had an earth floor and a balcony with access gained by an external staircase.'⁹ Mr Mills backed up by recent archaeological research, believes that part of the earlier medieval

7 J.A. Balfour (ed.), *The Book Of Arran* Volume 1 (Glasgow: 1910), p. 229/30.

8 This was confirmed in 2009, when during restoration work a medieval Gothic window was found built into the north-east corner of the building.

9 Colin Mills, *The Vanished and Disappearing Churches of Arran* (Arran: 2007), p. 27.

chapel, can be found incorporated in the structure, in the form of part of an old window. This feature was referred to locally as the 'Leper's Hole' and believed to have been used in medieval times as a means of dispensing the sacramental bread and wine, to those precluded by their affliction from attending worship with the rest of the congregation.

Whatever the truth or otherwise in this long standing myth, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was never celebrated at the Mission Church. The Kilmory minister continued to preach at Clachan 'once a month and three times a month' in the Parish Church at Kilmory. 'On other Sundays the members were perfectly content to worship in the Free Church, where they were also welcome. But a communion would only be celebrated at Kilmory.'¹⁰

It must be pointed out at this stage that at the Disruption of 1843 the vast majority of the people of Shiskine followed the lead of their much loved and well respected minister Angus McMillan and came out for the Free Church, leaving but a mere remnant to worship in the mission church.

The Disruption was largely caused by the insistence of the church to be free from state interference and over the enforcement of the practice of patronage. Under this system the local patron, usually the local landowner, was responsible for choosing the minister and imposing his choice on the congregation, often against the wishes of the people, who felt justifiably aggrieved at being robbed of the right to elect their own minister. On Arran feelings on this issue were running high in 1843, the people of Shiskine and indeed the whole of the west of the island still remembered how the Duke of Hamilton had imposed Dugald Crawford on them as minister of Kilmory in 1815, instead of their preferred choice of Angus McMillan, then Catechist at Lochranza. Only on Dugald Crawford's untimely death by drowning in 1821, did they finally get the man of their choice.

The system of lay patronage was eventually abolished by an Act of Parliament in 1874 and in time the Church of Scotland began to recover lost ground in places such as the west of Arran, which had so strongly supported the founding principles of the Free Church. As the Established Church began to recover in Shiskine, it became clear that the old mission church was no longer suitable for the needs of the congregation. Moreover the building seems to have fallen into a state of disrepair, or as it states rather quaintly in *A Brief History of St Molios Church, Shiskine*, it 'was becoming leaky'.

Consequently in 1886 a committee was duly set up to pursue the matter of raising the finance to build a new church. In this aim they were successful and the new Chapel of Ease, built of red sandstone on a site further down the valley, and named St Molios, was dedicated and opened for worship in 1898. Its completion rendered the old mission church obsolete, and now surplus to requirement, it was allowed to deteriorate until it became a roofless shell. At least this time the old building was not plundered to provide material for the new church and so survived largely intact.

Although no longer used as a place of worship for over a hundred years now, the old

¹⁰ *A Brief History Of St Molios Church Shiskine* p. 10.

Clachan mission church ruins are still very dear to the hearts of the people of the surrounding district. The present congregation of St Molios, now the parish church of Shiskine, feel strongly that it is their old spiritual home, its ruins mark a very important, historic Christian site, one still used as the local burial ground for the people of the parish.

Despite the huge ongoing burden placed on a small congregation in attempting to upkeep the Grade 'A' listed St Molios open for worship, at a recent Deacons' Court meeting (the congregational board of management), grave concern was raised as to the rapid deterioration of the Clachan Church, and it was resolved to lend full support to the efforts to preserve it from further disintegration.

It is very much hoped, that funds can be sourced and raised for this very worthy cause, and that the old mission church ruins can be saved and preserved for future generations.

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