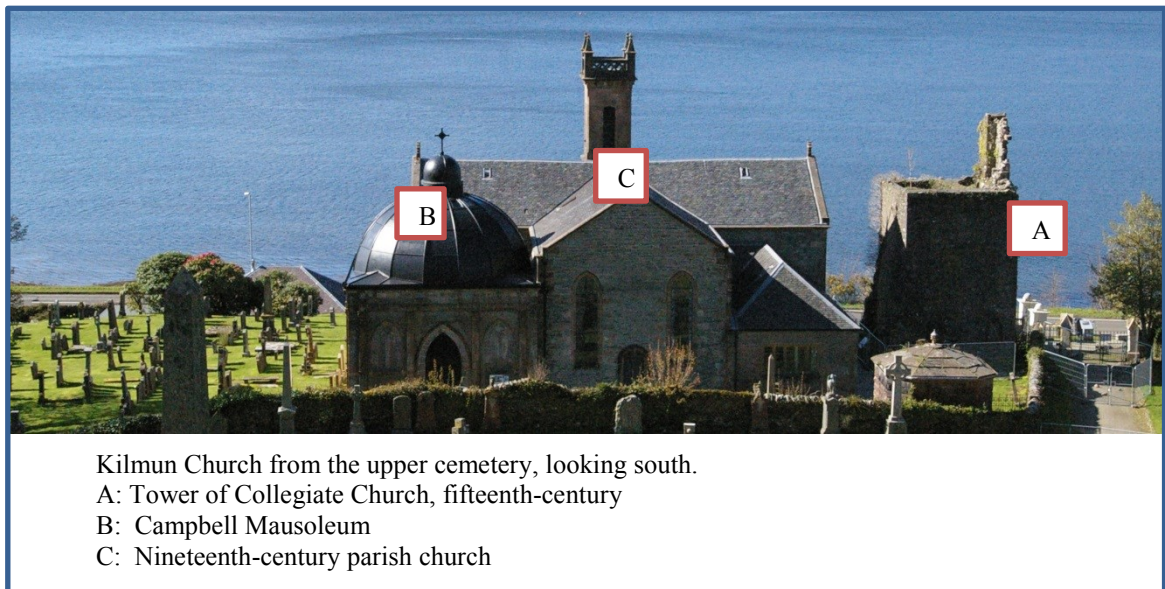


Kilmun – St Munn’s Church, Early Medieval Carved Stone

Consent is sought for the removal of an early medieval carved stone from the churchyard of St Munn’s Parish Church (Church of Scotland) and to mount it inside the church building.

Background

The parish church of Kilmun, St Munn’s Church, is a nineteenth-century building with a small and elderly but lively congregation. It is built on the site of a fifteenth-century collegiate church, the tower of which survives at the west end of the modern church (though it is in a parlous state and urgently needs attention, especially since a storm in January 2015 caused several large stones to fall from its upper level, leaving what remains even more fragile). The collegiate church was erected by Duncan Campbell of Lochaw in 1442, and the place became a traditional burial site for the Campbell earls, and later dukes, of Argyll. Because of this long association between Kilmun and the Campbells, many of whom were buried in the chancel of the church, a mausoleum was built at the site in 1790. This building still stands on the NE side of the nineteenth-century church, and has recently undergone extensive and costly restoration.



The Collegiate Church tower is a scheduled monument, as is the graveyard in the immediate vicinity of the church.

The Stone

In the churchyard, lying about four metres east of the east end of the modern church there lies a stone carved with a simple Latin cross (for location, see the plan on page 3 below). It was first described, as far as I can see, by Lacaille in 1925.¹ Its description is given by Ian Fisher as follows: ‘Slab, lacking foot, 0.97m by 0.36m. It bears a sunken Latin cross, 0.52m by 0.2m,



¹ A.D. Lacaille (1925) ‘Some ancient crosses in Dumbartonshire and adjoining counties’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 59: 143-53.

with a slightly curved shaft'.² Apart from this stone there is no visible evidence above ground of there having been a church at this place in the early medieval period. And as there is no written record of any church here prior to the thirteenth century (when rights in the church were granted to Paisley Abbey) this stone has great significance for our understanding of the place.



According to local informants this cross-carved stone has been moved around from time to time. At the moment it lies on its back between two modern gravestones, apparently having been placed there to protect it from damage. Again, according to local information, the Council workmen who come to cut the grass from time to time (the graveyard is owned by Argyll and Bute Council) run their machine over the exposed surface of the stone. One local woman occasionally pushes bamboo sticks with flags on into the ground beside the stone to warn workmen to avoid it, but this is not always successful, and the stone has suffered some effacement. The stone is also vulnerable to theft, as it is not fixed and is more or less portable – at least by a reasonably strong/fit person.

Though I have been employed for many years by Glasgow University (Celtic & Gaelic) as a researcher and lecturer, I am currently working for the Church of Scotland, in the Argyll Presbytery, in a twelve-month project which involves researching and promoting the history and archaeology of Cowal as a destination for 'faith tourism' or pilgrimage. As part of this project I have been liaising with the congregation of Kilmun, and with *Historic Kilmun* - a completely separate organisation who have over the last few years raised and spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on the restoration of the mausoleum, the archaeological investigation of the graveyard (by GUARD), and on the creation of a visitor centre in the entrance hall of the church.³

Following consultation with the Kirk Session, the minister of the parish and the committee members of Historic Kilmun, and with the support of all parties, it is now proposed to lift this cross-carved stone from its present location, to bring it inside the kirk, and to install it in a secure frame in the eastern wing where it will be protected from the elements. A space will be cleared around it and lighting placed nearby to shine a raking light on it to highlight its rather fugitive and effaced features. The seating close by would be re-arranged to make this stone the centre of attention in the building when the church was not being used for services. Visitors would be encouraged to visit the stone, and to read interpretation material installed beside it.

Although the burial ground is legal property (and responsibility) of Argyll and Bute Council, they have denied ownership of the gravestones there and have indicated that they regard the stones as the property of the church.

² Ian Fisher (2001), *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh) 151.

The drawing is found on p. 31 (M).

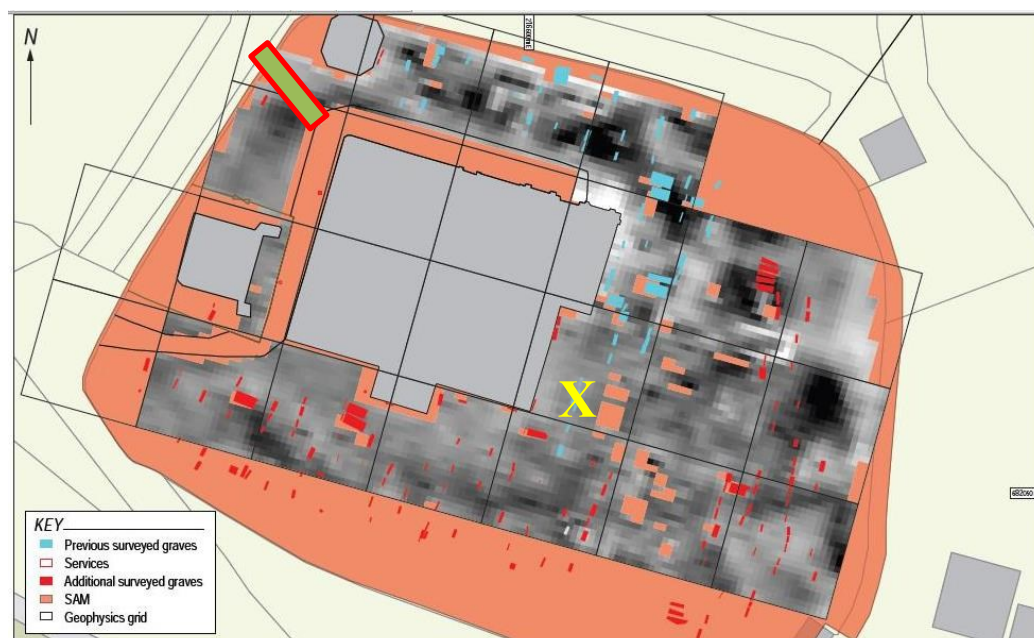
³ See their website at www.historickilmun.org.

Advantages

There are various advantages to the proposed removal of the stone:

1. It will protect it from damage by weather, footfall, mechanical damage by Council workers, and damage from being moved by anyone else.
2. It will prevent theft.
3. It will give the local church community a sense of responsibility for it and a place to celebrate it.
4. It will highlight the stone's presence at the site, bringing it to the attention of an 'audience', both locals (some members of the parish didn't know it was there until I showed them this year) and the visitors who will be attracted by it.
5. It will serve to highlight the antiquity of the church at this site where the current historical interest is mainly focussed on the Campbell mausoleum.
6. Given the decline in church membership in Cowal (currently 5% per annum) and the small and elderly congregation at this church, there is a real possibility that the church will soon cease to be a regular place of worship. This raises questions over the future of the building and the stones in the graveyard. The development of this site as a faith tourism destination (along with the wider pilgrimage landscape of Cowal) would give enhanced protection to the cross and the site as a whole, and the re-installation of the cross is envisaged as a central focus of this development.

We noted above that the stone was the only evidence 'above ground' of an early christian church here. But a resistivity survey carried out by Guard revealed a possible curvilinear enclosure underground, around the church and churchyard. The evidence is ambiguous, and a further application for consent will be made in due course for an archaeologist to open a trench across the feature. If this is a curvilinear enclosure, it may be further evidence of an early medieval church.



*Results of resistivity survey conducted by GUARD (2012)
with red/green line showing line where excavation is envisaged.
Yellow X marks the location of the cross-carved stone.*

Finally, I should add that this proposal is being made 90 years after the minister of the parish first promised to have the stone brought into the church. Lacaille, in the 1925 article cited above, describes the stone (of which he uses the term 'relic') and the promise of the minister thus:

The stone in Kilmun churchyard measures 3 feet in length, 1 foot 2 inches in width, and 6 inches in thickness. The sculpturings are all badly weathered, but it is gratifying to learn that the Rev. A. B. Harper, to whom I reported the find, has promised to have the relic, the only one of this nature heard of in the district, removed to cover, inside the church.

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