

CILLE BHREA, LEMLAIR, Nr DINGWALL.

Coastal erosion has been undermining the gravel cliff on the shores of the Cromarty Firth directly below the old pre-reformation church known as Cille Bhrea, and probably dedicated to Saint Brigh. Because of this, human bones are eroding from the cliff face from the church graveyard and from the interior of the church itself. Amongst the bone material were found several iron coffin-nails, which give indications, through impressions in the rust, of the wood that was used in their manufacture.

Inside the church are a fragment of a door-jamb and a substantial stone font. However, while investigating the eroding cliff-edge, several other dressed stones, perhaps originally part of the fabric of the church, were noticed incorporated into a retaining bank built along the base of the cliff to prevent erosion in the past. Among these was found what appears to be an arm of an early free-standing cross. This interesting find will be photographed and submitted to art historians of the period for their expert analysis and dating. One or two large flat tombstones have also slipped down the cliff. Negotiations are in progress with the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments) as to the future safeguarding of this early church site which once served the community of Lemlair. The site is a scheduled Ancient Monument, and now consists of a ruined chapel, standing about 4 feet high at the west end, and surrounded by a churchyard defined by a grass-covered stony bank.

The early origins of this church, and the threat to its future, might result in limited excavation work being carried out by SDD(AM) in the near future. If this proves financially impossible, MSC labour might usefully be employed in shoring the cliff-face to prevent further erosion of the site.

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21st April, 1983.