

EILEAN FHIANNAN, CHURCH AND GRAVEYARD, LOCHABER

Archaeologist's Report.

1. Proposal.

1.1. It is reported that the church of Eilean Fhiannan, its graveyard, and indeed part of the island itself, is now badly overgrown and in need of urgent remedial work to protect and enhance the site and preserve it for the future.

2. Background Information and Historical Synopsis.

2.1. The history of the church of St Finnan's is fairly obscure. It may be built on the site of a cell created by St Finnan during the 7th century AD, and reputedly built by Alan MacRuaridh, of the the early chiefs of Clan Ranald. The graveyard was the burial place of the Clan ranald until the end of the 16th century. The date of the present building is obscure, but it is reported to have been ruinous by the mid-17th century.

2.2. The chapel ruin is oriented E-W and measures 21.0m by 5.6m within a wall which is 0.9m in thickness and c.2.8m high at its maximum. The lower halves of four windows are visible in the north wall, while near the east end is a square-headed aumbry. The west wall contains the lower part of a window, while in the south wall are the lower parts of a further three windows with a doorway towards its west end. The altar is more or less intact, and upon it is a Dark Age bell of major importance.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1901 shows the extent of the graveyard defined by a pecked circle, but this can no longer be traced. The whole island now appears to be in intermittent use for burials, with some graves marked by small cairns rather than headstones - although these could have a different function and origin. About 60.0m north of the church, on a knoll, are five rudely-carved crosses and a single cross-incised slab. Other important medieval gravemarkers lie obscured around the church.

Some 50.0m south-east of the church is a heavily-overgrown sub-rectangular enclosure measuring 45.0m N-S by 40.0m transversely, formed by a tumbled stone wall spread to c.2.0m. Only a single modern grave monument has been noted in the centre of this enclosure.

2.3. The grave markers, crosses, cross-slab, altar and bell form a group of medieval artefacts of major importance. While the information held on these is limited, it may be that other stones of importance may be uncovered to add to those already recorded by MaLagan, Steer, Thornber and others. These include a late 18th century graveslab with inscriptions bearing a

possibly shrouded skeleton; a slab showing the figure of a female set in a niche; a small late Medieval crucifixion carving (small and easily removable); and a slab with a sword and foliage scrolls. In addition, the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, holds a circular brass brooch of early date found in the graveyard and donated to the museum in 1896.

2.4. The church and graveyard have been listed Grade 'A' by Historic Buildings and Monuments, Scotland, so that permission will be required to be sought for works affecting the Listed areas.

2.5. The Island lies within the Loch Shiel Site of Special Interest (HRC Ref: 729), and will therefore also be subject to discussion with the Nature Conservancy Council.

3. Problems and Perspectives.

3.1. The problems are principally fourfold:

- (a) Clearance of scrub and other vegetation.
- (b) Prevention of damage to structures and artefacts
- (c) Protection of movable objects
- (d) Future access

3.2. The clearance of scrub will be difficult, if, as reported, this consists mainly of gorse and broom. Both are pernicious plants, difficult to eradicate quickly and effectively. Both have damaging root systems: broom with a deep tap root, gorse with a spreading system of tough, fibrous roots from which the bush can quickly regenerate if not removed or poisoned. Other broadleaved weeds should pose less of a problem.

Uprooting of either gorse or broom is unacceptable where grave markers survive, as this will inevitably damage the stones. It would also break the vegetation cover, leading to massive and rapid recolonisation from seed. For this reason, these will require to be cut close to ground level, and the stumps treated with selective herbicide. It is likely that the area would require foliar retreatment on several further occasions over the next five years or so - although a specialist should be consulted on this. Broadleaved weeds should similarly be eradicated through the use of foliar herbicides.

Forward maintenance will also be problematic. Perhaps the best solution would be the reintroduction of a grazing regime using sheep or goats. This should reduce maintenance to a minimum, while causing little damage to the structures and monuments.

All scrub clearance etc. should be undertaken under direct professional supervision.

3.3. Measures will be necessary to identify and protect the grave monuments and other structures during clearance work. It might also be necessary or desirable to remove certain objects for conservation work off the island.

3.3. The bell, in particular, might best be removed permanently from the island in order to ensure its future safety.

3.4. Access to the island should continue to be limited, as it is both sensitive and difficult of access. If the island is to continue in use for burials, it would be wise to identify areas suitable for this purpose which avoid damage to existing structures and artefacts.

The island is **not** considered suitable for interpretation.

4. Research Priorities.

4.1. The island, once cleared of scrub, should as soon as possible, be surveyed in detail, to record the position of all visible grave-markers and buildings and add to that initial survey already undertaken by Mr Iain Thornber. A full photographic record should be made, together with a complete inventory, with drawings, of all visible monuments. It is possible that summer 1990 will see a survey undertaken by the RCAHMS to investigate the Medieval sculpture on the island as part of their overall survey of this period throughout west coast Scotland. The work should be linked to this programme and also seek to identify where on-site conservation work is required to ensure the future stability of the church and monuments, in order that such conservation can then also be carried out under professional supervision. If possible, historical research should be undertaken to acquire further information on the history and iconography of the site. An approach should also be made to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and Historic Buildings and Monuments, Scotland for assistance and specialist advice.

4.2. The site should be recommended to Historic Buildings and Monuments, Scotland, for protection as a Scheduled Monument under the 1979 Act. Eilean Munde, an island with similar origins and remains in Loch Leven, is already so protected.

5. Recommendations and suggested work programme.

5.1. A provisional work programme might be as follows:

5.2. A visit should be arranged to the island to examine the site at first hand to consider the feasibility of the following suggested steps. Those present should include if possible Mr Iain Thornber, who has already carried out much research on the island and will be aware of some of the more pressing problems; Mr Ian Fisher, RCAHMS, in advance of their projected later survey; Dr Foxley; a representative from HBM; and the Regional Archaeologist

5.3. The physical cutting and clearing of woody scrub only from those areas where subsequent consolidation work will not be required, i.e. not from the chapel or enclosure walls.

Treatment of stumps with a suitable herbicide, and treatment of selected areas with a more general broadleaved herbicide which will leave the grass cover intact where this exists, and allow this to recolonise elsewhere. Note that this may require approval from NCC as the island is part of the Loch Shiel SSSI. This work may perhaps be carried out using the services of the Scottish Conservation Volunteers - but only under strict professional supervision.

5.4. After clearance, survey should be undertaken to endeavour to locate and identify the area with gravemarkers present, and to identify and classify these. Accurate survey to locate the gravemarkers and provide a plan of the remains as then visible. This should, if possible, be tied in with the RCAHMS visit. At this stage, too, the identification of suitable areas for possible future burials should be made.

5.5. These exercises should allow assessment of the next phases of work which might be undertaken.

5.6. Preferably in a subsequent year, in order to allow grass cover to become fully established, removal of the remaining woody scrub associated with the chapel and enclosure walls, followed by immediate consolidation in accordance with the HBM Architect's Advisory Report undertaken by the late Sonja Hackett in 1988.

5.7. Removal of material, if deemed necessary, for professional conservation off site.

5.8. A programme of work, perhaps undertaken in a third season, to consolidate the stability of the vegetation on the island. This might necessitate the covering of some of the more sensitive Medieval sculpture, as it is reputedly already badly eroded. Consideration should be given to the possibility of the re-establishment of a suitable grazing regime to assist in maintaining the island free from scrub recolonisation.