

eilean fhianain and the bell



A short history of Eilean Fhianain or St Finnan's Isle on Loch Shiel and the ancient Bell that stood on the altar for centuries until it was stolen in July 2019.

Eilean Fhianain, St Finnan's Isle or The Green Isle, is a small island on Loch Shiel with a very long history. The island is nearly 20 kilometres from Glenfinnan where the loch narrows and is around 200 metres from both shores. It has been a burial ground for centuries and was possibly used for burial in pre-Christian times. There is evidence of iron-smelting on the terraces on the east of the island which may date to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries or even as far back to the Iron age. Blackthorn, though locally uncommon, flourishes on the island which may also indicate Iron age occupation .

Eilean Fhianain is named for St. Finnan, a follower of St Columba, who came to stay on the island in the 7th century. One of several saints named Finnan, this St Finnan is said to have landed at Kilchoan, settled on the island, and then spread Christianity to as far as Invergarry.

An early chapel may have been built of wood on the site where St Finnan had his cell. The existing ruins date back to 14th century but have been extensively rebuilt and altered right up to the 19th century. The stones of the medieval chapel are of good quality but later stone work is poor and the chapel was also lengthened becoming longer than any other in the area at 21 metres. The medieval chapel was possibly built by Allan MacRuairi, 4th Clanranald chief "the dread and terror of all neighbouring clans", in penance for outrages he incurred, including murder of clergy and the burning down of St Finnan's Church in Invergarry.

The chapel was the parish church of Sunart but subsequently became part of Arisaig parish. This came about because the Clanranalds who once owned the whole of Sunart lost lands to the Campbells and a line was drawn to the south of the island so that the Green Isle became part of Moidart to the north. This event left the population to the south of Loch Shiel largely Protestant, and to the north, staunchly Catholic to this day. The chapel fell into ruin by the mid 1600s which may have been caused by the neglect of this and many places of worship during a time when to be openly Catholic made life very difficult. The Clanranald Chief of the time, Sir Donald MacDonald, his son John and grandson, Donald, were outwardly Protestant and withdrew their support of both Catholic clergy and the chapels or churches.

The OS reference for the Chapel on the island is NM 75204 68276



A view of the ruined chapel looking east



People on both sides of Loch Shiel continued to want to be buried on the island, so an imaginary line was drawn east west with Protestant burials on one side and Catholics to the other. The chapel is on the Catholic side. Burials on the island included the Clanranald MacDonalds until the end of the sixteenth century. A small building to the south of the chapel also has medieval origins and was possibly used as a family vault by the Maclans of Ardnamurchan and later by the Kinlochmoidart MacDonalds. The island is still in current use today for burials by the communities of Moidart and Sunart.

The fact the island is still used for burials became significant, when getting permission to clear vegetation which was swamping the grave stones and even the large stone crosses to the north of the island. This group of roughly hewn large stone crosses to the north of the chapel were made by Donald Mor MacVarish of Mingarry in the 18th Century and can be clearly seen as you travel up or down the loch towards the island. The crosses and grave markers were disappearing from view under the vigorous growth of brambles and bushes, especially blackthorn. Loch Shiel is an SSSI, SPA and NSA (Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Area, and a National Scenic Area) in addition the chapel and the crosses are Scheduled Monuments by Historic Environment Scotland. A protected species, the black throated diver, which is on the amber list for concern by the RSPB, visits Loch Shiel for breeding in the spring. Naturally there was concern that any disturbance of the vegetation could cause a problem. However when it was realised that this island is a 'live' burial ground reasonable clearing of invasive weeds such as the bramble and blackthorn could go ahead. The Moidart History Group made a start in clearing the bramble and broom obscuring the grave stones in 2004 but it was soon realised that the job of clearing the blackthorn in particular was a job for professionals. Thanks to the hours of volunteer work by a forester, Christopher Hughes and his friend Hugh Semple the blackthorn was finally cleared in 2009.

The medieval crypt to the south of the ruined chapel



18th century crosses made by Donald Mor MacVarish are scheduled



Burials apart, other traditions have fallen by the wayside including an annual pilgrimage to the island on the feast of St Finnan which stopped so long ago it's not certain which day that occurred. Another tradition which carried on until the beginning of the 19th century was the pilgrimage of penitents as penance for their serious offences. If, because of the weather, they couldn't cross to the island itself, they had to kneel on the shore opposite to perform their religious practises with in sight of the island.

However, supporting the continuing tradition of reverence held for the island over time, was the presence of a hand bell in St Finnan's Chapel. This bell was said to be used until around 1880, when it was carried deiseil i.e. sunwise, round the island ahead of a funeral procession. Although the chapel is a roofless ruin, this small hand bell remained on the altar for centuries.

The Bell, around 20 cms high, was a bronze cast early medieval bell of around a thousand years old. Archibald Clerk wrote of the ruined church on Eilean Fhianain in 1838 that 'A very sweet-toned, antique hand bell remains on its stone table or altar'.

Father Charles MacDonald in his book 'Among the Clan-ranallds' (Published 1889) writes movingly about the bell : 'It has been left exposed on the altar for more than 200 years, nothing saving it from desecration or from being carried away except that deep feeling of reverence which Catholics and Presbyterians alike entertain for the place with which it has so long been associated'

There is a story that St Finnan himself brought the bell to the island from Ireland, but the style and form of the bell is of a later date. Bells in St Finnan's time of the sixth century would have been iron, folded into a four sided angular shape from a flat piece of metal. The bell associated with the chapel was cast bronze in Scotland around 900 AD to 1000 AD. According to Cormac Bourke, it was made by the same hand who cast a similar bell at Insh by Kingussie, but this bell on Eilean Fhianain was the finer of the two and one of the most perfect pieces of bronze casting from early medieval Scotland.

Below just three of the hundreds of headstones marking centuries of burials - many now lost under the turf. These are from left to right are in memory of Maighistir Alasdair of Dalilea, c1720, John MacDonald of Resipole 1892 and a Commonwealth war grave of 1916 in remembrance of D Grant aged only 20.



The bell by the sand stone cruciform slab on the ruined chapel photographed in 2011

Until recently there was just one instance recorded of the bell being actually stolen away from the island. In the 1700s a party of soldiers took the bell but hadn't taken account of Neil Mòr-an-Eilean, renowned locally for his formidable strength, fearlessness and courage. He was a custodian and sexton for the island and the last person to live on the island, having inherited this post by marrying a daughter of the previous caretaker named MacGillivray. Neil recovered the bell in Glenfinnan and soundly flogged the leader of the gang. The clapper however had been torn from the bell and a rough substitute was replaced later by one of the Kinlochmoidart family. This in turn disappeared and a new clapper replaced again around 2002.

In 2013, concerns were raised about the safety of the bell. The increase in tourism, visitors to the island by kayak in particular with the inevitable pictures of the island and the bell being circulated on social media, was thought to publicise the existence of the bell to a far wider audience than ever before. Opinions were divided as to what to do. Many thought that a replica should be placed on the island and the bell taken to a secure place such as a museum. Others thought that the bell was a replica anyway. Putting the bell behind a cage would mean it could no longer be rung. In the end the landowners wanted the bell to stay on the altar. With the approval of the estate and Historic Environment Scotland, in 2014 the bell was secured by a new phosphor bronze chain attached to a pillar under the altar, replacing the flimsy chain used up to that point.

However, using Father MacDonald's words, the bell was 'carried away' from this beautiful special island on July 2019, much to the sadness of locals and visitors alike and its whereabouts remain a mystery. There is a tradition locally that no good will come to anyone removing the bell from this sacred isle.

The bell with the new bronze chain on the large altar slab photographed in 2014— In 2023 the empty chain already dulled with time lies forlornly on the altar— the bell's whereabouts still unknown.



The jetty that leads onto Eilean Fhianain. Just up the grassy path from the jetty, a small panel was erected in 2023 with information about the bell and its sad loss. Maybe one day the bell will be returned to its rightful place on the chapel altar.



N.B. The chapel and the large stone quarried crosses are Scheduled Monuments by Historic Environment Scotland.

References:

Canmore.org.uk and do a site search for
Loch Shiel—Eilean Fhianain, St Finnan's Chapel

‘The Early Medieval Hand- Bells of Ireland and Britain’
by Cormac Bourke published 2020

‘Moidart Among the Clanranalds’
By Father Charles MacDonald

Post Script: On visiting the island in August 2023 to erect the information panel about the bell, it was noted that vegetation, including young birch, pine, bramble and broom, were steadily overwhelming not only the headstones, including the ‘skeleton’ engraved gravemarker for Maighstir Alasdair which was no longer to be seen, but also the entrance to the chapel which was obscured by broom and there was even a bush growing inside the ruined walls.

Moidart History Group 2023

