

Columba's Community: Historic Scotland on Iona

Over 1400 years ago, long before George MacLeod founded the modern day Iona Community, the Irish monk Columba arrived on the island. Since then, religious community on the island has existed in various forms down the centuries, adapting to external and internal struggles and acting as the burial place of countless important figures in Scottish history, from Macbeth to John Smith. The community today is indebted to this



history and so it was fitting that in June a joint event between the Iona Community and Historic Scotland was held; visitors to Iona engaged in a week of discovery of the island's past while exploring the ways in which communal living and spirituality informs the community's present. The week coincided with St Columba's day, celebrated on the 9th June. A diverse group of guests from across the world joined together with the Iona Community and Historic Scotland from the 7th-13th June, including some first time visitors to the island and others for whom Iona is a familiar place.

Participants in the week attended a number of lectures and sessions with researchers from Historic Scotland alongside the usual pattern of worship and common life. Topics covered ranged from archaeology to the development of the Book of Kells, an illuminated manuscript of the Gospels produced at Iona. The programme was full of information and new ideas, featuring ground-breaking research in studies of Columba and Celtic Christianity from experts in their fields. The event showed the Iona Community in collaboration with a



large number of people from a range of organisations including Historic Scotland, the National Trust, Argyll Archaeology and a number of universities. In addition to lectures on different aspects of Iona's past, participants also attended a workshop from Cheryl Porter on books and how the colours were made to



create the beautiful illuminated manuscripts. One interesting fact taken away from the session was that recent research shows that the blue inks, which were previously assumed to come from Afghanistan, were in fact just layers of woad, a common and local material. The programme was described as 'breathtaking, informative, challenging, so interesting and stimulating'.

These workshops made it something of an atypical week on Iona but alongside the Historic Scotland

events were regular fixtures which will be familiar to those who have spent time on the island before; the pilgrimage, the ceilidh and the Staffa trip were all well attended and much appreciated, and the morning and evening services in the Abbey bookended each day with prayerful contemplation. One guest told us that they 'liked gathering twice a day for a variety of worship services and that we shared that ancient space that has been filled with songs and prayer for so many centuries'.

The week was a synthesis of approaches to Iona, combining its importance as a historical centre of monasticism and learning and the unique sense of community and spirituality to be found there. Participants responded warmly to all aspects of the week, speaking of the hospitality they encountered, the community that built up over the short period and the sense of connectivity that being on Iona brings, a connectivity to both the past, as explored with Historic Scotland, and to the worldwide church and the wider dispersed community of Iona. One guest said that 'the best surprise of the week was how soon I became comfortable with the group of strangers who gathered here from around the world'. Guests came away with an interest in the historical Iona sparked; many spoke of wanting to read more about the topics covered by the lectures, but also with an appreciation for the modern-day Iona Community. Its friendliness, hospitality and pursuit for peace and justice in all things shone through throughout.



Thanks for the week must go to Historic Scotland and to the researchers who spoke to our participants for sharing their time and expertise with us; particular thanks to Peter Yeoman, an expert in Columba and the early history of the island and Principal Researcher for Historic Scotland's Heritage Research Team.

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