

# Iona Abbey needs £2.5m repairs to prevent 'catastrophe' on island

Neil Johnston

Iona is known as the cradle of Christianity in Scotland, but the religious community on the tiny Hebridean island is at serious risk from a multimillion-pound funding crisis.

Leaders at the Iona Community, which was founded nearly 80 years ago, have admitted that its abbey no longer meets the standards expected by guests.

In an eight-page submission to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland they say that without £2.5 million of investment the community could struggle to make it past 2021, leading to "catastrophic" consequences for the island.

Since worshippers finished rebuilding it in 1965, Iona Abbey has attracted tens of thousands of pilgrims from around the world. However, the abbey is struggling to meet "the expectations and challenges of the present day".

Community leaders believe that the latest rebuilding work may be the toughest challenge the community has had to face.

"If action is not taken now to improve the fabric of the buildings and the associated utilities, there is the prospect of the accommodation being unfit for purpose in five to seven years' time, which would in turn place the Iona Community's presence on Iona in serious jeopardy," the report reads.

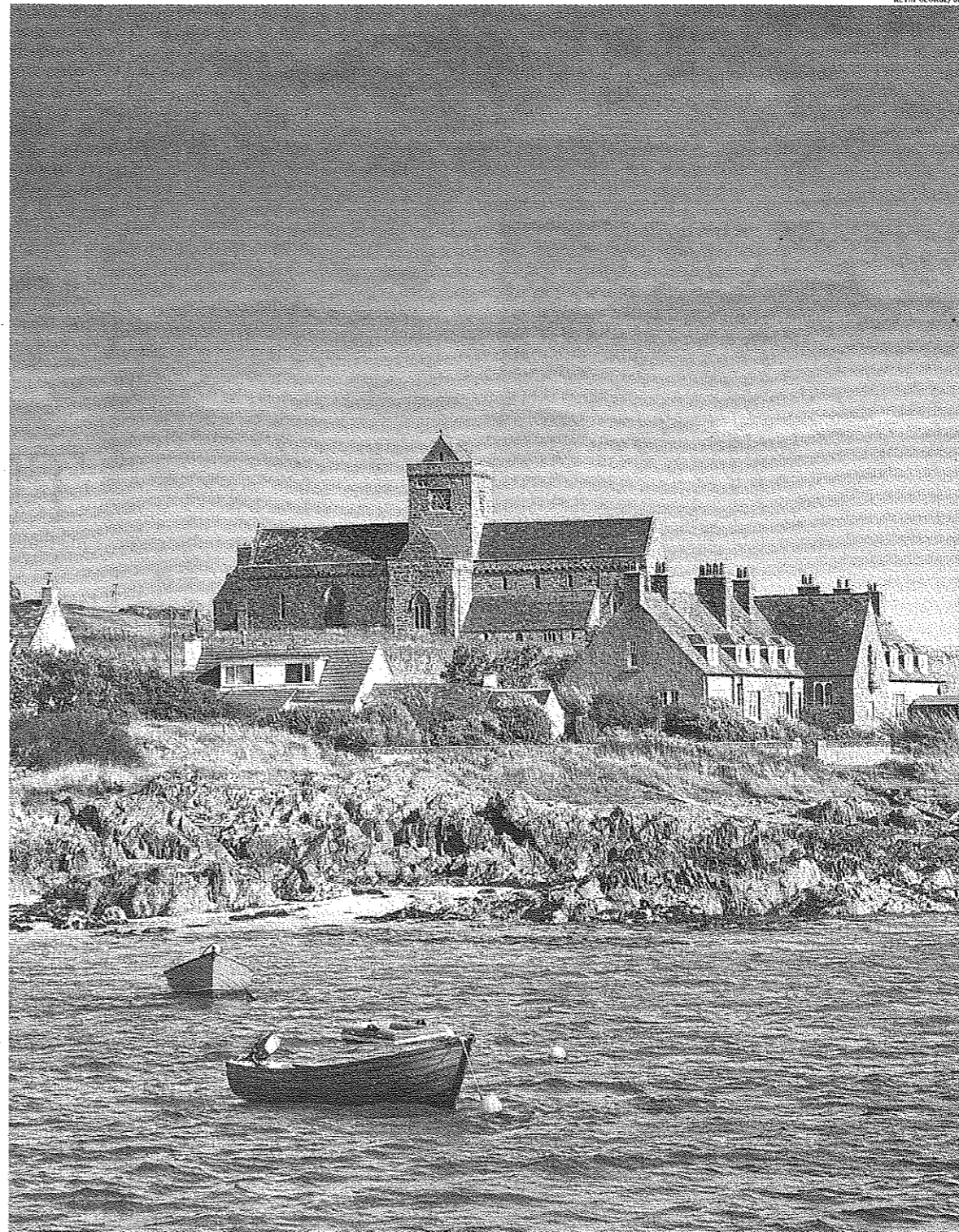
The island became a religious centre after Columba, the Irish monk, set up a monastic community in 563AD. This settlement helped to evangelise large parts of Scotland and the north of England, and in the Middle Ages the site became a Benedictine abbey.

Long after the abbey fell into ruin in the centuries that followed, the Iona Community was founded by the Rev George MacLeod in 1938. Its aim was to rebuild the abbey with the help of unemployed skilled craftsmen he had hired from Govan, Glasgow.

Under current arrangements, the outside of the abbey is managed by Historic Environment Scotland but the community, which has a year-round population of approximately 100, still live and worship in the building and is responsible for upgrading the interior.

There are fears that if the community collapsed, local business would suffer from the loss of income from both the religious group and visitors.

The report warns: "Failure to carry



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The Iona Community has warned that its presence on the island would be jeopardised by

failure to bring the famous abbey up to the modern standards expected by guests

out the urgent works required will undoubtedly place the Iona Community's presence on Iona in serious doubt. The impact of this on the island community of Iona would be catastrophic.

"Sixty years of piecemeal maintenance and sporadic upgrading of internal services, electrical, water, sewerage and heating have led to constant and uneconomic patchwork repairs."

It said that considerable capital works were required to address the problems that had developed, "together with the challenges of accessibility, flexibility and sustainability".

The community is preparing for "major funding applications" in the coming months, with the aim of raising £1.5 million from grants.

It hopes that the remaining million will be found through donations.

**'This is the opportunity to secure the abbey for another generation'**

The Rev Peter Macdonald, leader of the Iona Community, said that although the work required was "significant", it provided an "opportunity" to secure the community's future.

"The total costs will be somewhere in the region of £2.5 million, which is a lot of money for an organisation of our size," he said.

"We are hopeful that within our membership and grant funding we will be able to raise that money. The layout of the inside was completed about 50 years ago and over the years there have been piecemeal upgrades. You can only do that for so long — we have got to renew the whole thing.

"Rather than a temporary fix, this is the opportunity to secure the abbey for another generation. The longer we wait, the more the price will rise. This is a window of opportunity.

"Being at the centre of it, this feels like the biggest challenge since it was rebuilt. We have undertaken other projects but this is the most we have ever tried to raise."