



Each year in May, the Reverend Robin Mackenzie, Church of Scotland minister for Strachur and Strathlachlan parish, leads a group of parishioners on a walk from Kilmorie Chapel past Old Castle Lachlan to the ruins of the ancient chapel of Kilbride on a spur of land above Loch Fyne.

This account was written before the new bridge over the river was built.

KILMORIE TO KILBRIDE AND BACK - A PILGRIMAGE

Due to the weather, it is at the second time of asking that we gather at Kilmorie in Strathlachlan for our annual pilgrimage.

Before setting off in earnest, we look round what remains of the mediaeval church of Saint Mary itself. On the altar at the foot of the still surviving late 15th century east gable and below its double light, in 1543 Lachlan MacLachlan of MacLachlan received debts due to him; the now roofless MacLachlan Aisle was built onto its outer face after the Reformation of 1560.

This year there is an extra point of interest. The storms blew down one of the huge old beech trees, demolishing part of the kirkyard's drystane dyke, and when the dyker came to effect repairs he discovered a carved stone in the ruins. One of our party tells us the story of its discovery, how he has taken it into safe keeping, and how it is fully expected that it will be expertly confirmed as part of the broken head of the cross whose octagonal shaft still stands in the kirkyard. The newly rediscovered stone is about a quarter of the original head and confirms this was a foliate cross of Lowland style. It would have served as the 'merkat cross' for the annual market which King Charles II granted or confirmed in 1680 when it was still outside the burial ground. The intention is that, in due course, it will lie in the current parish church for safe keeping.

Happily stimulated by this good news, we return to the road, originally built in the 18th century as a military road. We turn left and not right as in previous years. Again the storms are the cause, for the foot bridge at Inver Restaurant has been washed away and so we head for the stone one up river. We will miss the roadside trough fed by a little spring amongst the spikes of the yellow flag or wild iris. They used to water their horses there but, as we are not riding, none may suffer too much. In years to come, we will again be able to turn south and cross the river by a new bridge.

Soon we are walking down the far bank of the river. What course did it take before it was canalized and made straight? Have we reached where the change-house or inn stood on the bank opposite Kilmorie church? There must have been a ford between the two in

those days, and it must have been on a regular route of travel. We are to be walking part of that route. So, past the site of the old sluice and on round the the head of the bay on the top of the embankment. Both these features, like the straightening of the river, were part of works undertaken many years ago to drain the marshy ground between New Castle Lachlan and the shore, making it better for agriculture. It is no disappointment for us that the drainage does not work perfectly now, for a heron and a Canada goose as well as seagulls are attracted to the water ponded in the field. The heron rises and flaps in his laboured way across the path to the shore to our left where tide is fairly far out. We look forward to seeing more.

Now we are on the track that goes past Old Castle Lachlan. Beside us primroses and violets and wood sorrel are in blossom. So too are the wild hyacinths – 'bluebells', but not in traditional Scottish usage, where it is the 'harebell' that is the bluebell, as in Harry Lauder's song:

*I love a lassie, a bonnie, bonnie lassie,
She's as pure as the lily in the dell,
She's as sweet as the heather,
The bonnie bloomin heather,
Mary, ma Scotch Bluebell.*

And above the wild hyacinths and our heads the ever trembling and rustling leaves of the aspen make their music, for there is a little stand of this native tree opposite the Old Castle. The root stock of such a stand may be many centuries old.

Between us and the castle is an avenue of small-leaved lime (*Tilia cordata*). It is not native this far north, but rather to well south in England. These trees will have been planted as part of the romantic landscaping of the estate, and would never have been there when the castle was a functioning fortalice; the ground would have been kept clear as an open field of fire. Yet the landscape designers may well have been attracted to their choice of species by a fine romantic legend that such limes were a sign in troubled times of a Jacobite household.

As we walk along, this pilgrimage merges in the mind with those of previous years and all become one. We hear again the roe deer crashing away through the suffocating undergrowth of *Rhododendron ponticum*. When the estate track that has taken us along above the rocky shore and through the edge of the oak wood peters out, we are at the head of the bay where people picnic and the mayflower blooms. This delicate, pale pink wild flower brings thoughts, not of a flamboyant and be-kilted international music-hall celebrity who could earn \$4,500 a week at the New York theatre in Times Square, but of austere Puritans in their *Mayflower* braving the Atlantic for a new life.

On the far side of the bay our track becomes clear again – a good thing, as it makes it much easier to climb the scarp onto the headland. From the top we can see our destination, Kilbride, on the next headland to the north. Our intermittent path drops down. We push through the ever encroaching rhododendron. The low ground is fairly wet but, for all that the path is well overgrown with moss and grass and visually indistinguishable from the surrounding ground, if you can keep to it you feel it firmer underfoot. People must have walked this way for many a long year and heard the cry of the oyster catcher, Saint Brigid's own bird.

The shore is strewn with much modern flotsam, but at last we scramble up the steep little

slope to the top of the headland and we are at the ruins of the ancient chapel of Kilbride. The walls still stand a couple of feet high, and the three foot wide wall that encircles the little enclosure or garth is clearly visible. Soon all will be obscured beneath a sea of bracken, but now it is time to enjoy the scene and remember stories of Bride or Brigid, the legendary daughter of a Leinster chief, the light of Kildare. We sing a psalm, as we do year by year – today from the 36th (in the Scottish metrical version):

*Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heavens;
Thy truth doth reach the clouds;
Thy justice is like mountains great;
Thy judgements deep as floods.*

Psalms, sometimes in English, sometimes in Gaelic, sometimes in Latin, will have been sung just here for fourteen hundred years or more. There is thankfulness for the saints in our hearts.

After our picnic we look around. There are the ruins of the village that once thrived here; one at least of the houses was later commandeered as a pen and is still being used by sheltering sheep and their lambs. Gaelic was the every-day language. On the very crest of the scarp, the remains of the mediaeval corn-drying kiln, oriented to the south-west to take advantage of the prevailing wind. Below, the skerry called Kilbride Island; you can walk out to it at low tide. The ground-nesting oyster catchers, Bride's bird to the native Gael, use it, and a cormorant may be seen. Seals play between it and the mainland when the tide is in, and the children have been delighted to be so close to them when standing on the shore. The rock which the gulls use as the anvil to crack open their catch of mussels interests them too.

Also on the shore, in the island's lee, is the remarkably well preserved landing for the Chappell Ferry that came over from Crarae. It ceased to ply its trade in 1790, but as this is the narrowest point on Loch Fyne, it will always have been a natural place to cross. At the wayside chapel of Kilbride you paused to pray, or give thanks for a safe crossing. From the far side it is easy enough to walk over to Kilmichael Glassary, as worshippers used to do Sunday by Sunday, and on from there to Dunadd. From this side you can go the way we have come, then over the Leanach to Kilmodan in Glendaruel, and on by the head of Loch Striven and Glen Lean to the Holy Loch from where Dumbarton Rock is in sight. In wintry weather you might prefer to keep to the low ground and go via Strachur and the border lands of Dreip. Quite possibly we are on a main route between the capitals of two kingdoms, the capital of Dalriada (Dunadd) and the capital of Strathclyde (Dumbarton Rock), a route that existed long before either the Old Castle or Kilmorie.

Time to go. There is a choice - go the way we came, or keep to higher ground for the first part of the return. Some choose the latter, for that way you pass by the old well. It is a lovely survival, at the foot of Barr-an-Longairt, and a good West Highland example; the stone-built chamber is intact with the movable stone slab protecting its entrance from pollution by stock still in place. All it requires to be fully functional is to be freshly lined with clay. After photographs, we continue up along the foot of the hill, then through more rhododendrons till we rejoin the end of the estate track and past the scaffolded Old Castle. Visiting is for another day; for now, the embankment, the bridge, and the cars.

It has been a rewarding pilgrimage. At the car park at Kilmorie we bid each other good-bye in the golden light of a God-given late afternoon.

The Lachlan Trust would like to thank Revd. Mackenzie for his permission to reproduce this article, which was first published in the 2014 edition of the Clan Maclachlan Society magazine Clan Lachlan.

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