

## From Glenfinnan to the Small Isles a journey through Christian History

From Fort William follow the A838 the “Road to the Isles”, soon after passing the end of Loch Eil you approach the village of Glenfinnan and enter the Church of Scotland Parish of North West Lochaber. This village is a Mecca for tourists who visit the Glenfinnan memorial. This commemorates the Highlanders who rallied to Bonnie Prince Charlie’s call in 1745. Crowds also wait to see the Jacobite Steam train “The Hogwart’s Express” cross the Glenfinnan viaduct. The National Trust for Scotland have a visitor centre here.

At the end of the village by the main road you reach the Catholic Chapel of St. Mary and St. Finnans set high above Loch Shiel with spectacular views over the water and mountains.



St Mary and St Finnan Glenfinnan

The church was built in 1873 in Late Early English style and designed by Edward Welby Pugin, an English architect. The church has a beautiful rose stained glass window in the west gable.

The Church is a memorial Chapel of the MacDonalds of Glenaladale, the family with whom Prince Charlie stayed prior to raising the Jacobite Standard on the shores of Loch Shiel in August 1745. The church contains memorial stones to the Prince and members of the MacDonald family.

Before you leave the environs of Glenfinnan consider a cruise along Loch Shiel (tel 07946 842732). Many of these cruises pass by the Green isle, also known as St. Fanniens Isle. St. Finnian was tutor to St. Columba in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and travelled to the island from Iona the monastery base of St. Columba. St Finnian stayed on the Green Isle for a period. This place remained a place of spiritual significance after his departure. A medieval church was built on the island and this was ruined at the reformation, suffering the fate of so many Roman Catholic Chapels and Monasteries.

After Glenfinnan and passing the freshwater loch of Loch Eilt you reach the sea loch of Loch Ailort . At Lochailort you will pass on the right, opposite the Lochailort Inn, a corrugated iron building close to the roadside. This mission hall was originally built by the railway company around 1900 and had various uses before becoming a Church of Scotland mini church.

From Lochailort you may like to detour left towards Glenuig. Drive right into the village and passing the Glenuig Inn you will come to the small Catholic Church of St. Agnes. The narrow road winds round with fine views across the bay to the Small Isles. You soon pass a large imposing house, Samalaman House which from 1783 to 1803 was a Roman Catholic Seminary and even until 1966, access was either on foot or on horseback. You may want to drive to the road end where there is a car park, and follow tracks to the deserted coastal village of Smirisary, waymarked walks with wonderful coastal views.

Returning to the “Road to the Isles”, the route to the coast passes under a white catholic chapel set on a headland at Polish. No longer a church, this Chapel ‘Our Lady of the Braes’ was built to service the now deserted townships of Ardnish and Polish

### **Arisaig**

The current Church of Scotland building in Arisaig was built in 1810-11 as a Roman Catholic Chapel financed by Clanranald of Arisaig but designed by James Gillespie Graham the Scottish architect who was in partnership with Edward Welby Pugin the architect for Glenfinnan Church. Gillespie Graham designed the Glenfinnan Monument that you have passed on route.



Church of Scotland  
Arisaig

The church became a Church of Scotland when the catholic congregation moved to their new church in the village. St. Mary's was Built in 1849, this Catholic Church has a more imposing presence and was designed by William Burn, an architect famous for grand churches in Edinburgh. The church has a high tower in stone with a ten hundredweight bell. There is a tall triplet window behind the altar with an eight-paned roundel of stained glass designed by Augustus Welby Pugin. Augustus was the father of Edward who designed the Glenfinnan Church.



St Mary's Catholic  
Church Arisaig

### **Morar**

Further along the road to Morar we reach an area with a deep and emotive history of those faithful to the Catholic Church and later to the Jacobite cause. Called Blessed Morar for the unswerving loyalty to Catholicism that remained unaffected by the reformation, despite constant persecution. After the reformation in 1560 catholic priests were outlawed and itinerant and had to preach to the faithful in private homes or in the open air, these were called the 'heather priests'

First mentioned in 1712, a Roman Catholic seminary was established on one of the islands in Loch Morar, 'Eilean Ban', a remote lonely retreat that hoped to escape notice. The priests taught a handful of boys and one of these Hugh MacDonald went on to become a Bishop. After the battle of Culloden and the defeat of the Jacobites in 1746, Government forces advanced into the Parish. Lord Lovat a supporter of the Jacobite cause along with Hugh MacDonald and other leaders of the Catholic seminary brought all the boats from the loch to the island believing they would be safe from the Government naval forces. However, the latter, numbering 300 men carried their boats up the waterfall above the Morar Estuary and attacked the seminary. The seminary was ransacked, books burned but many of the faithful escaped into the mountains. Lord Lovat was captured taken to London and executed on Tower Hill. Hugh MacDonald escaped in a French ship and later returned to Scotland.

Canoes and rowing boats are allowed on the Loch and a limited number of motorboats can be hired. If you venture to Eilean Ban you will find that little remains except the foundation stones of this once important catholic training school.

Undaunted by this set back to their religion the Catholics of the area built a church beyond Bracarina along the shore of Loch Morar at Inbhir Beag on the path to Tarbert. This is now roofless but was renovated recently and with bracken cleared the room layout is visible and an interpretation board tells of its history. Later the chapel moved to Bracarina, a building now a private residence. Since 1889 the catholic congregation has worshipped in the imposing church on the roadside where the river meets the loch in Morar. 'Our Lady of Perpetual Aid and St. Cumins' was built in 1888 by Lady Lovat to follow the wishes of her husband who had recently died. The spectacular wooden roof resembles an upturned boat. The style of the church is Early English with stained glass windows honouring St. Columba and St Margaret of Scotland, both designed by John Duncan. In recent times a stained glass tribute to St. Cumin was added.

'Our Lady of  
Perpetual Aid  
and St.  
Cumin's'  
Catholic  
Chapel Morar



High above Morar is a Cross, reached by steps that lead from a gate near the railway crossing. The original cross was erected in 1889 and the present 17ft cross was built in 1965.

The original cross was erected by Lady Lovat when her sons were saved from drowning in the river. The Lovat family used to spend the summer at Morar Lodge and the children were often taken by boat along the loch to the river, from whence they walked to the Morar estuary beach. After a time of heavy rain, the river was in flood and their two younger sons tried to row the boat themselves upstream. Unable to keep pace with the flow of the river the boat drifted towards the waterfall. Their elder brother and the boatman were able to stop the boat and save the children. Lady Lovat erected the cross with a thankful heart.

The view from the cross both along the loch and across to the sea and the Small Isles is superb, an amazing place to watch the sunset.

### **Mallaig**

St Columba's Church of Scotland Mallaig stands high above the village with panoramic views over the Sound of Sleat and overlooks the harbour of Mallaig. It was built in 1903 to the designs of J G Falconer. It is a rectangular church with a small chancel to the south and a bellcote on the north gable. There is one stained glass window, depicting Christ walking on the water, by Abbot & Co.



St Columba's  
Church of  
Scotland Mallaig

The Catholic Chapel for the village is close by, St. Patrick's Mallaig opened in 1935 and was designed by Reginald Fairley. The open timbered roof is similar to that of St. Cumins in Morar and the stained-glass windows were bought from an Oban church by the Marquis of Bute.

From Arisaig or Mallaig ferries take you to the Small Isles, Eigg, Rhum, Canna, Muck and to the remote hills of Knoydart, all steeped in ancient Christian history, arising from priests travelling from Ireland to spread the Christian gospel to western Scotland.

### **Eigg**

At Kildonan is a ruined church (map reference NM488854) on the site of an ancient religious site. This was created by St. Donnan of Eigg, a Gaelic priest, probably from Ireland, who was trying to spread Christianity to these parts of Scotland in the early Middle Ages. Eventually he fell out with local nobility, a Pictish princess of Moidart who tradition says, sent bandits to arrive by sea to attack the church. There is a suggestion that these were warrior women. St. Donnan was martyred in 617 during the attack along with 54 of his flock. He is now the patron saint of Eigg. After his death, the monastic community continued with renewed buildings.

The present ruin of Kildonan Chapel was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by John Moidartach directly on top of the old monastery. The area has been used as a burial site for many years. In the ruins of the

church you will find The Kildonnán Figure once thought to represent a Celtic Mother Goddess (a Sheela na gig) but this theory is now disputed. There is also an ornately carved shaft of a cross.

For more modern places of worship follow the main road up the hill to reach the small church at Canmore. This Church of Scotland building was erected in 1862. The interior is interesting for stencilled decorations and pairs of oil lamps.

St. Donan Catholic Chapel is further along the road above the Bay of Laig at Cleadale. Built in 1910. In 1913 Robert Thompson who owned the island bequeathed a pair of silver candlesticks and a Spanish oil painting depicting the descent of Christ.

### **Canna**

At Keil on Canna map ref NG2669055 there is a decorated Celtic Cross that dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century. This is thought to stem from the presence of an ancient monastery.

On a coastal terrace below steep cliffs at NG232045 Sgorr nam Ban-Naomha there is evidence of an ancient dwelling, once ascribed to a nunnery it is now thought that it was a hermitage attached to the monastery at Keil.

For more recent churches walk up the road from the ferry jetty and you will soon see the distinctive round tapering tower of St Columba's Church. Built by Mary Johanna Cameron in 1914 and designed by P MacGregor Chalmers in pointed Gothic Style using locally quarried rubble of many shades of colour. Mary built the church in memory of her husband's father Robert who bought Canna in 1881, and it was an outpost of Presbyterianism in a predominantly Catholic island. The Church is commonly known as the Rhu Church and because of its shape 'The Rocket Church'.

On the island of Sanday, connected to Canna by a bridge you can see the building that was once the Catholic Chapel of St Edward the Confessor. It was built in 1886 in Neo-Romanesque style with a rose window, apse, and saddleback tower.



St Edward the Confessor



St Columba's Rhu Church

The church was converted into a centre for gaelic study in 2001, but never opened as it was discovered that the poor state of repair meant costs were prohibitive.

Following the island road back to the jetty you pass the Catholic Chapel of St. Columba, and this is used for worship today. It was originally built in 1770, but when the new church on Sanday was built it was used as shop and post office, but in 1963 when the St. Edward church fell into disrepair the islanders once again used this smaller church.

### **Rum**

Rum is the largest of the Small Isles and at Kilmory (NG3631037) is St. Mary's Burial Ground. Here there is a cross marked pillar dating back to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century with various carvings.

Nearer the ferry port at Cave's Bay (Bagh na h-Uamha) map reference NM428972 there are crosses left by Early Church hermits in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Muck**

According to tradition St Columba visited the island in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. A field adjacent to an ancient graveyard near Port Mhor is called the field of Finnian. The remains of an ancient chapel lie within the graveyard which used to contain two inscribed slabs, but these have been removed for their protection to a building in Port Mhor.

### **Knoydart**

The 'Western Isles Ferry Service' will take you to Knoydart. The boat will pass by the statue of the Madonna erected on the headland marking the entrance to Loch Nevis. The statue is not ancient and is constructed of fibreglass, but nevertheless has a presence in this remote beautiful landscape.

Of more interest is the Kilchoan Cross near Inverie at map reference NM779991. The cross is in an ancient graveyard surrounded by pastures. The arms of the cross are two feet across but what is most significant is the 3inch hole in the middle. This is most unusual in Christian symbolism. The carving is from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, though the cross may be older. Kilchoan does refer to the gaelic for a church, so the siting of the cross may be significant. It remains a mystery. The graveyard is also the site of the ancient St. Comhan's Chapel.

In the 19<sup>TH</sup> Century both Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic Churches were built near Inverie.

The Church of Scotland building, on a prime site overlooking Loch Nevis was erected in 1859, sadly converted to residential use in the 1990's it is still a listed building.

The Catholic Chapel of St. Augusta was built in 1886 and situated near the water's edge. The Chapel was deconsecrated in 1990 and is now the Knoydart Brewery. The beer is on sale at the bar on the boat back to Mallaig.

Perhaps from here you are moving on to Skye with its rich Christian history or returning along the "Road to the Isles" to Fort William. Wherever you travel: -

*May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at you back May the sunshine warm upon your face. The rains fall soft upon your fields. (Gaelic Prayer)*

Sylvia Arnold