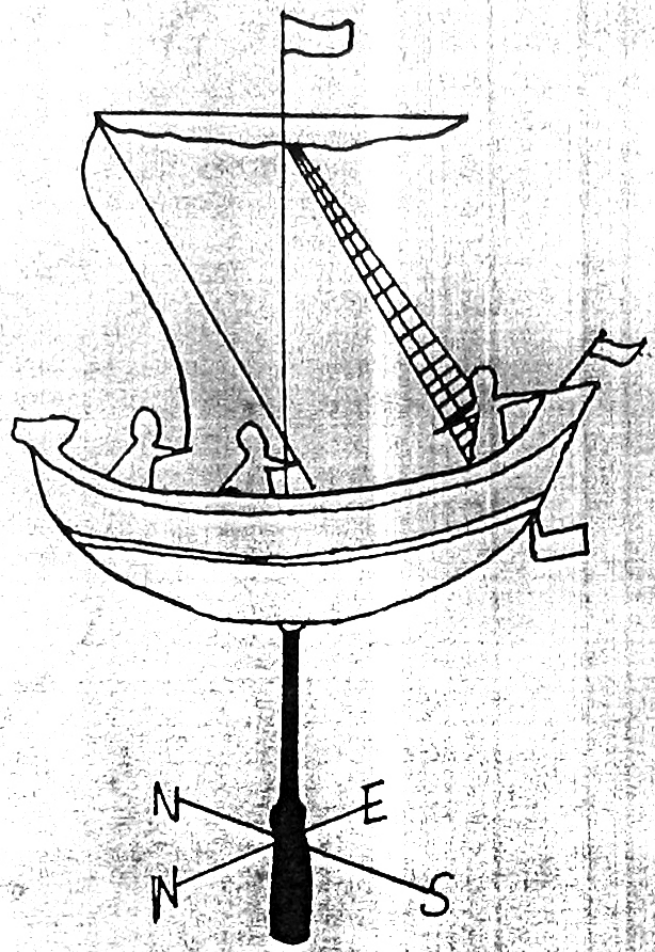


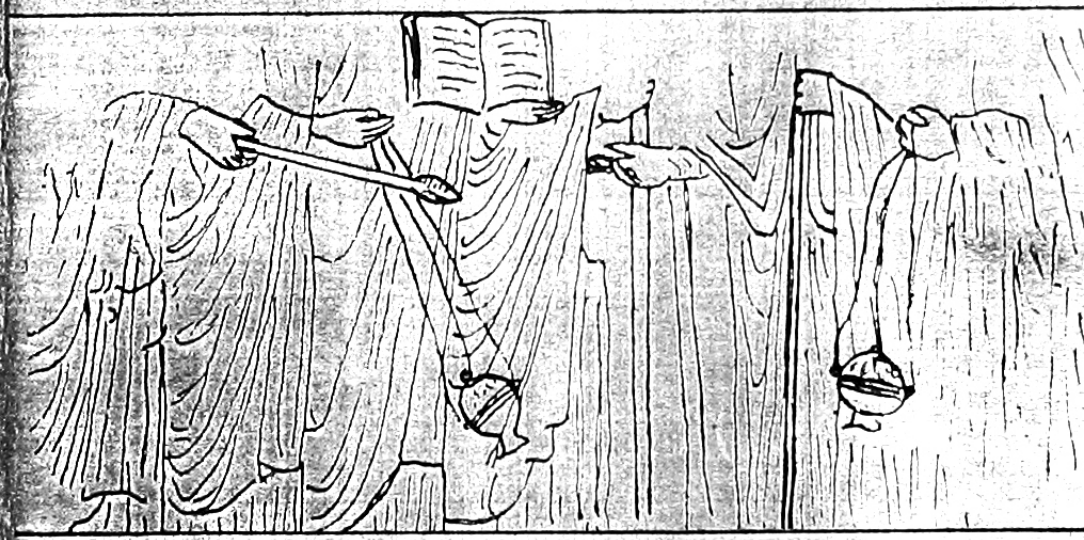
weather vane on Inchcolm Abbey

First printed 1984
Revised 1985
This edition 1986
© David A. Marshall

ISBN 0 946 201 83.8

Masons and Miracles

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INCHCOLM [redacted]



DAVID A. MARSHALL

Do Not Remove From Ship

Introduction

Inchcolm [redacted], thirty miles up-river from the North Sea, is believed by many to be the most beautiful of the islands in the Firth of Forth. It is situated six miles north-west of Leith and two miles south-east of Aberdour, to which parish it belongs.

The island was once known as Aemonia, or Emona, from the words "E", meaning "island", and "mon", meaning "isolated". It has also been translated as "Isle of the Druids". It did not in fact become known as "St. Colme's Inch" until the twelfth century.

Although only half a mile long and about 150 yards (138.5m) wide at its broadest part, this island boasts one of the most complete medieval abbeys still in existence in Scotland, as well as several other relics of the past. Many would say that the history of Inchcolm is in fact the history of its abbey, but this is not so. In this booklet it plays only a minor role, both to emphasise the other historical events connected with the island and also because the ruins have been written about and described in depth in so many books.

The abbey is, however, still the main reason why people visit the island, and, indeed, the ruins are impressive, as can be seen from the photograph on page 12 of this booklet. It serves as a good landmark both from the sea and from the shore on account of its sturdy Norman tower and 13th century Chapter House with the weather vane on top bearing a "golden" galleon.

Today Inchcolm is just another tourist trap, quite easy to get to by hired boat from Aberdour or on one of the regular sailings from South Queensferry, four miles to the west. In its medieval heyday, however, it was quite insulated against all but seafaring raiders and it was, indeed, a place of.....Masons and Miracles.

The Holy and The Will

The story of Inchcolm traditionally begins with the landing of the missionary Columba on its shores. There is, however, no concrete evidence to support this story, even though some historians in the past have gone as far as to provide a date for his arrival here, namely 567 AD, or thereabouts. Columba may have founded a base here while he was taking Christianity to the Picts, or the island may eventually have been named after another person by the name of Colm, of whom nothing is known. Columba has, however, won the day time and time again because he is one of the best-known and greatest of the Saints connected with Scotland, and there are many tales told of his posthumous miracles performed in relation to Inchcolm in the Middle Ages (see pages 9 and 10).

The next great event in the island's history occurred during the reign of King Duncan (1033 - 1038). While the Scots were celebrating the poisoning of an entire Scandinavian force at Perth, news arrived that another army, sent by King Canute of England to aid his brother, King Sueno of Norway, had landed at Kinghorn in Fife. A Scots army led by Macbeth was sent to repel the Scandinavians and was once again victorious. This event is briefly mentioned in Shakespeare's "Macbeth", wherein is reported that Sueno was not allowed to bury his dead until - "he disbursed, at Saint Colmes-inch* ten thousand dollars to our general use". Sueno paid the fee and retreated to Inchcolm to bury his fallen men.

The area of higher, flat ground westwards of the medieval abbey is thought to have been the site of the Scandinavian cemetery. Many stones marking the graves were still visible in the 16th century but they have all vanished now with the exception of one - a weatherworn, sandstone "hog-back", lying on a north/south axis. It is about 1.5m (5 ft) long and the sculpturing, because it is so worn, has been interpreted in various ways. Some say that the two ends are the heads of

* Remember that the island was not yet known by this name in the 11th century.

animals, while others say that they are in fact two human heads. Another interpretation given is that one end is a human head with the other being the feet. The sloping sides of the stone are decorated with a pattern of "scales", which has been interpreted as the scaly skin of a reptile or the armour of a warrior. On the east side of the stone is carved a now-faint human figure with arms upraised. This, it has been suggested, shows the Early Christian position for prayer, but another suggestion is that the figure represents a warrior brandishing a spear, or even the Norse god Thor waving his mighty hammer, thus linking the stone with the tale of Macbeth and the Vikings.

A hewn stone cross once stood beside the "hog-back" but it, too, has disappeared. The presence of such a cross, past historians have remarked, denoted the grave of a leader. The origins of the "hog-back" are, however, uncertain, although there has never been any real dispute about it being connected with Sueno of Norway and the burial of his dead on Inchcolm.

But it was during the 12th century and the reign of Alexander I that events really began on the island. The story goes that the King was crossing the Forth to Fife one day in the year 1123 when his boat was caught in a sudden gale. The monarch and his crew were so in fear for their lives that the King himself prayed fervently to St. Columba for help. The result was that the boat was carried onto the beach on Inchcolm, where the exhausted party was given food and shelter for three days by an old hermit who dwelt there in a stone-built cell, or "desert".

Many Culdee churches had hermits to guard them and Inchcolm may have had a church at that time. The cell in which this particular fellow is supposed to have lived is still in existence, now attached to the Abbey grounds and restored to how it must have originally looked.

In his prayer, Alexander I had promised Columba that, if he saw fit to save those in the boat, he would erect an edifice in which storm-bound or wrecked sailors could find shelter, which he would dedicate to the Saint.

Now, one may ask, why did the King choose to pray to St. Columba in particular? It may have been because he knew that Columba had lived on the island which was not far away, but there is a story which gives a different reason.

Apparently, the King's father and mother (Malcolm Canmore and Queen Margaret) had tried repeatedly to have a family without success until they prayed to Columba. Thus, it seems, Columba not only saved Alexander's life, but he had had a hand in giving him life, too! Doubtless the King thought this a great thing, but the people of the land may have thought otherwise. Alexander I was very hard and cruel towards his subjects and had earned the title of "Alexander the Fierce". He had, however, a great respect for and love of all things ecclesiastical, and this may have been the deciding factor in the Saint's mind that day in 1123.

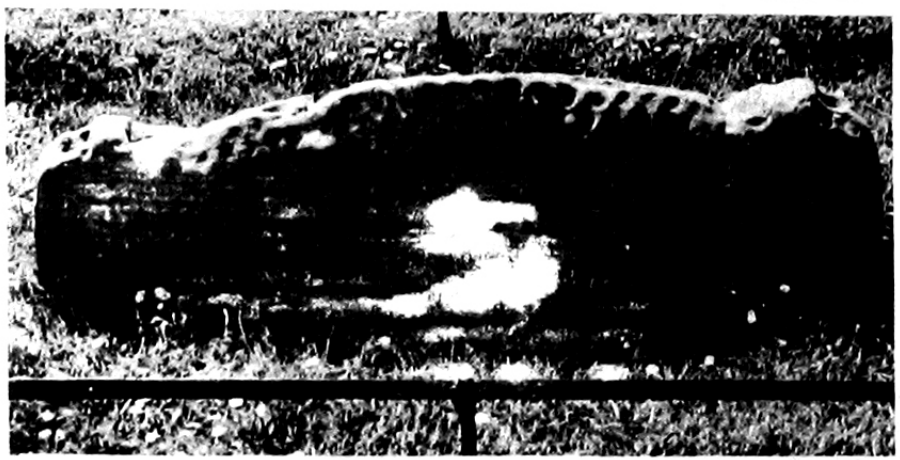
The King never forgot his promise to Columba after leaving the island but he was never to put it into practice, for the following year, 1124, saw him lying on his death-bed and neither Columba nor all the Saints in Heaven working together could save him this time. Alexander I has, however, always been accepted as the Founder of Inchcolm Abbey. Indeed, there is a medieval monks' rhyme which, when translated from the original Latin, runs:-

An M, a C, three Is, Xs two,*
These keep the year of Christ in view.
When Alexander I gave Emone's Isle
His Kingly gift - a rich monastic pile.
May God receive the noble Founder's soul
To regions high above the starry pole.

* i.e., MCXXIII = 1123AD, the year of the foundation of Inchcolm Abbey.



The Hermit's Cell, restored to how it might have looked



Hog-back stone, associated with the Danes in the 11th century

Masons and Miracles

Alexander was succeeded by David I, who was responsible for putting the former's intention into action. He entrusted Bishop Gregory of Dunkeld with the building and furnishing of Inchcolm Priory, as it was then (it did not gain the status of an Abbey until May 1235).

Alexander's intention had been to place Augustinian monks in the Priory. They were not too distant from the Columbians in their method, but they were Roman Catholic. Thus, Alexander was following the way of his mother, Queen Margaret, wife of Malcolm Canmore, later Saint Margaret. She had aimed to replace the Culdees totally with the Roman Catholic faith, and David I continued this policy.

The Priory of Inchcolm received its Spiritual Charter from Rome in March 1178, the monks having moved in some time between 1162 and 1169. The earliest building was simply a nave and adjoining chancel. By the end of the century a choir was attached to the east end of the chancel.

The next building phase is said to have been made possible through the generous gift of Sir William Mortimer during the reign of William the Lyon (1165 - 1214). Sir William, who owned the lands of Aberdour, is said to have angered the Inchcolm monks by having the King's Clerk, a man we know only by the name of Robert, fill an important vacancy which had arisen in the church at Aberdour. The monks were patrons of this church and Sir William's act had been a direct usurption of their rights as such. When the Canons protested, Mortimer's allies subdued them.

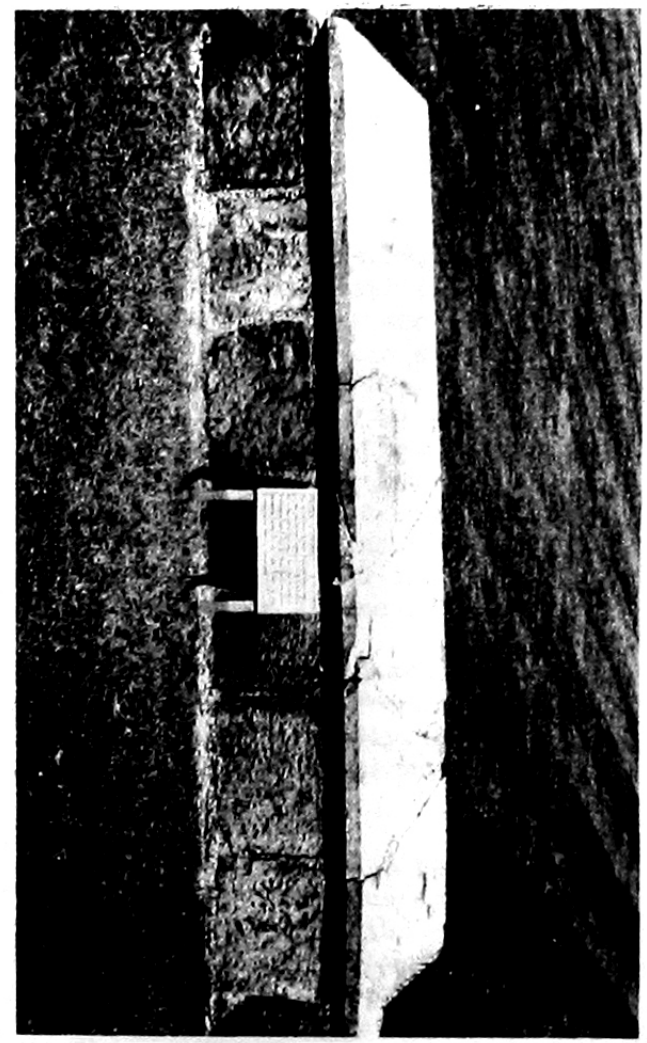
Later on, Sir William appeased the Canons by gifting them half of his Aberdour lands and a sum of money, on the condition that he and his family be buried in the Priory, on holy ground. The monks were quietened and Mortimer was relieved.

When he died, Sir William was laid in his lead coffin and, by the light of the moon, was loaded onto a barge to be ferried across to Inchcolm. The monks pushed off with their unsuspecting burden and the mourners on the shore went home.

When about half-way across the deep channel which separates Inchcolm from the mainland, the monks shipped their oars and rested for a while. The night was calm and the moon cast a silvery sheen on the water and the lead coffin. A solitary cloud began to drift over the face of the moon and, as if it were a signal, the monks got to their feet in the gently-bobbing craft. There were a few minutes of almost total darkness while the cloud passed by and, when it had sailed on its way, and the moon once again shone down, the monks had reseated themselves but the coffin had disappeared.

While they had welcomed his land and money, the monks would have none of Sir William's bones. No doubt they still felt a little aggrieved at his overruling them in the incident of Aberdour church and had finally seen a chance to get revenge. The channel between Aberdour and Inchcolm is still called "Mortimer's Deep" to this day.

With the gifts of Sir William, the monks were able to add a tower and Chapter House to their Priory. More additions were made in the remainder of the 13th century in order that the Priory Church (or Abbey, as it became in 1235) would have all the space and trappings required for the great religious rituals of the time. Since the previous century the monks had lived in nearby domestic quarters but, during the 14th century, the building of more adequate quarters was begun. After this, however, the grand scale of building works was slowed down and finally ceased altogether. This was due to two factors:- (1) the community of monks and Canons was never very large at any time and this made building slow; (2) the Wars of Independence between Scotland and England left the country very poorly and this affected the work of building all over the land. The monks were able to rebuild their Abbey but on a less expensive and simpler scale than before.



Altar slab bearing crosses to represent the Five Wounds of Christ. When discovered, it was in use as a gravestone, and is now located on the site of the 13th century High Altar

During the 14th century, the Abbey was a favourite with Bishops and raiders alike. Quite a few of the former resided here for lengths of time and some were buried here, while the latter, namely English sea-rievers, were attracted by the rich furnishings of the Abbey. The first recorded English raid took place in 1335. The crew of a ship of the English fleet raided the Abbey and took off with everything of value which was portable, among which was a beautiful image of St. Columba. The ship had not been under sail again for very long when a terrific storm suddenly blew up, threatening to drive it onto the rocks off Inchkeith, another of the islands in the Forth. Filled with terror, the crew called upon Columba to grant them mercy, adding that, if he did so, they would return the image and the rest of the booty to Inchcolm. Immediately the storm died away and the ship was able to make its way to Kinghorn on the Fife coast, where the stolen goods were quickly deposited to be sent on to Inchcolm, along with a peace offering of gold and silver. No sooner had they done this and set sail once more when a good wind blew up to help them on their way. The English vowed never to incur the wrath of this great Saint again.

This vow was, perhaps unwittingly, broken the very next year. An English attack was made upon the Church at Dollar, in Clackmannanshire, and everything of value was once again removed. After the raid, the English pirates sailed back down the Forth to the open sea, celebrating their good fortune.....which was shortlived. Just as they were passing Inchcolm the ship suddenly, and for no apparent reason, sank, and the entire crew went down to keep company with the bones of Sir William at the bottom of "Mortimer's Deep". What they may not have known was that Columba was also the Patron Saint of Dollar Church and that, by despoiling it, they had once again aroused his anger.

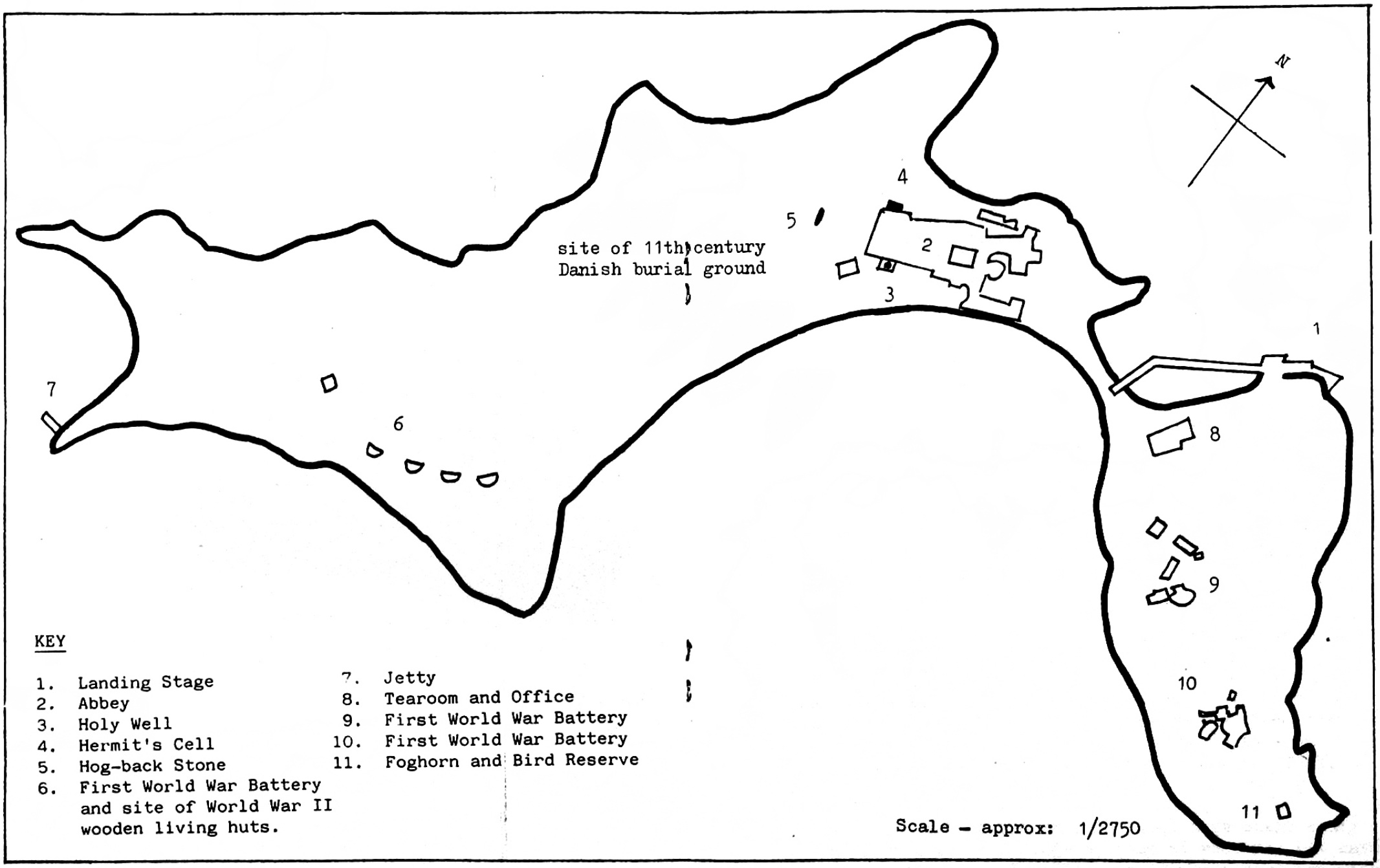
The name of Columba was for a while afterwards enough to strike fear into the hearts of even the bravest of Englishmen, but it was not long before the memory of his vengeful deeds faded and the English returned to their old ways.

In 1384 another raid was made upon Inchcolm Abbey. After the sacking, the outer buildings were set alight by one raider in the hope that the fire would spread and destroy the Abbey Church itself. The blaze was well alight, the flames licking nearer and nearer the Church, when suddenly the wind changed and blew them back from whence they had come, setting fire to the culprit's clothing. Some nearby friends were, however, able to beat out the flames and he lived.

The raiders set sail with their ill-gotten cargo and proceeded up the Forth to Queensferry, where they began to raid the land around there. Their orgy of destruction was interrupted by a band of Scots who immediately put to the sword as many of the villains as they could lay hands on. The rest of the raiders fled down to the shore to the safety of their ships. They were so desperate to escape that they began to crawl along the anchor ropes, without waiting for gangways to be lowered. Not that any would have been, for those on board were so anxious to be off that they could not wait for those on the shore. In fact, they cut the anchor ropes and the men crawling along them plunged into the sea and drowned.

To return to the individual who had set fire to the Abbey, he lived but went completely mad, foaming at the mouth and pleading with Columba incessantly. He was eventually pronounced incurable and killed. Columba had avenged his island again!

All these tales make the Saint out to be a fearsome person but this is not so. For instance, one occasion when he showed pity occurred in 1421, when the supply boat was sailing from the mainland to the island. The crew were rather drunk and they managed to capsize the boat. A Canon of the Abbey by the name of Sir Peter prayed to St. Columba for help and the Saint obliged by keeping him and his companions afloat until another boat arrived to pick them up. Yet another tale to tell by the fireside in winter!



KEY

1. Landing Stage
2. Abbey
3. Holy Well
4. Hermit's Cell
5. Hog-back Stone
6. First World War Battery and site of World War II wooden living huts.
7. Jetty
8. Tearoom and Office
9. First World War Battery
10. First World War Battery
11. Foghorn and Bird Reserve

Scale – approx: 1/2750

From Canons to Cannons

The Canons of Inchcolm must, however, have felt that, even with Columba as an ally, some deterrent was needed to prevent attacks occurring in the first place. During the English raids in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the Abbot and his men would flee to their mainland residence of Donibristle. The island seems to have been first fortified sometime between 1418 and 1443, during the time of Abbot Walter Bower. He is famous as the author of eleven of the sixteen books which combine to make the "Scotichronicon", a history of Scotland up until the death of James I in 1437. It is believed that Bower wrote his contribution in the Scriptorium of Inchcolm Abbey.

Originally, a dungeon in the basement of the tower was used to contain sinful monks, but prisoners from the outside world were occasionally housed here. One of its most outstanding inmates was Euphemia Leslie, daughter of the Earl of Ross and mother of Alexander, Lord of the Isles. Alexander was a cruel and ambitious man who sought to overthrow the King. He was captured once and only his connection with Royalty saved him (his grandfather was Robert II). He soon rebelled again but was forced to surrender. His life was again spared but he was imprisoned in Tantallon Castle, East Lothian. His mother, Euphemia, was accused of having incited her son to rebel and was imprisoned on Inchcolm.

Fifty years later, the dungeon had another eminent resident - Patrick Graham, Archbishop of St. Andrews. His beliefs were so like those of the later Reformers that he was denounced as a heretic by the Church and sent to the dungeon in Inchcolm Abbey. He was removed from there to Dunfermline when war broke out between England and Scotland and from there he was sent to Lochleven Castle where he died.

These are only two of the many who must have spent weary days and nights in that dungeon, some of whom may not have left the island again. In 1854, some workmen were removing

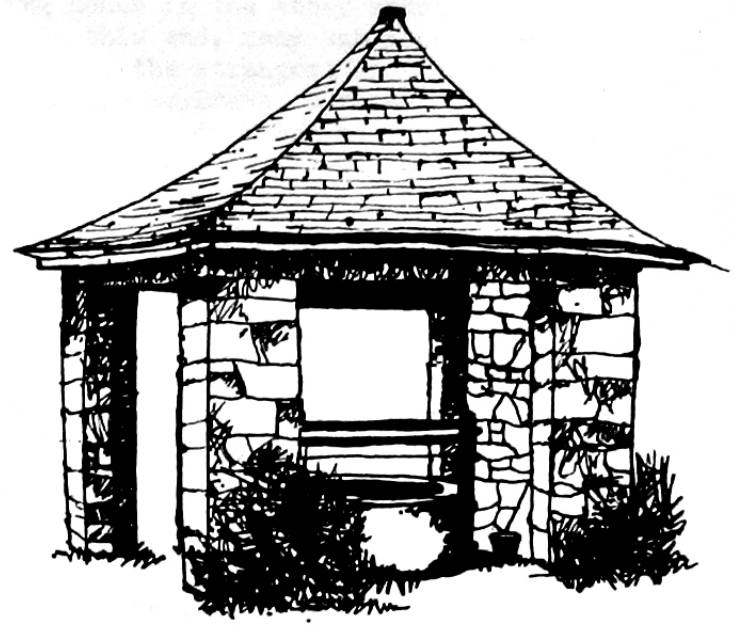
stones from the ruined Abbey for the purpose of strengthening a fortress on the island when they came upon a skeleton standing upright within a wall in the Abbot's House. How it ever came to be there is a mystery but one cannot help imagining some unwilling prisoner being "buried" alive in there.

One important person who came to the island and left again of his own free will was James IV, who visited it several times. On 1st July 1508, he spent the night at the Abbey before sailing on to Leith. The reign of James IV was a peaceful time on the whole for Inchcolm and the rest of Scotland, an era which came to a bloody end on the field of Flodden in 1513, where the King himself died.

Towards the middle of the 16th century, Henry VIII was using forcible means to try to achieve a marriage between his son, Edward, and the young Mary, Queen of Scots, and thus give England a strong foothold in Scotland. This resulted in the young Queen being sent to France but, even after Henry's death in 1547, the "Rough Wooing", as it is called, was continued by Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset and Protector for young Edward. In that year the English seized Inchcolm and built a fortress on the island, thus necessitating another retreat to the mainland by the monks. The Duke of Somerset visited the island but the English did not hold it for very long before it was liberated by the French troops of Mary of Guise, mother of Mary, Queen of Scots.

The Abbot and his monks were able to return to their island home. Their peaceful life was, however, once again to be shortlived for within the next ten years or so another event was to rock Scotland which sounded the death-knell for not only Inchcolm but every Roman Catholic church in the country - the Reformation!

The result of the Reformation was the dissolution of the abbeys in 1560. The Privy Council divided the properties of the non-Protestant clergies into three parts, two of which were to be held by those clergies during their lifetime. The last of the Inchcolm monks died about 1578 and with them went the island's ecclesiastical history, which had spanned over a thousand years.



The Holy Well, situated between the Abbey and the Custodian's bungalow. The monks obtained their water here

During the reign of James V (1513 - 1542), Sir James Stuart of Beith had had his eldest son, James, appointed as one of the Canons of Inchcolm. This son eventually became Commendator of the Abbey. He took over the Abbot's House as his own and, in 1581, caused part of the Abbey Church to be demolished. The removed stones were bought by Edinburgh Town Council who used them in the rebuilding of their tolbooth.

At this time, James, the son, was given the title of Lord Doune, so he sold the Inchcolm estate to the Earl of Argyll. In 1590 the island and its buildings were feued to James Stuart of Doune, son of the above-mentioned Lord Doune, for the annual sum of £3 6s 8d. This son is better known to us as the "Bonnie Earl o' Moray", who was murdered at Donibristle House on the nearby shore two years later.

During this period of change of ownership; an interesting event occurred in connection with the island. In 1582 or thereabouts, the "William of Leith" arrived in the Forth having come from Danzig. The ship was carrying the Plague and was quarantined off Inchcolm. All those from the ship who were infected were confined to the island. The majority of the crew of forty died and the survivors were removed to the nearby islands of Inchkeith and Inchgarvie, while the ship's cargo was stored in the cellars of Inchcolm Abbey.

In 1581, James Stuart, Lord Doune, had made his other son, Henry, Commendator in his place. Henry held this position until 1611, when the ruined Abbey and the island were erected into a temporal lordship with Henry being given the title of Baron St. Colme Henry was the younger brother of the Bonnie Earl and he died soon after being created a baron. He was succeeded by his son, James, who also died soon afterwards fighting abroad in the army of King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. He had no heir and so the title and the estate fell to his cousin, yet another James, who was the third Earl of Moray. The island was now to remain in the possession of the Earls of Moray for

another 300 years or so.

While the Earls of Moray preferred Donibristle House as a residence, it was a condition of the tenure that the dwelling house in the Abbey should be occupied at all times. To this end, many sub-tenants and poorer folk lived there, the strangest and most colourful of them all being Thomas Brown, a fisherman, who left his wife and children and took off to Inchcolm. He grew his hair and beard long and only ventured ashore to sell his fish or to visit his friend the Earl of Moray at Donibristle House. He lived on the island for several years towards the end of the 18th century but was forced to leave and go to Leith, where he lived until he died.

The reason for his departure was the construction of a fortress on the island in the 1790s, during the Napoleonic Wars. It was erected at the island's eastern end and consisted of a battery of ten guns placed on two revolving platforms, one higher than the other. The remains of this fortress were still visible at the end of the 19th century but have since disappeared under later fortifications.

The island once more became a quarantine station, or Lazaretto*, in 1845, when the fleet of Czar Nicholas I of Russia was anchored in the Forth. Many of the sailors caught fever and died. They were buried on Inchcolm and many skeletons, heaped one upon the other, were later unearthed all over the island.

The Napoleonic fort was refurbished with stones from the Abbey in 1854, when the skeleton was found within the walls of the Abbot's House (see page 13/14).

Inchcolm was again fortified during both World Wars. Pill-boxes are still in evidence at the eastern and western ends of the island, many of them partly subterranean for camouflage purposes. The most impressive remains are located on the hilltop at the eastern end. These buildings must overlie the 18th century fort.

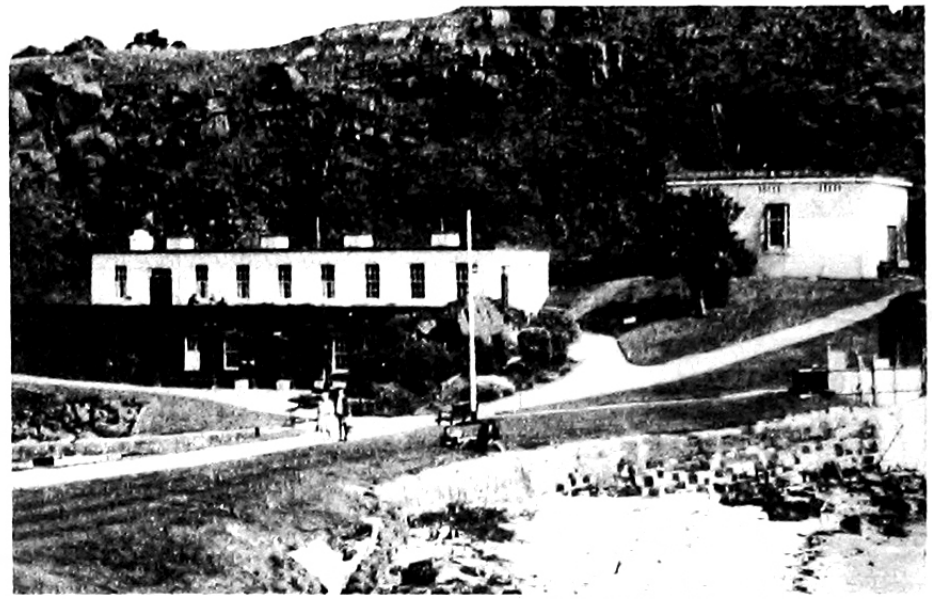
* Lazaretto comes from the word "lazar" meaning "leper". Lazarus was the leper raised from the dead by Christ.

A tunnel for the swift transportation of ammunition to the guns, runs through the hill. Above its eastern end is a plaque bearing the title "Cornwall Works" and the date, 1916 - 17.

During World War two, Inchcolm had three batteries - Charleshill, Kent and Colm - with 12 - and 6 pound guns. The island was the headquarters of the 504 Coast Regiment under a Colonel R.A. He was also the "Fire Commander", inner line, and was responsible for the coordination and firing of the batteries on Inchcolm, Inchmickery, Inchkeith and Cramond, were mainly from a territorial regiment from Edinburgh.

A floating boom was in position from the Fife shore to Inchcolm. Another stretched from Inchcolm to Cramond Island and a concrete boom linked this to the southern shore of the Forth at Cramond Village. Near Inchcolm was a "gate" operated by H.M.S. Barfair, or other ships of the class. (see also "The Little Jewels").

The majority of the military buildings still standing at the west end of the island date from the Second World War.



Present-day tearoom near the landing stage. The building on the right of the picture was an engine-room and dates from the Second World War.



First World War fort at the eastern end of the island

Conclusion

Although Inchcolm is now readily reached on one of the regular sailings from nearby Aberdour or South Queens--ferry, it is still remote enough to make it that little bit special. It is a favourite venue for school parties and the not so young alike, especially during the warm summer months.

Upon landing, it is but a short walk to the lovely land--scaped grounds of the narrow isthmus, with gravelled paths leading off to the Abbey, smooth lawns and garden areas, fringed on the north and south sides by sheltered sandy bays.

The first building reached is a two-storey block. On The lower floor is the custodian's office, while the upper floor contains a tea-room with an outside balcony, where visitors can sit and look at the Abbey or gaze over the Fife coast.

There is an entrance fee for the Abbey, but it is well worth paying just to stroll through ancient rooms and corridors or to climb the narrow spiral stairway to the top of the Norman tower with its old dovecot within.

The Abbey had fallen into a state of ruin long before fortifications were erected on the island, although military activities must have aided the decay to some extent. It was not until 1924, when the Earl of Moray presented the ruins to the Commisioners of Works, that the rubble was cleared and a close examination was able to made of what is now regarded as the most well-preserved example of medieval ecclesiastical architecture in Scotland. The Abbey is now in the care of the Scottish Development Department.

In 1984 excavations for a drain revealed that the north wall of the 13th century Chpter House actually belonged to an even earlier building which ran northwards. Other walling fragments suggested the existence of early buldings to the south of the Chapter House and east of the gateway.

The rough uncultivated ground to the west of the Abbey, under which, according to tradition, the fallen Danes defeated by Macbeth lie, is now frequently the grazing ground of sheep, while the hilltop to the east is the haunt of seabirds. During the nesting season they make good use of the thick vegetation and the old miltiary buildings, and one has to tread carefully in order to avoid the eggs laid in scrapes in the ground. Once the eggs have hatched, the visitor will be lucky to get any--where near at all, for the parents will wheel about and swoop down for the attack in a screeching myriad of black and white.

If fending of the gulls is not your idea of fun, then the sandy beaches provide a good spot to relax and watch the ships passing by. If the season is right and you are lucky you may be able to spot the grey seal bobbing around in the water or basking on the offshore rocks.

Indeed, Inchcolm has a diversity of wildlife and monuments difficult to match in any place of its size. Visitors will not be disappointed - unless, of course, it pours with rain!