

Report on the Cowal ‘faith tourism’ project

Gilbert Márkus (Dec 2016)

Background

The Church of Scotland, Presbytery of Argyll, decided to use income from the Augusta Lamont Bequest (intended for the purposes of the Kirk in Cowal) for a number of one-year projects during 2015. One of these was the Faith Tourism project, for which the principal expenditure was the employment of a worker.

Such a project would benefit the communities of Cowal more generally, by attracting visitors to the area and bringing revenue in fields such as transport, accommodation, hospitality, and other tourist-related activities.

Another important benefit would be that visitors with a religious interest would be able to engage with the church communities of Cowal. The Church of Scotland membership in the area has been declining by 5% a year over the last decade or so, while at the same time the age-profile of congregations is also getting older year by year. There is no good reason to expect this pattern to change, and as a result several parish churches in Cowal are likely to close and be sold in the near future.

But the Church is not *only* a collection of parishes. It is a network of organically connected institutions, communities, interest-groups, practices and cultures. One can think of examples like Iona, where something in the region of 250,000 people a year visit and participate in faith-related activities; or Lindisfarne which welcomes 650,000 visitor a year. These places are part of a widespread movement of people of all ages who want to explore Christian faith, its history, archaeology, community dimensions, stories of saints and more. The rising popularity of ‘faith tourism’ and pilgrimage across Europe bears witness to this interest.



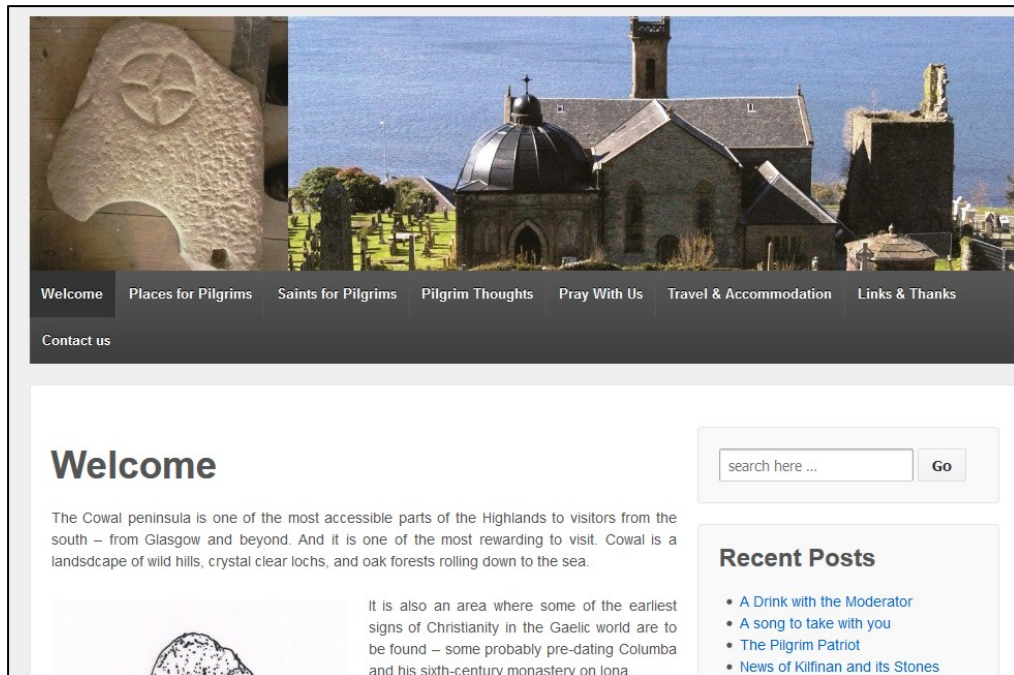
The hope for the Cowal project has been that the arrival of visitors with a particular interest in the Christian history and archaeology of the area would give support and encouragement to the local churches, who would be interested in welcoming such visitors.

Gilbert Márkus of the University of Glasgow (Celtic and Gaelic) is a specialist in early medieval Scottish history, with a special interest in ecclesiastical history. He was employed for one year to explore the Early Christian landscape of Cowal, and to ‘package’ it in such a way as to attract and guide visitors to the area – in essence to harness the widespread public interest in ‘Celtic Christianity’. His work resulted in a number of outputs.

A Website

- The website (www.faithincowal.org) lists all the places which might attract faith tourist (‘Places for Pilgrims’). These include modern churches with medieval foundations, ruined hillside chapels, holy wells and early medieval

carved stones. As well as listing and describing the attractions, the website gives historical background, photographs and maps, and information about access.



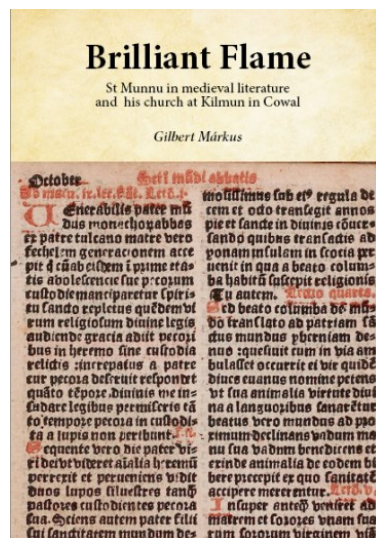
- Much of the landscape of Cowal is marked by place-names and church-foundations which reflect medieval devotion to early Gaelic-speaking saints (Munnu, Brigit, Mo-Laisse, Finan, Maodhán etc.). The website introduces each of these saints.
- Information is given on a wide range of options for accommodation, ranging from the low-budget end (village halls where twenty students might spend a night in sleeping-bags) to the more expensive and comfortable, and everything in between.
- Maps and instructions detail particular walks, bike-rides, car-journeys and trips by public transport, enabling the visitor to access the 'Places for Pilgrims'. Advice is also given on access-rights (Land Reform Act 2003), wild camping, and the need to behave responsibly when enjoying access.
- A blog is provided to update users on current events, developments, ideas, forthcoming pilgrimages and so on.

Leaflets

- A series of leaflets is now at the printers. One of them (print-run 5,000) contains a map of Cowal and a brief guide to all of the Places for Pilgrims. There are fourteen other leaflets (print-run 2,000 each) which cover individual places their history and archaeology and access.
- Leaflet holders will be put up to display the leaflets in all the Cowal churches.
- Leaflets will also be made available within Cowal (and perhaps furth of Cowal in Argyll) at suitable venues, to guide visitors around the area.
- The leaflets will be used more widely to promote Cowal and the Faith in Cowal pilgrimage idea to youth groups, churches, etc.

Kilmun Church and St Munnu

- Kilmun Church (St Munn's) was one of the most important churches in medieval Argyll. It became the burial place of the earls (later Dukes) of Argyll. It is hoped that the church will become something of a 'hub' for the wider pilgrimage landscape.
- Kilmun is a very early church. Although the present church is a nineteenth-century building, a fifteenth-century tower beside it shows its importance in the late Middle Ages. Archaeological evidence at the site, however, suggests an origin long before that. In particular an Early Christian carved stone (which will shortly be brought inside and mounted in the sanctuary of the church) points to an origin in the sixth or seventh century. Other evidence at the site makes the prospect of archaeological excavation an attractive one, and we hope that this may go ahead in the near future.
- St Munnu (or Munn, *aka* Fintan) is the saint commemorated at Kilmun (*Cill Mhunnu*) church. Just as Columba is able to attract folk to Iona, or Aidan to attract them to Lindisfarne, we hope that promoting the story of Munnu will help attract visitors to Kilmun and Cowal. To this end, Gilbert has collected all the medieval sources about this saint, both Latin and Gaelic, and published a translation in a little booklet, *Brilliant Flame*. Munnu will never have as high a profile as Columba (or as Aidan for that matter), but his dossier is interesting for historians and for pilgrims, and helps to add value to the landscape, history and archaeology of Kilmun and Cowal.



Forthcoming

Although Gilbert Márkus's role as a full-time project worker came to an end on 31st December, he will continue for one day a week for a few months, to tie up some loose ends and develop the project a little further.

- Distribute leaflets and leaflet holders to all churches, and to other appropriate places.
- Promote the pilgrimage to UK churches and potential pilgrims (writing articles, giving talks, radio broadcast etc.)
- Erect signage at various sites to guide and encourage visitors.
- Talk to Cowal-based service-providers (guest-house owners, bus companies, taxi-drivers etc.) to make sure that local people are *au fait* with the project.
- Continue promotion of the Cowal pilgrimage movement via the internet, targeting both British and international interest groups.
- Liaising with related bodies: Visit Scotland, Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum, Cowal churches (of all denominations), Argyll and the Isles Tourism Cooperative.