



**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC214

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90268)

**Taken into State care:** 1887 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2013

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# ST NINIAN'S CAVE



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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# ST NINIAN'S CAVE

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## SYNOPSIS

St Ninian's Cave is located in a cliff face above the pebbly beach of Port Castle Bay, 300m NW of Physgill Glen and 3 miles SSW of Whithorn. Seven crosses of early form are cut into the rock face on its west side. A variety of stone memorials and crosses found at the site in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century have long been removed to the museum at **Whithorn Priory**. The cave is traditionally regarded as that used by the early 5<sup>th</sup>-century St Ninian as a retreat, where he 'studied heavenly wisdom with a devoted mind in a cave of horrible blackness' (*Miracula Nynie Episcopi* (8<sup>th</sup> century)). It clearly became a place of pilgrimage thereafter, a role it continues to perform to this day.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview:

- **c. 400 AD** – St Ninian establishes a monastery at Whithorn.
- **7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century** – the oldest surviving crosses are carved on the cave's rock face, most probably by pilgrims visiting the cave believed to have been used by St Ninian as a retreat from his monastery at **Whithorn**.
- **1871** – an incised cross is discovered on the wall of the cave. Further discoveries of crosses follow soon thereafter.
- **1882** – the first Ancient Monuments Act passes into law. Shortly after, Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers is appointed the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments.
- **1884 & 1886** – excavations are carried out by Sir Herbert Maxwell of Monreith, MP, at the cave, during which numerous loose stone memorials and crosses are discovered.
- **1887** – Pitt Rivers visits the cave with Sir Herbert Maxwell and sketches it. He adds the site to his 'Schedule' of Ancient Monuments, and the property passes into state care.
- **1950** – C A Ralegh Radford, an eminent early Christian archaeologist, conducts further excavations at the cave.
- **1960s** – all the remaining loose stone memorials and crosses are removed to the safety of the museum at **Whithorn Priory**.
- **1972** – closing scenes in the cult film, *The Wicker Man* (starring Edward Woodward, Christopher Lee and Britt Ekland), are shot at St Ninian's Cave.
- **2005** – the museum at **Whithorn Priory** is comprehensively refurbished and all the early Christian stones, including the eighteen removed from St Ninian's Cave, are redisplayed and reinterpreted to the public.

### Archaeological Overview:

The cave was first excavated in 1884, following a rock fall at the cave entrance, and again in 1886, both supervised by Sir Herbert Maxwell of Monreith, MP, a leading light in the movement to give better protection to the nation's archaeological and architectural heritage. C A Ralegh Radford, the eminent early Christian archaeologist, carried out further investigations in 1950, following on from his work at **St Ninian's Chapel** and **Chapel Finian**.

These excavations revealed internal stone walls and pavements, together with the disturbed and undated burials of an elderly adult and two children. Early medieval carved stones were also found, to complement those incised onto the rock faces (see [Architectural Overview](#) below). Most of the eighteen excavated stones were found built into a wall of post-medieval date, whilst others were found lying loose in the interior of the cave or at its mouth. All these loose stones were subsequently removed to the safety of the museum at **Whithorn Priory**, where they have recently been attractively redisplayed and re-interpreted; for further details see the ICS for **Whithorn Priory and Museum**.

There is likely to be little else of archaeological interest surviving at the cave.

#### Architectural/Artistic Overview:

St Ninian's Cave is approximately 7m long, 3m high, and almost 3m wide at its mouth. The side walls slope dramatically inwards and upwards, meeting at an acute angle both at the end and at the roof. Due to periodic collapses of the overhanging stone ceiling, the cave is now reduced in size compared to its medieval form, thus reducing its dramatic appearance.

Ten crosses are incised into the rock forming the south (seaward) side of the cave. All but two are carved outside the mouth of the cave. The largest group are 2m from the cave mouth, and another group are 6m beyond; they would all have been within the cave originally, before the numerous rock falls took their toll. The crosses are dated on stylistic grounds to around the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and are the only certain evidence for the use of the cave in early Historic times, along with the free-standing sculpture subsequently removed to **Whithorn Priory**.

Of the ten incised crosses, eight are Latin crosses, pocked in outline. Seven of them, all carved on the same section of cave wall, have the same form of cross with expanded terminals, a central dot and waisted shaft. The eighth is of simpler, straight-limbed form. The two remaining incised crosses are simple crosses with barred terminals.

#### Social Overview:

St Ninian's Cave is a popular visitor attraction, chiefly because of its association with St Ninian (see [Spiritual Overview](#) below). However, the cave's association with the cult film, *The Wicker Man*, released in 1973 – the closing scenes were filmed at the cave - has since added a new audience of visitors.

#### Spiritual Overview:

St Ninian's Cave clearly played a significant spiritual role in medieval times, chiefly as a focus for pilgrims heading for the shrine of St Ninian at **Whithorn**. This aspect of popular religion persists to this day, with many visitors using the place to reconnect with medieval spirituality. This is evident in the large numbers of crosses (most made from twigs, with others from larger pieces of wood), and rough cross-incised beach pebbles which are continually being left in the cave, along with offerings of coins being left in the rock crevices.

A formal pilgrimage, held under the auspices of the Roman Catholic diocese of Galloway, takes place annually, on the last Sunday in August (St Ninian's festival is actually 16 September). The diocese's website has details and many images.

#### Aesthetic Overview:

St Ninian's Cave itself, it has to be said, is rather unimpressive and lacking in atmosphere, courtesy of the numerous rock falls that have reduced its depth, and thus its gloom. It is now difficult to appreciate the sentiment expressed in the 8<sup>th</sup>-century *Miracula Nynia Episcopi* that this was 'the cave of horrible blackness' in which St Ninian 'studied heavenly wisdom with a devoted mind'.

By contrast, the approach to the cave is an enchanting, exciting and moving experience – beginning with the somewhat dark and claustrophobic walk down the heavily wooded glen (at its best in Springtime with the scent of wild garlic and the sight of the carpet of bluebells), which then surprisingly opens out onto the pebble beach of Port Castle Bay and its seemingly endless expanse of sea and sky. The somewhat difficult walk across the pebbly beach to the cave helps inspire thoughts of the hardship of medieval pilgrimage.

The views out to sea from the beach are stunning, with a particularly fine view of the west side of the Isle of Man predominating; it seems so close you feel you could almost touch it.

#### What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was the cave actually used by St Ninian as a retreat? If not, when did it begin to serve as a place of Christian devotion? The answer may never be known.
- When did the cave become a focus of Christian pilgrimage? It is possible that the various excavations have removed all the evidence to resolve this.
- What was the function of the stone pavement and walling discovered in the excavations? At other caves (eg, King's Cave, Arran, and the Wemyss Caves), there is evidence of non-religious use, such as for a school or light industrial use), but there is as yet no evidence for such use of St Ninian's Cave.

#### ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

##### Key Points

- St Ninian's Cave is a rare example of an early medieval place of religious retreat in Scotland. Such places are poorly understood.
- St Ninian's Cave formed an integral part of the liturgical landscape of pilgrimage to the shrine of St Ninian at **Whithorn**. These included chapels (eg **Chapel Finian**), crosses (eg, **Laggangairn Standing Stones**), retreats (**St Ninian's Cave**) and wells (eg, Chapel Finian and Wells of the Rees).
- St Ninian's Cave played a part in the formative years of monument protection in Britain, through its association with Lt-Gen Pitt Rivers, the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments, one of the pioneers of monument conservation.

Associated Properties:

(*other locally related pilgrimage places*) – Barhobble Chapel?; **Chapel Finian;**  
**Glenluce Abbey; Laggangairn Standing Stones; St Ninian's**  
**Chapel; Whithorn Priory**

(*some other places seen as retreats for early Scottish saints*) – Bass Rock; **Eilean**  
**Mor;** St Columba's Cave, Kintyre

Keywords:

Early Christian; medieval; crosses; carved stones; pilgrimage; St Ninian; Pitt  
Rivers; Raleigh Radford

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