

St Martin's Cross is the only carved stone cross on Iona which survives intact from the 8th century. You can see it still standing outside Iona Abbey.

INVESTIGATING ST MARTIN'S CROSS, IONA

Information for Teachers





Iona Abbey

The tiny island of Iona was the heart of the Scottish Church in its earliest years. In AD 563 St Columba and a small group of followers arrived from Ireland and established a monastery on the island. This grew into a noted centre of learning and crafts. Workshops for developing skills such as stone carving were established here. Surviving raids by the Vikings, the monastery flourished but in time was replaced by a Benedictine Abbey. Today Iona Abbey attracts both pilgrims and tourists who are drawn to its peace and beauty.

A few of the remarkable high stone crosses carved over a thousand years ago can still be seen on the island today. One of these is St John's Cross, dating from the 8th or 9th century. The original stood outside Iona Abbey but is thought to have collapsed soon after being constructed. The pieces can be seen in the Abbey Museum, and a replica stands outside the Abbey.

Practical information

- Location: Outside Iona Abbey, Isle of Iona, PA76 6SQ
- Information and Museum opening times:
Tel. 01681 700512.
- Access and parking: Coaches may be parked at the ferry terminal at Fionnphort, Isle of Mull. Ferry crossing takes around 10 minutes. Walk 10 minutes to Iona Abbey.
- Toilets: Accessible toilets available.
- Risk Assessment: This is the responsibility of the teacher in charge.
- Recommended adult: child ratio: 1:10

How to use this resource

This resource is designed to enable teachers or parent helpers carry out a simple investigation of St Martin's Cross. The activities focus on the original stone, which stands outside Iona Abbey. Simple discussion points focus pupils' attention on what they can see and encourage pupils to interpret this evidence. We recommend that you also spend time looking at the other carved stones around the Abbey and in the Abbey Museum.

This activity guide should be used in collaboration with the much larger full-colour booklet *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009. This is available free of charge to teachers from Historic Scotland and can also be downloaded from the Historic Scotland website. This booklet sets St Martin's Cross in the context of other Early Christian stones and provides a wealth of additional suggestions for pre-visit, on-site and post-visit activities.

Call **0131 668 8793/8736** or visit www.historic-scotland.gov.uk for more details.

Suggested activities

The following activities are a few suggestions for additional practical activities relating to the St Martin's Cross which may be carried out on-site or back at school.

- Estimate or measure the dimensions of the stone or so that back at school you can recreate a life sized or scale drawing or model of it.
- Draw one element of a pattern from the stone. Get pupils to look closely at the lines which appear to 'weave' over and under each other. Back at school pupils can use these drawings as a basis for scale drawings of the stone or to create their own designs based on 'knot work' like this.
- Using clay or other modelling material, pupils could design their own stones with 'carved' patterns or images.

Further reading

- Historic Scotland Education, *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009.
- Anna Ritchie and Ian Fisher, *Iona Abbey and Nunnery*, Historic Scotland 2004.



Did you know...

St Martin's Cross was carved out of a single piece of stone.

Background information

This may be read aloud to pupils either before the visit or on site.

- This stone was carved more than 1200 years ago by craftsmen who worked at the abbey here. It's called St Martin's Cross.
- The first abbey here was set up by St Columba, who came to Iona from Ireland in the year AD 563. He set up a religious community here and taught people about Christianity.
- After he died, many people used to come to Iona to visit his grave. St Martin's Cross was just one of many crosses which showed these visitors the way to the abbey. Only a few crosses are left today – how many can you see?
- As well as showing the way to the abbey, the stone crosses were places where people would stop and pray as they passed by.
- St Martin's Cross is the only one left which is still in one piece.



Modern-day pilgrims to Iona gather round St. Martin's Cross



The carved stone ball shapes are called bosses

Discussion points

Teacher prompt

Have a quick look at the cross. Look for a symbol or pattern that you like. Show it to a friend.

Pupil responses

Pupils' own responses.

Look carefully at the stone. How many different pieces of stone do you think the craftsmen used to make the cross?

Cross made from one huge piece of stone – greyish green.
Base carved from another piece of stone - pinkish.

What colours are the stone?

Look at the side of the cross facing the abbey.

What kind of patterns can you see?

Circles and curves; lots of carved ball shapes.

The carved stone ball shapes are called 'bosses'.

Are there any carved people on this side?

No people.

Can you see any animals?

Snakes.

There is a stone circle connecting the arms of the cross. What do you think this is for?

Could be for decoration or it could be to make it stronger – to support the arms.

Look at the sides of the cross. Can you see slots in the end of the cross arms? What do you think these were for?

Something slotted into these – perhaps wooden or metal decorations to make the cross look more beautiful.

Look at the other side. What makes this side different from the first side?

Shows people.

Is anything the same?

More carved bosses.

This side shows scenes from Bible stories. They are quite worn away now, but perhaps you can make out some of them.

Look for:

- Mary with baby Jesus.
- Daniel in the lion's den.
- Abraham about to sacrifice his son – you can see his raised sword.
- David playing a harp, and a musician playing pipes.
- David about to attack the giant Goliath with his catapult.
- In the centre of the cross.
- Below Mary.
- Below Daniel.
- Below Abraham.
- Below David.



Illustration highlights scenes from the Bible



The decorated cross shaft shows scenes from the Bible

What do you think these carvings were for?

Might have been used to remind people of the stories and inspire them
Might have been used as 'pictures' to go with preaching by the monks.

Why do you think the pictures have become so worn?

Wind and weather.

Do you think the stone should be moved inside for protection?

Pupils' own responses.

Which side of the stone do you like best?

Pupils' own responses.

Which side of the stone do you think is the front or main side?

Pupils' own responses.

