



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC188

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90071)

Taken into State care: 1952 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CHAPEL FINIAN



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CHAPEL FINIAN

SYNOPSIS

Chapel Finian (or Chapel Finnian) lies beside the A747 coast road on the east side of Luce Bay, 5½ miles north-west of Port William. The property consists of the low stone footings of a rectangular, unicameral building, measuring 7m by 4.5m externally, orientated east to west and interpreted as a chapel. It lies within a low stone enclosure wall. A stone-lined well, known as Chipper (Tobar) Finnan, lies in the south-west corner of the site.

The site was archaeologically investigated in 1950 and dated to the 10th or 11th centuries. The chapel may have been associated with a probable monastery founded by St Finnian at Elrig, 2 miles inland. St Finnian (or Finnbar) was educated at **Whithorn** and died about AD 580.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **c. 580** – Finnian (or Finnbar) of Magh Bile (Movilla), Co. Down, dies. Educated at **Whithorn**, he returned to his native Ireland and taught the young Columba.
- **10th/11th century** – Chapel Finian is built beside Luce Bay, probably to aid pilgrims en route from Ireland to a monastery founded by St Finnian at Elrig, a little inland from the chapel.
- **1684** – Andrew Symson, in his *Description of Galloway*, describes the site as ‘a little ruinous chapel call’d by the country people Chapel Finzian’.
- **1950** – C. A. Raleigh Radford, an eminent early Christian archaeologist, directs an excavation at the site, on behalf of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History & Antiquarian Society. The excavated remains are thereafter consolidated and laid out for public view.
- **1952** – Chapel Finian comes into state care.
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Archaeological Overview:

The archaeological excavations in 1950, directed by the eminent early Christian archaeologist C. A. Raleigh Radford, revealed the foundations and lower stone walls of a mortared rectangular stone chapel, or oratory, measuring 6.7m by 4.1m internally. The structure lay within a tightly enclosed drystone enclosure wall defining a sub-rectangular area and entered near the west end of the south wall. The well at the south-west corner of the site was not investigated.

The form of the structure, and parallels with similar buildings in Ireland, suggested to Raleigh Radford that it was a chapel built in the 10th or 11th century AD. The fact that the enclosure wall was of drystone construction also raised the possibility that it might predate the chapel, and that the present chapel may not have been the first on the site.

The excavations were mostly confined to the chapel structure, and the possibility exists that a priest's house and burial ground remain to be discovered within the enclosure.

Archaeological excavation took place on 19.1.10 as part of the PIC minor archaeological works call out contract (HSCO – 90071-2010-01), in advance of a new layby. Inspection of a drain and excavation of a trial trench located to the south-west of the site, revealed nothing of archaeological interest.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The simple, rectangular, unicameral stone structure was entered through a door at the west end of the south wall, whose door jambs were formed of long upright stones. The foundations of the structure also incorporated long stones set on edge, a feature noted also at the recently excavated chapel site of Barhobble, near Airylick (Elrig), a little inland from Chapel Finian. The outer walls were stone buttressed, one at each corner, with a single central buttress midway along the side walls, suggesting a roof of some substance, possibly stone vaulted. The presence of such buttresses is unusual in early Christian chapels (Barhobble had just one midway along the north wall).

The internal walls were evidently originally plastered, and the furnishings included a stone bench, with wooden facings, against the east part of the south wall.

Social Overview:

Other than being a minor visitor attraction, Chapel Finian currently plays no social role.

Spiritual Overview:

Chapel Finian clearly played an important spiritual role in its heyday, but what spiritual role it plays today is difficult to determine without recourse to survey. It is possible that the well, known as Chipper (Tobar) Finnan may still be perceived as having 'holy' qualities, but the absence of coins within it suggests otherwise.

Aesthetic Overview:

The monument lies close to the raised shingle beach fringing Luce Bay, with just an isolated uninhabited cottage nearby. The location easily evokes images of pilgrims offering prayers of thanksgiving for their safe arrival by boat at the spot.

The view to the west, out over Luce Bay, is attractive, offering splendid views of the Isle of Man and the Mull of Galloway.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there an earlier chapel at the site, and could it date back as far as the time of the historical Finian in the 6th century?

- What else lay within the small enclosure? Further archaeological excavation could well answer the question as to whether the chapel was accompanied by a priest's house and burial ground.
- What was the precise nature of the chapel's internal fixtures and fittings? It may well be that the 1950 excavations have removed what little evidence of these remained.
- Did the chapel continue to have a proprietorial or parochial function in the later medieval period, and when did it finally go out of use?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Chapel Finian is a rare example in Scotland of a pre 12th-century chapel surviving as an above ground architectural monument.
- The chapel is one of only a handful of monuments surviving within the spiritual landscape of pilgrimage associated with **Whithorn**. Its possible association with St Finnian, as well as St Ninian, is of added interest.
- The chapel site still has the archaeological potential to inform a wider understanding of the development of early church building within a stone tradition.

Associated Properties:

(*other local places associated with the cult of St Finnian*) – Airylick (Elrig);

Barhobble Chapel; **Whithorn Priory**

(*other holy wells in the vicinity*) – Wells of the Rees

Keywords:

early Christian; chapel; holy well; pilgrimage; St Finnian; St Ninian; Ralegh Radford

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