

A very pleasing country church

John R Hume reflects on the place and history of a church in the Mull of Kintyre.

ALONG the west side of Kintyre, the long arm of Argyll which reaches down towards Northern Ireland is a series of rural parishes.

At the south end of this peninsula is the Mull of Kintyre. The village of Clachan, where the subject of this article is situated, is further north. Kilcalmonell is the church for the northmost of three parishes linked for ministry. All are sandwiched between the rocky spine of the peninsula and the breakers of the Atlantic Ocean. There is nothing between them and North America. One of these parishes, Gigha and Cara, is an island group off the west coast, linked to the mainland by a ferry. The others are Killean and Kilchenzie (whose church at A'Chleit was the subject of an article in *Life and Work* in January 2011) and Kilcalmonell, whose church is in the small estate village of Clachan.

I am prompted to write about this church by the news in the October issue of *Life and Work* that the Rev Scott Burton has been translated (wonderful word) from Perth: St Matthew's to these apparently remote parishes. Until the early modern period, however, sea transport linked the western seaboard of Argyll with northern Ireland and other areas bordering the Irish Sea, and with the long sea-lochs and islands to the north of Kintyre. The whole of this part of Scotland was converted to Christianity by Irish missionaries from the 6th century. It became the Kingdom of Dalriada in about 500AD, and a distinctive Gaelic-speaking Christian culture developed. This was

characterised by small, simple chapels, and by carved stones of a variety of types. The Gaelic culture survived the integration of Dalriada into the kingdom of Alba with the kingdom of the Picts and the Scots north of the Forth in about 844AD, and indeed persisted into the 20th century.

The early Christian character of Gaelic Kintyre can still be seen in stones marked with crosses and by later small single-celled chapels, distinctly different from most of those found further east. The early Gaelic heritage of the area is also evident in the abundance of parish names beginning with Kil- (from the Gaelic cille' meaning a church). Relics of later Gaelic Christianity include distinctive later mediaeval tapering carved grave markers and ruined churches, notably those at Killean and Kilchenzie. The parish of Kilcalmonell was defined in the 12th century, centred on an existing church dedicated to St Colman of Lan Eala. Until the Reformation in 1560 its priest was a 'prebend' of the Cathedral of Lismore, committed to engagement in services there. The revenues of the parish were allocated to Paisley Abbey. The parish of Kilcalmonell was linked to that of

Kilberry before the Reformation, with two churches. This arrangement lasted until 1965 when Kilberry was linked with Tarbert, and Kilcalmonell with Skipness. Skipness was later linked with Saddell, and in about 2007 Kilcalmonell was linked with Killean and Kilchenzie. The present three-way linkage dates from about 2013.

Kilcalmonell church is a very pleasing country church on an ancient site. In its churchyard are early Christian, mediaeval and post-Reformation monuments characteristic of this part of Argyll. The church building dates from about 1760. Its rectangular windows are typical of that date. It was enlarged in 1828, probably by raising the wall-heads to accommodate a three-sided gallery, and inserting the present tall windows flanking the pulpit. The interior was rearranged in 1878 and refurnished in about 1900. Kintyre is not visited as often as it merits; if you go there do not miss the fascinating parish churches and their evidence of a long Christian history. ■

