



Arisaig Old Parish Church and Burial Ground

The roofless medieval parish church dedicated to St Maelrubha stands in a burial ground immediately to the SE of St Mary's Roman Catholic Church and manse. The site slopes gently from NE to SW and commands an open view over Loch nan Ceall.

Heavily restored, the church is rectangular on plan and now measures up to 14.2m from ENE to WSW by 5.8m transversely within walls that are 1m thick, except at the ENE end where the thickness is only 0.7m. The WSW gable has been modified and cement-capped, and now stands to an internal height of 6.4m, narrowing above the height of the side-walls. The ENE end is a modern reconstruction standing only up to 1m high. The side-walls, which stand to a maximum height of 2.8m at the WSW end, have been made level and are capped with cement. The masonry is of local, roughly dressed boulders with pinnings bonded with lime, though much of this is obscured by modern cement pointing. Both an external harl and an internal render are visible in places. The doorway is set at the WSW end of the SSE wall. The chancel was lit by two opposing rectangular slit windows with broad splayed jambs, while a larger and square third window, perhaps inserted, is set into the WSW gable. The margins throughout are plain, but two re-used stones have been incorporated into the reconstructed masonry. The first, a dressed stone with a check and socket, is set in the outside of the SW corner close to the wall-head; the second is set into the ENE end of the NNW wall and bears the initials 'AM'. The interior of the church is taken up with burials, some of which are described below. In addition, a neatly carved stone bowl, probably a late-medieval font or stoup, has been set into the window recess in the NNW wall. It measures 0.59m in diameter overall by about 0.14m in thickness, and the bowl measures 0.37m in diameter and 0.11m in depth. There is also evidence that at least one small burial enclosure once stood outside against the NNW side of the church.

Little is known of the history of the site, although a parson of 'Arasech' is recorded as early as AD 1250 (Orig. Paroch. Scot. 2 (1), 200). The present church may be of 16th century date and this coincides with the first documentary records of a church known as 'Kilmoroy in Arisik' in 1517 (ibid). Lying within Clanranald territory, the church is traditionally attributed to John Moidartach, 8th of Clanranald, or his son Allan, but is possible that the church was already in existence before their supremacy. A competing story that the church was built by Allan nan Creach, 12th of



Cameron, seems less likely given that the land was not within his territory (Blundell 1911, 359; Rixon 1982). The parish of Arisaig was combined with Elanfinan, or Sunart, and Kilchoan to form Ardnamurchan sometime after the Reformation, but the precise date of the abandonment of the building is not known. It was certainly a roofless ruin by the late 18th century (Stat. Acct. XX, 287). The dedication of the church is given as Mary in many secondary sources but it is now accepted as Maelrubha (Reeves 1862, 291-2).

The principal restoration of the church seems to have occurred after 1923, since photographs taken by M E M Donaldson before that date (Donaldson 1923; Collection ref. IN 4266, IN 4289) show the WSW gable with a step to take the rafters, a horizontal recess for a roof collar, and a lack of cement pointing.

Macdonald of Morar Burial Aisle

Attached to the WSW end of the church there is a chapel or burial aisle, which, but for the presence of the gable window and misalignment of the plan, might be taken as part of the original design. Set at a slight angle to the main axis of the church, it measures 4m from WSW to ENE by 2.75m transversely, within walls 0.75m in thickness. The SWW gable has been reduced to the height of the side-walls which have been restored and capped at the same height as those of the church. The former roof-line is marked by a series of coping stones set into the church gable. The aisle is entered through a doorway at the WSW end of the SSE wall, above which is an arched recess, possibly for an armorial panel. Both the WSW gable and the SSE wall are pierced by slit windows with broadly splayed jambs, similar to those in the church. In the SSE wall there is also a low recess containing a simple oval bowl or stoup, which is accessible from the exterior through a circular opening. A round-arched burial recess is set into the NNW wall, the external face of which projects 0.2m, with rounded corners and coping. The dressings of the recess are all formed of yellow sandstone, not found elsewhere in the church, providing the only evidence that it is later in date than the aisle.

Within the recess, and presumably inserted at a later date, there is a small panel formed of two freestone elements. The upper bears the date 16[4]1 and initials [M] A R G M. The lower panel contains a Macdonald armorial. Centred in the upper part is an eagle, flanked on the dexter side by a hand grasping a wheel-cross. On the sinister side is a lion rampant. In the lower dexter



corner is a galley, and a triple-towered castle fills the sinister corner. Centred in the lower part there is a salmon naiant. The armorial bears close comparison with another at Kildonan, Eigg, also dated 1641 (Digital image SC 1564691), the famous example from Howmore, South Uist (RCAHMS 1928, 106), and with others of the Macdonald family (cf. RCAHMS 1980, 145-6, 259).

Within the interior of the room is a large table-tomb borne on carved feet which bears the inscription:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF / SIMON MACDONALD MAJOR IN THE 92 / REG OF FOOT/ HE DEPARTED
THIS LIFE / IN HIS HOUSE OF MORAR THE [. . .] OF MARCH 1800/ IN THE 41 YEAR OF HIS AGE / THIS
STONE IS PLACED BY / [. . .] EMELIA MCDONALD/ HIS WIDOW / IN TOKEN OF THE REGARD/ SHE BEARS
TO HIS MEMORY

Above the burial recess there is a monument which reads:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY / OF / AMELIA / WIDOW OF SIMON MACDONALD OF MORAR / OF THEIR
DAUGHTER ELIZA, AND SONS / JAMES, SIMON AND JOHN. / THE SORROW OF A MOTHER / BORNE OF
PATIENCE TRULY CHRISTIAN / AND THE SAD FATE OF HER FAMILY / ARE HERE RECORDED. /R.I.P. / JAM
POSUIT 1843

Beneath the inscription there is an armorial shield bearing, quarterly, 1st, a lion rampant; 2nd a hand couped holding a cross-crosslet; 3rd an oak tree; 4th a galley, sail furled, salmon naiant (?) at its base. A castle of three towers surmounts the shield. The Macdonalds of Morar were a branch of the Clanranalds from the 16th until the 19th century, latterly resident at Traigh House (MacDonald and MacDonald 1904,251-8; Miers 2008). Subsequent owners of the estate are also buried in the adjacent cemetery.

Late medieval carved stones

Eight late-medieval carved stones are known from Arisaig, with most of them are now housed in the roofless church. A photograph from the 1920s (IN 4265) shows how one group had been set in a cement panel at the E end of the church, although they have now been removed to the modern church. The numbering used here follows Blundell (1911). Numbers 1, 5 and 6 were not

accessible on the date of visit and for these descriptions have been compiled using existing sources.

- (1) Two fragments of a slab with a decorative band of roundels and lozenges, within which are two canopied niches separated by a sword. Within the right-hand niche there is an ecclesiastic wearing Eucharistic vestments and holding a chalice with both hands, while the left-hand niche formerly contained a crucifixion scene, now detached and presumably lost (Rixon 1982). The low-pointed mitre worn by the ecclesiastic is of an early type (Steer and Bannerman 1977, 30).

Images: IN 4265; SC 1570282; SC 1570267.

Refs: Lumsden 1884; Blundell 1911 No.1; Donaldson 1923; Rixon 1982.

- (2) The fractured remains of a late-medieval grave-slab bordered by a margin with widely spaced roundels and lozenges, measuring 1.78m in length and 0.37m broad at the head. The upper panel has a foliated cross above a panel showing an archer and three deer. Below this are the hilt and pommel of a sword with an angled quillon ending in a quatrefoil ornament and, to the right, another animal, possibly a horse.

Images: SC 1570270, SC1570280-281.

Refs: Lumsden 1884. Blundell 1911 No. 2

- (3) A tapered slab, 1.6m in length and 0.37m in breadth at the head. Set within a plain border, the upper panel bears a foliate cross set above a sword flanked by plant-scrolls and at least one animal. The sword has angled quillons ending in quatrefoil ornament. The stone is now the NNE of three carved slabs fixed against the inner face of the WSW gable of the church.

Image: SC 1570279.

Refs: Blundell No. 3

- (4) The lower part of a tapered slab, measuring at least 0.5m in length by 0.38m in breadth and 0.07m in thickness. The decoration within two roll mouldings is a simple and poorly executed interlace.



Image: SC 1570286.

Ref: Blundell 1911 No.4

- (5) A small fragment decorated with plant scrolls within a border.

Ref: Lumsden 1884, Blundell 1911 No. 5

- (6) Two small irregular fragments. The first depicts the waist and arms of an archer wearing a plaid or kilt with a belt end, holding a long bow facing to the left. The second shows an emaciated figure above a panel that features a dog chasing a deer.

Image: IN 4265; SC 1570268.

Ref: Blundell 1911 No. 6

- (7) A tapered slab with the right side slightly convex, 1.63m long and 0.43m broad at the head. Set within two roll mouldings, the upper part of the stone shows a much eroded foliate cross above a sword flanked by plant-scrolls. The stone is now the SSE of three carved slabs fixed against the inner face of the WSW gable of the church.

Image: SC 1570278.

- (8) A tapered slab, 1.59m long and 0.43m broad at the head. A single roll moulding forms a border around the edge of the slab, whilst another defines an upper and lower panel. The upper panel depicts a foliate cross, the lower a sword behind which are animals and plant-scrolls. The sword has angled quillons ending in quatrefoil ornament. The stone is now the central of three carved slabs fixed against the inner face of the WSW gable of the church.

Image: SC 1570277.

Burial ground

The burial ground, which is enclosed within a 19th century wall, has been expanded to the SE, while its modern replacement stands further downhill to the S. Among the memorials in the burial ground there is a slate headstone dated 1768 which records the death of a Macdonald tacksmen of Ardnafuaran. This was also reputed the burial place of Alexander Macdonald (d. c.1770), the



Clanranald bard (Macdonald and Macdonald 1904, 579-589), who is commemorated by a bronze plaque erected in 1927. Among a large number of 19th and 20th century monuments, the most notable include those of successive owners of the Arisaig Estate: Francis D P Astley (1825-1863), Francis D Astley (1853-1880, see NM68NE 34), Gertrude Susan Nicholson née Astley (c.1850-1920) and Sir Arthur William Nicholson (d.1832). There are also eight graves commemorating servicemen from World War 2. Six of these were from H.M.S. Curacoa, which was sunk in a collision with R.M.S. Queen Mary on 2nd October 1942.

Visited by HES Survey and Recording (GFG, ATW) 7 September 2017.