

The Bute Museum Carved Stone Collection

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Summary

The Bute Museum houses an impressive collection of Early Christian and Mediaeval carved stones. Until recently, some of these stones were in storage due to lack of facilities to display them. It was decided to review the arrangements and in particular to find a way of displaying the Inchmarnock Cross - a project which was close to the heart of Dorothy Marshall.

The Inchmarnock Cross

The Inchmarnock Cross was a real problem because it is a heavy stone, carved on both sides and broken in two, with possibly a third missing piece (Marshall 1990). It was also in need of conservation work. After much discussion it was decided to have the stone put into a cross-shaped mount with a division which would both bear the weight and suggest the location of the possible missing piece. The cross was conserved and cleaned before it was lifted on to specially shaped balsa-wood mounts which would help to absorb the weight evenly. Clips of stainless steel were made to hold the cross in position and spotlights placed to highlight the contours of the stone. The finished display was designed and built by Eric Jarvie.

The Rothesay Stone

Much more extensive conservation work was required on the Rothesay Stone. This stone originally came from St Mary's Chapel and was displayed at Rothesay Castle for many years before finally coming to the Museum. The years of weathering had taken their toll and we were advised that this stone was in danger of losing the whole carved surface if it was not attended to. It had been displayed in a vertical position, bolted to a backing board which in turn was nailed to the floor. The preservation work was undertaken by Jonathan Kemp, stone conservator, who had to work with the stone in its upright position because it was in too delicate a state to move. He injected an acrylic resin behind the surfaces of the carving to fill the voids and then the stone was



Photo 1: The St Blanes Stone.

steam cleaned. It then took six strong volunteers to shift the stone to the plinth constructed for it. It is now displayed in a horizontal position which will help preserve it and which will also allow the intricate carving on the edges to be fully appreciated.

The St Blanes Stone

A recent addition to the Museum collection is an Early Mediaeval carved stone from St Blanes Chapel (see photo 1). It is 75 cms by 25 cms by 5 cms and is decorated on one side only. It is divided into two panels. The upper panel depicts a horseman carrying a spear and in front of his face is what appears to be a drinking horn. The lower panel is decorated with diagonal checks.

This stone was recorded at the turn of the century by both Hewison and Romilly Allen. However, the stone could not be located when a recent survey was being carried out at St Blanes. It was eventually found, under several centimetres of soil, with the help of a plan of the burial ground from the Museum archives. The stone was broken into three pieces (it was already in this state when recorded by Hewison in 1893). Historic Scotland lifted the stone and took it to Edinburgh for conservation work. They returned it on long term loan to the Bute Museum. It is now on display in the recently re-organised carved stone case which was designed and fitted out by Charles Murray.

The McAllister Stone

Permission has been given to move the McAllister stone from the High Kirk graveyard to the Museum. This stone is also suffering from exposure to the elements, and a repair undertaken by Rev Hewison at the end of last century is showing its age. The stone will be removed from the graveyard under Jonathan Kemp's supervision, and will be taken to the Museum to be repaired, conserved and put on display in a protected environment.

Further plans

At the time of writing (March 1996), the first phase of the carved stone project has been completed. The second phase, about to be started, includes an increase in the display area by the opening up of the bottom of the carved stone case and the renovation of a smaller case to display the collection of church plate, communion tokens, *etc.*, formerly housed in that area of the gallery.

The carved stone project has been an enormous undertaking, and its success so far is a reflection of the huge amount of work put in by the volunteers from the Buteshire Natural History Society.

References

Marshall, D N, 1990: Carved Stone Cross from Inchmarnock, *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, Vol XXIII (1990).

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