



HISTORIC SCOTLAND  
ALBA AOSMHOR

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# IONA ABBEY

LARGE PRINT AUDIO GUIDE SCRIPT





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## **1. Welcome to Iona Abbey**

**MUSIC:** Gaelic song, *Na Libh O Ho I*

**VOICE:**

*'What is the magic in the name Iona which lures men and women from the far corners of the earth to the tiny rocky island off the west coast of Scotland? Surely not the scenery, for there is more magnificence on the mainland of Scotland. It must be something deeper. Something knocking on the heart which speaks of mystery and holiness, of dreams and truths which have outlived time....'*

**NARRATOR:**

Iona Abbey: a sacred place with an extraordinary story.

The abbey was founded in 563 by St Columba, also known as Colum Cille. It soon became a famed centre of Christianity, a place where heaven and earth touched, a place of high learning and fine arts – a place of firsts. It was also a place of pilgrimage. At a time when religion was at the heart of everyday life, going on pilgrimage was an opportunity to smooth your passage into heaven.

Iona Abbey's own history was anything but smooth. Over the centuries, its fortunes rose and fell. But even through Viking raids and revolutions of faith, the abbey remained a

spiritual hub. That spirituality continues today: an active religious community holds services in the church built where Columba's first church stood more than 1,400 [fourteen hundred] years ago. Pilgrims from around the world continue to make their way here. And scholars are only now fully realising the tremendous importance of this holy place.

On your tour, you'll visit the key areas of this sacred site, including the abbey church and the famous shrine of St Columba. Since Iona Abbey is still a place of worship, you'll notice that some areas are closed to the public. And please watch your step, as surfaces aren't always even.

You can listen to the stops on your tour in any order by entering the numbers as you come to them. It takes about an hour to listen to everything but bear in mind that doesn't include the time taken to move between stops. And remember to leave some extra time if you want to explore the abbey museum.

Each stop is marked with a numbered headphones icon on a panel. To access a stop, simply enter the number on the keypad. And if you'd like further instructions on using your player, key in 99 at any time.

Welcome to Iona Abbey. We hope you enjoy your visit.

## **99. Using Your Player (IRIS only)**

### ***NARRATOR:***

It's easy to use your player.

To listen to a stop, simply enter the number you see on the panel into the keypad. The number will appear on the screen and the track will begin. Don't worry if you enter a wrong number. The screen will clear itself, allowing you to re-enter the number you want.

You can adjust the volume on your player by using the two buttons at the bottom of the keypad. You can also pause, play, fast-forward or rewind a track by using the buttons on the side of your player.

If you'd like additional help, press 99 at any time to hear these instructions again. Or ask a member of staff. They'll be happy to lend a hand.

## **2. A Place of Pilgrimage**

**MUSIC:** *The Harpie Set*

***NARRATOR:***

It's the 1400s, a sunny day, although the wind is whistling around the abbey buildings and high crosses. Today is the ninth of June — St Columba's feast day. All around you, pilgrims have journeyed from afar to Iona Abbey to pray near Columba's holy relics. They have come here for worship, but the area outside the abbey church is alive with excitement.

SFX: hustle and bustle, children playing and laughing, conversations in Gaelic, French, Lowland Scots, etc.

Pilgrims greet one another, exchanging travel stories...

***VOICE:***

*Fresh bread and ale! Badges blessed by Columba! Holy water!*

SFX: coins clinking

***NARRATOR:***

... vendors sell refreshments and souvenirs...

SFX: bell ringing, sound of pilgrims murmuring prayers and of course, people pray.

SFX: all fade

Just as you've come here today, medieval pilgrims arrived by boat and then followed a set path, visiting burial grounds, chapels, and places associated with St Columba's many miracles. The cobbled road in front of you is known as Sràid nam Marbh [pronounced straj-nam marav], or the 'Street of the Dead'. You can only see a short section of it today but it once stretched all the way to the landing point at Martyr's Bay. Along this processional way, pilgrims approached the holy of holies: St Columba's Shrine. The road also linked the abbey with its main burial ground, Reilig Odhrain [pronounced ray-lig oran], to your right. Generations of abbots and monks are buried there, as are the great lords and warriors whose bodies were brought here to Iona, carried along the Street of the Dead before being laid to rest.

Reilig Odhrain, or Oran's Burial Ground, is named after one of Columba's original followers. It lies just outside the monastery boundary, in-keeping with ancient Roman custom, in which the dead were kept at arm's length. The Street of the Dead may have imitated the Appian Way leading to ancient Rome, which was lined with important monuments and tombs.



Medieval sources claim that early Scottish kings were buried in Reilig Odhrain. Although evidence for this is uncertain, we do know that the great and the good of Gaelic society were interred there from the 1100s, buried beneath impressive carved slabs in that sacred soil. You'll see some of their grave slabs lying in the cemetery, while the best are preserved in the abbey museum, church and cloister.

Some of those important people were buried after elaborate ceremonies in the stone chapel, known as St Oran's, which you can see standing in Reilig Odhrain. Built in the 1100s, it served as the burial chapel for the MacDonald Lords of the Isles, powerful chiefs who ruled over this part of Scotland. You can explore the chapel and the cemetery after your tour.

### 3. Tòrr an Aba ('Hill of the Abbot')

**MUSIC:** *Altus Prosator*, Kilmartin Sessions

***NARRATOR:***

If you were on this spot 1,450 years ago and looked at this hill — known as Tòrr an Aba or 'Hill of the Abbot' — you'd have noticed a small wooden hut on top. That's where St Columba wrote his great works. A monk of extraordinary talents, Columba was known as a prophet, scholar, scribe, statesman, composer and administrator. Archaeologists believe they've found traces of his writing hut beneath the surface at the top of the hill.

Columba was born in Ireland in 521 into a royal family of County Donegal. He was given the monastic name Colum Cille or, in Latin, Columba: 'Dove of the Church.' He began religious life as a child, and by his early forties had already founded several monasteries in Ireland.

There are different stories about Columba's arrival on Iona: some say he'd been banished from Ireland; others believe he chose exile. We do know that in 563, Columba and twelve followers — a number symbolic of Christ's twelve disciples — established an abbey here. His intention was

to create the perfect monastery, a new Jerusalem, as close to Heaven as you could get on Earth.

Columba would have watched over his monastery from his writing hut at the top of this hill, which later became one of the stations on the pilgrimage circuit. If you'd like, you can climb the hill to see the views. And to hear more about the monastic complex in Columba's day, enter 30 on your keypad.

## 30. Columba's Monastery

### **NARRATOR:**

From the top of The Hill of the Abbot, you can imagine the view Columba would have had in the 500s: the Isle of Mull, the boats on the Sound of Iona, and the buildings of his monastery. In those days, the structures were most likely of wood and thatch. They included the church, the monks' 'great house'— or dormitory —, the guest house and the scriptorium.

### **VOICE:**

*'In principio erat verbum. In the beginning was the word.'*

### **NARRATOR:**

Christianity was a religion of the Word, and writing was at its heart. Iona's monks established a great scriptorium, where they wrote and illustrated sacred books. Iona produced more texts than any other Celtic monastery, most notably the famous Book of Kells. Created in about 800 [eight hundred], it contained the four Gospels in Latin and was a masterpiece of design, calligraphy and illustration.

The scriptorium and the rest of Columba's monastery were surrounded by a high bank of earth known as the vallum —

an important boundary, separating the secular world from the spiritual.

Take a look at your screen to see a photograph of a surviving section.

Within the vallum, there was a complex system of further boundaries. One eighth-century source – which may have been written on Iona around 800 – lists the rules for who was allowed to enter each area.

**MALE VOICE:**

*‘There ought to be two or three barriers around a holy place: the first which we allow no one at all to enter except priests and nuns; the second, into its streets the crowds of common people, not much given to wickedness, we allow to enter; the third, men who have been guilty of homicide, adulterers and prostitutes, with permission and according to custom, we do not prevent from going within.’*

## 4. The Early Community

### ***NARRATOR:***

Imagine a medieval abbey: Latin chant and the murmur of prayer breaking the peaceful silence. The early monastery on Iona sounded exactly like that — at least, inside the church.

MUSIC: Quicker movements of *Puirt a Beul*

SFX: clanking, voices in Gaelic, cows, pigs

But outside, it was an active, bustling community.

Columba founded his monastery on the idea of worship and work. The monks spent part of their days

SFX: cows, pigs, sheep

tending cows, pigs and sheep. Some monks worked in the fields,

SFX: scything, digging

scything and stacking hay. Many of the brethren were skilled at a wide range of crafts,

SFX: clanking, bellows, furnaces, scratching of quills on vellum

from metal-, glass- and stone-working to the creation of exquisitely decorated manuscripts.

Those expertly crafted items weren't only used on Iona. As the network of Columban churches grew across Scotland and Ireland, Iona's monks equipped them with psalm books, hymnals, and precious altar vessels. By the 700s, Iona was at the cutting edge of scholarship and art — from some of the earliest images of the Virgin and Child to the first high crosses: beautiful objects for the glorification of God.

SFX: hand bell

Then, at least seven times a day, the labours stopped. A hand bell summoned the monks for their most important work: worship in the abbey church.

SFX: prayer or hymn (*Altus Prosator*, Kilmartin Sessions)

The reason we know so much about life at the early monastery is thanks to a biography of St Columba by the seventh-century abbot, Adomnán. Adomnán's own life was a fascinating one. To hear about it, enter 40 on your keypad.

## 40. Adomnán, Abbot of Iona

### **MUSIC: Monk singing early Columban hymn**

#### ***NARRATOR:***

Adomnán was born in around 627, about 30 years after Columba's death. Like his kinsman Columba, he came from Donegal in Ireland. Adomnán led a religious life, and for 25 years served as the ninth abbot of Iona. During that time, he travelled widely throughout Britain and Ireland not only as a religious leader but also as a diplomat. He became known as 'Adomnán the Illustrious'.

Around 690, Adomnán wrote his famous *Life of St Columba*. Combining known facts with popular traditions, Adomnán portrayed Columba as the ideal abbot, a Christ-like figure who predicted the future, turned water into wine, calmed the seas and healed the sick. Adomnán's biography highlighted Columba's holiness — and, by extension, the holiness of Iona. Even today, Adomnán's writings shape the image we have of Columba and his 'fame' as a saint. But in many ways, his work probably tells us more about life here in Adomnán's own time than in Columba's.

Adomnán was also a respected clerical lawyer. In 697, he created the Law of Innocents, for the first time providing



protection for women, children and clergy during war. The emphasis on women and children shows not only Adomnán's revolutionary thinking but a strong connection to Iona's devotion to the cult of the Virgin Mary as the mother of God.

Adomnán died and was buried here on Iona in 704. He was later proclaimed a saint.

## 5. St Martin's Cross

### **NARRATOR:**

For monks and pilgrims alike, this towering cross would have made a dramatic impression. Carved from a single piece of stone, the cross was made in around 750 – and it's been standing on this spot ever since.

Its design may seem familiar: the typical ring-headed 'Celtic cross' seen around Ireland and elsewhere. But high crosses like this one, dedicated to St Martin of Tours, were invented here on Iona. At the end of each arm, you can see the slot where, on special days, decorative mounts covered in gold and jewels were attached. The shafts of the high crosses were carved with distinctive patterns and biblical scenes — repeated in the manuscript illumination and metal working that also flourished here on Iona. The crosses were a ground-breaking way of using art to convey the central messages of Christianity.

### **VOICE:**

*'Let the boundary of a holy place have signs around it. Wherever you find the sign of the cross of Christ, you will do no harm.'*

### **NARRATOR:**

By the 700s, the island of Iona was peppered with high crosses of both timber and stone. Scholars believe that these crosses marked sites associated with miraculous events in Columba's life. The crosses became stations on the pilgrimage route, where pilgrims would pause and pray before arriving at St Columba's shrine.

To the left is another high cross – a replica of the great St John's Cross -and the now-empty base of St Matthew's Cross. You'll be able to explore these masterpieces in the Abbey Museum. Here, though, to learn how to 'read' the carvings on this cross, enter 50 on your keypad.

## 50. Symbols in Stone: St Martin's Cross

### ***NARRATOR:***

St Martin's Cross is a spectacular early monument. It was meant to be read sun-wise: when the morning sun shone on the east face, you, the monk or pilgrim, would contemplate those images. In the afternoon and evening, you'd focus on the west side. The carvings depict familiar Biblical stories, centred on the theme that God will protect the faithful.

Make sure you're looking at the side facing away from the water. Below the cross-head, biblical scenes are carved onto the shaft. At the top is Daniel in the lion's den. Below that, Abraham holds a raised sword, preparing to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Just beneath, King David plays his harp. In the final scene towards the bottom, a younger David is about to triumph over the giant, Goliath. Some of these Old Testament stories foretell the arrival of Christ.

But most important of all, in the centre of the cross are the Virgin and Child, flanked by angels. Here on Iona, a cult of veneration developed around Mary as the Mother of God, and this image is among the oldest of its kind in Europe.

Now move to the other side of the cross. The shaft is decorated in a repeating motif known as snake-and-boss. Bosses are knot shapes and the five large ones on the head of the cross correspond to the five wounds Christ received during the crucifixion. Snakes weave out from and around the bosses. These animals often represent evil and the fall of humanity. But here, they symbolise wisdom and, because they shed their skins, they can be a metaphor for the resurrection of Christ.

## 6. The Well

**MUSIC: Barnaby Brown track including clarsach**

***NARRATOR:***

You, a devoted pilgrim, have been travelling, perhaps for days or even weeks to reach Iona Abbey. You've passed the cemetery and high crosses, and now, you've arrived at the well. You may feel thirsty, but that's not the reason you're here. This well, at the heart of the abbey complex, is one of the most important stations on the route to St Columba's shrine and to the church.

Although the well head is modern, the well itself may date back to the time of Columba's monastery – and possibly even before.

Columba's monastery was laid out around this well. Holy water was drawn here for baptising new monks and for use in the Mass. It was also put into flasks for pilgrims to take home to heal the sick.

SFX: stone turning against stone + sound of Gaelic prayer

In this area, you can see remnants of another kind of worship — one very different from the rituals being carried out inside the church. Take a look at the large stones

leaning against the well. These lumps of granite are called *clachan brath*, or prayer stones.

SFX: louder

Pilgrims rotated 'noble globes of white marble' while invoking Columba's heavenly support for a good harvest or a safe voyage home. According to tradition, the Day of Judgement would come when the stones wore through. You can see that at least one of the stones has — so we must be on borrowed time!

Many people relied on traditional rituals like these during the early days of Christianity. Excluded from the sacraments and the Mass, which was celebrated only by the clergy, turning prayer stones was a practical action ordinary people could take to influence the course of their lives.

## 7. St Columba's Shrine

**MUSIC:** *Altus Prosator*, Kilmartin Sessions

**NARRATOR:**

You've followed in the footsteps of generations of pilgrims — and now you've arrived at the holiest place on Iona: St Columba's shrine. This small stone chapel stands in the same place as an earlier timber building which enshrined Columba's grave.

Columba died here on 9 June 597 at the age of 75. His biographer, Adomnán, wrote how the saint predicted his own death, telling his attendant:

**ADOMNÁN (reading as Columba):**

*'... my Lord Jesus Christ deigns to invite me; and to Him, I shall go... For so it has been revealed to me by our Lord himself.'*

**NARRATOR:**

Columba's grave remained untouched for more than a century after his death because the monks feared his overwhelming power and holiness.



### **ADOMNÁN:**

*'...during his mortal life, he was surrounded by a halo of heavenly light; and even since the departure of his happy soul from the tenement of his body until the present day, the place where his sacred bones repose is frequently visited by the holy angels, and illumined by the same heavenly light...'*

### **NARRATOR:**

St Columba's remains were eventually removed from his grave and placed in gilded containers, along with personal possessions like his bell, pastoral staff and vestments. The abbey silversmith would have created a church-shaped reliquary box to hold his bones. Opening the grave was a dangerous business and the monks first spent days celebrating Mass and saying penitential prayers to attain a state of grace. Columba's shrine became an important pilgrimage destination – and today, thousands of modern-day pilgrims still flock here to worship and reflect.

The architecture of the stone shrine is also of great importance. To hear why, enter 70 on your keypad.

## 70. Enshrined in Stone

### ***NARRATOR:***

St Columba's original timber shrine was rebuilt in stone around 800. It may be the first stone church in Scotland, and many scholars believe that it served as a model for other saints' shrines, especially in Ireland.

If you look to either side of the doorway, you'll see two projecting stumps. These are all that remain of twin stone corner posts, known as antae. They may have been intended to resemble the columns that fronted ancient Roman temples.

By the 1600s, Columba's shrine had fallen into disrepair. But it was reconstructed on this spot in around 1960.

Before you go inside, take another look at St John's Cross, purposefully built in front of the shrine. Although this cross is a replica, it serves the same purpose as the original.

As you see on your screen, at a certain time of the afternoon, the shadow of the cross falls precisely across the shrine doorway. This effect was intentional, one that underscored Columba's holiness. You can find the original St John's Cross in the Abbey Museum.

## 8. 'An Eaglais Mhor' ('The Great Church')

**MUSIC:** Scottish Medieval Plainchant + sound of a bell ringing

### ***NARRATOR:***

During your pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, you'd have prayed at a series of sacred places. Now, standing here before entering the abbey church, your sense of anticipation would be elevated to fever pitch.

This structure isn't Columba's original church but one built on the same site in the 1200s for the transformation of the abbey into a community of Benedictine monks. By the mid-1100s, Iona was under the control of the mighty ruler, Somerled. His son Ranald reformed the style of worship here, bringing the monastery into line with mainstream European practice. Under this powerful patron, Iona was re-founded as a Benedictine abbey, dedicated to the Virgin Mary but still deeply devoted to St Columba.

Between the 1200s and the 1500s, the church building was remodelled and enlarged to accommodate the needs of monks and pilgrims.

In 1560, the Protestant Reformation brought an end to monastic life on Iona and the church crumbled into ruin. But even then, this building held an importance for the islanders who called it 'An Eaglais Mhòr' or 'The Great Church'.

The church was restored by the Iona Cathedral Trust in the early 1900s and stands to this day on the same spot chosen by Columba in 563.

Iona Abbey is still a working church with services held by the Iona Community – a Christian group founded by Reverend George MacLeod in 1938. We ask that you remain quiet and respectful during your visit.

## **9. Inside the abbey church**

### **MUSIC: Scottish Medieval Plainchant**

#### ***NARRATOR:***

We're in the 1400s. The gloomy church is punctuated by bright pools of light from candles and oil lamps, glinting off the precious vessels on the high altar. The walls aren't exposed stone but plastered, richly painted and decorated with hangings. Outside, dawn is breaking, the island slowly coming to life. The monks enter through the main door: first the abbot, then the prior, both dressed in fine vestments embroidered with gold thread, followed by pairs of men in black habits, chanting as they process along the nave towards the high altar. They carry gospel books, pastoral staffs, and even portable reliquaries containing saints' relics, engulfed in clouds of incense. It is Columba's feast day, 9 June, and great celebrations are being held at the monastery. It's an awe-inspiring spectacle, with hundreds of believers coming together in prayer.

MUSIC: fades

Not every day was as special as St Columba's feast day, but they were all marked by worship. The monks attended offices eight times a day, saying Mass, singing psalms and canticles and reading from scripture.

Today, the church is still used for prayer and services are held by the Iona Community – an ecumenical Christian group which continues the tradition of worship at the abbey. At the same time, the building's interior is a rich testament to its history, filled with objects reflecting its holiness and its changes over the centuries.

## **901. West Highland Grave Slabs**

**MUSIC: Gaelic genealogy being chanted at graveside**

### ***NARRATOR:***

These carved stone grave slabs commemorate members of a Gaelic-speaking West Highland society. Dating from about 1300 to 1500, they were once laid over graves in the abbey cemetery, Reilig Ohdrain. Traditionally, a list of the dead person's ancestors would be read out during the burial service, harking back through the generations of their family.

West Highland society had — and still has — its own language, culture and identity that sets it apart from the rest of Scotland. The grave slabs are magnificent works of art, featuring motifs symbolic of that culture. Look out for the iconic intertwining foliage designs carved into the stone. Iona has the largest collection of these West Highland grave slabs. The ones displayed here all commemorate members of the clergy. You can learn more about them in the cloister and in the Abbey Museum, where there are many more on display.

Before you move on, be sure to look at the baptismal font in front of the grave slabs. Made in 1913, its decorations hark

back to Iona's early stone crosses. You'll see a dove, a reference to Columba, as well as other motifs, like the snake-and-boss design. The font's base and columns are carved from green veined white marble, quarried here on Iona.

As you explore the nave — the long corridor running down the centre of the church where ordinary people once stood to worship — keep an eye out for clusters of quartz pebbles on the floor and small crosses carved onto flagstones. These markers designate spots where burials took place, probably those of abbots or other high-status individuals. The graves were discovered during restoration work carried out in the 1900s.



## 902. The Presbytery

### ***NARRATOR:***

You're now in the holiest part of the church - the presbytery - where the modern communion table stands bathed in light from the great windows. If you were a pilgrim worshipping here in the 1200s, though, you wouldn't be standing in this airy space. Instead, you'd be praying in the crypt, a chapel beneath the presbytery floor. Pilgrims descended into that dark space to get close to the holy relics of St Columba. Most of the saint's relics – his bones and his belongings – had been sent away from Iona in the 800s, to keep them safe from Viking raiders. But one of his hands remained here, later enshrined with silver and gold, given to the abbey by benefactor Donald Macdonald, Lord of the Isles. The crypt was done away with in the 1400s and the presbytery floor was lowered to the level you see today.

Take a look at the stained glass windows high on the presbytery walls. Four saints are glorified here. On your right, as you face the communion table, you'll see St Margaret of Scotland. And on the opposite wall, left to right, you'll see St Columba, St Bridgid and St Patrick - all deeply venerated in the Gaelic-speaking world.

A close-up of St Bridgid is on your screen now. A fifth-century abbess, Bridgid founded several monasteries, including Kildare in Ireland. She shares a name with the pagan goddess of fire and is often depicted as being 'touched by fire,' as she is here.

St Patrick is thought to have baptised Bridgid and they both prophesied the coming of St Columba. All four of these stained glass windows were created by Scottish artist Douglas Strachan and given to the abbey between 1939 and 40.

Now take a look at the ferns growing on the walls. These are rare sea spleenworts. They may have taken hold when the church was in ruins and open to the elements. The fact that they're still growing here today shows that recent conservation repairs have been successful: the building is able to breathe.

## 903. Builders and Benefactors

### MUSIC: Scottish Medieval Plainchant

#### ***NARRATOR:***

These two stone effigies, or sculptures, are memorials to the abbots who repaired and remodelled the abbey church in the 1400s.

The older of the two effigies, to your right if you're facing the communion table, is Dominic Mackenzie, who served as abbot between 1421 and about 1465. He needed to raise funds for rebuilding the church and used a practice common at the time: he petitioned the Pope for a special indulgence. This decreed that anyone who visited Iona on St Columba's feast day — 9 June — would spend less time in purgatory cleansing their souls after death. More pilgrims coming to venerate St Columba meant more offerings and greater wealth for the abbey. The indulgence helped Dominic to fund improvements to the church, and his successor, Abbot John MacKinnon, was able to continue the rebuilding. You can see his effigy just opposite.

Between the two effigies, on the floor, is an outline on a marble slab of a knight in armour. The figure was originally depicted in brass, complete with a decorative frame and inscription. The tomb beneath, placed in the position of

honour in front of the high altar, could be that of MacClean of Duart Castle reflecting his importance as steward of the abbey lands. Unique among the tombs on Iona, he was depicted in European plate armour, rather than that the homespun armour of the West Highlands.

## 904. Columns and capitals

### ***NARRATOR:***

If you look up at the top of the columns in this part of the church, you'll see that their capitals are decorated with lively carvings: a West Highland warrior is mounted on his horse, ready for battle. Four men prepare to slaughter an ox. Adam and Eve give in to the serpent's temptation. You'll also find a scene, with the Virgin and child flanked by angels, placed dramatically beside an image of the Crucifixion. All of this surrounded by delightful decorative foliage and mythical animals. One of the columns is topped with a Latin inscription of about 1450 which reads: 'Donald O Brolchan made this work.' O'Brolchan came from a family of Irish craftsmen, and this was him proudly signing his work.

## 905. The North Transept

### MUSIC: Scottish Medieval Plainchant

#### **MALE VOICE:**

*'Columba, most holy of saints... You sweeten bitter apples; you restore the dead to life. You command the winds; you clear the air and put the plague to flight. You draw water from a rock. You, mirror of the church and protector of this land, ... most holy of saints... may Christ's mercy by your prayer watch over this place dedicated to you. Alleluia.'*

#### **NARRATOR:**

You're standing in one of the oldest parts of the abbey church, the North Transept. Here, in a niche in the wall, you can see a pair of stone feet – all that remains of a statue of Saint Columba from about 1300. The statue was traditionally considered to have miraculous powers.

#### **MALE VOICE:**

*'... bend your ears to offerings of praise. Drawing us away from vices, lead us to the joys of life. Alleluia.'*

#### **NARRATOR:**

The abbey Columba founded in 563 was to become one of the most important monasteries in western Europe. Although Columba wasn't himself an evangelist, his example inspired generations of monks and priests to bring Christianity to many parts of Britain and Ireland.

It's possible that this chapel was once dedicated to St Columba and at some point may have contained his relics. If so, it would have been the final destination for pilgrims praying for miracles.

Before you move on, take a look at the display telling the story of Columba's life.

906. The Duke and Duchess of Argyll

**MUSIC: Ana Wendy Stevenson, *Hard is My Fate*.**

***NARRATOR:***

These effigies, with their smooth Carrara marble and crisply carved drapery, commemorate George Campbell, eighth Duke of Argyll, and his third wife, Ina McNeill. He was responsible for initiating the restoration of this church in the early 1900s.

The Duke's family had owned the island of Iona for about 200 years. In 1899, he transferred ownership of the derelict abbey to the newly-formed Iona Cathedral Trust, with very specific conditions: the church had to be restored and made available for worship by all denominations. If you look at the wall to the right of the effigies, you'll see a copy of the Deed of Trust. The Duke's conditions were met and the first service was held in the restored abbey church in 1910.

Only the duchess is actually buried here in the abbey. The duke was interred in his family mausoleum near Dunoon on the mainland.



## 10. The Cloister

SFX: sound of the church bell, soft shuffle of sandaled feet

### ***NARRATOR:***

It's the 1200s. The paint is still fresh on the arcades of this newly-built cloister. Along its peaceful walkways, monks pass, their sandals shuffling across the stone floor as they walk from their dormitories to the abbey church. In stormy weather, the brethren stretch their legs here or read their scriptures, protected from the wild Hebridean winds.

SFX: scratching of quill on parchment, distant Latin chants

On warmer days, they bring their manuscripts from the scriptorium and work on calligraphy and illustration.

SFX: fade

The cloister, like the church, fell into ruin following the Protestant Reformation of 1560. But thanks to its reconstruction we can once again appreciate the elegant arches and carved decoration. Take a good look at the carvings at the top of each column: a few are surviving Benedictine capitals, which were originally painted in brilliant colour. Most are modern replacements which took Scottish sculptor Chris Hall about 30 years to carve. These often feature modern motifs, like flowers from Iona and the

British Isles, carefully crafted to fit in with the cloister's architecture and ambiance.

In the centre of the cloister is a modern sculpture by Lithuanian sculptor, Jacques Lipchitz. Called *Descent of the Spirit*, it was donated to the abbey in 1959.

Around the cloister walls, you'll see a number of West Highland graveslabs which originally lay in the nearby burial grounds. The idea of being buried on Iona was a powerful one; a graveslab was a way to leave a mark on this world and individuals commissioned them during their lifetimes. These slabs contain motifs characteristic of West Highland sculpture: stylized foliage, swords, ships, and crosses.

Before you leave the cloister, you can hear about a typical day for a Benedictine monk. Just enter 110 on your keypad.

If you're ready to move on, you can reach both the abbey church and the gift shop from here. If you've already visited those, you may prefer to explore the Abbey Museum. To get there, follow the signs or ask a member of staff for directions.



## **110. A Day in the Life of a Benedictine Monk**

SFX: owls, wind whistling, sea sounds

### ***MALE VOICE:***

*‘Orare est laborare, laborare est orare. To pray is to work, to work is to pray.’*

### ***NARRATOR:***

Those are the words of St Benedict. And the life of a Benedictine monk revolved around prayer: eight canonical hours at set times throughout the day and night.

SFX: bell

### ***MALE VOICE:***

*Midnight.*

SFX: chanting: matins

### ***NARRATOR:***

The sleeping monks were summoned by a bell to the office of Matins to welcome the new day. Before wax candles came into use in the fourteenth century, this office was said in the dark or with just a little light from oil lamps – but that didn’t matter as the monks knew the services by heart.

Matins consisted of chants, psalms, and lessons, as well as celebrations of saints’ days. It could be a long service, sometimes lasting until...

SFX: bell

**MALE VOICE:**

3 a.m.

SFX: chanting: lauds

**NARRATOR:**

The morning office of Lauds, praising God. Another long service, Lauds sometimes ended at dawn. By then, the monks were ready to return to their beds.

SFX: owls, wind whistling, sea sounds, gentle snoring

SFX: bell

**MALE VOICE:**

6a.m.

SFX: cocks crowing, monks washing, cows and sheep

SFX: chanting: prime

**NARRATOR:**

The monks washed before attending *Prime* — the first hour of the day. They then gathered in the Chapter House to receive instructions, listen to a chapter from the Rule of Benedict, and attend to business. Afterwards, they focussed on private prayer, spiritual reading or some light work – but nothing too physical.

SFX: chant, sounds of turning pages

SFX: bell

**MALE VOICE:**

*9 a.m.*

SFX: chant: mass

***NARRATOR:***

The monks said the office of *Terce*, or the third hour of day, followed by High Mass. Then the monastery gradually grew busy.

SFX: cows, sheep, dogs barking, distant voices of pilgrims, buzz of bees, scratching of quills on vellum

Some monks kept bees or tended the garden, some were busy with estate business, while others created manuscripts in the scriptorium. Still others guided and instructed the pilgrims who arrived to pray at the abbey.

SFX: bell

***MALE VOICE:***

*Noon.*

SFX: chanting: sext (Scottish Medieval plainchant)

***NARRATOR:***

The service of *Sext*, or the sixth hour, took place, followed by the midday meal.

SFX: kitchen noises, crockery, low voice of single monk reading

The monks ate in silence, except for one who read from an edifying text. Afterwards, they prayed and rested.

SFX: bell

**MALE VOICE:**

3 p.m.

SFX: chant: none

**NARRATOR:**

Monks said the service of *None*, or the ninth hour. Then work called again:

SFX: horses, pigs, hoeing, sweeping tasks in the garden and keeping house.

SFX: bell

**MALE VOICE:**

6 p.m.

SFX: chant: vespers

**NARRATOR:**

The evening began with Vespers. Then came supper...

SFX: crockery, eating

followed by...

SFX: bell

**MALE VOICE:**

9 p.m.

**NARRATOR:**

Monks said the night prayer, *Compline*, the last of the canonical hours.

SFX: evening birdsong, wind rising, waves

Then it was bedtime —a few hours of sleep before prayers began again.

SFX: fade



## 11. The Iona Community

### **NARRATOR:**

You're standing at the bottom of what's known as the day stair. When the cloister was built in around 1200, the Benedictine monks used this staircase during the day to move from their dormitory and refectory to the cloister and abbey church. They used a different stair to attend nighttime services, a shortcut which led directly from the dormitory to the church. Today, the dormitory and refectory are closed to the public, as they're used by the Iona Community.

Reverend Peter MacDonald, Leader of the Iona Community, describes the group's origins, not on Iona but in Govan, in Glasgow.

### **PETER MACDONALD:**

*'It was there that George MacLeod was parish minister and he realised that the church was failing to engage with the everyday concerns of people living in the midst of poverty and hardship. In 1938, George Macleod brought a group of young ministers and students, along with unemployed craftsmen, to rebuild the buildings that you see around you. This was to symbolise the rebuilding of community back in*

*an urban setting and the re-engagement of the church with the struggles of everyday life.'*

**NARRATOR:**

Today, the Iona Community is an ecumenical group with a diverse membership.

**PETER MACDONALD:**

*'Our members are doctors, teachers, ministers, come from a wide range of professions but who all still are committed to George's original vision of renewing community and working for justice and peace and seeing these as central to the Christian gospel.'*

**NARRATOR:**

The Iona Community has over 270 members, 1,400 associate members and thousands of friends worldwide. While it's still based in Glasgow, it operates retreat centres on Iona and the Island of Mull, welcoming over 100 guests each week.

**PETER MACDONALD:**

*'Guests staying with us ... join in the rhythm and pattern of daily life, which begins with a service of worship and ends with a service of worship. And in between, there are*

*activities which foster community and also help people experience God. So whether it's working together in the kitchen to help prepare the meals or in programme sessions discussing an issue or reflecting on the Bible or joining in the weekly pilgrimage around the island, all of these are opportunities for people to engage with one another and hopefully, engage with God.'*

**NARRATOR:**

You can learn more about the Iona Community in the chapter house – reached from the cloister - where the monks used to meet daily to hear a chapter from the Rule of St Benedict and to discuss the business of the abbey. The Iona Community uses the room for meetings to this day but if there's nothing on at the moment, you're welcome to go inside.

## 12. The Sea Road

### ***NARRATOR:***

Look outover the waters of the Sound of Iona. Unless it's very foggy, you can usually see the Isle of Mull. While today Iona may seem remote, for the early community of monks the opposite was true. People travelled mainly by boat, and the island was centrally located on a busy sea highway. Ireland, the Isle of Man, England, mainland Scotland and Norway were all within easy sailing distance. These busy trade routes meant that the Columban monks could access good stone and timber for building and carving, exotic spices, dyes and foodstuffs, along with casks of wine from Gaul — modern-day Bordeaux, in France – for use during the Mass. The same routes also brought them religious icons and books from other centres of the Christian world.

Island life was closely linked to the sea. Monks undertook seafaring and fishing expeditions, even catching deep sea fish — and, with Columba's help, they faced the challenges of the oceans. Adomnán recounts the saint's warning to one of his brethren, Baithen:

### ***ADOMNÁN:***

*“Last night, at midnight, a great whale rose from the depth of the sea, and he will float this day on the surface of the ocean between Iona and the island of Ethica.” Baithen answering replied, ‘I and that beast are under the power of God.’ ‘Go,’ said the saint, in peace; ‘thy faith in Christ will defend thee from this danger.’ Baithen accordingly, having received the saint’s blessing, sailed from the port; and after crossing a considerable distance on the sea, he and his companions saw the whale; and while all the others were much terrified, he alone, raising up both his hands, blessed without any fear the sea and the monster. At the same moment the enormous brute, diving under the waves, and never appeared to them afterwards.’*

**NARRATOR:**

The monks often beseeched Columba for a safe return amidst ferocious wind and waves. But even Columba couldn’t keep Iona completely safe.

SFX: attack... starting very softly

The Vikings first attacked Iona in 795 and carried out repeated raids, terrorising the monastery throughout the ninth century.

SFX: attack... louder

**VOICE:**

*'The seas heaved, vomiting up gaping prows of dread, threatening peril to our blessed men. No harbour was free from these marauding Norsemen, who in a rush of slaughter ravaged our holy shrines and sanctuaries....'*

**NARRATOR:**

The Vikings wanted the gold and jewels from the abbey's precious possessions — and were often quick to murder the monks defending them.

Many of the abbey's treasures were looted by the raiders until much of what remained was moved to Dunkeld, in present-day Scotland, and to a new centre at Kells, in Ireland, for safekeeping. Despite these attacks, however, Iona continued to thrive. While the abbey lost some of its power and prestige, its fame as Columba's monastery endured and it continued to attract pilgrims.

Before you move on, you might like to hear about some of the wildlife that graces Iona's sacred shores. Just enter 120 on your keypad.

## 120. The Wildlife of Iona

### ***NARRATOR:***

Iona has a unique natural history. Although it lies close to the Isle of Mull, it's geologically very different. Mull was mainly formed from volcanic lava about 60 million years ago. Iona, however, is made up of some of the oldest rocks in the world — an astonishing 1,500 million years old. The island is part of a plate of Lewisian gneiss, metamorphic rocks extending throughout the Hebrides.

The seas surrounding Iona are home to minke whales, killer whales, basking sharks, porpoises and dolphins, as well as large numbers of seals. The waters are rich in fish, crabs, lobsters, prawns and scallops, which all help to support the region's fishing industry.

You can also spot a wide range of birds — from gannets and oyster catchers, to red-throated divers and white-tailed sea eagles. Iona is also one of the last places in Britain with a thriving population of corncrakes.

Since they're well camouflaged and rarely seen, an image of a corncrake is on your screen now. You can also hear its distinctive 'creaking' call.

SFX: corncrake

There's one animal you won't find on Iona, though: snakes.  
Adomnán tells another story of Columba:

***ADOMNÁN:***

*'... raising his holy hands, he blessed the entire island, saying: 'From henceforth poisonous reptiles shall not be able to hurt men or cattle in this island, as long as the inhabitants shall observe the Commandments of Christ.'*



### 13. Afterlife

#### **VOICE:**

**(beginning with Gaelic then fade beneath English)**

*'An Ì mo chridhe, Ì mo ghraidh,  
An àite guth manaich bidh geum bà  
Ach mun tig an saoghal gu crìch  
Bithidh Ì mar a bha.'*

*'Iona of my heart, Iona of my love,  
Instead of monks voices shall be  
the lowing of cattle;  
But ere the world shall come  
to an end,  
Iona shall be as it was.'*

#### **NARRATOR:**

This ancient Gaelic prophecy is attributed to St Columba. And for almost 1,000 years after his death in 597, Iona Abbey continued to be a busy, powerful monastery. But the Protestant Reformation of 1560 brought an end to monasticism in Scotland and by the 1600s, the abbey buildings had fallen into ruin.

Iona was still an important place, though. It was here, in 1609, that the Gaelic chiefs were summoned to meet with representatives of King James the Sixth. The chiefs had to sign up to the Statutes of Iona: conditions limiting their

power and requiring their children to be educated in Edinburgh — in English. Traditionally, oaths sworn on Iona, particularly those sworn while kneeling on the mysterious ‘black stones of Iona’, were considered binding. So it’s ironic that James the Sixth tapped into Iona’s vital place in Gaelic culture to try to put an end to that culture.

SFX: Gaelic psalm singing

Although Iona’s buildings deteriorated, the abbey retained a spiritual significance for the Protestant population of the island. In 1764, the Reverend John Walker described how, even without a minister, the locals:

***MALE VOICE:***

*‘...repair on the Sabbath to their devotions in the ruinous abbey, to Columba’s tomb and to the chapels of several different saints.’*

***NARRATOR:***

MUSIC: Mendelssohn Hebrides Overture

Writers, artists and travellers were drawn here to Iona, including Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1773 on his famous tour of the Hebrides. In the 1800s, Victorian visitors, fascinated by the idea of Scotland’s remote corners and rugged beauty, flocked to Iona. They included author Sir Walter Scott and

the poet William Wordsworth, who wrote four sonnets about the island. When Queen Victoria and Prince Albert visited in 1847, a tourism boom followed. Felix Mendelssohn, composer of the renowned *Hebrides Overture*, wrote:

***MALE VOICE:***

*'When in some future time I shall sit in a madly crowded assembly with music and dancing round me, and the wish arises to retire into the loneliest loneliness, I shall think of Iona.'*

MUSIC: fading in under narration

In 1899, the Duke of Argyll gave the ruined abbey church to the Iona Cathedral Trust for restoration. It re-opened for worship in 1910. This revival was continued by George MacLeod, a Glasgow minister, who founded the Iona Community in 1938. They hold services in the abbey church to this day, carrying on Iona's legacy of Christian worship begun by St Columba more than 1,400 years ago.