



**Early
Christianity
at Whithorn and the Isle
(D&G)**

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An Early (Celtic) Christian Tour ...



Mull of Galloway Lighthouse



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An intensive day trip, giving an insight into the earliest Christian sites in Scotland.

Contrary to popular understanding, the earliest Christian site in Scotland is not at Iona, but dates to over 100 years before and is at Whithorn, in Galloway, South West Scotland.

The Latinus Stone, which is on display at Whithorn Priory Museum, is the earliest evidence we have of Christian practice, worship and settlement anywhere in Scotland. The western part of Galloway, an ancient kingdom that preserved its separateness from modern Scotland for centuries, has a concentration of Early Christian sites on the Machars, dating from 450AD.

Visiting these will give you an insight into a very different route to Christianity than the one which we associate with the colonization of Iona by monks from Ireland.

This tour can be taken in either direction – west to east, or east to west, depending on origin and time available. Parking is possible for cars and coaches at all sites.

Visits to include are ...



Isle of Whithorn



Whithorn Priory



St Ninian's Cave

Kirkmadrine – Western Christianity in the 500's AD

Near the village of Sandhead, situated on the glass-covered porch of what is now the small and isolated burial chapel of Kirkmadrine, there are three of the oldest Christian memorials in Scotland. Dating to the mid 500s AD – only slightly later than Whithorn's Latinus Stone - but in a very different style, with lettering reminiscent of Roman Gaul (now modern France).

The stones indicate the existence of a church here of great sophistication: they mark the graves of "special priests", Ventidius and Mavorius. One refers to the Book of Revelation, "Initium et Finis", the Beginning and the End. These types of inscribed memorial are unique to Western Britain, on the fringe of the Roman Empire.

The remaining memorials date from the 700s to 1100s AD.

Visit duration approximately 30 minutes.

Whithorn Priory, Museum and Visitor Centre

Whithorn is the site where archaeologists have discovered the earliest known evidence for Christian worship in Scotland. Hear the story of how Christianity arrived first on the southern shores of Galloway, at the Whithorn Trust visitor centre and the Priory Museum (HES). The earliest Christian monument in Scotland is housed within the Museum.

Whithorn Priory ruins are the remains of one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Scotland. The site has been settled from the 5th Century and churches have likely been on this hilltop for 1600 years, making this the earliest site in Scotland from which we have evidence for Christian practice and worship.

By 1500, this had become a major centre for pilgrimage, patronised by the Kings and Queens of the House of Stuart, and was at the centre of mediaeval power politics.

The ruined nave shows signs of former glory – a Romanesque 12th Century doorway is finely sculpted with chevron markings. The cathedral grew in size over time to accommodate the large numbers of pilgrims seeking miracles and forgiveness. Visit the crypts below where pilgrims once thronged to touch the bones of St Ninian, as well as reconstruction full-scale Iron Age Roundhouse.

The Whithorn Trust Visitor Centre has an exhibition of artefacts that were discovered during excavations in the 1980s -1990s. These include evidence of international trade and elite feasting, dating back as far as the 5th Century AD. The site was occupied continuously – a focus for Anglo-Saxons monks from Northumbria, Viking traders from Dublin, and under the patronage of the semi-independent Kingdom of Galloway in the 12th Century.

It later became the destination of choice for the Stuart Kings and Queens, from James III to Mary Queen of Scots.

Visit duration approximately 2 hours. Bespoke guided tours are available to groups.

St Ninian's Cave – A Saint's Retreat

The short walk from the public car park at Kidsdale to St Ninian's Cave is a favourite walk with locals and visitors alike. The first stretch takes visitors through the wooded glen of Physgill burn (the path is muddy at times) where there are displays of wild bluebells in spring, with pungent wild garlic.

The beach at the end of the first stretch is all shingle and may require care when walking. Walk towards St Ninian's Cave, which you can see to your right, to visit one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in the country, associated with St Ninian of Whithorn, and mentioned as far back as the 8th Century in a Latin poem written at Whithorn.

The Cave is protected by Historic Environment Scotland and you can find carved crosses in the rock, left by pilgrims from the 700's onwards, to today. The Cave has been the setting for the annual Roman Catholic pilgrimage, which is still held in August every year. It is also famous for another reason: one of the scenes of the cult film, *The Wicker Man* (1973), was filmed here. Some of the crosses found here by excavators in the 19th Century are now on display at the Whithorn Priory Museum. Visit duration approximately 1.5 hours.

St Ninian's Chapel, Isle of Whithorn – Pilgrim's Welcome

Built in the 12th Century, this was sometimes mistaken for St Ninian's original white church, but we now know that this was most probably a reception chapel, built to receive pilgrims arriving by sea, giving thanks for their safe arrival, and then heading inland to Whithorn across the country on the ancient path which ended at King's Road in Whithorn. We know from medieval sources that pilgrims arrived by sea from the Isle of Man, Ireland, Wales and Northern England.

Today, you can add your own stone to this ancient record of pilgrimage, placing it on the 'Witness Cairn' at the entrance to Chapel field. St Ninian was one of the most revered saints in medieval Scotland, for a time being the favoured saint of the Royal House of Stuart; his name is commemorated in churches, holy wells, altars and chapels throughout medieval Scotland.

Visit duration approximately 30 minutes.

This itinerary has kindly been provided by Julia Muir Watt, the Development Manager, The Whithorn Trust (www.whithorn.com / enquiries@whithorn.com).

Julia has been an enthusiast for the area's heritage and an archaeologist a long time. She has been with the trust for over 6 years and advocates for heritage-led regeneration, using Whithorn's medieval heritage to secure economic and social benefit for the town and area.

If you like any of the above, you may also like the below suggestions of sites nearby



Glenluce Abbey



Glenwhan Gardens



Torhousemuir Standing Stones



Bladnoch Distillery

Lunch and snack stops :

Tigh na Mara Hotel Sandhead (near Kirkmadrine);

Whithorn Trust café (lunches and teas);

Isle of Whithorn St Ninian's Hall and Steam Packet Hotel;

Wigtown – Reading Lasses;

Bladnoch Distillery – Café Melba

The Isle of Whithorn acquired its name because it was once genuinely an island, separated from the mainland, and was the port belonging to the Prior of Whithorn. Today, the quay is a continuation of the mainland. It was once the haunt of smugglers bringing goods from the Isle of Man, which can be glimpsed out to sea, and, according to local story, they used the narrow channel between the island and mainland to escape a government cutter. The endpoint of the Isle, at Isle Head, is a favourite local look-out point: story has it that you can glimpse five kingdoms (England, Scotland, Ireland, Man, and the Kingdom of Heaven).

The local micro brewery is now called Five Kingdoms Brewery. The promontory was certainly a fortified site in the Iron Age, but now has a poignant reminder of the loss of the Solway Harvester fishing boat out to sea in the year 2000. The local pub, the Steam Packet, is a favourite with the locals, serving fresh seafood, and a new community-run tearoom and cinema operate from St Ninian's Hall.

Whithorn is a South Ayrshire and Galloway Biosphere Community.