

A 'shipwrecked' cargo looted from sacred Iona dumped on the seabed on a Loch Fyne laird's doorstep.

A local chapel vanishes, ancient clan graves are decanted, and the dark-age, druid heritage gets shifted too.

Gerry Burke attempts to unravel an unholy mess.

THE BACKWASH from the scandalous desecration of Iona's heritage may have seeped into the fabric of a Cowal parish which had some of its own graves emptied and its ancient Celtic church removed around the same time.

But a sunken consignment of looted ancient monuments might yet be salvaged to cast light on their hidden history.

We revealed last week how an innocuous reference in the revived Dewar Manuscripts lifted the lid on a blackmarket trade in Iona's sculptured gravestones and iconic Celtic crosses which angered Sir Walter Scott and other eminent figures.

The earlier infamous Viking depredations were only the start of the shameful devastation of Columba's isle as they sought gold and silver grave goods. But their bloody raids were later used as a smokescreen when 'cash-and-carry' tomb-raids intensified in a more enlightened age.

It was the arrival of west coast steamboat tourism that kick-started a lust for iconic artefacts that visitors could carry away in exchange for cash and tobacco. But the promotion of the Crinan Canal in 1800 opened the lock gates for more ambitious customers. And it appears more than one cargo of iconic Celtic crosses and sculptured stones took the 'cross-country' shortcut to upper Loch Fyne.

The giveaway was a previously unremarked mention of a wreck in the Strachur area by John Dewar who recorded fascinating historical episodes in the Argyll highlands and islands area for the 8th duke of Argyll.

'Worse savages than we are...'

His huge Dewar Manuscripts archive, now revived for publication with fresh transcription and translation from the Gaelic, tells no tales about the events behind the enigmatic mention in a notebook. But why the tombstone piracy never made it into his collection begs a question.



General John Campbell

He had been advised: "Don't let us make out to be worse savages than we are but let us tell the truth and shame the de'il." But did he consider connections, directly or otherwise, with grave-robbing might be a shame too far for his employer - or was he censored?

Grave monuments and artefacts from Iona have surfaced in various parts of the country from iconic Celtic crosses to fragments even in America and the valuable marble quarry was exhausted.

Most of the trashing of the 'cradle of Christianity' was during the 6th duke of Argyll's time when he almost ruined the family's fortunes with his cavorting in London. More is written of him in the diaried exploits of a favourite 19th century lady friend than in official records. Harriette Wilson's detailed encounters with his friends Beau Brummell, the duke of Wellington and other society suitors were a sell-out. He had numerous children but none were legitimate heirs.

He inherited the dukedom in 1796 and was Lord Lieutenant of Argyll from 1799 until his death in 1839. Presumably, he was more effective as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of Scotland than hereditary 'guardian' of Iona where the local schoolmaster apparently displayed more concern than the Argylls' factors. His father John the 5th duke did have a care as noted in estate records but his

efforts at preservation were futile.

Whether George was directly involved or not in the free-for-all, a major consignment appears to have been despatched to his aristocratic Campbell neighbour on the other side of the Loch from Inveraray castle.

War bounty

At least one vessel appears to have steered a course for Strachur Park where General John Campbell, 17th chief of the MacArthur Campbells had finished building his new stately home, church and the village inn.

The ex-commander of British forces in the American war of independence had bought out a native Ferguson landholding with part of his huge war bounty which ensured local construction employment for years.

Here, with an uninterrupted view down Loch Fyne, was the unrivalled site for the new mansion almost keeping pace with the construction of Inveraray castle. He might have been influenced by the winter solstice panorama where the setting sun grounds on the jagged peaks of towards Kintyre. His front windows 250 metres above the bay framed at least two standing stones and a druid circle.

Here is where at least one consignment of Christian stones went to the bottom, but apparently others floated ashore 'miraculously', according to local folklore.

Vessels from 1800 were using the newly-opened Crinan Canal into Loch Fyne at Ardrishaig, but earlier island deliveries to Inveraray might have used the traditional 'coffin-route' and drove roads after landing at Loch Feochan, for example.

The sunken cargo disclosure in John Dewar's Gaelic notebook contributes to a fairly precise location by clarifying which Creggan had been referred to.

Previous references indicated the 'cargo discharge' site could be in the middle of the loch or near the Creggan shore on the Kenmore side but he states: "The vessel containing the crosses and grave slabs sank between Strachur and Creggan." which narrows down the options considerably as shallow depth

was also a major factor.

There had been references to a pursuit which could have indicated a fairly common anti-smuggling swoop by an excise vessel looking for moonshine whisky or tobacco heading for Strachur, Inveraray or Cairndow.

Panic could have gripped the crew as they tried to deliberately ground the vessel as close to the high water mark as possible but were snagged by a hidden sandbar. The cargo would probably have been jettisoned into relative shallows freeing the hull on the next tide.

Local legend

Local legend records local knowledge that artefacts were indeed stolen from Iona, but a curious reference adds: "... when the boat carrying them was wrecked in Strachur Bay the stones miraculously floated ashore." It is likely that stones retrievable at low water were simply rafted ashore but were accorded supernatural status in imaginative fireside tales. Wooden crosses had also been a target.

Retired puffer skipper, Tommy Ferguson believes a misjudged, Para Handy-style beaching might, indeed, have been foiled by a hidden sandbar directly in front of General Campbell's house.

A gently-inclining stretch runs smoothly to the highwater mark and might have been custom-cleared for deliberate careening for repairs or stranding to conveniently unship a cargo.

He said: "That stretch stands out on the charts as a good clean shore for heavy cargo discharging just like the puffers. The fishermen might even have used it to check and repair their hulls. But there's a shoal running right along the middle of the approach which could easily ground a boat prematurely. The only way to get off could be to jettison the cargo into a depth you cannot recover from."

He believes any objects might now be obscured by decades of silt and 'though an extensive sandbar exists today it may have moved with time and tide.