

Three Caves in coastal Scotland

St Fillan, St Molaise, St Ninian

St Fillan's Cave, Pittenweem, East Neuk, East coast of Scotland



Pittenweem, the small fishing village on the east coast of Scotland, has a name that in Pictish means 'place of the cave'. The cave was formed by erosion, probably by water action as after the ice ages it would have been at sea level for a long time. A river would have flowed through and out to the Firth of Forth, but now the only traces are the markings in the limestone floor. Today the entrance can be reached along a side alley, Cove Wynd, which leads from the east end of the village to the harbour.

In 7th Century the cave was used as a chapel by Saint Fillan and his followers. St Fillan was a missionary from Ireland, though it is uncertain whether he is the same Fillan as the saint of the Strathfillan area. It is most likely that he did not live in the cave for any length of time as he would have led a peripatetic life, moving from one small community to another, and only using the cave for shelter. The cave divides into a Y shape with two caverns, one of which contains an altar. St Fillan is called the patron of the mentally ill and sufferers were taken to the holy pool of water within the cave in the hope of a cure.

In the 12th century Augustinian monks built a monastery on the hill above the cave and made a passage from the cave up to the Priory gardens. They probably used the cave for a store room for goods brought in from the harbour as it was cool and a natural refrigerator. After the Reformation it was used by smugglers, and even as a rubbish dump.

It was in 1935 that Rector Canon de Voil and his father dug out the mess and built a shrine in the cave. In 2000 the cave was further renovated with new entrance gate, handrails and lighting. Today it has many visitors from all over the world and is still used for occasional services by the local Episcopal church and other pilgrimages from Scotland.

Visiting

The cave is open all year Wed-Sat 10-17 Sun 12-17.

The key to the entrance gate in the alley, Cove Wynd, which leads from the High Street to the harbour is available from the Gingerbread House Craft Shop and Coffee Shop, 9 High Street, Pittenweem.



St Molaise Cave, Holy Isle, off Arran Isle, West coast of Scotland

St Molaise of Leighlin was a 6-7th Century Irish abbot of Lethglenn, now Old Leighlin, in Co. Carlow (Galway). He was born the son of Cairell, the Irish king of what is now called Ulster, and the Scottish princess Gemma. He was raised in Scotland and when offered the throne of Ulster when he came of age, instead chose the life of a hermit in a cave on Holy Isle, Arran. After living on the isle it became known as Eilean Molaise, which is Gaelic for 'Molaise's island'. When he was about 30 years old he visited Rome as a pilgrim and was said to have been ordained bishop there by Pope Gregory the Great. He returned to Ireland and to the great monastery that St. Gobban had established. He played an important role in introducing the Roman method of dating Pascha. He is thought to have died between 639-41.

The cave is half way along the western shore of the island, not far from the ferry jetty and Buddhist Peace Centre. It consists of an overhanging sandstone rock with a sunken stone floor. In St Molaise day it would probably have had a wall and door to protect it from the weather. Simple crosses can be seen carved on the walls alongside Norse runes of personal names. Some of the crosses were carved around the same time as the names, so perhaps the cave was a place of pilgrimage among the Vikings. Contemporary pilgrims have made small shrines from shells and pebbles found on the nearby beach. Close to the cave is a

spring, known as the Healing Well that is thought to cure ills and bring blessings. In the 18th century it was recorded that "the natives used to drink and bath in [the well] for all lingering ailments". The same source describes the water as "gushing out of a rock". The spring is now overgrown so that you wouldn't get more than a footbath from it, but the water is still cold and clear, and although it does not meet current EU standards for drinking water this doesn't deter pilgrims from drinking the holy water and collecting it in bottles. St Molaise rock stands at the foot of the cave. This is where he is said to have preached to followers and delivered judgement about local islander's disputes. He was a much-loved saint during his lifetime and continues to be loved and venerated today.

Visiting

Holy Isle is now in the custody of the Rokpa Trust and is officially designated as a UK Sacred Site. In summer months it is possible to visit the island for the day, or to stay for a retreat at the Peace Centre, which offers comfortable accommodation and vegetarian meals using organic vegetables from the island garden. The island has several good walks and you may see some wild ponies and sheep. There are also boat trips around the island on fine days.

Ardrossan/ Brodick ferry Tel: 01294 463 470
Website: www.holyisle.org

Holy Isle ferry Tel: 01770 6000998



St Ninian's Cave, Whithorn, Dumfries & Galloway, South West coast of Scotland

Local tradition says that St. Ninian chose to settle in Whithorn because it was a place of solitude and retreat. The cave where he went to pray alone is a small sea cave a few miles from Whithorn Abbey. St Ninian was a missionary among the Southern Picts and built the first Christian church in Scotland in 397 A.D. of whitewashed stone so that it could easily be seen. He called it Candida Casa which in Latin means White House, which is *hwit aern* in Old English, which in turn led to the modern name Whithorn. There are no known teachings of St. Ninian but tradition teaches that he was a Briton who studied in Rome and established an episcopal see at Candida Casa. Some say that he died in Ireland in 432 A.D.

Whithorn soon became a place of pilgrimage and we know that from the 7th century both kings and commoners travelled to the shrine believing in St Ninian's power to cure illness and perform miracles. The ruins of the complex of buildings, some of which can still be seen today, confirm that there was an extensive complex of buildings to house and feed visitors to the shrine. By the 12th century a huge cathedral was on the hillside with a thriving town around it. Whithorn remains a site of pilgrimage. The Catholic Diocese of Galloway holds an annual pilgrimage to St. Ninian's Cave. There are also youth pilgrimages and a Christian Aid walk to the cave.

Inside the cave pilgrims have left crosses and little stones poked into small crevices in the rock. Some have names or a prayer on them, some a cross. The rock wall has carvings of names and some dates going back centuries. The cave is not directly accessible by car. Instead visitors are required to take an enjoyable one and a half mile walk through a woodlands path. Start at the car park shortly before Kildale Farm and follow signposts leading to Port Castle Bay and look along the pebble beach and you will see the cave entrance.

Visiting

The cave is accessible all year but check local sea tide times.

From Dumfries follow the A75 to Newton Stewart, from Newton Stewart follow the A714/ A746 for Whithorn. The car park for the walk to the cave is located to the left side of the minor road just before Kildale Farm (NX433366).

You may also be interested to visit Galloway National Park where there are wild goats, or to extend your pilgrimage by traveling by ferry to Ireland from nearby Stranraer.