

A Black Isle church

John R Hume considers a church with connections to early Christianity.

THE former Rosemarkie parish church is now the place of worship of the Fortrose and Rosemarkie congregation, which is linked with that of the neighbouring village of Avoch.

Rosemarkie is a village on the southern shore of the so-called 'Black Isle', on the north side of the Moray and Beauly firths. The Black Isle is not an island, but a peninsula. Until 1983 its main link with the south was the Kessock Ferry, but the Kessock Bridge now carries the main road north from Inverness.

There is a string of villages along the south side of the Isle – North Kessock, Munloch, Avoch, Fortrose and Rosemarkie, all facing south, and protected from the north by low hills. Avoch and Fortrose have little harbours, now yacht havens. Today the most celebrated feature of this stretch of coast is Chanonry Point, a spit of land stretching south between Fortrose and Rosemarkie. Here there was a ferry across to Fort George (the pier for which can still be seen), with an icehouse for commercial salmon-fishing and a delightful little lighthouse designed by Alan Stevenson, an uncle of Robert Louis Stevenson. Chanonry Point is now well-known as a very good place from which to see Moray Firth dolphins gambolling.

The church which is the subject of this article sits in a graveyard which was probably the site of the first cathedral of Ross, said to have been founded in the 7th century by one St Boniface. It in turn appears to have been constructed on the site of a church established by St Moluag,

one of a team of missionaries from Iona led by St Columba who brought knowledge of the Incarnate Christ to the Northern Picts in the 6th century. The success of that mission can still be seen in the extraordinarily fine collection of Pictish slab crosses in the area, one of the finest of which, from Rosemarkie churchyard, is now in the Groam House Museum in the village. From such stones it is clear that the Picts found the message of Columba and his followers entirely compatible with their earlier beliefs, as crosses and older Pictish symbols can be seen on the same stones.

The cathedral of Ross was transferred from Rosemarkie to Fortrose in the 13th century, where its much-reduced remains can still be seen. (Most of its stonework was taken to Inverness during the 1650s to build Oliver Cromwell's fort there). When the United Free Church united with the Church of Scotland in 1929 the Fortrose parish church (built in 1839) was sold to become a town hall, with the united congregation worshipping in the former Free Church, constructed in 1895-98. A few years ago there was a union between the Fortrose and Rosemarkie congregations, with the intention of worshipping in the Fortrose building. However this was found to need extensive repairs, so the Rosemarkie building is now the church of the united charge. It is a handsome Georgian Gothic Revival church constructed in

1818-21 by Charles Falconer and John Watson, masons and James McLean, wright (joiner). It was built with an unusually tall tower, apparently to act as a navigational aid for shipping using the Moray and Beauly firths. The interior of the building was remodelled in 1894 by John Robertson, though the pulpit canopy was retained from the Georgian building.

Travelling east from the Kessock Bridge to Rosemarkie – a delightful journey – one is I believe, very conscious of a long, and happy history, coloured by belief in a loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit brought here by Columba and Moluag a millennium and a half ago. For many reasons this is a part of Scotland infinitely worth visiting. ■

