

Between Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, the Isle of Man has a unique story that is well illustrated by its archaeological remains and buildings. Mick Aston took time off from filming for Channel 4 to have a look



THE ISLE OF MAN

I recently had the opportunity to go to the Isle of Man, a place I had always wanted to go, but had never had the chance before. It is a remarkable place with a rich archaeology, and a well-organised scheme for displaying the heritage and for encouraging visitors to see as much of it as possible.

The Isle of Man is very mountainous with rounded peaks up to 621m high (Snaefell) in the centre, and much of the coast has steep cliffs. There is flatter land, more suitable for farming, in the north, where there is a plain out to the Point of Ayre, and along the south-south-east side of the island where the main town, Douglas, and the airport are situated.

The place to start any archaeological visit is very definitely the Manx Museum, “the island’s treasure house” in Douglas. This has all the background geology, geomorphology and natural

Above: St German's cathedral (left) with castle (right) and (in foreground) the 16th century Half Moon gun battery

Opposite: Typical Isle of Man coastline



history displayed in the traditional way, which I like, as well as galleries of all the main periods up to and including the role of the island as an internment camp for German nationals in the second world war.

In the bookshop, which stocks all the main literature about the archaeology, history, folklore and place-names of the island, I bought booklets on Prehistoric Sites, Early Christianity, and Celts and Vikings. Interestingly, and like Ireland, the Romans never invaded the Isle of Man. These guidebooks are part of an overall integrated scheme for the island called the Story of Mann, whereby sites are labelled with uniform signs in the countryside and then these relate to the museum galleries and the guides. It works very well, and it is made easy to find and visit sites – all the churches were open and included within the

scheme, for example – and to read why they are significant on display boards when you get there. A more modern or trendy version of the history of Man, which is very well done, is situated at Peel – the House of Manannan – with full size cameos: a prehistoric round house with moving figures, an early Christian chapel, a Viking house and a smelly herring-curing establishment.

Out in the countryside the surviving archaeological sites are spectacular. The abundance and great variety of building stone on the island mean that many monuments from the neolithic onwards were stone-built. There are lots of good burial chambers and late prehistoric promontory forts, some of which are very small; it must have been odd living on the edge of a cliff with steep drops into the ocean all round.

But my interests of course lay much more with the early medieval period. I



had gone to the Isle of Man with Time Team to dig a keeil, one of nearly a hundred chapel sites of the period from the 7th to the 12th centuries AD. These seem to have been the equivalent of early churches elsewhere, though whether for hermits or holy men, or as “parochial” and burial centres, or indeed both, is not at all clear. As well as these chapels there were early monasteries. One of the most important seems to have been Maughold, on the east coast of the island, where under a church and churchyard, there are four former keeils, three of which survive as footings, and a great collection of crosses and inscribed stones, all housed in an open-sided display shed. Another

Top: Stone setting of Viking ship burial at Chapel Hill, one of several on Man

Above: Maughold, on the east coast, was one of the most important early medieval monasteries. As well as the surviving church in the graveyard, this air view shows the sites and remains of four keeils

Left: A collection of crosses and inscribed stones can be seen in a display shed at Maughold

Right, top: One of the neolithic burial chambers at Mull Hill

Right: Three views at Cregneash, a hamlet in the south preserving many traditional buildings that are part of the National Museum Service's Story of Mann



monastery almost certainly existed at Peel on the small St Patrick's Isle just off the coast but now connected by a causeway. Here there is a church and a chapel, both dedicated to St Patrick, showing the Irish connection. Later a cathedral, St German's, was built and the whole lot incorporated into Peel Castle, an impressive late medieval fortress. Other fine collections of crosses and stones exist in the churches at the north end of the island at Kirk Michael, Jurby, Andreas, and Bride, as well as at Braddon (after St Brendan of Ireland) near Douglas.

Of course the Isle of Man is in the middle of the sea routes along the western side of Britain, so it is not surprising that there is an important Viking presence. There are several ship burials known (one at Chapel Hill with a keeil in an earlier fort) and many of the stone crosses and grave markers in the churches are of the Viking period, but after they were converted to Christianity in the 10th century. The monuments therefore display a delightful combination of Christian and pagan Scandinavian iconography. These were all initially studied by the great antiquary of the island, Philip Moore Callow Kermode (1855-1932), whose illustrated Manx Crosses was published in 1907. He ensured that they were preserved, studied and displayed, and he is buried in the Kermode plot in Maughold churchyard, which has one of the finest collections of stones.

The contemporary early medieval settlements of course are usually more elusive. At Braaid, however, a remarkable Viking period farm survives on the side of the hill. This site used to be thought to be a stone circle with two stone rows. But reexcavation demonstrated that the circle was a very large iron age house, and the rows were a Viking longhouse and a barn. The site, well-displayed and signposted as part of the Story of Mann scheme, shows what an early farm looks like. There must be many hundreds of others still to be found on the island.

Finally on the last day I went to Cregneash, a village at the south end of the island where lots of traditional, post-medieval buildings are preserved. I like sites like this where life in the 19th and early 20th centuries is displayed. This one was unusual; not only was it part of the Story of Mann and it had reenactors, it was also lived in by the people explaining it. With its



fields full of oats in stooks and its native Manx Loghtan sheep, Cregneash gives a really good impression of what the island looked like in the recent past.

The Manx National Museum Service operates 11 national heritage museum sites. A Necessary Evil, an exhibition drawing on archives about the role of Manx merchants and mariners in the slave trade, is at the Manx Museum throughout 2007. The Manx Museum and the House of Manannan are open all year, while other museums reopen at Easter. For information see www.gov.im/mnh and email enquiries@mnh.gov.im.



MICK ASTON (6), TERESA HALL (1)