Conservation Problem for Britain's Remotest Island Community

Monday 30 November, 2015

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The tiny congregation in the remote island of Colonsay has been hit with an urgent bill for £20,000 to make safe its 200 year old church belfry. As a listed building, the belfry will be fully restored at a total cost of £55,000 but the structure has to be made safe immediately, pre-empting the possibility of grant aid during the first phase of the operation. Colonsay has only 135 inhabitants, 90 of whom are either pensioners or schoolchildren, and it is 36 miles from Oban, the nearest accessible community. The islanders are literally on their own, with barely a dozen regular worshippers , and have only just completed the complete renovation of their beautiful little 1802 Georgian church.

This new work must start immediately, to dismantle the rather elegant birdcage belfry before storms can bring it to the ground. Session Clerk Kevin Byrne said “The financial implications for this small congregation are serious. Although our church is presbyterian it has a completely ecumenical ethos and shares all services with the local Baptist congregation. It relies upon visiting volunteer preachers for pulpit supply and often welcomes ministers from other branches of the Christian family. The building is always open, it is available for suitable secular purposes and provides mortuary facilities regardless of creed. Almost incredibly, there are more than a million people worldwide with one or more ancestors who are connected to our church through a baptism, marriage or funeral.

We are hopeful that well-wishers will assist at this time of crisis and then visit Colonsay to see the result." Details of a special appeal are posted at www.colonsaychurches.org and the church is a registered charity SC031271 eligible for Gift Aid.

ENDS

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Direct link to appeal page: http://www.colonsaychurches.org/text/Belfry Appeal.htm

Notes to editors:

Colonsay is an island of 20 square miles in the Inner Hebrides, famous for its ruined mediaeval priory and for its wildlife, including populations of otters, Grey Atlantic seals, corncrakes and chough. It once had a population of almost 1000 persons, but during the early 19th century lost most of its population to clearance and emigration. www.colonsay.org.uk

The island was at the centre of controversy when residents voted to welcome employment opportunities offered by fish-farm operator Marine Harvest (see HeraldScotland, 1 April 2012).

The parish church was built in 1802 at a cost of £444.15s.2d and is notable for its elegant classical design, and for a very fine coombed vernacular wooden ceiling. “There is a blind oculus immediately above the vestry, and the pediment is surmounted by a simple bird-cage belfry with ogival-topped canopy and ball finial; a bell remains in situ" – RCAHMS (Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments in Scotland).

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Isle Of Colonsay :: Hebrides :: Church :: Conservation :: Appeal :: Belfry :: Argyll ::

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Digital images are available from Kevin Byrne: church exterior, interior and the belfry

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