

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

DONEGAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY



ST PETER'S TURAS, MOUNTCHARLES

The earliest inhabitants on Inver Parish lived along the Drimkeelan Ridge, northwest of present-day Mountcharles where the remains of a Neolithic Court Cairn and a Crannóg have been discovered. A third early site, known locally as the Turas, beside the lake, is likely – like St Patrick's, Armagh and St Bridget's, Kildare – of pagan origin. The name of the founder of this secluded foundation is unknown. It could have been founded by now-forgotten Peter or Peadar. This was the place of worship for those in the east of the Parish of Inver for a thousand years. Unlike the Parish Church – St Naul's at Inver – the Turas wasn't taken over by the Established Church at the Plantation of Ulster so it continued to be frequented by the Catholics. In fact, it is said these Stations increased in stature in Penal Times as, when no priest was available to say Mass, the people could perform the stations themselves.

In the 11th Century St Malachy brought The Canons Regular of St Augustine to Armagh and they took over Lough Derg Priory in 1134. In 1632 on the order of Lord Justice an assault on the island was directed by Dr Spottiswood, Bishop of Clogher. The monks had to flee to the mainland. Some of the Canons made their way to the Donegal Bay area and ministered at the Mountcharles Turas from the 1660's until they died out. According to Dr Geraldine Carville in her study on the occupation of Celtic sites by Continental Orders, these monks took over sites already in existence. Continental Orders would not have founded a new Turas; this type of pilgrimage site dates from early Christian times, not from the 18th Century.

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

The stations performed at both Lough Derg and Mountcharles have a similar extra feature – in both, prayers are recited at the water's edge. In both cases, the saint's chair is some distance from the main site. St Davog's Chair at Lough Derg is on the mainland and St Peter's Chair at the Mountcharles Turas is beside the well on the opposite side of the hill where the station begins. Both stations formerly began on the 29th June, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, and ended on 15th August.

The first modern reference to the Turas appears in *The Statistical Survey of Ireland* published in 1816. The section on Inver Parish was written by Rev Alex Montgomery, Rector and landed proprietor. Writing of the Lough near Mountcharles, he says,

“It is known by the name of Turas Hill Lough, from a Turas or Catholic Station. Having been held there, it is still thought to an inferior degree, frequented for the purpose of devotion”.

A Mass house had been built in Frosses in the 1770's. As soon as services and devotions could be moved indoors the Church authorities actively discouraged outdoor penitential stations. O'Donovan in his 1835 'Survey' wrote “Catholics still go to St Peter's Lough for cures for their maladies as it is considered Holy”.

In thanksgiving for the cure of J.J. Friel, a returned American commissioned a local stonecutter, Patrick Quinn, to sculpt a Celtic cross and erect it on the altar. The late Neil McHugh, Sacristan of Frosses Church, encased the picture of the Holy Family in cement, and decorated it with seashells on the altar. A statue of the Madonna and Child, in Drumkeelan stone, also adorns the altar. It was carved by a German visitor Karl Hagman, whilst staying with a local family.

The numbers attending continued to decline for the next hundred and fifty years. However, with the recently renewed interest in Celtic spirituality people are returning to the ancient site.