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Ruination and reinvention

A self guided walk around the Kilmahew estate near Cardross



Discover the ruins of a medieval castle and a modernist building
Explore the overgrown pathways of an ornamental Victorian estate
See how water has shaped the natural and built landscape
Find out how an arts organisation is planning to revitalise the site

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the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks







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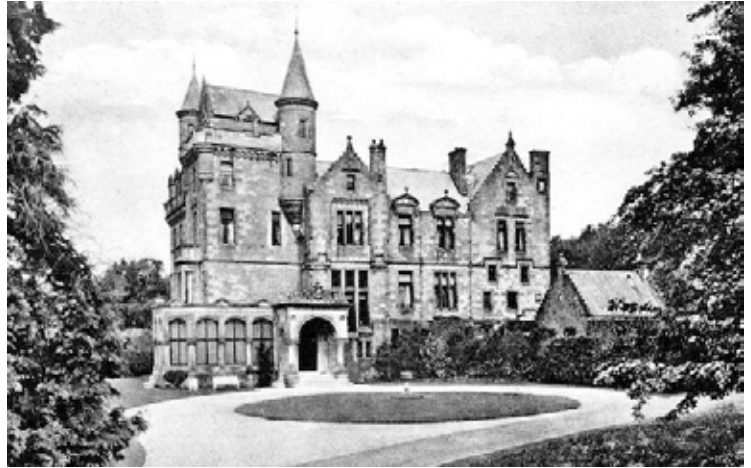
Ruination and reinvention

Discover the secrets of the Kilmahew estate

If you go up to these woods today you're sure of a big surprise!

Hidden in the woods of Kilmahew Glen is an abandoned country estate with the ruined remains of human habitation from the medieval to the modern period.

Kilmahew has had many incarnations. Each time a new vision and design has been followed by decline and ruin.



Kilmahew House
© Helensburgh Heritage Trust

Amidst a landscape of woods and rhododendrons are stone, brick, iron and concrete features that offer a tantalising glimpse of the buildings and structures that once stood here.



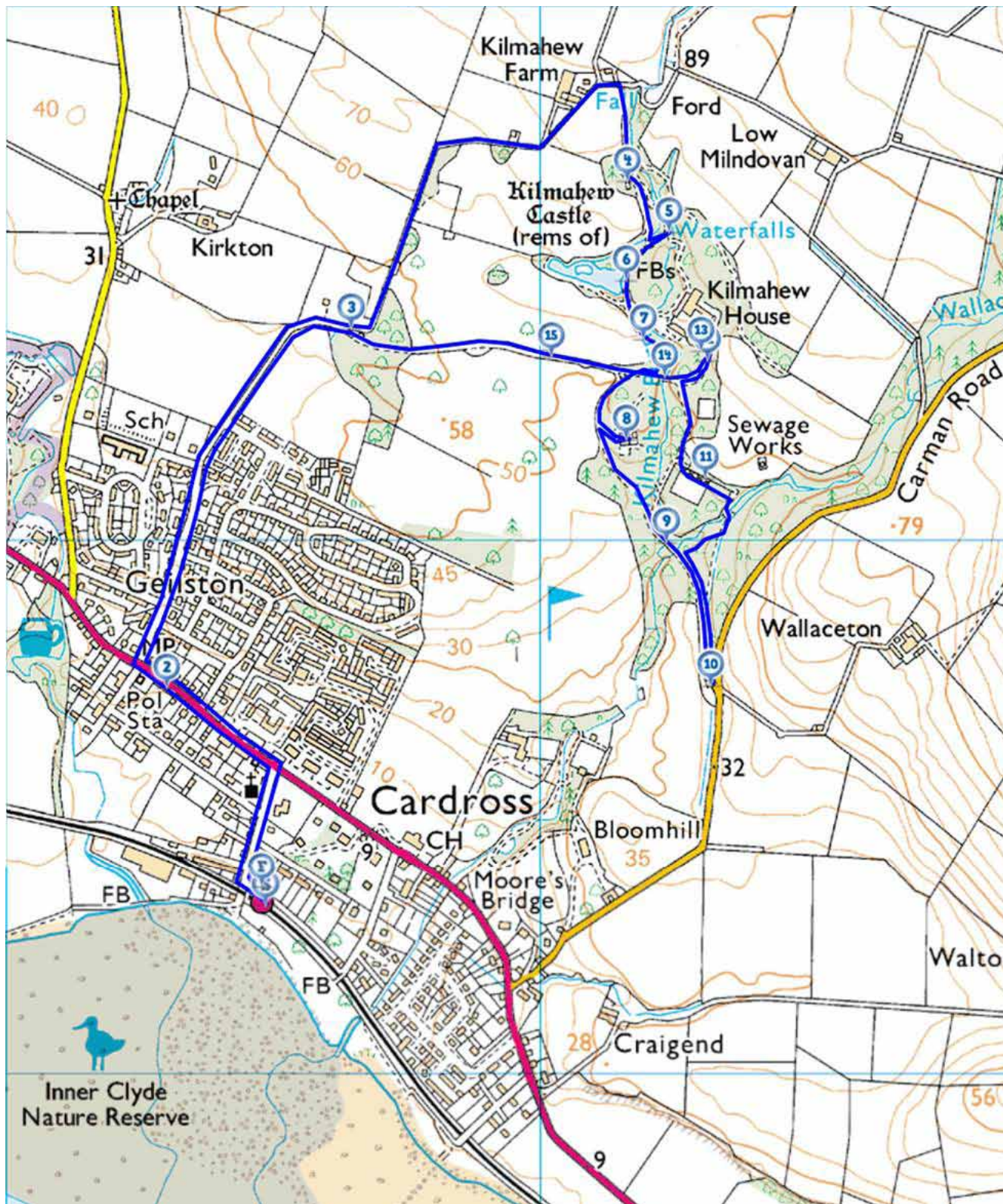
Discover remains of iron footbridges and scenic walkways
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Step through the undergrowth to discover waterfalls, gardens and ponds.

Let your imagination recreate the grandeur of driveways, parkland and ornamental gardens.

As you walk in the footsteps of early Christian missionaries, old Scots nobility, trainee priests and community volunteers the layers of history on this site reveal themselves.

Route overview



Practical information

Location	Cardross, Argyll, Scotland
Start & finish	Cardross railway station, G82 5NL
Getting there	<p>Car - Cardross is on the A814 road between Dumbarton and Helensburgh on the north shore of the Firth of Clyde. There is a small car park at Cardross railway station</p> <p>Train - Cardross is served by trains running every half hour between Glasgow and Helensburgh</p> <p>Bus - Cardross is served by buses running between Glasgow and Helensburgh; alight at the stop near the Post Office and war memorial</p>
Walk distance	4 miles
Level	Moderate – An undulating route with some gentle slopes
Terrain	Outside the village the paths are a mixture of gravel tracks and woodland footpaths around a gorge; the ground can be rough underfoot in places and some paths can be overgrown
Conditions	The site is invariably muddy all year round so do wear walking boots or wellies and take waterproof clothing
Suitable for	- Families - Dogs
Refreshments	Cardross village has two pubs (The Coach House Inn and The Muirholm), a couple of small convenience stores and Laura's café (selling rolls, hot snacks and drinks)
Toilets	There are no toilets or other facilities on the Kilmahew estate; the nearest toilets are at the pubs in Cardross village

Important notes

There are several ruined buildings on the Kilmahew Estate. These are not safe for entry or exploration so please view them from the outside only.

The whole site is in a state of continual flux and there may be unforeseen disruptions to the walk route caused by demolition or restoration work, rhododendron clearance or other activities. Seek alternative footpaths if the route is barred.

Detail of first and last part of route



Stopping points

- S** Cardross railway station
- 2.** The Napiers plaque, Main Road
- 3.** Metal gates at West Lodge
-
- F** Cardross railway station

Detail of middle section of route



Stopping points

- 4.** Ruins of Kilmahew Castle
- 5.** Spottie's Linn waterfall
- 6.** Path beside pond
- 7.** Path through rhododendron tunnel
- 8.** Shipping container in old stable courtyard
- 9.** Double Bridge over burns
- 10.** Metal gates at East Lodge
- 11.** Walled garden
- 12.** Fence by ruin of St Peter's Seminary
- 13.** Fence by ruin of St Peter's Seminary
- 14.** Bridge over Kilmahew Gorge
- 15.** Footpath between golf course

1. Welcome to Cardross

Cardross railway station

Welcome to this Discovering Britain walk in Scotland created by a team from the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

We're in the village of Cardross about 20 miles northwest of Glasgow city centre on the northern shoreline of the Firth of Clyde. This walk explores an area on the edge of the village called Kilmahew. It's a wooded glen containing an old estate of the landed gentry.

This walk explores a landscape that has changed many times throughout history in its ownership, layout and use. It has experienced many cycles of ruination and reinvention: each period of decay and neglect has been followed by a new vision and design.

We will discover evidence in the woods of buildings and features that were once integral to the estate including an old castle, mansion house and modern building as well as scenic driveways, a walled garden and ornamental pond. Amidst the ruins and undergrowth we will imagine what the site was like in different periods and hear from people with memories of living and working here.

Although fenced and gated at points along its perimeter, Kilmahew is well known to some locals and on ordinary days you'll find ramblers, dog walkers and joggers on the paths through the woods. Beyond the village this site is less known; it remains a secret and largely undiscovered place. We hope you enjoy the walk in this unique place!



The wooded Kilmahew Glen from the air
© Thomas Nugent, Geograph
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Directions 1

From Cardross railway station turn right into Station Road and head towards the village. At the war memorial turn left onto Main Road. Keep to the pavement on the left side for about 200 metres. Shortly before the red telephone box and second pedestrian crossing find a boulder with a plaque to the left of the pavement.

2. Wandering monks and noble families

The Napiers plaque, Main Road

The area you are about to enter boasts a long human history. Its name, Kilmahew, is derived from the Gaelic word cille which refers to a small settlement of monks and Mahew who was a sixth century monk and among the first wave of missionaries spreading Celtic Christianity from Ireland to Scotland.

Located only half a mile from here was the early Christian chapel of St Mahew. There is also evidence to suggest that the church of St Mahew was built on the site of an earlier pagan sanctuary.

From the end of the thirteenth century the land in this area was claimed by the Lairds of Napier, an ancient Scots noble family. This local aristocratic connection is commemorated on the fading plaque here by the roadside. Here's local historian and walking guide, Glen Lindsay to explain what the Napiers did:



Plaque to the Napier family in Cardross village
© Michael Gallagher



The restored St Mahew's chapel
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

In the fifteenth century Duncan Napier of Kilmahew had St Mahew's chapel restored and it was re-consecrated in 1467 by the Bishop of Argyll.

Later on it fell into ruin until the Archdiocese of Glasgow took it over in 1948 and decided to restore it again. In 1955 they dug up an ancient standing stone thought to be the cross of St Mahew. It's still in the vestibule of the new church.

This is the first example in our story of a cycle of the ruination and renewal of cultural and spiritual sites.

Directions 2

Continue along Main Road and cross over at the pedestrian crossing. Turn right into Barrs Road beside The Muirholm pub. Follow the road gradually uphill past residential housing. After about 400 metres the road becomes a rougher grade of track and there are fields on either side. After about 200 metres the track bends to the right past a house. Immediately after the house the track forks: take the right fork and stop at the modern metal gate.

3. An impressive approach

Metal gates at West Lodge

We are now outside Cardross village and at the perimeter of the Kilmahew estate. The estate covers about 140 acres and in the past there were formal entrances on the north, southeast and west sides.

It was common for country estates to have buildings positioned at main gateways. This is the site of Kilmahew West Lodge and we can still see some evidence of it.

Notice that the modern metal gate is fixed between two, much older, stone piers. Beyond the gate are the remnant standing walls of the Lodge.



Remains of the West Lodge
© Michael Gallagher

The old driveway curves away, edged with railings. Once it passed through parkland to reach the front of the mansion house of Kilmahew. It was deliberately designed to be scenic and show off the parkland and house beyond.

From here you can see two mature Wellingtonia trees (commonly known as giant redwoods) standing as sentinels flanking the track. They were planted there for dramatic effect. Today the parkland forms part of the layout of Cardross Golf Course. We're not going to enter the estate here but will skirt around the perimeter and enter from the north.

Directions 3

Return to the fork in the track and turn right. The ruined Lodge is clearly visible on the right. Follow the track as it ascends steadily with fields either side. Pass a large house and round the next bend pass a cottage and barn of Kilmahew Farm.

Where the track splits turn right across the front of Kilmahew Cottage. After about 20 metres (just before the track starts to descend steeply) there is a cattle grid on the left side at the entrance to Kilmahew Cottage. Immediately opposite on the right side are two stone pillars that mark the northern entrance into Kilmahew estate.

Go between the stone pillars and follow the footpath with fields on the right and a ravine and stream on the left. At certain times of year this path may be quite overgrown. Stop when you reach the ruins of a stone tower.

4. An antiquarian enigma

Ruins of Kilmahew Castle

You have now entered Kilmahew Glen which has been continuously wooded for over 500 years. Here is Kilmahew Castle, or rather the ruins of it. It is in quite bad repair with lots of loose masonry so for your own safety please don't go inside. The castle is listed as a historic building but it is something of an antiquarian enigma.

The castle is a key part of the Napier family's local history and was certainly a cardinal point in the late medieval landscape of Kilmahew. But was it a house or a place of worship? Was it originally fortified and afterwards 'follified'? Or was it all of these things and more besides? Here's Dr Ed Hollis from the University of Edinburgh with his own theory on how to unpick this puzzle of a place.



Kilmahew Castle
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

On first inspection Kilmahew Castle looks like a sixteenth or seventeenth century tower house. But look at the south façade and you can see big gothic windows which are eighteenth or nineteenth century additions to the building made once it was a ruin.

The little round tower on the corner is probably part of the original structure but the windows have been taken from churches –they're not part of the original fabric of the building. They were added to make the building look suitably gothic.



Left to right: The southeast corner, southern doorway and southwest corner staircase
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

On the left hand side of the tower you can see two columns and a bit of an arch. This has been deliberately added on to suggest that a much larger building once stood here. In fact that wall never continued in that direction.

If you're lucky you'll catch a glimpse of the current laird of Kilmahew Castle, a barn owl, who likes to roost at the ivy-clad apex of the in-filled arch facing to the south.

We are in an elevated position here so before moving on take in the panoramic views of the Clyde estuary to the south west.



Views down to the Firth of Clyde
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Directions 4

Follow the main footpath that leads downhill from the castle. After a short distance look for a drainage ditch that passes under the footpath and a very large beech tree to the right of the footpath. Immediately after passing over the drainage ditch take the small path to the left. The path may be overgrown, but you should be able to make your way along it to a painted wooden post with the number 6 which overlooks a ravine and waterfall.

5. Sprites and steeds

Spottie's Linn waterfall

According to local lore this waterfall is called Spottie's Linn. The name indicates a supernatural presence. Spottie is the old Scots word for a will-o'-the-wisp, the woodland sprite who, by a trick of the light, tempted unwary travellers off the beaten track. Do tread carefully now...

It is said that the last laird of Kilmahew, George Maxwell Napier, chose a waterfall's edge as the burial place for one of his prize horses.

Horses were his greatest fancy. He even had a stable lined with mirrors so he could better admire his most cherished steeds.



Spottie's Linn
© Michael Gallagher

When he got married he rode across country to Caithness in the far northeast of Scotland to collect his bride and for the occasion his horse was shod with shoes of silver.

But his is a cautionary tale. He was a man of expensive tastes and had a gambling habit. He squandered a fortune and imperilled the ancestral home of Kilmahew. Plots and parcels of land were sold to settle his debts. In 1820, after four centuries of association, the remains of the estate were sold out of the Napier family. By then, the castle was in ruins too.

Directions 5

Retrace your steps back to the main path and turn left. Follow the path for a short distance until you reach an embankment on the right side over which is a pond.

6. Pleasure gardens

Path beside pond

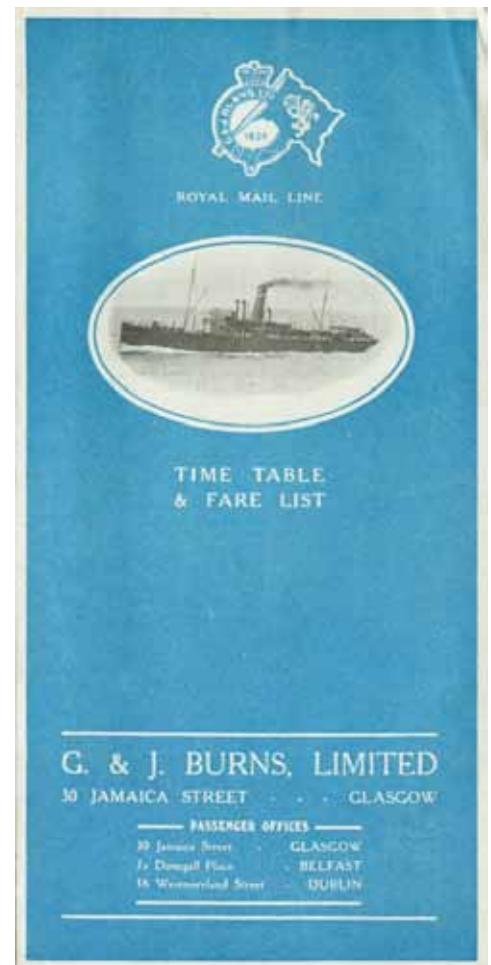
At the last stop we heard about the eventual sale of the Kilmahew estate by the Napier family.

The property and site was bought by the Burns family who were highly successful industrialists and made their money through shipping. They were partners in the British and North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (later the Cunard Line) and the return on their investment was handsome.

They spent some of their wealth on restoring and redesigning Kilmahew. Over the low embankment at the side of the path is a small artificial lake known as the Swan Pond, complete with a miniature ornamental island. It is fringed with stands of pine, birch and cherry trees and at the far side the distinctive serrated shape of monkey-puzzle trees frame the scene.

The Swan Pond was just one of the decorative features within the pleasure gardens created here at Kilmahew by the Burns family. Look out for remnants of others as you continue on the walk.

Family members and guests could enjoy promenades along an intricate network of paths, each with a different scenography. A dozen ironwork footbridges criss-crossed the gorge and provided a good place to look at the waterfalls. There was also a rose arch, curling pond, walled garden and areas of formal terracing planted with ornamental species.



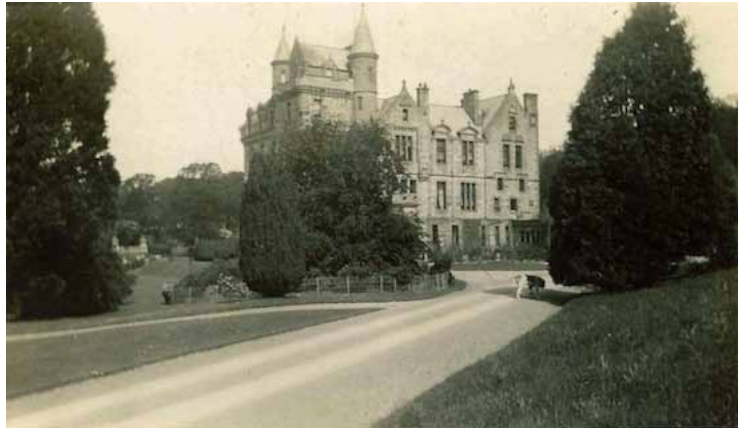
Cover of a timetable for G&J Burns shipping line
© Glasgow City Archives and Special Collections



The ornamental pond and rock garden
© Sheena Allan, courtesy of Michael Wilson

The redesign of the landscape centred on Kilmahew House, its crowning achievement. It was built of sandstone quarried from Carman Moor above the estate.

This baronial mansion boasted 21 bedrooms, a billiard room and a library of rare books. James Burns' vision was one of well-proportioned estate improvement, but in a romantic style where landscape could embody different emotions, memories, ideas and moods.



Approach to Kilmahew House
© Sheena Allan, courtesy of Michael Wilson



The Swan Pond and remains of one of the iron footbridges today
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Directions 6

Continue following the path. For a short section the golf course is visible to the right of the path. Immediately after this is a rhododendron tunnel.

7. An exotic tunnel

Path through rhododendron tunnel

This spectacular rhododendron tunnel is a most peculiar entanglement of natural forces and cultural tastes.

Rhododendron ponticum was one of many species planted in the Victorian era when it became fashionable to introduce exotic trees, shrubs and plants.

Some of the exotic species planted over 150 years ago can still spring a flowering surprise such as the East Asian bog plant, Rodgersia, with its pyramidal plume of feathery pink flowers.

Others have long since disappeared such as the rock plants once integral to the design of the ornamental Japanese garden, though Veitch's bamboo still sprouts nearby.

Here the rhododendron was trained to rise upwards and then intertwine overhead to enclose the path in a tunnel.



Rhododendron ponticum in flower (top) and Rodgersia (bottom)
© A Barrs / James Steakley, Wikimedia Commons



The spectacular rhododendron tunnel
© Neil Davidson

Although *Rhododendron ponticum* in bloom is a pretty sight, the plant has a bad reputation for rampant growth. It tends to darken the understorey, crowding out more delicate plants and preventing the cycle of woodland regeneration.

Thus it is often categorised as an invasive species by woodland managers and some conservationists, and so earmarked for removal. But the idea of uprooting these enchanting tunnels has proved controversial.

Here are some members of the local community offering their views on the matter.



A non-ponticum species tagged by the community to prevent removal when ponticum clearance starts
© Michael Gallagher

- *I really loathe rhodies and what they do to our native plants and animals so at first I wanted to get rid of them all. But at the same time rhododendrons hold this site together and make the place what it is at present; they create areas of mystery and make it enchanting for people to come here.*
- *If the rhododendron doesn't get cleared it'll eventually take over and choke everything out. Through time it'll grow up and then there'll be nothing special here at all.*
- *I famously said if you're going to cut down another rhododendron tunnel like this one up to the castle I'll chain myself to it!*

Directions 7

Continue following the path downhill until it meets a wider track. To the left is a bridge over the Kilmahew Gorge to which we will return later. Turn right and follow the track until you reach a grassy island. Follow the surfaced track that bears left and goes gradually downhill. After about 100 metres bear left on an unsurfaced track that leads to an area of level ground where there is an old shipping container.

8. Upstairs, downstairs

Shipping container in old stable courtyard

In 1919 the Burns family sold Kilmahew estate to Claud Allan who was heir to the Allan Line, the world's largest private steamship company. It was said to be the inspiration for the popular 1970s television drama series *The Onedin Line*.

Allan undertook a programme of modernisation adding tennis courts, a sewage works and a gasometer. Allan also built new stable buildings surrounding a courtyard, right where you are standing now – the stables are long gone but some cobblestones still remain. The shipping container is a more recent addition and is not of Allan Line vintage! Here's Michael Wilson, grandson of Claud Allan, recalling the life of the Big House:



The tennis court (c. 1910s)
© Sheena Allan, courtesy of Michael Wilson

It was a real upstairs-downstairs situation. There were the outside staff and then there were the inside staff. Just as you may have seen in Downton Abbey there was a servants' hall. In fact I actually heard Chamberlain's speech about the declaration of war in the servants' hall.



War memorial in Cardross village
© Michael Gallagher

During the Second World War the Luftwaffe bombed the shipyards of Clydeside. The industry whose profits helped to develop the estate had become a strategic target. Although the shipyards were 20 miles away the estate was not unaffected. Here's Michael Wilson again:

The staff shrunk down just to a handful of people because all the young boys went to war. Alexander Dunbar, one of the gardener's sons, was killed in the RAF. The Germans dropped land mines on parachutes, particularly in Clydebank, and so all the windows of the house had netting over them so splinters wouldn't come in if there was a bomb.

Directions 8

Retrace your steps away from the shipping container back to the main track. Turn left and follow the track for about 300 metres until you reach a stone bridge over a stream.

9. A liquid landscape

Double Bridge over burns

Flowing through the estate are two 'burns' (the Scots language name for a stream) that have shaped the character of this landscape over many centuries.

Since entering the estate in the north near Kilmahew Farm, our walk has to this point followed Kilmahew Burn.

Just a stone's throw below this bridge it is joined by Wallacetown Burn which has come down from Carman Hill to the northwest.

In earlier days visitors might have paused here to look at the pretty view of the union of burns.



Confluence of the two burns
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)



Stone bridge over Kilmahew Burn
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Kilmahew is a watery place. Depending on which chapter of the estate's history you consult, water has been both the making and the undoing of Kilmahew. Water falls and floods, drenches and quenches, drowns and drips, incises and ingresses. Everywhere.

Meteorological records show that it rains here roughly one in every two days. The average annual total is 1,200 millimetres. By these measures you find yourself in the depths of a Celtic rainforest. Wherever you are in Kilmahew, listen carefully and you'll hear the sounds of water flowing, dripping, splashing and gushing.

Directions 9

Continue across the bridge and follow the track for about 250 metres (passing part of the golf course on the right) until you reach a modern metal fence by a road.

10. The gardener's cottage

Metal gates at East Lodge

The stone gateposts at either end of the modern metal fence and a pile of stones are all that remain of the East Lodge.

Like the remnants of the West Lodge that we saw earlier, this was another entrance to the Kilmahew estate and was the start of the long scenic driveway that we have just walked down.

For their upkeep, all British countryside estates depended on a dedicated staff. Some families had a long association with the estate.

Frank Dunbar the gardener and his family lived here at the East Lodge between the wars. Here's Michael Wilson again:

We visited all the cottages of the families - we'd go down to the stable and garage block to see the Aitkens, we'd go down and see Mrs Dunbar at the East Lodge...

Dear old Dunbar, the head gardener with a wonderful gruff voice and thick glasses. He was absolutely brilliant. There were prize cups all over the dining room which he'd won in sweet pea shows.



East Lodge before it was demolished in 2008
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Directions 10

Retrace your steps back along the track. Immediately before the stone bridge turn right onto a footpath which is likely to be muddy. Follow it up through the woods and over a stone bridge. Take care to avoid the exposed hole on the right side of the bridge. Go through the arch in the red-brick wall and follow the path. Go through another archway and stop in the walled enclosure beyond.

11. Green fingers

Walled garden

You have now entered the kitchen garden, an area of the estate bounded by red brick walls. It was inaugurated in 1866 and the head gardener was John Fleming who had already developed a reputation at Cliveden House in Buckinghamshire.

During its heyday much of the garden would have been dedicated to growing vegetables but Fleming also erected glasshouses with a heating system to grow a surprisingly wide range of soft fruits such as grapes, peaches, plums and nectarines.

Look on the north wall for the partially-collapsed wooden and iron frames of the glasshouses bearing the stamp of their makers, Simpson and Farmer of Glasgow.

In the crumbling south wall you may be able to spot the rusty remains of a heating pipe. Simpson and Farmer were noted horticultural engineers at the start of the twentieth century, responsible for several large glasshouses around Glasgow, some of which are still in good condition, unlike the ones here at Kilmahew.



Rose Arch in the Walled Garden
© Courtesy of Michael Wilson



Remains of the glasshouses
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Recently the land has been brought back into productive use. Local volunteers have planted vegetables and come here regularly to tend and harvest them. The inaugural potato crop was named 'Fleming's Firsts', in memory of the garden's green-fingered pioneer. Here's one of the current gardeners speaking about what's been achieved in the first year of cultivation:

There's probably a core of about half a dozen of us that come here every week doing bits and pieces and trying to keep it productive and keep the weeds down. Most of the beds are planted – we've got Tuscan kale, miniature green beans, lots of onions, carrots, peas, leeks, courgettes and tomatoes. We did have a lot of other things but the rabbits seem to have taken them!



Volunteers preparing the ground and the planted vegetable beds of the productive garden
© Michael Gallagher

Directions 11

Continue following the path through the walled garden with the ruins of the glasshouses on the right and the cultivated area to the left. Go through the archway at the top corner and turn right under another archway. Follow the footpath steadily uphill through the woodland. When you reach a surfaced track turn right and follow it as it curves uphill to the left. Stop when you reach a modern metal fence.

12. A radical and daring design

Fence by ruin of St Peter's Seminary

The last we heard about the history of land ownership here at Kilmahew was the estate's purchase by Claud Allen soon after the First World War.

In 1948 the Catholic Archdiocese of Glasgow bought the estate, attracted by the ancient religious geography of the place and the secluded nature of the landscape.

Kilmahew House, the stone mansion which had been built by the Burns family, was transformed into a seminary, a college for the training of priests.



Kilmahew House became home to trainee priests
© Courtesy of Michael Wilson

In 1953 the Glasgow architectural firm Gillespie, Kidd and Coia was approached about extending the building. This project evolved and expanded, resulting in one of Britain's greatest architectural commissions of the twentieth century.

The design, dreamt up by architects Andy MacMillan and Izi Metzstein, was radical and daring: a new complex of buildings combining concrete and glass wrapped around the existing mansion house.

Construction started in 1961 and the new college building, christened St Peter's, opened in 1966. In its dramatic frame and floating interior spaces, the aesthetic vision of two global superstructures was united: Roman Catholicism and architectural Modernism.

Father Dominic Doogan studied at the college when it first opened and remembers his impressions of the new building:

I thought it was an amazing building to live in. It was something quite revolutionary and I think there was a sense of pride in going to be part of a community living in that building. I was always impressed with the way the architect had built the new building round the mansion with the mansion forming the fourth side of the structure.

Opinion about Modernist architecture can vary wildly. What can't be undisputed is its dramatic presence, either as building or as ruin.



Images of St Peter's when it first opened in the 1960s
© The Glasgow School of Art

Directions 12

Remain by the fence overlooking the ruined building.

13. Ruins and raves

Fence by ruin of St Peter's Seminary

You might well be wondering why a building less than 50 years old is now in a state of ruin. Various factors contributed to its decline. First, thinking in the Vatican Council shifted in 1962 with preference being given to the training of clergymen in communities rather than the seclusion of seminaries. Second, the number of men entering the priesthood had begun to decline sharply. Third, it was soon apparent that the building's design and materials were unsuited to the wet climate here in western Scotland.



The ruins of St Peter's seminary
© Lairich Rig, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Maintenance problems mounted. Internal leaks were as many as trainee priests were few. A priest who studied at St Peter's College remembers the problems that befell the place:

There were buckets all over the building. It just wasn't a practical design for the Scottish climate. It would be great in India or somewhere where there's constant sunshine but with the rain and the wet in Scotland a flat roof just doesn't work. So there were lots of leaks when it was in use as a seminary.

St Peter's closed in 1980 after only 14 years of active service and the processes of physical decay then accelerated rapidly. Rain, vandalism, theft and arson all conspired to pull the place apart. In 1992 the buildings were given Category A listing in recognition of their architectural importance but by 1995 the old Kilmahew mansion house, ravaged by two fires, was reckoned too unsafe and pulled down to the dismay of many. Today, only the foundations remain, showing the footprint of the old place.

The surrounding newer buildings still stand, gradually decaying and collapsing. The altar is cracked, the chapel crumbling and the staircases burned out. Fences have been erected all around and signs warn off trespassers. But despite the official abandonment people still come here. The graffiti and empty beer cans are evidence of this and there are late-night tales to be told too.

A couple of years ago me and some friends heard about a rave that was going on here up at this building. There were a lot of people there – at least 150 – and it was a really nice atmosphere. People had strung up disco balls and fairy lights. One guy had filled his car with speakers and had driven through the gates into the car park – the sound quality was really good, like being at the front row of a rock concert...



Images of the ruins of St Peter's
© Michael Gallagher / The Invisible College

Directions 13

Retrace your steps back down the surfaced track to the bridge over the Kilmahew Gorge. Stop in the centre of the bridge looking back up towards the ruined structure of St Peter's.

14. The Invisible College

Bridge over Kilmahew Gorge

Over the years a variety of plans have been imagined for the commercial redevelopment of St Peter's: a hotel and conference centre, conversion to luxury flats, artists' studios.

Some people insist that it is a worthless concrete carbuncle whose demolition is long overdue. Others claim it as an architectural treasure deserving full restoration. What do you think?

The latest scheme to be developed is by the Scottish arts charity NVA, which is raising funds to buy the entire site. They have a vision for the transformation of this landscape combining community-centred activities, university-led research and contemporary arts practice.



Ironwork rubbings
© Neil Davidson

Their programme revolves around the idea of an 'Invisible College' which is less an institution and more a series of imaginative interventions such as the new community growing space you have seen and the walk you have taken today. Here's Angus Farquhar from NVA explaining how this will work:

The landscape itself – the natural landscape and the buildings (we make no separation between the two) are different layers of history and they should be the place that we learn from and be inspired by. The whole idea of the Invisible College is a place without walls. So much of our learning from childhood onwards takes place indoors in dull, stifling environments. So why not just spend time in a place that in itself can be the source of inspiration or the source of debate? That's really what the Invisible College is for: it's that idea that education can be fun and relaxed; it should feel like a day off from your ordinary life but that doesn't mean that it stops you thinking or stops you opening up to new possibilities.

The Invisible College has brought together academics, architects, activists, artists and, crucially, local people who have spent their lives around the site. It is the latest way in which this remarkable site is being reinvented once more.

Directions 14

Cross the bridge and follow the track to the grassy island. Take the track to the right which bisects the golf course. After a short distance, stop and turn around to take a last look back at the woods.

15. Ongoing cycles

Footpath between golf course

This walk has told the story of Kilmahew estate and its cycles of ruination and reinvention. From medieval lairds and Victorian industrialists to the Catholic Church and an arts charity, new owners have each put their imprint on the design, layout and buildings of this site.

We have explored this wooded glen to discover a castle and a mansion, waterfalls and a pond, ornamental gardens and a kitchen garden, scenic driveways and bridges. It's a site with a complicated past and an uncertain future.

We hope that you have enjoyed exploring this unique site. Perhaps it will make you stop and think next time you are out on a walk about the processes that have shaped the landscape including the climate, the history of land ownership, and the use of land.

Landscape change happens at different speeds in different places. What results can be the outcome of careful design or sometimes take place with no willed intention and without any plan. Operating in combination these environmental processes can create very different kinds of landscape beauty.



Kilmahew is a site with layers of history
© Lairich Rig / Michael Gallagher

Directions 15

Continue along the track between the two parts of the golf course until you reach the ruins of West Lodge. Go round the modern metal gate where we stopped earlier. Follow the track past the house and between the fields as you retrace your steps back towards the village. Go straight down Barrs Road then turn left onto Main Road. At the war memorial turn right into Station Road and the railway station is at the end.

Credits

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