



A trip across the water can be a unique way to visit Historic Scotland sites, writes Friend Bob Jones.



SHIP TO SHORE

Wee Bonnie Boat Trips

Most of the Historic Scotland sites we visit, we reach by car – castles, abbeys and chapels. There are also many monuments we walk to – stone circles, forts, standing stones. But there is another type of Historic Scotland site as well. These are the places you can only reach by ferry. These properties, by the very nature of their location, are unique.

The first of these ferry-trip sites that my wife and I experienced was Lochleven Castle on the west edge of Fife, near the town of Kinross. The 14th-century fortress, situated on an island in Loch Leven, has been visited by many of Scotland's most historic figures. William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, King David II, and Robert Stewart (Robert II) all visited Lochleven Castle in the 1300s. The castle's most famous visitor was Mary Stewart, Queen of Scots who was a guest on the island in 1561 and then was imprisoned there in 1567.

The island, which my wife, Anne and I visited in 2000 and again in 2002 is larger than the one Mary Queen of Scots knew, since the loch's level has been lowered, thus adding more land to the island. However, she wouldn't have had the nice partly-covered ten-passenger ferry we took over to the castle. The 15-minute ride offers attractive views of Kinross House in the park next to the small ferry terminal dock. On one of our visits we passed many smaller boats with serious fisher folk angling for a big one in a national fishing contest.

On the ride over, the Historic Scotland steward, piloting the boat, gave us some interesting information about the loch and the castle. We listened as the boat drifted past the geese and swans which are one of the reasons Lochleven Castle has been receiving tourists since the mid-1700s.



Just a ferry trip away:
Lochleven Castle.



Above: The ferry arrives at Lochleven Castle.
Right: Inchmahome Priory.

Another Historic Scotland property on a loch is Inchmahome Priory. In the middle of the Lake of Menteith, the 13th-century priory was established by Walter Comyn, Earl of Menteith and was occupied by Augustinian canons from Cambuskenneth Abbey near Stirling (also an Historic Scotland site). Again, there is a connection between Inchmahome and Mary Queen of Scots who visited for three weeks when she was four years old. The Lake of Menteith is often called the 'only lake in a land of lochs', but a close inspection of a good map shows at least one other small 'lake' nearby.

We left for our trip over to the island from a small boat dock in Port of Menteith, about 12 miles from Callander. We signalled to the island by turning a sign indicating we wanted to be picked up. A few minutes later we boarded the same type of ferry as we had sailed in, on Loch Leven. The Historic Scotland steward told us about the loch and the priory as we sat in relative comfort in the open cabin, while he braved the rain to pilot us on the eight-minute crossing. Once we got to the island, the two stewards, who take turns piloting the ferry, were particularly informative about the history of the priory and the ruined Menteith Castle on Inch Talla, the neighbouring island in the loch.

In the case of the trip to Threave Castle, near Castle Douglas, the boat dock isn't next to the car park. To get to the dock we first had to hike three-quarters of a mile down a nice path fenced off from cattle on one side and sheep on the other. Interestingly, many gates along the path shut using an automatic stone and chain weight system. One of the things we find at Historic Scotland sites is that they often show the old ways are still efficient.

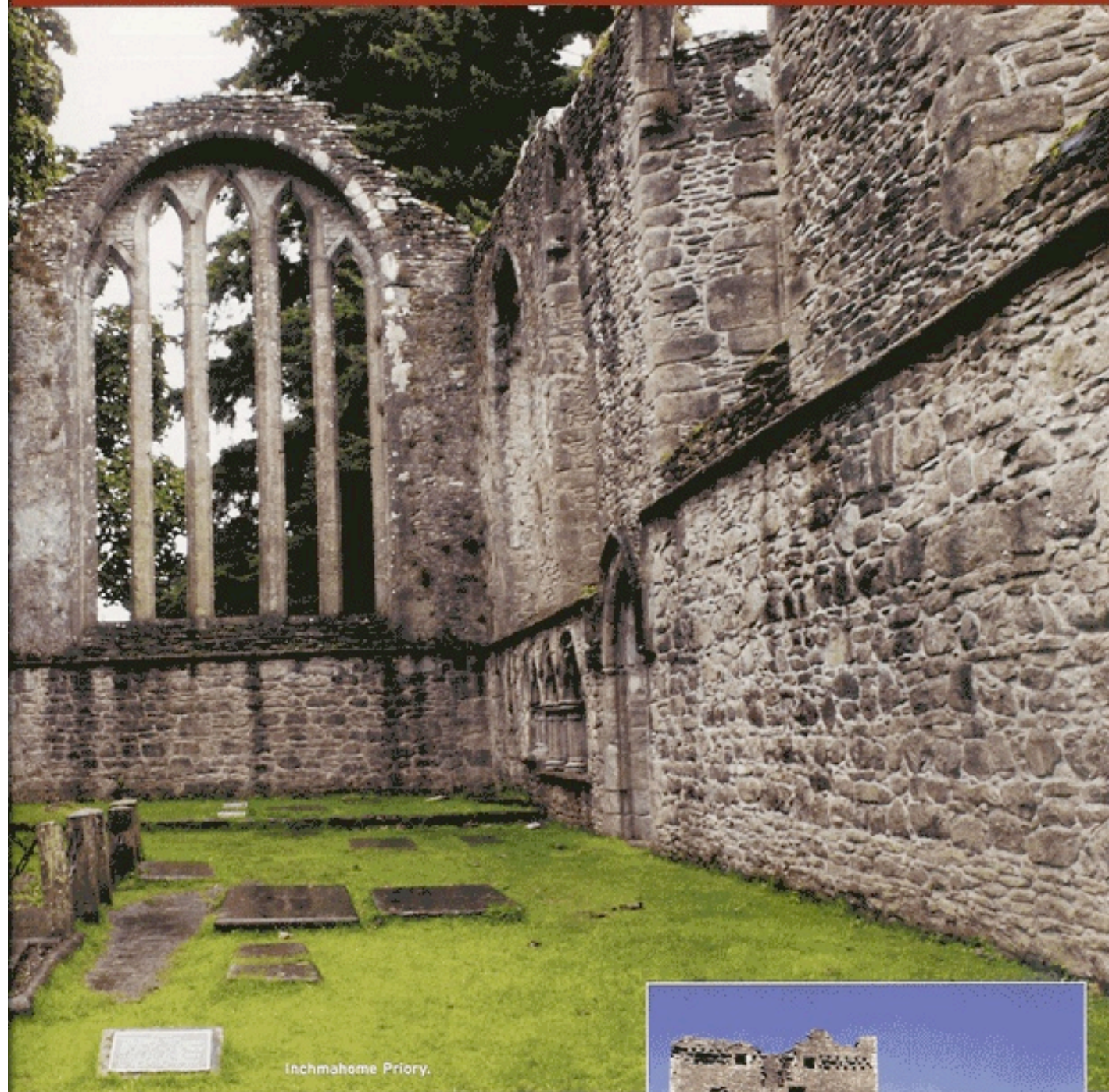
Once at the dock, we signalled via flag to have the



ferry pick us up. This 'ferry' was a large rowing boat with an outboard motor – big enough for four passengers and more than adequate for the two- to three-minute crossing of the gently flowing River Dee.

The 14th-century tower house built for Archibald 'The Grim' Douglas was one of the first ruined castles protected under state care. As Anne and I explored the castle, we watched parents help their two children find facts to fill in an activity sheet they had picked up in the visitor centre on the island.

As former educators we thought that was a great way to engage children in learning history – and Threave



Inchmahome Priory.

Castle was a magnificent setting for that learning.

Lochleven Castle, Inchmahome Priory, and Threave Castle don't exhaust the list of Historic Scotland sites visited by small ferry rides. And obviously, large ferries are the main vehicle of transport to the sites on the northern islands and the Hebrides. Iona Abbey, reached by ferry from Oban to Craignure on Mull and from Fionnphort on Mull to Iona's only village, Baile Mor, is a trip not to be missed. And while the castles and priories we've visited by ferry are not in themselves more special than other properties, the ride across loch, lake, or river adds yet another dimension to the Historic Scotland experience. ■



Threave Castle