

# Rosslyn Chapel and the Great Tree of Ormiston

Thursday 4 July 2024

## Rosslyn Chapel



Rosslyn Chapel

Eighteen club members and guests arrived promptly at Rosslyn Chapel for the field trip led by Council member Sarah Campbell. Although a very breezy day, we were blessed with sunshine and blue skies. After the formalities of admission to the site, members and guests were free to tour both the Chapel and the surrounding grounds in their own time.

Rosslyn Chapel was founded in 1446 by Sir William St Clair as a family chapel in the grounds of his ancestral home, Rosslyn Castle. Dedicated in 1450 as the Collegiate Chapel of St. Matthew, the Chapel had several staff including a provost, six prebendaries and two choristers, and was intended to pray for the founder and spread spiritual and intellectual knowledge. When Sir William died in 1484, the building work ceased. His son, Sir Oliver St Clair, roofed the choir with its stone vault but did not complete his father's original design, believed to be that of a much larger cruciform building.

In 1592, as the Scottish Reformation took hold, the Chapel's staff were forced to resign and Catholic worship in the Chapel ended. Sir Oliver St Clair was ordered to destroy the Chapel's alters and, in time, the Chapel fell into disrepair.

In 1650, Cromwell's troops attacked Rosslyn Castle and stabled their horses inside the Chapel. Sir William Sinclair of Rosslyn was killed at the Battle of Dunbar and,

following what is believed to be the family custom, was buried in full armour in the Chapel vault, the last knight to be interred there.

In 1736, Sir James Sinclair made the first efforts to preserve the Chapel, repairing the roof, glazing the windows, and paving the floor with flagstones. The Chapel was further repaired and restored by the Victorians and was rededicated in 1862 when weekly services began again.

The Chapel has played to host to several literary and artistic figures over the years including Alexander Nasmyth, Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and William Wordsworth. Queen Victoria visited the Chapel in 1842 and wrote in her diary that the “architecture is most beautiful and rich.”

In 1995 the Rosslyn Chapel Trust undertook a major conservation project to conserve the building and continues to manage it for the thousands of annual visitors.



Rosslyn Chapel – south facade

The Chapel is a treasure trove of medieval stonework with richly adorned pillars and fascinating carvings, and members had a chance to wander and discover the different symbols, meanings, and Biblical references before being given a seated information talk inside the Chapel.

The Guide described the history of the Chapel, pointing out some of the more intriguing stonework, and narrated the tale of The Apprentice Pillar. Told since at least the mid-17th century, the tale relates that before carving his final pillar in the Chapel, Sir William St Clair's Master Mason travelled abroad for inspiration. While the Master Mason was away, his apprentice dreamt of a beautiful pillar and was allowed to carve it. Returning home, the Master Mason was so jealous of his apprentice's work that he struck him on the head with a mallet and killed him. He was put to death for his crime. Fellow masons carved the heads of both the Master and apprentice into the Chapel, a reminder of the consequences of jealousy.

## The Great Tree of Ormiston



Group Leader Sarah Campbell under the Great Yew

After lunch, members and guests rendezvoused for the short walk to the Great Tree of Ormiston, also known as the Cathedral Yew. We were met by Scott Gillies, Chair of the Ormiston Community Council, who kindly led the party to the tree and gave brief details of the community's work to preserve the tree, its location and prevent damage to it.

First mentioned in text in 1474, this unique Yew tree is a wonderful example of a layering tree. It has ten major branches, some of them supported by props, and all subdivided. At around five metres from the bole, the branches reach the ground and sprout new growth.

Protestant Reformers John Knox and George Wishart are reputed to have preached here. At that time, the Yew was a well-known local landmark, and it is thought that it could well be around a thousand years old. George Wishart did preach in nearby Haddington and was later captured by the Earl of Boswell after dining with the prominent protestant John Cockburn at his home, Ormiston Hall. The tree stands in what would have been the grounds of the hall. The hall itself is now in ruins.

Members and guests congregated under the branches of the tree and President Brian Payne gave a short talk on the Yew and its significance in history and folklore.



President Brian Payne talks to the group

The Yew tree is a native species and was held sacred in pre-Christian times. The longevity of the Yew and its ability to regenerate meant that it came to symbolise death and resurrection in these early cultures. The tree's connection to death may also come from the toxicity of the tree's needles. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the witches concocted a deadly drink that included "slips of yew, silvered in the moon's eclipse." Indeed, the Yew tree has long been associated with witches and the practice of witchcraft, though there is no documentary evidence that the infamous witch trials held in and around Berwickshire involved this tree.

Although the toxicity of the Yew has limited its practical uses, Yew trees contain compounds that have been developed and used in drugs to treat cancer. However, the hard, close-grained Yew wood is best known as the material from which medieval longbows were made. Robert the Bruce, for example, ordered bows to be made from the sacred Yews at Ardchattan Priory in Argyll, which were then used during the Scots' victorious battle at Bannockburn in 1314.

The Yew tree's association with the themes of death and resurrection continued into Christian times with, for example, people using boughs of Yew as 'palms' in church at Easter. Yew trees are now popularly associated with old churchyards.

Following the President's talk and before leaving for home, members were encouraged to take a walk around the location of the tree to observe the abundant wildflowers and other flora and fauna, including Common Spotted-orchid and Meadow Brown butterfly.



Common Spotted-orchid



Members and guests pose in front of the Great Yew canopy

Sarah Campbell