

# Vicky Schilling Bursary Report

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## Searching for St Columba's Yew on the isle of Bernera, Scotland

Bernera is a tiny, uninhabited tidal island off Lismore in the Firth of Lorne. It was on Lismore in the 6th century the Irish Christian missionary St Moluag established his mission. He was a companion of St Columba and legend has it that St Columba (or perhaps St Moluag, or both) preached and created a cell on Bernera underneath a huge yew tree. It became popularly known as St Columba's Yew.



Waiting to cross the narrows to Bernera (Photo: Paul Greenwood)

The yew was felled in the 18th century by the Campbells of Loch Nell in Argyll and its wood used to make a staircase in their castle. The castle burned down about a century later, but the staircase apparently survived. However, enquiries made with the current owners of Loch Nell discovered that the yew staircase was finally lost in a fire only a few decades ago. On the Loch Nell official website is a claim that the building stands upon a 6th century 'Columban' cell.

### Legendary yew

Various reports were made, in recent decades, that the yew survived the felling and had regenerated, in a creeper like manner, along a cliff, but searches made by many people had failed to locate it. Enquiries made prior to the visit with our guide Bob Hay (author of *Lismore: The Great Garden*, Birlinn Ltd., 2015) had confirmed he knew of two yews, but they appeared to be small bushes growing at the top of a cliff. Nevertheless, the question was were either of these yews connected to the legendary yew. If so, and part of the post 18th century regeneration, it would mean they were part of a yew with a root system certainly 1,400 years of age minimum.

### Large congregation

The yew was said to have been large enough in the 6th century to shade and shelter large congregations of people, hence the size at that time implies a possible age of 2,000 years old today. If so, this would put the age on par with the broad consensus that the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire is at least 2,000 years old and Robert the Bruce's Yew at Stuc an T'lobhairt, above the eastern shore of Loch Lomond south of Tarbert, said to be big enough 700 years ago to shelter King Robert and 200 of his followers, could be circa 2,000 years old.

That a yew can grow big enough to shade and shelter large numbers of people is proven today by the Great Yew of Ormiston, East Lothian. It is said that, over 450 years ago, this yew was used to gather sizeable congregations under its boughs to hear the radical ideas of the Scottish Reformation promulgated by George Wishart and John Knox.

### Precarious experience

Accessing Bernera is dangerous and only possible at low tide across a narrow neck of rough rocks with deeper water either side and should only be attempted with a guide, in our case, Bob Hay of Lismore Heritage Centre and Iris and Lorna of Explore Lismore. Even at low tide, as we found, strong winds can cause swells strong enough to knock a person off their feet and wading across such a short space is a precarious experience, moreover, when carrying sensitive technology such as cameras and mobile phones. Waiting to cross in comparative safety meant the time window on the island was compromised and reduced to just over an hour. From the narrows a rocky path takes about 20 minutes to reach an area below the summit and above a sheer cliff about 30 ft (10 metres) high.

### Clifftop overhang

On reaching the spot we found two female bushes of yew growing about 10 metres apart poking through a tangle of thick vegetation including brambles and young trees which mostly appeared to be ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). It is not possible to get very close as the surrounding vegetation on the clifftop overhangs the sheer drop and is dangerous to explore. It is obvious that these two bushes are not creepers and have distinctive stems although these were not fully visible from the viewpoint. Given that previous searches in the 1990's found this yew growth impossible to find is understandable as it may not have been as visible then as it is now.



A section of yew on the cliffs of Bernera (Photo: Paul Greenwood)



Second section of yew, showing the beach below the cliff on Bernera  
(Photo: Paul Greenwood)

As time was at a premium, both to recross the tidal narrows and then drive to reach the ferry back to the mainland, Bob had suggested he left to retrace our steps and then divert to reach the shoreline beneath the cliff, so we could obtain an assessment of the site from below as well as above. Although the area at the base of the cliff is surrounded to some distance by thick undergrowth, he could confirm what looked like a trunk was growing from the cliff and the bushes were the tops of stems and not separate trees. The yew is historically described as growing from a cliff overhanging a level area leading to the shoreline. Nearby was a shingle beach where boats could be easily drawn up and the topography of the site fits this description exactly. The fact that both stems are female, suggesting they are the same tree, is more supporting evidence that this was what we were looking for – St Columba's Yew but also the Holy and Noble Yew of Bernera.

Given the well-known propensity of the pre-Christian Druid culture to utilise yew trees or yew groves, it is possible this yew was known and revered by the Druids prior to the establishment of the mission of St Moluag and why archaeological investigation of the site is imperative. Since the visit Bob has advised he will organise the clearing of the dense undergrowth at the base of the yew over the coming months and this will enable a look for archaeological evidence (Bob has extensive archaeological experience investigating the history of Lismore) that a monastic cell or retreat was indeed here, as traditions maintain, during the period of St Moluag's and St Columba's missions.

### Spiritual relationship

That St Columba had a profound spiritual relationship with yew trees is found in part of a verse attributed to him and written before his exile regarding a yew in his native Derry:

"This is the yew of the saints  
Where they used to come with me together.  
Ten hundred angels were there,  
Above our heads, side close to side.  
Dear to me is that yew tree;  
Would that I was set in its place there!  
On my left it was pleasant adornment  
When I entered into the Black Church..."

These words raise the compelling question that, if St Columba spent time under this yew tree on Bernera, did he experience angels 'within' it too?

### Sole survivor

Leaving aside the anthropological significance to this yew, of most significance is that there is a yew on Bernera in the first place. Although Bernera and Lismore are unusual in that their geology consists mainly of limestone and not formed from the igneous rocks more typical of the west Highland region, this environment is exceptional for yews as it is fully exposed to the salt laden, Atlantic storm strength winds which continually batter the islands, and would typically induce slow yew growth. As Bob knowledgeably advised, trees are not traditionally popular in a long history of livestock farming on Lismore and Bernera "because they take up space" so yews may have been here and lost over many centuries. If so, that would make the yew on Bernera perhaps a sole survivor of a very ancient population. However, it could be the only yew there has ever been on Bernera and a result of avian seed dispersal however long ago. This is reasonable to assume, but is not quite so, as we found out.

### Direct progeny

On our return from the site we were excited to find another yew on Bernera, a tiny bush growing atop a steep cliff a few hundred metres to the north-west of the main site. Given the other yew is female, evidence suggests this bush is a direct progeny of the other and a result of avian seed dispersal.



Yew bush growing on a cliff top, Bernera (Photo: Paul Greenwood)

### Further exploration

It is genuinely compelling to consider that what is said to have been a huge yew 1,400 years ago began life on Bernera in such a way, germinating upon a cliff and, already, in this case, its life has been sculpted by the prevailing weather and possible nibbling by sheep. Not only has an example of yew regeneration apparently occurred on Bernera, since the felling by the Campbells, the unexpected discovery of this other yew is equally significant. This is evidence suggesting the Holy Yew of Bernera has probably produced at least one successful offspring thriving as best it can in such a challenging habitat. This raises the possibility that further exploration of Bernera may find more and Bob will be investigating this exciting prospect in due course.