

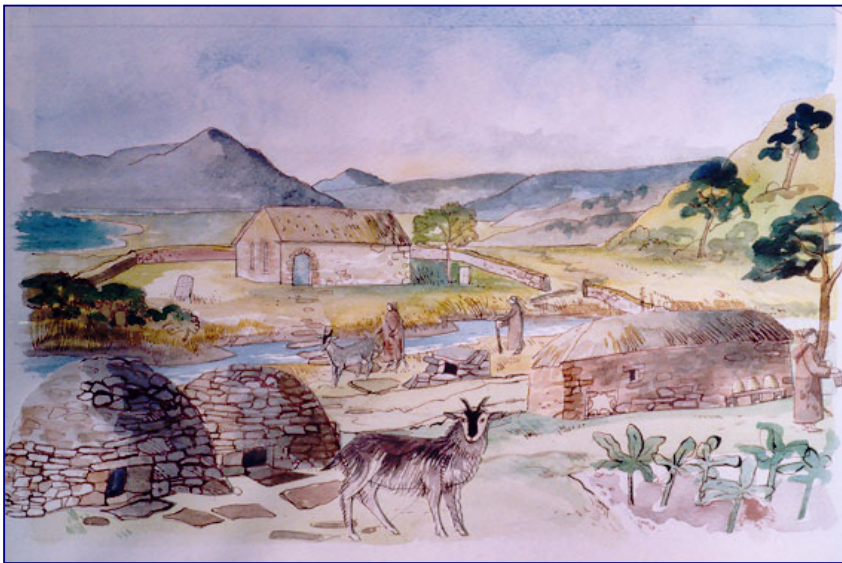
# Dornoch Cathedral



| HISTORYLINKS SCHOOLPACKS |

## Background information

The town of Dornoch owes its very existence to the Cathedral you see before you. Gilbert de Moravia, Bishop of Caithness, built the original cathedral on this site between 1224 and 1245. Before then, very few people lived in the area. There were probably a few small farms nearby with families living in small, turf-built cottages thatched with heather. Perhaps there was also a small stone-built church dedicated to Saint Finbarr standing to the east of the present Cathedral graveyard, and there may even have been a small community of monks living in beehive cells on the hill that rises to the north of the town centre. Some sources suggest that Saint Finbarr brought Christianity to this area in 540 AD and established a monastic community here in Dornoch, but there is no real historical or archaeological evidence to support this view.



*Artist's impression of possible beehive cells and St Finbarr's chapel*

## Moving the diocese to Dornoch

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the **Diocese** of Caithness included all of south-east Sutherland. Before Gilbert became Bishop of Caithness, the cathedral-church of the diocese was based at Halkirk. Tragically, Gilbert's two predecessors had been viciously attacked by the local inhabitants. In 1201 Bishop John was brutally maimed by a mob, and some twenty-one years later, his successor, Bishop Adam, was attacked and burned alive on his own kitchen fire!

In 1224, Gilbert sensibly decided to move away from Halkirk and build a new cathedral at Dornoch, where he owned land.

## Building the Cathedral

Building this new cathedral must have been very difficult. There were few local inhabitants to help with its construction, so skilled builders and masons must have been brought into the area from other parts of Scotland. It seems likely that Gilbert used sandstone from local quarries and glass from Cyderhall to help build his magnificent new cathedral. Today only the four central pillars and arches of the cathedral are original: time, warfare and the elements having taken their toll of the building over the centuries.



*Skilled builders & masons came to Dornoch to work on the Cathedral.*

The building of the Cathedral attracted people to Dornoch. Gilbert appointed a number of church officers to help him run the diocese, and most of these men built large stone houses around the Cathedral in which to live.

Local farmers visited Dornoch to sell their produce to the churchmen, while other tradesmen (blacksmiths, masons, carpenters etc.) would have been attracted to the area to find work.

Dornoch became an important trading centre for south-east Sutherland, and it was not long before weekly markets were established in the town.

By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Dornoch was probably a small but thriving village that owed its existence and wealth to the presence of Gilbert's Cathedral.

Gilbert himself died in 1245 and he was later **canonised** by the Catholic Church.

## 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century

### Feuds and fires

The Cathedral itself fell victim to clan warfare and natural disaster. In 1570, as part of a long-standing feud, the Mackays of Strathnaver, men from Caithness and the Sutherlands of Skelbo and Proncy attacked Dornoch. Three years earlier the Mackays had burned the town, but the Cathedral had survived.

Gilbert's church was not to be so lucky on this occasion. The inhabitants of Dornoch defended their town valiantly, but were eventually forced into the Cathedral and the nearby Castle. In an attempt to drive them out, the Mackays and their allies set fire to the Cathedral, which apart from the tower, was badly damaged. When the siege was finally called off the magnificent building must have been an almost unrecognisable pile of smouldering rubble.

## Natural disaster

Less than forty years later, things got even worse. On 5 November 1605, the very night when Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament in London, a terrible storm hit Dornoch, blowing down all the remaining stone pillars on the north side of the Cathedral. By the time the storm ended, only the tower was left standing.

## Repairs and renovation

John, Earl of Sutherland, set about repairing the Cathedral between 1614 and 1622, and further repairs were carried out at various times during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is clear that many problems still remained – the congregation was soaked every time it rained! It was not until the Countess of Sutherland carried out major work between 1835 and 1837 that the building was finally restored.

Although additional repairs were carried out in the 1920s, the Cathedral that you see today is largely the work of the Countess of Sutherland, and bears little resemblance to the original 13<sup>th</sup> century building. Nevertheless, at least today the congregation can sit in comfort and not get soaked by the rain or buffeted by the wind!



*Cordiner's Sketch of the Cathedral Nave (c.1776).*

## The Cathedral today

The Cathedral is now the main place of worship in Dornoch for members of the Church of Scotland, and has a thriving congregation. In addition to its regular services the Cathedral is becoming well known for its atmospheric musical events, and on occasion, as the chosen venue for celebrity weddings and christenings. Perhaps the most famous of these – and certainly the most reported around the world – was the christening of Madonna and Guy Ritchie's son in December 2000.

## Glossary

**canonised:** *to be made a saint by the church*

**chancel:** *the eastern part of a church containing the altar*

**diocese:** *a district or area controlled by a bishop*

**gargoyle:** *a grotesque carved head or figure acting as a waterspout, usually found on the roof of a church*

**nave:** *the main central part of a church*

**sarcophagus:** *a stone coffin or tomb*

**transept:** *in a church with a cross-shaped floor pattern, either of the two arms at right angles to the nave*

**SOURCE SHEET – The Cathedral Charter**

Bishop Gilbert gave his new cathedral a constitution, which was similar to that of Lincoln Cathedral. His Charter (on display in the Cathedral) sets out how the church hierarchy was organised, and gives job descriptions for each of the main church officers. It is likely that Gilbert's Charter remained in use for the next 300 years, until the coming of the Scottish Reformation.

Extract from the Appointment by Gilbert, Bishop of Caithness, of a Constitution for the Chapter of his diocese:

*“To all the faithful in Christ who shall see or hear this writing, Gilbert, by divine mercy Bishop of Caithness, greeting in the Lord everlasting. Whereas in the times before our administration there was in our cathedral church but one priest serving God, both on account of the poverty of the place and also of frequent invasions, we, desiring for the honour of Lord Jesus Christ, and the most blessed Mary, his mother, and all saints, to amplify the divine worship therein, and having diligently considered the same and sought the advice of discreet men, have determined at our own expense to build the said cathedral church and consecrate the same to the honour of the before-mentioned Mother of God, as also to erect a conventual as our poverty may permit. We ordain therefore and provide that in the said church there shall be ten canons with the bishop who shall be for the time, and they shall vigilantly by themselves or their vicars by turns discharge the duties of the ministry therein, over whom as their head the bishops shall preside. Out of their number five shall be appointed dignitaries, to wit, a dean, precentor, chancellor, treasurer, and archdeacon, each of whom, together with the bishop and the Abbot of Scone, a canon appointed in the said church, shall find one priest to minister for him in the said church in his absence every day. The three remaining canons shall find deacons who shall diligently assist and serve the foresaid priests in the said church.”*

Source: *Dornoch Cathedral and Parish* by Rev Dr Charles Bentinck, published in 1926

### CATHEDRAL WORD PUZZLE

Try to rearrange the letters into words. All the answers are in your worksheet – somewhere!

**RINFARB**                    - - - - -  
**AORVAMI**                   - - - - -  
**LYDLACHRE**               - - - - -  
**WYUKEGASF**              - - - / - - - - -  
**ESIDOECE**                - - - - -  
**YACCAMLAKN**             - - - - / - - - - -  
**ITTIABNSGELR**           - - - - / - - - - -  
**TLHOADERCNOHRDCA**    - - - - - / - - - - -

### CATHEDRAL DATES

What event took place on each of these dates?  
Find the answers in your worksheet and write them here:

540 \_\_\_\_\_  
1201 \_\_\_\_\_  
1224 \_\_\_\_\_  
1245 \_\_\_\_\_  
1570 \_\_\_\_\_  
1605 \_\_\_\_\_  
1614 \_\_\_\_\_  
1622 \_\_\_\_\_  
1835 \_\_\_\_\_  
1837 \_\_\_\_\_  
1920 \_\_\_\_\_  
2000 \_\_\_\_\_



## CATHEDRAL QUIZ

**Write your answers on this sheet.**

1. How many **gargoyles** are there on the outer walls of the Cathedral? (Do not count the carved stone heads around the doors).

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2. On the east wall of the South **Transept** there is a coat of arms. To which family does this coat of arms belong, and what is on the shield in the centre?

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3. Who restored the organ in the North **Transept** in 1908?

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4. There are two copies of St Gilbert's Charter on the east wall of the North Transept. One copy is written in English: what language is the other copy written in?

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5. Soldiers from which European country were stationed in and around Dornoch during World War 2? (Look on the north wall of the **Chancel**).

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6. Look for the commemorative plaque to St Gilbert in the Chancel. Where was Gilbert buried?

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7. On the south wall of the Chancel there is a commemorative plaque to Sir Robert Gordon, Sutherland's first historian. Where was he educated?

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8. Go to the **Nave**. Where will you find the plaque commemorating the restoration of the Cathedral in 1835-7?

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9. Find the **sarcophagus** of Sir Robert de Moravia. What lies at Sir Richard's feet, and what lies across his lower body?

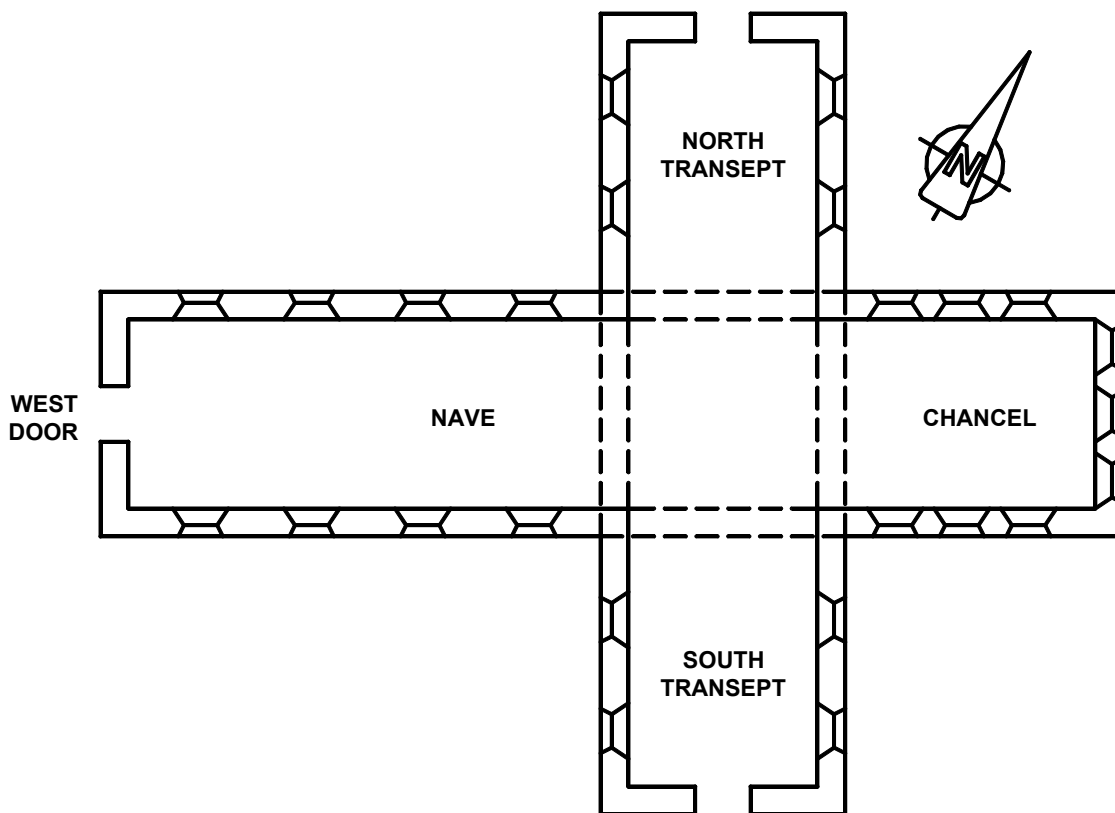
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**CATHEDRAL PLAN**

Mark the places referred to in questions 2-9 above, on the Cathedral Plan. Use the numbers in the key below.



**KEY:**

- 2 Coat of arms (east wall of south transept)
- 3 Restored organ (north transept)
- 4 St Gilbert's Charter (east wall of north transept)
- 5 Soldiers' plaque (north wall of chancel)
- 6 Plaque to St Gilbert (chancel)
- 7 Plaque to Sir Robert Gordon (south wall of chancel)
- 8 Plaque commemorating 1835-7 restoration (nave, west door)
- 9 Sir Robert de Moravia's sarcophagus