

# SEA VIEWS

Portencross castle is built on a rocky promontory at Farland Head. It was built there to provide easy access to the sea, and it holds a strategic position overlooking the routes to the upper Clyde Estuary and the Clyde Islands.



## FOR TEACHERS

Why is the sea so busy on the west coast? How easy is it to travel on land compared to travelling by sea? Is this true for other parts of Scotland?

Other castles are built near the sea on the west coast, for example Duntrune on Loch Crinan, Dunyveg and Claig on Islay, Dunollie and Gylen on Kerrera, and Dunstaffnage on the Firth of Lorne. As well as investigating Portencross Castle, choose some of these castles to investigate and find out what their advantages are, for example, commanding views for defence, easy anchorage, or strategic trade routes. Researching Birlinns on the internet will help here.

Use the internet to make direct comparisons between Birlinns and Norse Galleys. What is a clinker built boat? How does that differ from modern boat construction?

Investigate the differences between sailing and rowing. How do they work? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Look at poems about Birlinns or Clyde Steamers, sea journeys, or journeys in the Clyde. Pupils can use these to inspire poetry describing their own journeys across the sea or around the west coast.

## CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE LINKS

### LITERATURE

- LIT 1-20a/LIT 2-20a
- LIT 3-20a
- LIT 2-23a
- LIT 3-23a

### SOCIAL STUDIES

- SOC 2-09a
- SOC 3-07a
- SOC 2-13a

### TECHNOLOGIES

- TCH 2-01b
- TCH 1-08a/TCH 2-08a
- TCH 2-12a/TCH 3-12a

## FRIENDS OF PORTENCROSS CASTLE

This leaflet was produced by Friends of Portencross Castle (FOPC).

FOPC is a recognised Scottish Charity (No. SC028181) dedicated to conserving the castle and providing access to the building.

In 2007 FOPC was awarded grant support from The Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland and the Architectural Heritage Fund. With additional support from local charities, North Ayrshire Council and many individuals, FOPC was able to raise just over £1 million pounds for the costs of the project. Grant support does not include maintenance. As a result FOPC has to raise costs for staff, maintenance, education materials, website and overheads. We will remain open with the help of donations and by having events and functions at the castle.

**Please donate if you can. You can become a Guardian. Find out more from our web site [www.portencrosscastle.org.uk](http://www.portencrosscastle.org.uk) or pick up details at the castle during opening hours.**



# PORTENCROSS: A SEAFARING STRONGHOLD



© 2010 Friends of Portencross Castle (FOPC)

[www.portencrosscastle.org.uk](http://www.portencrosscastle.org.uk)

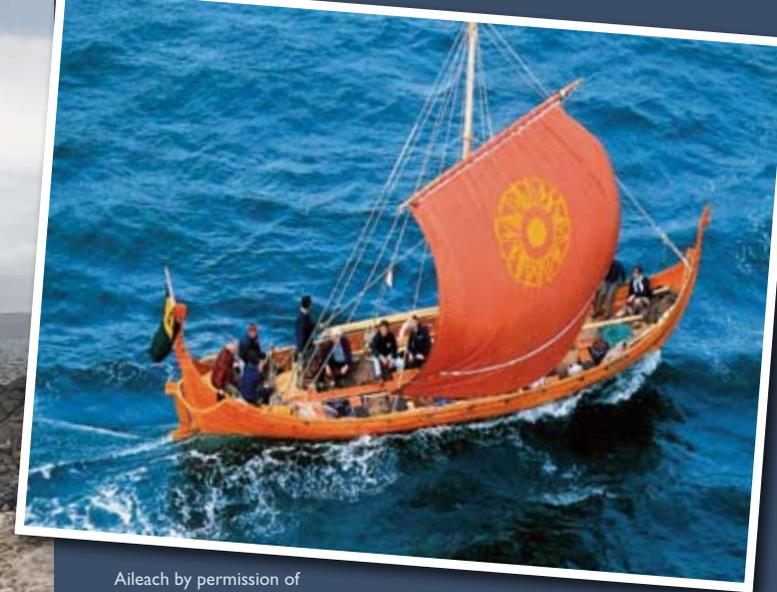
General view of Portencross; courtesy of North Ayrshire Archives

## A SEAGOING KINGDOM

Think of the geography of the west coast of Scotland: inaccessible mountains, dense woodlands, islands, inlets and sea lochs. Before cars and roads, boats were the easiest way to travel from one settlement to another.

The western seaboard of Scotland has long been a busy and sometimes dangerous place, with a complex history and shifting borders. Between 400 and 800AD The Kingdom of Dalriada, spanning from Northern Ireland to Skye, traded across the Irish Sea and with France, Spain and the Mediterranean. From the 800s to 1200s AD, Norwegian Vikings raided and invaded settlements and islands bringing a strong Norse influence. During the middle ages the Clyde Islands formed the border between what was known as the 'Kingdom of the Isles' and the rest of Scotland.

Trade and travel routes around Portencross



Aileach by permission of the Lords of the Isles Galley Trust

## SAFE HAVENS

Look at the small natural harbour - this 'Puirt' (Gaelic for sheltered beach) is ideal for small boats and was used as a ferry port in the 1300 and 1400s. From the harbour, boats reached many destinations from the Clyde Islands to the Western Isles (shown on the 'Sea Routes' map). Rothesay was an important destination, and the early Stewart Kings used Portencross en route from Dundonald Castle in Ayrshire to Rothesay Castle. An older tradition is that between the 800s and 1000s AD, the bodies of the ancient Kings of Scotland, were taken from mainland Scotland to their last resting place on the holy island of Iona via Portencross, but historians can't confirm this. Looking at the map, can you work out the route they might have taken?

The harbour just north of Portencross castle is still in use today. During the 1700s, around 30 fishing boats worked out of the harbour. Fishermen used the castle for storage and shelter. In 1793, a lighthouse was built on the west side of Little Cumbrae. Before this fires were built on a tower on Lighthouse Hill to warn boats of danger. You can see the old lighthouse tower on Little Cumbrae from the roof of the castle. The current lighthouse is now automated. The concrete pier to the north of the castle was built during the era of the Clyde Steamers.

## BIRLINNS

During the middle ages, the most common boat in these waters was the Birlinn, a hebridean galley. It is said to have been developed from the Norse Galley by Somerled, who led the Kingdom of the Isles in the 1100s. Birlinns were clinker-built wooden boats that could be rowed or sailed, with a single mast and square sail. These small but sturdy seagoing ships were an improvement on the Norse Longship, (Norse byrðingr - ship of burden). The most important single difference is the replacement of the steering-board (a large oar) by a stem rudder. Other small variations in size and design were found along the west coast.

During medieval times Birlinns were the workhorse of the west coast seas. They were used for everything from ferrying people and cargo to going to war. The design was more manoeuvrable than that of the Norse boats and suited to both rough seas and shallow water. The boats were light, but could be weighted with ballast to make them more stable in rougher conditions and the shallow draught made them easy to haul out of the sea. Portencross and other similar west coast castles seem to have been built in places that allowed easy access to the sea, and where it was easy to haul Birlinns out of the water.