Small Pilgrim Places Journal 81: Cathedral Isle of Man Gardens



The cathedral church of the Diocese of Sodor and Man stands in Peel, on the west coast of the island. Completed in 1884, it became a cathedral by Act of Tynwald (the Manx parliament) in 1980. I visited it on a summer evening with Rosemary Clarke, who lives nearby.

We approached the cathedral grounds up a sloping path lined with young, neatly manicured trees. This was the beginning of a tour of discovery around seventeen recently-created conceptual gardens that surround the cathedral building, each of which is deeply symbolic and rich with meaning. The twelve pairs of pleached Beeches that guard the approach symbolise the tree planting by the Anglican Communion's longest episcopacy of Thomas Wilson (1697-1755). Further along, bushes, flower borders and sculptures explore the history of humankind and of faith, aided by interpretation boards and, via a QR code, an audio guide.

The visitor can trace the presence of Christianity on the island from its earliest beginnings. The Maughold Garden tells the story of the sixth century St Maughold, who became the island's bishop and its patron saint. A slate amongst the pebbles and ferns here makes mention of the legend that St Maughold, like St Patrick in Ireland, was responsible for the banishment of snakes here. A stone bench nearby, thoughtfully provided for rest and reflection, is set under a stand of willows, trimmed to resemble an upturned boat, echoing the saint's journey across the sea from Ireland.



Another space is occupied by a representation of one of the ancient single-room chapels scattered across the island. These simple structures, known as keeills, were possibly each inhabited by a lone monk, or visited by an itinerant one, in the first millennium. All that remained of those that I visited during my stay on the island were their rectangular stone foundations, so it was fascinating to step inside this recreated one with its head-high walls, door and window openings and simple altar. Other features include reproductions of Celtic crosses with their intricate knot designs, and a sky gazing bench set within a curving timber wall and tall grasses.

A stunning labyrinth of dark and light stone slabs takes up a large space surrounded by climbing roses and espaliered fruit trees, its entrance directly opposite a statue of the Virgin Mary. Another garden is themed

around St Francis, patron saint of ecology, and his Song of Creation. He is also known for creating the first Nativity scene which is given an international dimension through black stone sculptures from a Zimbabwean artist. Other themes include the evolution of ~~the~~ Tynwald, which still operates today, and the history of Methodism on the Island; nearly 150 Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist chapels were built here, more than 30 of them continuing to serve their local communities today.

A poignant theme in another space focuses on peace and reconciliation, and centres around a Celtic-style war memorial. The Knockaloe Garden is named after a World War I enemy alien internment camp on the island, the largest of its kind in the British Isles. A horse chestnut sapling was planted here on what would have been the 80th birthday of Anne Frank, who from her attic hiding place in Amsterdam looked out on a chestnut tree.

There is so much for the visitor to learn and appreciate in these gardens; and yet they are equally welcoming to any pilgrim or passer-by who feels drawn simply to finding a quiet space to rest and be still in this green oasis.