

DUAL BATTLE TO KEEP HEAT ON AND SOCIAL HUB ALIVE ON THE ISLAND OF TWO HALVES

Tiny Iona's separate communities – the Christian and secular – are running vital fundraising campaigns, writes *Julia Horton*

The marked contrast between the tiny, isolated geography of Iona and its huge world presence as a place of pilgrimage has been a reality for so many centuries that it has become almost the whole story of the island, virtually set in stone. And while the way people live and travel has changed dramatically since St Columba's time, just getting on or off this Hebridean isle can still be challenging, for visitors and locals alike, of any religion or none. A simple storm, whether whipped up by nature or a higher being, cannot be defeated by any amount of faith or sheer hard graft.

That there is an abundance of both those qualities in Iona's residents is little surprise. What shocks more than a few of the thousands of modern-day tourists, though, is that there is not one community here, but two, albeit intertwined.

As Joanne MacInnes, a Dundonian and now an islander notes, wryly: "Many people think we're all practising Christians who spend a lot of time in the abbey. They're quite surprised to find we're also an urban, metropolitan community. You're always battling people's preconceptions when they arrive."

The Iona Community, with a capital "C", is made up of committed Christians continuing the work St Columba began when he journeyed from Ireland in the sixth century to found one of Britain's most influential monasteries. As his fame spread, pilgrims from across the globe trekked to what became known as the birthplace of Christianity in Scotland.

The wider island community is less well known, but no less important – a diverse mix of crofting families who have been living and working here for generations and incomers, such as MacInnes, arriving from the wider world.

In stark contrast to most remote settlements across the Highlands and Islands today, Iona's 170-strong population has been rising.

Now a new energy is – literally – about to rise up from the sacred ground of this holy isle, thanks to plans for a renewable heating system which will pump hot water from the earth to supply the historic abbey, village hall, school, homes and businesses. The pioneering community-led scheme is not just a crucial step towards a more sustainable way of life, it also reflects a vitality here.

For, despite their different reasons for being on Iona, both communities are forging ahead with parallel multimillion-pound appeals to secure their collective future for generations to come.

One is for a refurbishment of the historic abbey, the other to fund a new village hall to replace the current near-century old building. But as both fundraisers make a final urgent push towards their targets, there is also frustration and fear over the barriers to survival,



It takes two ferry trips from the Scottish mainland, via the island of Mull, to reach Iona, whose abbey and St Columba's shrine is a draw for pilgrims worldwide

big and small, that must be overcome to thrive here.

When you live on an island off another island, an oft-used, romantic-sounding description referring to Iona's location just beyond the Isle of Mull – two ferry trips from the mainland – services can suffer, from healthcare to bin collection.

The island's physical isolation does not exempt Iona from increasingly tough UK immigration policies. Changes over recent years have already effectively barred modern-day African pilgrims from visiting. The looming, shape-



Pretty Iona has a population of about 170 who rely on the island's village hall

shifting shadow of Brexit also raises concerns that, by the time the village hall and abbey are renewed as vital centres for all islanders and visitors, Iona may be unable to welcome or keep the many Europeans who come to look around, volunteer, work or live.

The Rev Kathy Galloway, co-leader of the Iona Community, says: "We've always had a few volunteers from Africa and Asia, but it's almost impossible now."

"As for volunteers from Europe, we just don't know what will happen with Brexit or how we will manage. Having

already contracted from the rest of the world, if we're now going to contract from mainland Europe as well, it's dreadful. It does not sit well with the faith community. It's difficult for people who come here to work, too."

It was the warm welcome from both the religious and wider island community that led Anja Jardine to move here and start a family.

She grew up in East Germany, so knows more than most about physical and political barriers. Her first visit to Iona then, I just came with my church youth group. It was magic to be in such a close-knit community."

Now 45 and married to islander, Mark, with whom she has a 12-year-old daughter, she works as the abbey cook and has volunteered on the village hall committee for nearly 20 years.

Referring to Brexit, she says: "I think we've been living a little bit in a bubble – we were extremely surprised by the way the referendum went and I worry that Britain will do something it will terribly regret."

"Iona is very dependent on people

from all over the world, not just visiting but working. It has always been welcoming," she says. "I'm not a big worrier, but I know that a fellow German living here is definitely more worried about what this means for us. Will we be all right? I'm just hoping we'll be OK."

However, like the other islanders she is focused on the tasks in hand, and is optimistic that the "contagious" creativity of people here – "not just in an artistic sense but an entrepreneurial one" – will prevail.

Last week, while the abbey appeal's patron, Anne, the Princess Royal, was in Glasgow for a fundraising reception, the village hall hosted a sports event and Christmas fair.

Though it cannot compete architecturally or historically with the abbey, Iona's village hall couldn't be much more multipurpose – it serves as "everything" to islanders, from school PE space to makeshift cinema and ceilidh venue. In winter, when the pub and hotels shut, there is nowhere else for locals to gather.

Aptly the hall's own celebrity supporters include George Clarke, an architect and presenter of Channel 4's *Amazing Spaces*, who recently launched the committee's latest fundraiser, *Are you an*

Iona?, seeking support from people, places and organisations that, like his daughter, who is named Iona, qualify.

MacInnes, 41, a mother of two and a member of the village hall committee and a fundraiser for the abbey, married into a crofting family. She is confident that the appeal total will be reached, but is disappointed at the lack of statutory funding. Despite "ticking all the boxes" not one penny has been received, she says.

Although every remote community's social space is important for its survival, Iona's may be needed more than some and, at the same time, harder to obtain. Land is precious here. The present hall is sited next to an ancient Benedictine nunnery that has conservation status, but islanders negotiated a "bargain" deal of extra ground with the National Trust for Scotland, so the new hall will be bigger and better.

In winter, Iona has a particular need for a social space to cater for the above-average number of older women on the island. In summer, parents doing seasonal jobs tend to work opposite shifts to cover childcare, meaning that a safe space to meet other adults is highly valued.

The restoration of the abbey will extend the season by making accommodation habitable during winter, supporting both the religious and wider communities economically.

A common factor in both appeals and communities is the number of women leading the way, which is at odds with St Columba's reputed view that the fairer sex should be barred from Iona because "where there is a woman there is mischief".

A former civil servant in London, Shiona Ruhemann leads Iona Community Council and the island's renewable energy scheme. The mother of two is clearly making a difference since moving here in 2013. She has a lifelong connection with Iona – her father, a minister, worked with fellow minister George MacLeod on the 20th-century abbey restoration, which launched the Iona Community in 1938.

Ruhemann's political nous is proving invaluable in securing Scottish government support for the energy scheme. "It's been quite amazing coming from the centre of Whitehall to the end of the track. The amount of effort you have to put into explaining your case has been eye-opening," she says.

"People here are very energised, and like attracts like. But that confidence is also fragile because people are aware that if even a couple of families moved, it would have quite an impact. It is quite a remarkable time on the island," she says.

For more information on the hall and abbey appeals or to make a donation visit ionavillagehall.org or iona.org.uk/capital-appeal-information

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THIS CHRISTMAS, LET'S FOSTER A WORLD COMMUNITY OF PEACE

All faiths should join in with the festivities, writes *Paigham Mustafa*

Can a Muslim wish their Christian friends and neighbours Merry Christmas? It's a question that would not have been worthy of an opinion column only a few years ago, because Muslims did wish everyone a Merry Christmas. But it's a topic that some see as being up for debate.

Some Muslims feel that taking part in festivals that do not represent their faith could be damaging to their religion because it introduces their children to alien beliefs. Speaking to family, friends and people in the community, it is clear there is a push to instead celebrate Milad un Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and a party, reportedly the biggest in Europe, to mark the occasion was held in London last month.

However, because there is no written history from the time of the Prophet, Shias and Sunnis celebrate it on different days and, since they both use the lunar calendar, it arrives 10 days earlier each year.

Some imams say that what a good Muslim should do is to not single out these days for any kind of celebration, decoration, adornment or special foods.

"Whoever imitates a people is one of them," said Shaykh al-Islam Ibn

Taymiyyah, the medieval Sunni scholar who is still much revered. "Imitating them on some of their festivals implies that one is happy with the falsehood they are following, and that could make them [the non-Muslims] take this opportunity to mislead those who are weak in faith."

According to the Hadith, words and actions attributed to the Prophet some 200 years after his death, Muslims must not partake in any religious festival or imitate non-Muslims by holding parties on these occasions, exchanging gifts or taking time off work.

On that basis, it would seem, imitating Christians by going along with their celebrations would imply that a Muslim is compromising his or her own faith. However, in my opinion this viewpoint has to be rejected outright because it is not supported by the Koran, which speaks of tolerance and understanding between communities.

In fact, believers in the Koran are encouraged to live in harmony with all people from all backgrounds.

Countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, where there are multi-faith communities, largely embrace this inclusive philosophy and Christmas celebrations are seen as a happy time of the year and treated with respect.

Simply discouraging Muslims from joining in on the celebrations goes against the Koran's values and, in my view, no good can come of it.

What we should do instead is foster goodwill between people of all faiths, as well as those of no faith.

In multicultural Britain, tolerance and respect for each other must be the key approach.

The Koran says we should open our hearts to everyone. It advocates the things that strengthen communities and for people to unite with believers of all faiths, enjoy all kinds of festivities and be appreciative for what they have. (Koran 14:37).

Muslims who truly understand the Koran should see Christmas celebrations as an opportunity to show that Jesus is mentioned and respected in the Koran. Believers share this respect with those who follow Christ.

It is with that Koranic perspective in mind, that Muslims everywhere should strive to create a world community of peace and respect. Their good wishes for Christmas will no doubt be reciprocated.

Therefore, sending greetings cards and wishing each other Merry Christmas should be an opportunity to foster and strengthen good community relations.

Wearing a Santa hat or pulling a festive cracker isn't going to weaken anybody's beliefs. So this Yuletide, a little early, best wishes to everyone for a very merry Christmas.

Paigham Mustafa's book, *The Quran: God's Message to Mankind*, was published in 2016 and is available from signal.co.uk