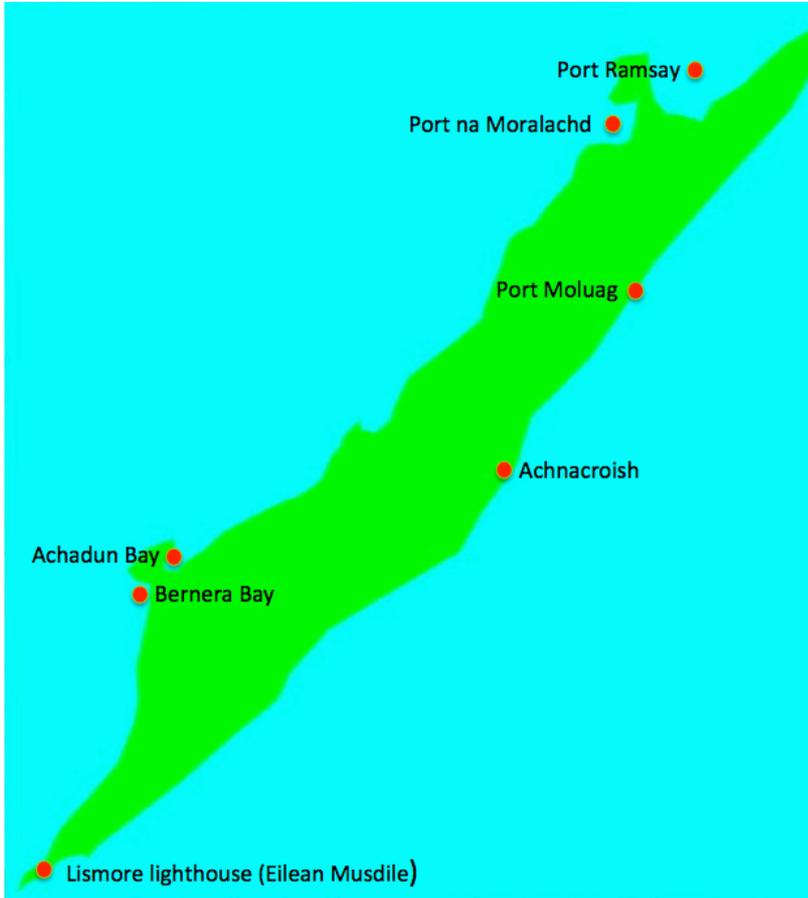


Lismore

Last updated February 28th 2022



In translation from the Gaelic, Lios Mòr means 'the great garden'.¹ It is an island where there has been no pub since 1881, and even now there is no hotel or restaurant. Instead, there is peace and quiet, farming on remarkably fertile soil (based on limestone), lots of wild flowers, and not too many holiday homes. Most people on Lismore live there, about 200 of them (in the 19th century there were about 1500, far too many for the island to support).

Apparently St Columba thought Lismore was far too fertile for a monastic settlement (although in 562AD he was beaten to it by his brother monk St Moluag). So he went off to Morvern to found the church at Kiel, a much tougher environment and so

more suitable for serious monkish activities.

A good half-day circular walk, starting at any of the northern anchorages, takes you to most of the interesting things to see: the church at Clachan, Castle Coeffin, Tirefour Broch, limekilns at Port Ramsay, and the Heritage Centre (with the only café on the island). For example, from Achnacroish walk along the coast to the Tirefour Broch at Port Moluag, then along very small roads to Port Ramsay, round the bay and over the hill past Port na Moralachd to Castle Coeffin, to the centre of the island again and the church at Clachan, tea and buns at the café, then back along the road to Achnacroish.

Lismore does not seem to be much visited by boaties, or by others, even though it is very close to Oban by ferry and just a stone's throw from Appin, also by ferry but not for cars. Once there you can hire bikes, phone 07376 425996. So it is all quiet and peaceful. But there is one blot on the landscape, the granite quarry at Glensanda over on Morvern, the only coastal quarry in the UK. You can see it from almost everywhere on the west coast of the island.

¹ <https://isleoflismore.com/>

If you want to know more read Robert Hay's 'Lismore, the Great Garden', Birlinn, 2009. And for archaeology, history and landscape take a look at an informative short film.²

Achnacroish

Achnacroish is just a wee hamlet, there is nothing really to see or do, just the primary school, some not very attractive houses and a rather beaten-up pier and ferry terminal. It is all surprisingly Hebridean so close to Oban, and the bird song is lovely.

Take a walk to the Heritage Centre³ which is in a calm and quite attractive 2007 modern building (ph 01631 760030) on the 'main' road opposite the turning for Balnagown. It is only about a mile from the anchorage if you take the path along the coast via Balnagown. There are a lot of interesting old photographs and artefacts, and a restored cottage with an audio of someone speaking in Gaelic — post blackhouse because it has a fireplace and is divided into two rooms. In the same building as the museum is the Isle of Lismore café⁴, the only place on the island for a cup of tea. It sells home-baked cakes, and snacks of various sorts — it does not do regular evening meals, and nor does anywhere else on the island (ph 07745 536902). Check the opening times on their website before making a journey. Sitting outside on the deck on a nice day is extremely pleasant, particularly watching the sweaty cyclists toiling along the road below.

A little further along the road you come to Clachan with a delightful and extraordinarily interesting church⁵. At first glance it looks like an ordinary Scottish Kirk but look closer and you will see all sorts of stuff which reveals its more illustrious past, incredibly for such a small place, as a cathedral which began life in the 13th and 14th centuries as the seat of the Bishop of Argyll. By 1512 it was in ruins. The present structure arose in the 18th century. It is based on the original cathedral choir, although it has been much altered since then (the gallery and the timber roof are late Victorian). Confusingly, the inside is now back to front with the pulpit at the west end. The stained glass windows are good. The few remains of the older cathedral are as spectacular as they are surprising — seven external buttresses, the blocked-off doors in the north and south walls, the arch in the west wall, the three-arched sedilia and the piscina in the south wall. The graveyard is charming, full of wild flowers, a good place to sit and think, some old graveslabs have been stacked up under cover. The immediately adjacent old manse is a lovely 18th and 19th century building, as is the 18th century Bachuil House 100 yards further towards Port Ramsay.

² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tVo-msJbNZx2qNOBf7MY12LY_jQRgGrW/view

³ <https://www.lismoregaelicheritagecentre.org/>

⁴ <https://www.lismoregaelicheritagecentre.org/the-cafe/>

⁵ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23100/lismore-st-moluags-cathedral>

Bernera and Achadun bays

Achadun (Achinduin) castle⁶ is not as ruined as Ardtornish castle, not as restored as Gylen, and certainly not as complete as Dunstaffnage — but it is in a pleasing position above the bays giving two anchorages protected from all wind directions, no doubt a consideration to those who put the castle there in the first place. But these early builders would not have had their view up Loch Linnhe ruined by the Glensanda quarry⁷. However, one must not moan. That quarry does employ something like 200 people, the stone goes out by boat rather than by road, and it will I think eventually be all grassed over.

The castle dates from the 13th century and was apparently built by the bishops of Argyll in the days when bishops needed to defend themselves, from what I know not. But nowadays it is thought the MacDougalls built it and only later did the Bishops take it over. It was probably abandoned in about 1400.

Walk down to the tidal isthmus across to Bernera island and have a look at what I think must have been a fish trap — easily visible at low tide, facing northwest. On the southeast side of the island is a very, very ruined chapel⁸ with no visible gravestones, and loads of wild flowers in summer

Lismore lighthouse (on Eilean Musdile)

Not an official anchorage but that doesn't mean one can't anchor in quiet weather off either the east or west slipway depending on the wind direction, for a short while to have an explore. And well worthwhile it is, to stand on the terrace looking out over the swirling tide and the boats going to and from the Sound of Mull. As ever the lighthouse⁹, the two cottages and associated buildings and slipways, are all beautifully proportioned and constructed, particularly the curving wall bounding the path through the garden where once the lighthouse keepers grew their vegetables. Of course it is yet another Stevenson, built in 1833 and automated in 1965. There is an interesting film on the web about how the lighthouse used to be supplied when it was still manned¹⁰.

What the two very large walled fields were for I don't know, surely too large for a vegetable garden but OK for a cow or two (there are some ruined byres to support this idea). The arched bridge connecting one island with the other has no obvious purpose now, but it was built to transport materials to build the lighthouse from the original landing opposite Lismore itself.

The cottages, and indeed all of Eilean Musdile, are now privately owned but I have never seen anyone around during my many, many trips past the lighthouse. But one sunny spring day I did stumble on the owners busily painting their cottages white, and very friendly they were too. They don't mind anyone wandering around their island paradise, just be careful not to disturb them if they are in residence (a visible boat or helicopter is no clue because they are brought here by a boat taxi from Oban)

⁶ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23018/lismore-achadun-castle>

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glensanda>

⁸ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22656/bernera-island-chapel-and-burial-ground>

⁹ <https://www.nlb.org.uk/lighthouses/lismore/>

¹⁰ <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/5206/83443441>

By the way, off here is where I want my ashes scattered when the time comes.

Port Moluag

Hardly a port, a mere indentation in the coastline just north of a line of low cliffs, with a stony beach to land on. Walk up the hill a bit, then left to Tirefour (Tirfuir) Broch¹¹. Built in the first century AD, it is perched on the cliffs overlooking the Lynn of Lorne, surely a defensive position. It is not as well preserved, or as high, as the broch at Vaul on Tiree, but it is a broch nonetheless. So you can get some idea of what these strange Iron Age structures¹² looked like. You can't get between the double walls, there is a fence barring the way. But it is a fine airy spot from which to contemplate

Port na Moralachd

Notwithstanding the fish cages this is a great anchorage, and you can't even see Glensanda if you get yourself in the right place, tucked into the north or in the more traditional south bay (there is a very ruined lime kiln down on the shore of the latter but the ones at Port Ramsay are much better preserved). There is quite a bit of driftwood to make a barbeque.

From here you can easily walk over to Port Ramsay. Better, although it is about a half-an-hour walk, is an expedition to Castle Coeffin¹³ and maybe on to the church at Clachan¹⁴ and the Heritage Centre¹⁵. Not only is the walk very pleasant but the small castle has a great position perched on a limestone outcrop with splendid views up and down the Lynn of Morvern (avert your eyes from Glensanda and take photographs when it is in the shade). The castle is very ruined but it has been stabilised and you can scramble up to take in the views. If you look down on the bay to the southwest you can see very clearly the remains of a fish trap. It is another MacDougall castle, originally built in the 13th century, but before that it was the site of a Norse fortress.

The small farm with loads of horses, tucked away behind the castle and more or less invisible from the sea, is a bit of a surprise, and the signs to direct you around it are helpful rather than antagonistic.

Port Ramsay

Despite the slightly daunting entrance between covered rocks, once you are in there is loads of space to anchor, and in more or less any wind direction. As it has been for over two centuries: *"Ramsey Bay, near the E. end of Lismore, is the only safe anchorage in this Island; the*

¹¹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23082/lismore-tirefour-castle>

¹² <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/Brochs-the-Tallest-Prehistoric-Buildings-in-Britain/>

¹³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23093/lismore-castle-coeffin>

¹⁴ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23100/lismore-st-moluags-cathedral>

¹⁵ <https://www.lismoregaelicheritagecentre.org/>

ground is good, the harbour pretty well sheltered, and the depth sufficient for any ship".¹⁶ To safely enter the small bay to the east you need the Antares chart.

Port Ramsay is a charming place with many wild flowers and a very extensive foreshore full of whelks, hermit crabs and various other forms of life, fringed with sea pinks. Good for brambles (blackberries) too. And seals on the rocks at the entrance. The only problem is that it is quite a long row to the shore from the larger anchorage to the west — aim for the island in front of the cottages, but watch out you don't get cut off by the tide on your way back.

The main thing to see is the early 19th century lime kilns¹⁷ just northeast of the workers' cottages built in about 1850, surprisingly not mostly holiday homes — yet. Lime production for agriculture and building became a major Victorian industry on Lismore, but by 1934 the last kiln (in Sailean) had closed. Just behind the kilns is the quarry where you can still see where the holes for the charges were drilled into the cliff face. The slipway on the foreshore is where boats once arrived with the coal for the kilns, and left for Glasgow with the lime. More or less the whole island is limestone so the number of lime kilns should be no surprise. Unfortunately, in 2017, a rather gross house was built right next to the kilns.

¹⁶ From the very first 'Sailing Directions', published by Murdoch Mackenzie in 1776. He was an Orcadian cartographer and hydrographer, and the first to produce recognisable charts of the seas around the British Isles while working for the Admiralty. You can find the book on line on line, and also many of the charts on line at the National Library of Scotland. Mind you, some of his metrics for distance strike one as quaint. For example, the rock in Canna Harbour now incorporated into the pier he described as being "*about a pistol shot from the shore*".

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lime_kiln