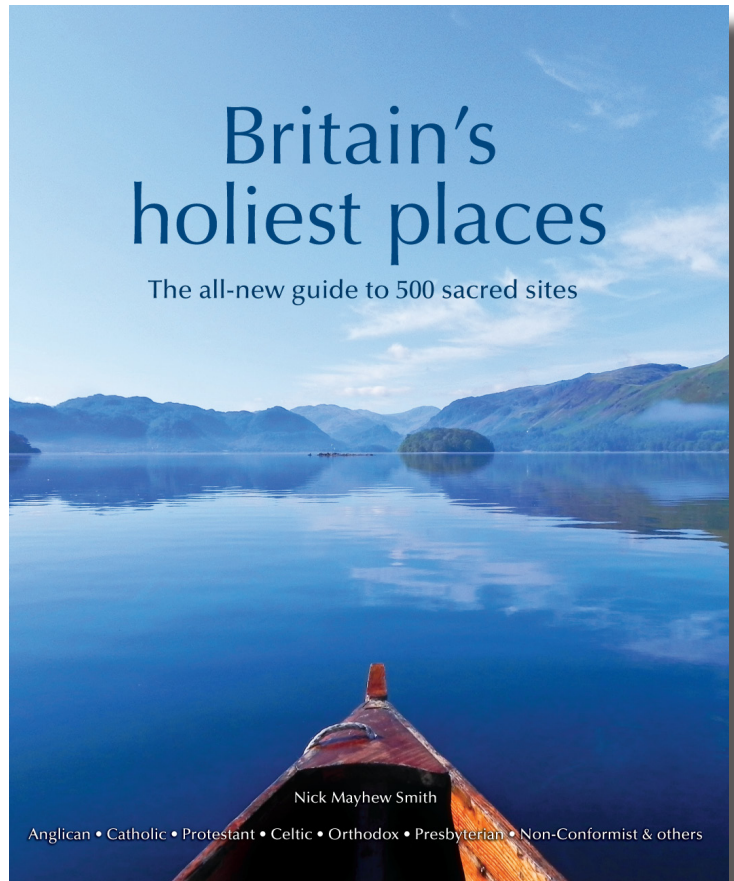


## Govan Old Parish Church

Below is an extract from *Britain's Holiest Places*, the new guide book to 500 sacred sites. Reproduced with full permission from the author Nick Mayhew Smith.

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[www.holybritain.co.uk](http://www.holybritain.co.uk)



## Govan Govan Old Parish Church

10★

CofS/Ang	Catholic	Orthodox	Relics	Access	Condition	Bonus
★	★	★	★★	★★	★★	★

- **Shrine tomb of St Constantine**
- **Early Celtic, Pictish and Viking carvings**
- **5th-century Christian burials**

Govan Old Church has no equal when it comes to telling the story of Scottish Christianity. It has the best-preserved Celtic shrine, a mesmerising collection of pagan/Christian crossover artworks, and evidence of Christian burials dating from the late 5th century.

Surrounded by all these artefacts, it is hardly surprising that one church minister, George MacLeod, felt inspired to pack in his regular job and rebuild the ancient abbey of Iona in the 1930s (page 463). Govan Old Church is therefore unique: a backdrop to both the birth and the rebirth of the Celtic church in Scotland.

Its first Christian burials, uncovered by archaeologists in the churchyard, date from

around 50 years before St Columba arrived in the country. This suggests Govan has origins in the late Roman era, like Whithorn 70 miles to the south (page 477).

The pagan symbols on its collection of ancient carved stones speak of yet another influence, local Pictish religion. The Sun Stone has a rudimentary swastika-style device made of snakes on one side and a peculiar Celtic cross on the other, with serpents coiled next to its stem.

Despite the church's name, the building itself is relatively recent, having been completed in 1888. It is thought to be the fifth church on the site. A display in the baptistery shows how it might have developed over the centuries.



▲ St Constantine's tomb, on display in Govan Old Church, is one of the most elaborate early shrines in Britain.

It also demonstrates just how important this foundation is: a site of worship in continuous use since the early 6th century.

Its Christian community continues to develop, with plans to regenerate the church as a centre of pilgrimage and worship. In recent years it has offered space to the local Russian Orthodox community, which particularly reveres the shrine tomb of St Constantine.

The saint himself is possibly 6th century, a companion of St Kentigern, though exact details are hard to come by. Later medieval records contain a few passing references to a king and/or missionary of this name. A 14th-century history by John of Fordun, a priest based in Aberdeen, describes him as a local king who died and was buried here. The name certainly indicates a royal pedigree, following the Roman emperor Constantine the Great (see York, page 389).

The sarcophagus itself leaves no doubt that

an important saint was venerated in Govan. It dates from the 10th or 11th century, a magnificent piece of carving with much detail sharply preserved. One side appears to show a hunting scene. It is perhaps a coincidence, but another 6th-century saint, the Cornish king St Constantine, was converted while chasing down a stag (page 161).

Other evidence of early Christianity is unmissable, from the circular shape of the graveyard to its collection of 31 engraved stones. These were all found buried in the churchyard and are now safely housed throughout the church building. In addition to the pagan-style snakes, there are also Celtic and Viking influences to be seen, from rough-and-ready early works to some beautiful and intricate Christian knotwork crosses and eternity symbols.

The church is open every morning during the week for a short service at 10am, and has regular visiting hours in the summer. The minister Dr Moyna McGlynn is exploring ways to renovate the church while retaining its principle function as an active place of worship.

This part of Glasgow has a history of deprivation but is undergoing regeneration. Govan's old church has an obvious part to play: in one sense, this is Scotland's richest parish.

Govan Old Parish Church, 866 Govan Road, Govan, Glasgow, Strathclyde G51 3AQ  
[www.govanold.org.uk](http://www.govanold.org.uk)  
 LR: NS553659 GPS: 55.8646N 4.3129W  
 Govan Subway station 250m

**Directions:** The church is open to visitors from early June to late September on Weds, Thurs and Sat 1pm-4pm. It is open every weekday throughout the year for a short prayer service at 10am. The church is set back from the main road. From Govan Subway station come out on to Govan Road and turn left. The path to the church is on the opposite side of the road after 200m.

▼ The current church in Govan is the fifth on the site of an ancient Christian foundation.

