

Photo of Mark Oxbrow: Mark Foster (artifice-design.co.uk)

## An encounter with Mark Oxbrow



Richard Zahra speaks to renowned Scottish historian and folklorist, **Mark Oxbrow**, who sheds light on the mysteries of the Rosslyn Chapel  
Photos of Chapel: Richard Zahra

**T**he Rosslyn Chapel is located south of Edinburgh, Scotland, close to the Midlothian village of Roslin. It has earned international celebrity status after it featured in *The Da Vinci Code*. Author Dan Brown chose Rosslyn as the place to resolve his thriller. Since then, the number of visitors to Rosslyn has soared to hundreds of thousand every year. Mark Oxbrow has been visiting the Chapel and studying its history for over 20 years. Together with Ian Robertson, he has co-authored the book entitled *Rosslyn and the Grail* (2005, Mainstream Publishing Co Ltd), which is a very well-executed attempt at unravelling the mysteries that for hundreds of years have puzzled visitors. *Rosslyn and the Grail* sheds light on the real history of a remarkable medieval work of art and on the family who built it.

**RZ** Why do you think Rosslyn is such a special church and what makes it so unique?

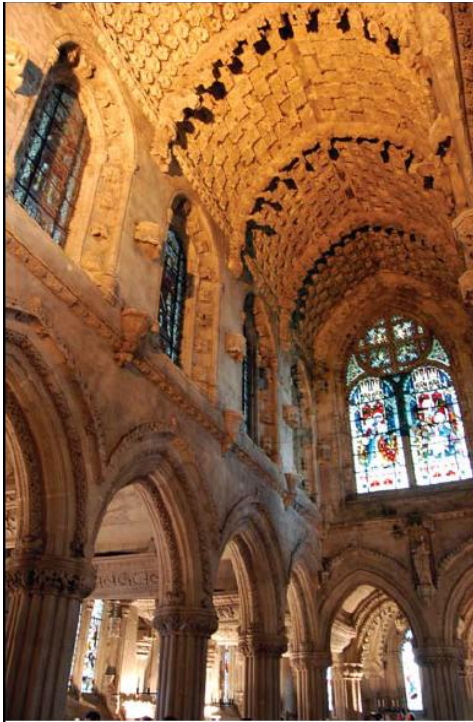
**MO** During the 15th century, it was a popular habit amongst Scottish nobles to build collegiate churches, which were

simultaneously centres of worship and learning. When you compare Rosslyn to other collegiate chapels of the 15th century it stands out because it is like a tapestry in stone. You enter Rosslyn with a feeling that a thousand eyes are watching you at the same time. It feels organic; alive, and for many years it was known as the chapel amidst the woods. When I first went to Rosslyn, many years ago, it was almost unknown – the admission fee then was 50 pence! It was covered in green moss and felt secret and magical. Rosslyn is unique because there is so much ornamentation squashed into such a small church. My appreciation for it has grown over the years as I pieced out how everything fitted together in a bigger picture. It is a complex sculpture that allows you to travel back 500 years in time.

**RZ** Do you believe that the proximity of Rosslyn to what was once the Scottish Templar headquarters at Balantradoch to be purely coincidental?

**MO** Yes! The Templars were wiped out in 1309. Rosslyn was built in 1446. There's a gap of over a 130 years, so the Templars had nothing to do with Rosslyn.

**RZ** In the book *Rosslyn and the Grail*, you demonstrate a fascination for the traditional legends of Rosslyn. However, you keep legends in a strict analytical perspective. Do you think that the legends of Rosslyn can help us shed light on the Chapel's history?



Rosslyn Chapel – Gothic architecture at its most spectacular

**MO** In a way I think that sometimes legends are truer than history, not because they tell us what happened, but because they tell us how the people of the time felt about what happened. For example, the legend of the White Lady is a symbolic story, representing the Catholic beliefs of people. It is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary and other Christian traditions that the people of the time believed in. Legends are an alternative source of history, and if studied in their proper context, can be used to fill in the gaps that conventional sources leave out. Legends represent the common folks' beliefs and how they perceived the world around them.

**RZ** The presence of 'American Plant' carvings (maize and Aloa vera) at Rosslyn has been much speculated upon, since Rosslyn Chapel was built in 1446, before Columbus' discovery of America. In your book you dismiss these speculations by giving alternative interpretations to the carvings (bundles of wheat for the maize and wild strawberry leaves for Aloa vera). Are there any Rosslyn carvings whose significance is really difficult to explain?

**MO** Yes. On the outside of the chapel, on the east wall, there is a badly worn head that bears what looks like a winged helmet. It could be interpreted as Hermes. If it is so, you could ask yourself, why was Hermes depicted? This could lead to other kinds of speculation like for instance the fact that Hermetism influenced Leonardo da Vinci.

There's also another carving in the sacristy that is very interesting. On one side of a door there is St Peter with the keys to heaven. On the other side there is a female figure wearing a medieval winged dress.

This figure gives you its back and is carrying two children on her shoulders. You can note their faces. I have the suspicion that the figure depicts William Sinclair's wife who had two children, and who died before the chapel was built. The odd depiction could mean that she was heading towards heaven.

**RZ** In your book you say that: 'In reality, it is far more likely that the impetus to create the Collegiate Church of St Matthew came from Elizabeth Douglas and Sir Gilbert Hay.' Isn't that speculation, just as the alleged Templar and Masonic connections to Rosslyn?

**MO** It is informed guesswork based on research. Sir William Sinclair, the builder of Rosslyn, was Elizabeth's third husband. Her brother had financed the building of Glasgow Cathedral and University. I don't think it's coincidental that the ground plan of Glasgow Cathedral. Rosslyn, had it been completed, would have provided a perfect base for setting up a university in the East, close to Edinburgh. Sir Gilbert Hay was a world class scholar who moved from the French court to Roslin Castle just two years before the building of Rosslyn Chapel started. It must have been very difficult for Sir William Sinclair not to be influenced by Sir Gilbert's views. Most probably, Sir William sent for Sir Gilbert so that he could utilise his immense knowledge while the building of Rosslyn was taking place.

**RZ** A letter dated 1546 was sent by the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, to the Lord of Rosslyn, William St Clair, saying: '...and secret shown to us we shall keep secret.' Your explanation is that by 'secret' she meant her confidences. Secret is a very strong word though. Could this be a clue that there was really some important secret held by the St Clairs?

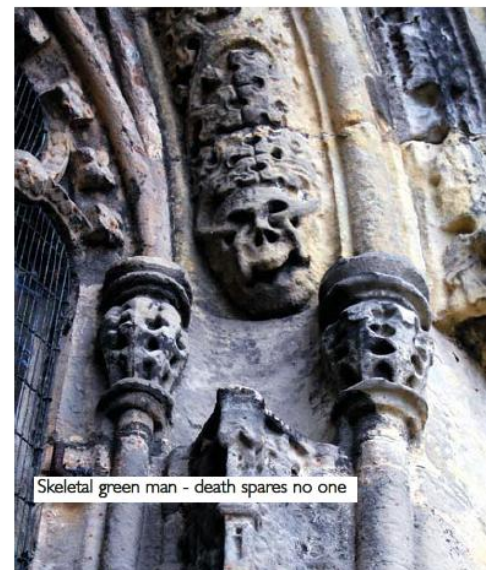
**MO** It is very possible that there are secrets at Rosslyn. While researching about the Chapel, I came across one account that said that the Scottish royalty, Mary of Guise and later Mary Queen of Scots were using Roslin Castle as a safe. Both Maries were Catholic, and during the uneasy shift of the Protestant Reformation, they found strong and trustworthy allies in the Catholic St Clairs. The legend of the White Lady is based on the belief that a woman of the St Clair line is guarding a secret room, possibly under the castle. When Lord Darnley married Mary Queen of Scots, the ceremony was presided over by a bishop who was the grandson of William Sinclair, the Chapel builder. Darnley was very rich and liked to flaunt his wealth. When he was blown up, no one knows what became of his treasure. However, it is very tempting to think that Mary could have turned to the St Clairs during the turbulent time for the safekeeping of her husband's wealth. The St Clairs were one of the few families who were still loyal and devoted to the Catholic Queen.

**RZ** According to Sir Walter Scott, the last male heir of the Rosslyn branch of St Clairs became the first Freemason Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1736. What do you think of Rosslyn's 18th century Masonic Connection? Do the sculptures point to this connection?

**MO** The St Clair in question was initiated into Freemasonry and a short while later was elevated to the highest rank of Grand Master. This looks very odd. Most probably, the Freemasons 'adopted' the St Clairs to give an ancient pedigree to their organisation. The Grand Lodge of Scotland was formed after that of England and the Scottish Freemasons wanted to make their lodge more prestigious – hence the adoption of the St Clairs. During Victorian times, Freemasons repaired and added carvings to Rosslyn Chapel. The Victorian baptistery was also built by Freemasons.



Lady and children finding their way into heaven



Skeletal green man - death spares no one



External detail from the Victorian baptistry

**RZ** Why have the Arthurian connections at Rosslyn been so well-hidden until you co-wrote 'Rosslyn and the Grail'?

**MO** Not many books were written about Rosslyn at all. Most either focused on the history, or on the religious carvings or on Templar myths. They failed to put the carvings in their proper 15th century context. At the time Arthurian literature was very popular. It represented the high culture of the nobles. Rosslyn, for all that matters, was closer to French culture than to the culture of the Scottish highlands. After the old castle was burnt down, Roslin Castle was rebuilt in Flamboyant style. Remember that William St Clair had been an envoy to the French court. There is a cosmopolitan European feeling about Rosslyn Chapel.

**RZ** In the book you affirm to have cracked the story in the stone. Can you tell us about it?

**MO** It took us many years to figure out the order in the carvings. The green men gave us the clue, as they age on going from east to west. Religious ceremonies always follow a clockwise, sun wise movement. The east side of the Chapel represents the beginning of life. There is a carving of the Nativity, the birth of Christ, with the Star of Bethlehem, and also an angel with an open book. As you move south, you find maturity, represented by bearded green men. On the north face of the chapel's outer wall, there are skeletal green men that are very rare carvings. The lamb of God carving represents the breaking of the 7th seal and the Day of Judgement. There is also a depiction of the Crucifixion. The north side represents Death. The crypt where the St Clair lords are buried lies on this side too. The north-east end of the chapel is the weirdest area, where the End and the Beginning join. The highly ornate Apprentice Pillar also spirals clockwise and represents the focus of the chapel. This pillar and the two other central pillars



Detail of the Apprentice Pillar

symbolise truth, strength and beauty. Every pillar and carving in Rosslyn has been carefully positioned and is part of an intricate web of symbolic links.

**RZ** The messages in the sculptures were intended to convey a story to people. Like written literature, couldn't the story have different layers – intended for different categories of people? Perhaps a superficial meaning covering deeper meanings?

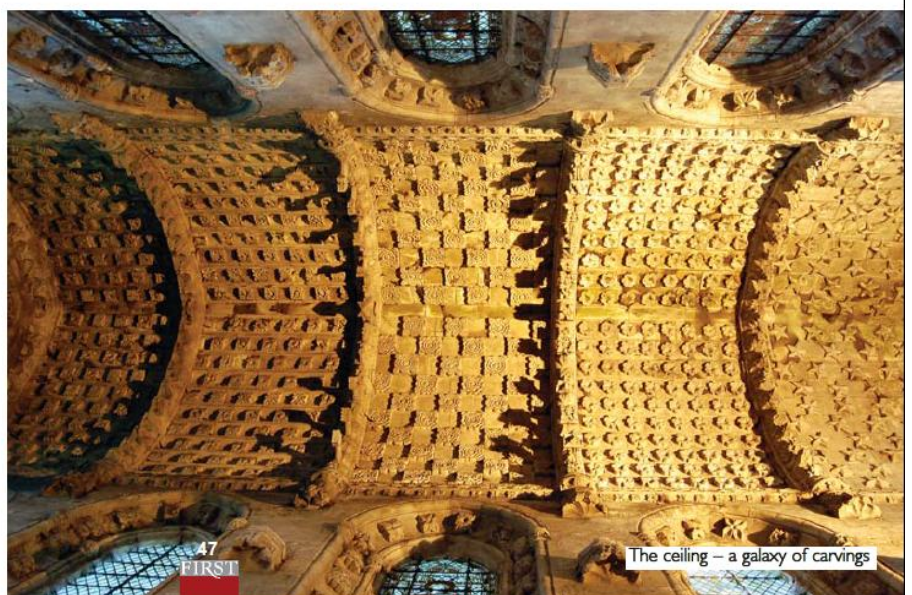
**MO** These layers are clearly demonstrated in the Apprentice Pillar. Legend here tells you more than history – the Master Mason killed his apprentice in a fit of jealousy after the latter carved the beautiful pillar in his absence. Modern stonemasons believe that in reality this pillar was carved by different people. Hidden beneath the superficiality of the legend is the very old idea of sacrifice. Other clues hint to this such as the depiction of Isaac, Jacob and the sacrificial goat. Also, hidden in the crypt beneath the chapel, are the remains of the St Clairs. This family tomb would have meant a lot to the St Clairs but would have been unknown to everyday worshippers.

**RZ** In your book you mention that if there is the possibility of buried treasure, it probably lies beneath Rosslyn Castle or somewhere beneath Rosslyn Glen. Are the hordes of 'treasure seekers' who flock to Rosslyn Chapel misguided?

**MO** Perhaps the real treasure of Rosslyn Chapel lies in the fact that it gives us a vision of what 15th century Catholicism was like in Scotland, and it must have been quite different from that of mainstream European Catholicism. Rosslyn was really meant to be felt. The awe it inspires and the sense of the Divine it makes you feel are far superior to any material treasure. Rosslyn Chapel is a sacred site that cannot be looked at simply in a rational way. It is magic. ❖

- More information about Mark Oxbrow can be gleaned at <http://www.markoxbrow.com/>

- The Rosslyn Chapel Trust is responsible for conserving the Chapel and making it accessible to visitors. A history of Rosslyn Chapel can be read from the Trust website: <http://www.rosslynchapel.org.uk/>



The ceiling – a galaxy of carvings