

PRESS RELEASE

Church with unique links to Ireland's most famous Christian king faces its own battle for survival as historic 1000-year Good Friday victory over the pagan Vikings is celebrated

Swords, Dublin, Ireland, 18th April 2014

Celebrations to mark the 1,000th anniversary of the passing of Ireland's most famous Christian warrior-king are proving bittersweet for the small, beleaguered congregation of a church uniquely connected to his famous story.

As every Irish schoolchild knows, Brian Boru died in the most tragic of circumstances on Good Friday 1014 after his historic victory over Ireland's hated Viking invaders at the Battle of Clontarf.

A handful of Norsemen who had fled the battlefield near Dublin later stumbled upon the High King of Ireland's poorly guarded tent, where he was praying. As he gave thanks to God for the greatest victory ever achieved by an Irish leader, they claimed the noble warrior's life.

King Brian's anguished warriors brought their leader's body to a hilltop church in the nearby village of Swords. Grateful followers lined up in their thousands at a traditional 'Irish wake' to pay tribute to the man who had finally defeated the heathen invaders.

A millennium has passed but a place of worship – known as Saint Columba's Church – still stands on this site just north of Dublin where King Brian Boru was mourned by his tearful followers.

However, as the 1000th anniversary of his victory and death is marked today, the church and its parishioners find themselves locked in their own challenging battle for survival.

The current church building dates back 202 years, and shares its grounds with a striking tall stone 'round tower' which was built as a place of refuge from Viking plunderers, and was centuries old at the time of King Brian Boru's wake.



Late last year, structural problems caused by a leaking roof forced Saint Columba's Church to close its doors to services of Christian worship. Today, for the first time in more than two centuries, there will be no Good Friday commemoration of Christ's sacrifice for humankind in the building.

Historic plasterwork is falling from the building's ceiling and the congregation of just 200 families – faced with a bill of more than \$680,000 – have been forced out of their church.

The local minister, Canon Reverend Robert Deane explained: "It's a massive repair bill and certainly some people fear that it is beyond us to raise the money needed. As plans get underway to celebrate Brian Boru's remarkable life and achievements, many in our parish fear that 2014 could also be remembered as the year in which their church had to finally close its doors to its community."

Saint Columba's Parish has now launched a campaign to raise the funding necessary to repair their celebrated building and reopen its doors to its congregation and the wider community.

They are also using Facebook (facebook.com/savestcolumbaschurch) to reach out to Christian communities, not just in Ireland but all over the world, to secure the finances needed to rescue their place of worship.

Reverend Deane explained: "The arrival of the Vikings signalled one of the biggest challenges the Christian way of life has ever faced and it was an international threat. The different Irish kingdoms united for the first time under Brian Boru as High King of Ireland and, at the Battle of Clontarf, drove the Vikings into the sea."

"A thousand years have passed but our Christian way of life still faces pressures and challenges, albeit of a different kind. We hope that people in Ireland and beyond will come together to help us at our own time of need. As was the case a thousand years ago, we cannot succeed on our own."

Everyone who makes a contribution to the *Save Saint Columba's Church* fund, no matter how small, will become a Friend of this historic Irish church. Their generosity will be recorded in a book (see below) which will have pride of place in the building for as long as it stands. In this way, the names of all those who help us prevent this celebrated church from decaying to its demise will quite literally go down in history.



Brian Boru's full name in the native Gaelic language of Ireland was Brian Bóruma mac Cennétig (or Kennedy in English). From County Clare on the wild Atlantic coast, the title of "High King" he held had been largely ceremonial up to his appointment in 1002. With the Vikings well established around the Irish coast – particularly in the east where Dublin was one of the largest Viking trading ports in all of Europe – Brian set out to unite the warring fractious Irish kings and drive out the Norse invaders. Events eventually came to a head with a decisive battle twelve years later.

Historian Dr Françoise Henry, author of *Irish Art During the Viking Invasion*, explained the impact the Norse invaders had on a religious Ireland. "Pagans, they violently shocked a society which had become essentially Christian. They plundered without restitution, destroyed without redress, a permanent plague rooted in the land."

Just after dawn on Good Friday, 1014, Brian Boru rode out through the lines of his army with a cross in one hand and a drawn sword in the other. Raising his powerful voice, he delivered a rallying cry to echo through the ages to his outnumbered troops. "On your valour rests the hopes of your country today, and what surer grounds can they rest on. The barbarians have impiously fixed to enslave us upon the very day the Redeemer was crucified. Victory they shall not have. Destroy forever their tyranny by the avenging of your swords."

The battle, which lasted a full day, featured 6,500 to 7,000 Vikings and allied forces of which an estimated 6,000, including almost all the leaders, were killed. The Irish numbered just 4,500 and are reputed to have lost 4,000 men. But by the battle's end, with Brian Boru's victory, Viking power in Ireland was broken forever.

Among the Viking leaders was Sigurd, who brought 1,000 men to Dublin from his base in the Orkney Islands between Scotland and Norway. According to legend, this heathen king carried a "magical" standard into battle which drew the Irish warriors to it, eventually forcing their way in and killing the bearer. Although the standard was supposed to guarantee a victory for the bearer's forces, it also guaranteed the bearer's death. No one would pick it up due to its reputation, so Sigurd did and was quickly killed.

History records that the assassin who cut the Irish High King down with an axe in the wake of the battle was called Brodir. After his treacherous act, he yelled, "Now let man tell man that Brodir felled Brian." According to Viking accounts, Brodir was tracked, captured, and gruesomely killed by King Brian's brother, Wolf the Quarrelsome. The two warriors had actually clashed earlier on the battlefield. Although Wolf was unable to break Brodir's armour, he knocked him to the ground and Brodir had run away to hide.

For further information on the Save Saint Columba's Church Campaign, please contact the chairman of the fundraising committee, Jonathan Foley at jonathan@helpusmakehistory.org, via our Facebook page at facebook.com/savesaintcolumbaschurch.org or our website www.helpusmakehistory.org



The 'Battle of Clontarf' by Hugh Frazer in 1826 depicts Brian Boru in his tent overlooking the conflict. It was exhibited in Honolulu for 30 years until February 2014 when it was purchased and returned to Ireland for the 1,000th Anniversary celebrations.