

## Portmahomack

Portmahomack is Port ma Cholmag – the port of Colman, an early Christian saint. The Tarbat Centre, in the old parish church, presents the history of the settlement and the results of extensive archaeological investigations by the University of York.

Portmahomack lies on the south shore of the Dornoch Firth, an inlet of the sea fed from the west by the river Oyckell. The firth is one of Britain's most attractive and unspoilt estuaries, rich in wildlife.

This area was, for long, a disputed borderland. Although it became part of the Kingdom of Scotland it was at various times controlled by the Norse ('Viking') earldom of Orkney. Off this coast in 1029 Thorfinn the Mighty, Earl of Orkney, defeated the Scots in a sea battle. The victory was commemorated by Thorfinn's poet, Arnor.

*Well the red weapons  
fed wolves at Tarbat,  
young the commander who  
made that Monday-combat.  
Slim blades sang there  
south on Oyckell's bank;  
fresh from the fray he  
outfaced the Scots king.*

Arnor, the Earl's poet.

In the 1690s George Mackenzie (later 1st Earl of Cromartie) built the giral (grain store) which still stands by the harbour. His tenants paid rent in kind – a part of their crop rather than money – and the grain was stored here before being shipped south to the markets in Edinburgh. The larger store beside the giral dates from 1779.

The harbour pier was built by the engineer Thomas Telford in 1816, possibly incorporating an earlier structure. Many houses along the curve of the bay date from this period, when Portmahomack's herring fishery was thriving.

The fine cast iron fountain by the harbour (dated 1877) commemorates in Gaelic and English the introduction of 'gravitation water' (piped water) to the village.

There were other developments in fishing and in a single year in the 1790s over 70,000 lobsters were shipped from here to London – kept alive in the tanks of 'well smacks'.

The port lies nestled in the bay in the shelter of the headland of Tarbat Ness, where you can see Tarbat Ness lighthouse – built in 1830 and heightened in 1892 to make it the second tallest lighthouse in Britain.