

# Lewis Chessmen take their ancient battle to New York

Report by Katie Macleod

**I**t is a game of kings. The final two warriors face each other in the closing stages of a lengthy battle. A few sidekicks remain, waiting for the ultimate move in what is no ordinary confrontation. This game of kings is one of chess, set out in the main exhibition space at The Cloisters Museum in northern Manhattan.

The Cloisters, the branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art dedicated to medieval artwork, has had 34 of the Lewis Chessmen on show since November 2011. The Museum is a giant in the art world, and a tourist destination in its own right – making it a suitable site for showing off the world's most famous chess pieces. It is the first time such a large number of the Lewis Chessmen have been exhibited outside the U.K., away from their permanent places of residence at the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland.

In the centre of the Romanesque Hall – which resembles the interior of a medieval church – is a large glass case that holds the two kings, set out to mimic the final positions of a modern chess match, the 1972 World Chess Championship. Tourist-trap replicas are no match for the originals. The creamy white walrus ivory is delicately detailed, from the strands of hair that flow down the kings' backs to their lidded eyes. Both leaders sit straight in their thrones, which are covered with serpents, swirling leaves and Celtic-style patterns, as they rest their waiting swords in their laps. In her blog on the exhibition,

Cloisters curator Barbara Drake Boehm writes that she can almost "sense... the dramatic tension between the Kings, eyeing each other."

The drama has been carefully constructed. Visitors are immediately drawn to the central case of the kings but although they steal the show, they are not all that is on offer: around the edge of the room sit the 'fallen' chess pieces from the metaphorical game. One of the warders (a modern day 'castle' or 'rook') is so desperate for battle that he restrains himself by biting the top of his shield; his prominent teeth poke over the top of the armour and his eyes are bulging in excitement. The nearby knights are armed for battle, straddling the steeds that sport cleverly carved (and distinctly individual) shaggy manes. Even the knights' miniature fingers are wrapped tightly around the spears at their sides, displaying an expert eye for detail.

It is widely accepted that the Lewis Chessmen were crafted in Norway, most likely in the town of Trondheim during the 12th century. An entire stone wall of the Cloisters hall is given over to the story of the Lewis Chessmen, with an image of a picturesque Uig taking pride of place. The exhibition details the discovery of the hoard in 1831 by a local crofter who thought he had encountered a group of gnomes, and informs visitors that the find soon "became shrouded in legend." Also apparently legendary is the remoteness of the Isle of Lewis, which the museum mistakenly describes as "more than 120 miles off the north west coast of Scotland." "I didn't know it was so isolated!" one patron exclaims to another. Unbeknown to him, the

museum doesn't really know either.

The Met may have this geographical fact wrong, but the historical insights into the artistic and actual aspects of the chess game are fascinating. The popular board game is believed to have originated in India, and the pieces used reflect the location of the game. Bishops did not appear on chessboards until the 12th century, and then only in Europe, where they represented their roles as advisors to rulers. They were preceded by elephants, used as animals of war in Indian and Persian battles; examples of these medieval Islamic pieces can be seen at the very edges of the room.

It's a similar story with the Queens. Each Queen holds a hand to her face, concerned, her hair hidden under a veil. It was only after the 11th century that Queens such as these began to be seen on chessboards, as they replaced the Viziers – advisors to kings in Islamic Spain – of earlier games.

The Lewis Chessmen are the main draw while in residence (the gift shop stocks everything from Chessmen t-shirts to water bottles) but the museum itself is a wonder to explore. A reconstructed church building from medieval France, the Cloisters sits in a leafy park at the edge of Manhattan, overlooking the river and emitting an atmosphere that is more European than American. There are frescoes on the ceiling, religious artwork on the walls and fortress-style studded wooden doors. For all this, the stars of the show are still "the greatest hoard of chess pieces ever found": the famous local loot of the Lewis Chessmen.



The retiring line-up at the Stornoway Trust from before the recent election - from left, at back - Donald Crichton, Norman Macleod, Robert Frater, and Norman A Maciver

From left, front - Murdo Murray, Charlie Nicolson who chaired the Trust, Zena Stewart, Calum Maclean, and Iain M Maciver. Inserts Fiona Cowan and James Macarthur

## Pavements dug up for fibre-optic link

**P**avements in Macaulay Road and Matheson Road were being dug up in April and May to install a high-speed fibre-optic link – but it's not for the homes and businesses along the route.

The link is to allow NHS Western Isles and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to strengthen their business-critical contingency plans with a fibre optic backbone cable to back up data to remote servers.

Diggers are currently preparing the ground which will see a high-speed cable connecting the two headquarters and new data back up servers installed to enable each organisation to archive their data offsite.

NHS spokesperson Maggie Fraser explained: "The design is simply for a direct link between these sites. The plan is that the NHS will provide a space for the Comhairle to install servers, and they will reciprocate in kind. That way we each get the ability to back up data offsite, and both organisations increase the robustness of their continuity/recovery plans. At the moment the intention is that each partner will own 50% of the fibre and that traffic for each partner will not be mixed with traffic for the other but will travel on its own cores of the fibre."

The data link will be owned outright and therefore not entail any annual recurring fees.