A Brief History of Govan.....

500  Around 500 AD, according to tradition, the Christian missionary St Constantine arrives in Govan and builds a small wooden church next to a sacred well and in the shadow of the ceremonial hill. The first Christian Govanites are buried in the heart-shaped burial ground which now surrounds Govan Old Church. The people of Govan and the Clyde Valley in these early times are called 'Britons'. They're different from their neighbours, the Scots and Picts, and speak their own language. In this language the name Govan means 'little

650  The church and the ceremonial hill at Govan are part of the kingdom of the Clyde Britons which is ruled from Dumbarton Rock. The king of Dumbarton has just won a great victory over the Scots of Dalriada (now Argyll) and has become one of the most powerful kings in the British Isles.

756  A combined army of Picts and Northumbrians attacks Dumbarton and forces the Clyde Britons to surrender. The invaders are recorded as having forded the River Clyde at Govan, and the actual surrender may have taken place in a ceremony on the ancient hill of Govan.

850  Around the mid to late 800s the richly decorated Govan Sarcophagus is carved from a single block of stone. It is a high status burial monument, replete with interlace design and figurative panels, including a scene portraying a mounted warrior hunting, a symbolic motif which combines ideas of military prowess with the Christian quest for salvation. Whether it was intended to hold the relics of a saint or the bones of a king is impossible to tell, but it is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding pieces of sculpture of its age.
870 A new power appears in the seas around Britain and Ireland around AD 800 - Viking raiders from Norway and Denmark. In 870 Vikings sail up the Firth of Clyde to plunder the old fortress at Dumbarton. The king of the Britons is captured and killed. But the kingdom manages to survive, and the new king moves up the river to Govan, which becomes the heart of the kingdom. The kingdom itself gets a new name: Strathclyde.

900 A sculptural tradition known as 'The Govan School' is believed to have originated in Govan around 900AD. The 'recumbent' cross-slabs, 4 free-standing crosses and Norse 'hogbacks' displayed in Govan Old Church are all carved during this period. The recumbent cross-slabs are the longest-lived style of monument, spanning c. 900-1100 AD. Taken as a whole, the carved stones are evidence of a major high status, probably royal, cemetery at Govan.

925 The Norse influenced 'hogback' burial monuments are thought to have been carved in Govan during this period. The 5 hogbacks in Govan Old Church are the largest known collection in Scotland. They are typically found in areas of northern England settled by Vikings and on the southern Scottish mainland where there was a significant Norse presence.

1000 The kings of Strathclyde are at the height of their power. They rule as far south as the Solway Firth. They and their families worship at the old church of St Constantine at Govan and are buried in the churchyard, their graves being marked by finely carved cross-slabs and 'Hogback' stones. The royal palace is sited across the river at Partick, and the ancient hill to the east of the church forms the administrative hub of a new power-base, used for important ceremonies, gatherings and pronouncements.
Around this time, the kingdom of Strathclyde is conquered by the Scots and absorbed into the kingdom of Scotland. The Scottish King, David I, establishes a new diocese based at Glasgow Cathedral (founded 1114), which eclipses the old church and power-base at Govan, and its association with the British kings. The Scottish kings have no use for court hill at Govan. They have their own ceremonial mound at Scone. The royal estate lands at Partick are given over to the Bishops of Glasgow.

The church continues in use as the mother church of Govan parish. The small, rural settlement of Govan grows up around Govan Cross and the north-south axis leading down to the river crossing at Water Row. Old customs die hard and the Govanites of medieval times continue to gather around their hill for public meetings and community events. Law and justice ('dooms') are still handed out at this special place. Local people call it the 'Doomster Hill' or simply 'The Hillock'.

The medieval church is replaced by a new church in 1726. The graveyard contains burial markers spanning over 500 years, the earliest of which are typically flat, carved slabs favoured by prominent, local land-owning families. By the eighteenth century, artisans and craftsmen are also buried in the churchyard. The craftsmen prefer a style of upright headstone carved with designs reflecting their craft, e.g. shears for weavers, the trade most commonly commemorated.

The Doomster Hill has fallen into disuse - a water reservoir for Reid’s dye-works has been put on the top. Local historians start to take an interest and begin to record the stories still told about the Hill. ‘Govan Old’, the first shipbuilding yard in Govan, is opened by McArthur and Stevenson next to Doomster Hill.

Govan has grown quickly from a small fishing village with a population of around 4000 in 1820, into an over-crowded industrial town. Its population reaches a peak in 1907 at 95,000 people. Most have come from the Scottish Highlands, Ireland and England in search of work. In 1891, 86% of families in Govan live in a 'single-end' or two-room flat.
**1900**

Govan's second age of greatness is at its height – the burgh is an international centre for shipbuilding. By the 1930’s over 30% of the world’s shipping is ‘Clydebuilt’. Doomster Hill has been levelled to make space for the shipyards – no trace of it remains. In 1912, Belfast shipbuilder Harland and Wolff buys three small shipyards in Govan and constructs giant new sheds and slipways on the site of Doomster Hill. The churchyard at Govan is almost entirely surrounded by shipyards. In the same year, Govan becomes part of Glasgow.

**1938**

George MacLeod and his Govan congregation found the Iona Community on the island of Iona and in Govan. Unemployed craftspeople (mainly shipyard workers) from Govan work to restore the monastic quarters of the Abbey of St Columba on the island. The Great Depression of the 1930s hit’s hard in Govan.

**1970s**

In 1971, the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders 'work in' at Fairfield and three other yards lasts for more than a year and saves the yards from closure. Following restructuring, Govan Shipbuilders is created in 1972. Today, the yard employs over 2000 workers and is operated by BAE Systems. In 2010, some 800 mourners attend the funeral at Govan Old Church of UCS union leader, Jimmy Reid. The restored A-listed Fairfield Shipyard Offices are due to open in 2013 as a heritage centre and office spaces.
SOME KEY DATES:

450-93 First mention of northern British Kingdom. St Patrick writes to the warriors of Coroticos at Clyde Rock (Dumbarton).

450 -500 First Christian church at Govan.

612 Death of St Kentigern (Mungo) at Glasgow.

756 First mention of Govan as site of battle between the Northumbrians and the Picts, following their raid on the British at Clyde Rock (Dumbarton).

794-95 First recorded Viking raids on the Hebrides and first Viking raid on Iona Abbey.

870 Vikings from Dublin destroy Dumbarton Rock, stronghold of the northern British kingdom.

876 King Constantine I, son of Kenneth mac Alpine (King of the Scots), is killed by the Viking leader Haelfdene and declared a martyr, (St Constantine)

900 Carving of the Govan Sarcophagus, perhaps for King Constantine I, the martyr.

937 Battle of Brunanburh, at which the King of Strathclyde fights alongside Scots and Vikings against king Athelstan of Wessex.

950-1050 Kingdom of Strathclyde at its peak, perhaps also the highpoint of the Govan School.

1018 Battle of Carham, Owen the Bald, king of Strathclyde, helps the king of Scots to defeat the Northumbrians and secure Lothian.

1114 King David I grants Govan church and lands to Glasgow Cathedral. Bishops of Glasgow acquire many of the royal estates of the kings of Strathclyde, including Partick.

1263 Battle of Largs marks the end of Scandinavian interest in Strathclyde.

1314 Battle of Bannockburn.

1560 Beginning of the Scottish Reformation.

1603 Union of the Scottish and English crowns following the succession of James VI &I.


1756 Govan Weavers’ Society formed.

1830s Human bones discovered during excavation of Doomster Hill to build a water tank for the Reid’s dye-work.

1841 Robert Napier begins building iron ships at Govan

1860s Doomster Hill cleared for expansion by the Old Govan shipyard.

1864 Establishment of the Burgh of Govan.

1885 John Elder’s shipyard moves to new premises at Fairfield


1971 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in.