
Fife gravestones: a personal view

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Introduction

Little work has been done towards an overall study of this important subject in the Fife area. This paper hopes to draw attention to the work that has been carried out, that which is currently underway and provide an outline of work needed in the future. The need for a fuller understanding of the historic importance of graveyards and the monuments within them has been widely publicised in recent years by many organisations including the National Committee on Carved Stones in Scotland. Unfortunately many gravestones have now reached a stage where they are under threat from a variety of destructive agents including exposure, pollution, natural decay and aspects of graveyard maintenance (or the lack of it). Recording of and research into these stones and their inscriptions are therefore vital to ensure that this valuable resource of historical, social, artistic and archaeological information survives.

Previous studies

The first studies of Fife gravestones were published in the very early 18th century. Robert Monteith's book entitled 'An Theater of Mortality or A Further Collection of Funeral Inscriptions over Scotland', followed on a book of monumental inscriptions from Edinburgh published in 1704, (Monteith 1704, 1713). The work included inscriptions from Cupar, St Andrews, and Kirkcaldy. Monteith gave no reason for his work but felt that the study of one's ancestors was important 'It is just, that every man should remember, and look to the pit, from whence he is hewen, and the rock, from which he is digged.' (Monteith, 1704)

In the mid to late 19th century Andrew Jervise (1820–1878) made notes on a number of stones within Fife (NMS MS 84), but whether this was to further the work that he had done in the north-east of Scotland or just for his own interest is unknown. (Jervise, 1875 & 1879) The notes contain inscriptions of gravestones with some sketches, and occasionally newspaper cuttings relating to a site's history or inscriptions. In 1887 the Reverend Walter Wood published a work on the East Neuk of Fife in which he occasionally incorporated inscriptions from a few stones relating to the prominent family histories he was interested in. (Wood, 1887) He made a few notes on inscriptions at Elie, especially those that were in Latin.

In the very late 19th century Erskine Beveridge (1851–1920) made notes on a number of stones throughout Fife. The focal point of his interest in gravestones was his published work of Crail Churchyard (Beveridge,

1893). He noted that whilst previous studies in the 19th century were focusing on medieval churches and their related documentation or to the architecture of churches, no work was being done on gravestones. He was probably the first to raise the importance of recording as well as the future preservation of those monuments. His pioneering work not only included the gravestone inscriptions, but also used photographs and related records to complement the survey.

In the early decades of the current century, numerous papers appeared on gravestones in Fife in particular those relating to St Andrews Cathedral, notably by Reid, MacDonald and Fleming, (Reid 1910; MacDonald 1935; Fleming 1931). David-Hay Fleming's catalogue of the stones in St Andrews Cathedral Museum not only made reference to the previous studies at the cathedral, but he also used the burgh of St Andrews' Commissariat Records to make notes on the persons mentioned on the stones. The Commissariat Records are an early form of testaments or wills. An index of these records had been published in 1902. (Grant, 1902)

In 1933 the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland published its Eleventh report (RCAHMS 1933) on the counties of Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan. Due to the Commission's methodology at that date only gravestones of a pre-1707 date were recorded. Many were not photographed and only a size, style and inscription were noted. Recommendations were made mainly for medieval or earlier stones for their future care and preservation. Only one stone of a post-Reformation date at St Leonard's in St Andrews was recommended for further attention. The few photographs that they did take are of interest, if only to show what did exist and is now lost.

At St Christophers Church in Cupar the condition of the armorial decorated stone of Thomas Crichton of 1619, against the east gable of the church, (Illus 1; RCAHMS 1933, figure 191 opposite page 85) is in sharp contrast to a photograph (Illus 2) of the same stone taken by the author in 1998. It shows quite evidently that a substantial amount of deterioration has taken place over the complete stone, both decoration and inscription being affected. It is a typical example of deterioration due to weathering by wind, rain and frost and damage by environmental factors such as lichen and pollution. Details lost include parts of the inscription and details of the armorial panels.

From the 1960s the method of recording promoted by the Scottish Genealogy Society, and used by the Mitchell's (1971, 1972) was to summarise the inscription. Therefore the following inscription from Kirkcaldy, Kirk Wynd (NT 2804 9170) of 'In memory of



Illus 1 Stone of Thomas Crichtone of 1619. Copyright RCAHMS F/156. St Christophers Church, Cupar.



Illus 2 Stone of Thomas Crichtone of 1619. Copyright RCAHMS D15778/fr6. Stuart Farrell Collection.

John Millar late shipowner in Kirkcaldy who departed this life on the 11th day of August 1809 aged 65 years' was reduced to the following: 'John Millar late shipowner 11.8.1809 65'. Placename details and epitaphs were usually dropped, giving little or no indication of whether those interred are from the local community or if the placename is just the place of death. The person who erected the stone, if included in the inscription, is also sometimes omitted. The Mitchell's did occasionally indicate the type of stone recorded and gave notes on other records that would have genealogical information. Their work is a good indication of stones or inscriptions now lost.

In 1970 there appeared in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland an article by John di Folco (di Folco, 1970) on gravestones in East Fife. Following on the work of the RCAHMS (1933) the survey concentrated on stones of a pre-1707 date, noting type, size and the full inscription of each stone. A number of parishes were excluded, as they had no stones within the survey date. Though he also included stones of a later date 'where it was felt they possessed details of design or lapidary interest' (di Folco, 1970, 205). This article also included notes on classification and styling including dates of use. Records were also made where stones which had been noted by the RCAHMS (1933)

were found to be missing. The importance of this article will only be fully realised when complete surveys have been made of the sites included in the paper.

Work in the late 1970s and early 1980s resulted in the Council for British Archaeology (Jones, 1984) and later the Council for Scottish Archaeology (Willsher, 1985), producing a recording sheet which included details for stone type, size, material, the full inscription and a photograph to be taken of each stone. In the early 1980s work by Derek Hunter recorded the churchyard at Markinch using these guidelines. His work at Markinch involved schoolchildren from a local primary school and won numerous awards, including a Council for British Archaeology School Award in 1985.

Presently the only sites fully recorded prior to the present work being carried out by the author are Crail, Dalgety St Bridgets, Markinch churchyard, Tulliallan Old Parish Church and St Andrews Cathedral. A summary of the work carried out at St Andrews Cathedral has recently been published (Proudfoot, 1998).

As part of wider studies of gravestones in Scotland, Betty Willsher has used a variety of stones in Fife to demonstrate their uniqueness and variety in a number of publications, especially by photographs. This collection of photographs is held at the National Monuments Record Scotland (NMRS) in Edinburgh.

Current work

The author surveyed each graveyard or cemetery in Fife in 1998 to ascertain the variety and condition of the monuments contained therein, and to take monochrome and colour photographs of particular stones. This has also involved research into the history of the study of graveyards in Fife, in particular antiquarian research. The photographic work has focused on stones of a pre-1855 date or those with an architectural or historical value. This survey enhances the existing collection of photographs in the NMRS and has been deposited there.

Work has also included the full survey of a number of sites (including Boarhills, Cameron, Carnbee, Creich, Dairsie, Dunbog, Dunino, East Wemyss churchyard, Kennoway churchyard, Kingskettle churchyard, Largo churchyard, Leslie churchyard, Kinglassie churchyard, Milton of Balgonie and Newburn) with work including death records and lair registers to those sites. The use of burial and lair registers can help not only demographic studies but help place stones in their own historical context in relation to actual persons buried giving better ideas of social status. The latter part of this work is being done with the help of the database of death records from the parish records compiled by the Fife Family History Society.

As part of each site survey a summary of previous work and related church history is also included. Future work will be conducted on sites in East Fife, where the least amount of work has been undertaken in the past in comparison to the number of sites available for study.

This work has been funded by Fife Council, the Russell Trust, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and the Marc Fitch Fund. Results have been lodged with Fife Council Sites and Monuments Record, the NMRS and the Fife Family History Society. At a future date summaries of the work will be lodged with local libraries.

Future work

Although it would seem daunting to record all the cemeteries in Fife, it is not an impossible task. The author estimates that all the gravestones in Fife could be recorded within 5 years on a full-time basis, enabling each site to be recorded in detail with a full and comprehensive photographic survey based upon the recording sheets recommended by the Council for Scottish Archaeology (See Willsher, 1985). This survey material could be used to monitor future deterioration in any stones inscription and carvings as an aid in any conservation work. This could be linked to the recent handbook by Historic Scotland on the assessment methodology handbook of carved stone decay (Yates, et al 1999).

Additional areas of work and research might include the following:

i An assessment of the antiquarian studies that have been carried out. One topic of research might be an overall study of St Andrew's drawing upon all work done or the work by Erskine Beveridge. It would help note loss of stones and find out what stones antiquarians were interested in.

ii A study of the history of the Funeral and Hearse Societies and how they relate to the development of town cemeteries. An understanding of these societies would give an indication to social changes, which have affected attitudes to death and to the commemoration of the dead.

iii A detailed study of the pre-Victorian cemetery organisation and management eg Rosyth, where a large amount of relevant documentary material exists; How did new management schemes affect the existing churchyard?

iv Studies of all church records especially Kirk of Session and Heritors Minutes to investigate the enclosing of churchyards and the organisation of the building of mort and watch houses. There has been no systematic transcription or study of these records.

v Following the approach adopted by Fleming (1931) the Commissariat Records and other local history related documentation could be used to try and identify if there is any true kind of 'social standing' of the persons commemorated on the gravestones. A starting point for this could be a detailed study of the unusual document of the record of persons erecting headstones at Torryburn and Crombie churchyards from 1793 to 1853, held within the Torryburn Church Records. An example from 1828 is John Hynd, coalhewer, Baldrigeburn, Dunfermline parish, erected a headstone in Torry Churchyard marked : 'William Hynd & Helen Paterson, his wife, & John Hynd, their son, and Marion Williamson, his wife'. If this was linked to a detailed survey of both these churchyards, noting especially the symbols and styles of stones, the importance of this document would be realised, not only to those stones that are now lost, but also to note which occupations are omitted from the stones because they have no recognised symbols.

vi Indexing and transcription of death records and lair registers and comparing this to the physical evidence ie the gravestones themselves. Likewise there is a need of comparative studies by the use of demographic methods. One study might be to look at what biases might be seen in a particular parish or between parishes.

vii Specific monument/material types such as cast-iron need further study to identify their origin, who manufactured them, style, etc; There is also a need to try and identify local traditional styles of stones.

viii The links between Commonwealth War Graves and War Memorials and any related family monuments need to be researched and established. How do these memorials relate to each other? What further information do they give to attitudes and ideas of commemoration of a fallen serviceman or woman?

Conclusions

The graveyards of Fife represent an area of historical and archaeological heritage, not only on a local basis but also on a national one. The gravestones have been studied in varying ways and extent over the last 200 years. Only now, however, is the real wealth of information available becoming known and studied. It is hoped that in future years a systematic and consistent record of the stones will be undertaken as a necessary basis for their management, conservation, and also for their appreciation and interpretation. Future studies should ensure that this resource of historical, social, artistic and archaeological information is both better understood and realised.

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Abstract

This paper is a short summary of the study of post medieval gravestones in Fife, looking at past, present and future studies, in particular the history of the recording of the information that they contain.

Keywords

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survey

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