

The
Historic
Kirkyards
of
Aberdeenshire

A Survey Report

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Foreword

The historic kirkyards of Aberdeenshire abound with many significant and delightful architectural features, the nucleus of which has always, or in most cases, been the kirk.

However the world of architectural history has long been primarily concerned with either the study of country house or ecclesiastical architecture, though within the last quarter of the 20th - century the former has dominated the field significantly. The latter suffering from the staid image of a struggling entity becoming more distant and irrelevant to the lives of successive generations of their parishes. – And yet the historic kirkyard, so rich in the development; of aesthetic style, of local craftsmanship, of local and favoured materials, of genealogy and of economic prosperity - that of the kirkyard, has never been fully recorded and expounded upon by historians.

Before reading this survey report, it must be considered that although many of the kirks are fragmentary or ruinous, their present physical condition is generally more stable than at any time since their creation. Much historical speculation was presented in the 19th(and early 20th)century as to how many of the kirks became ruinous, though it is now readily accepted that their fate lay in the fluctuating purse-strings of the kirk session, or indeed to the particular whim of each parish, rather than the ravaging marauders of the Reformation of 1560.

Nonetheless the observant visitor to the kirkyards will note, through individual examples from differing ages, the changing development of the plans of kirk architecture to accom-

modate the needs of the communities which they served. Such observations will eventually render a complete understanding of a substantially more complex development than may have at first been appreciated. - The fragmentary medieval remains of St. Adamnan's kirk at Leask or St. Mary's of the Storms at Cowie Stonehaven also illustrate a remarkable level of craftsmanship in detail than was not incorporated in any secular building in Scotland before the 17th - century. Nonetheless, if a parish was unable to sustain the up-keep of an entire kirk, the bellcote gable, generally the W. gable, would be preserved, as the bell was instrumental in calling together the community and to play the part of the "deid bell" during a funeral procession. This fortunate occurrence has left Aberdeenshire, in particular, with the finest array of stylistic and architecturally diverse bellcotes in Scotland. These bellcotes date from the early 17th - century, adhering to the dictum of the Book of Discipline of 1560 for the Reformed Kirk. The most outstanding examples occur at Arbuthnott, Culsalmond, Inch, Pitsligo and Rayne, though this by no means exhausts the list.

The primary focus of a kirkyard is of course to play host to the internment of the dead of the parish, the memorials of which have left an abundant and diverse legacy whose history precedes that of the bellcote. The earliest of these extant tombstones date from the early 16th - century and are in the form of heavy whinstone or granite recumbent slabs, though some stood upright and were decorated with symbols of mortality such as; cadavers, skull and cross bones, hour glasses and coffins coupled with

the ubiquitous inscription of "*memento mori*" and a well-carved inscription to the deceased. This ideal of a memorial naturally developed in the 17th and 18th centuries with the use of more sophisticated detailing. The inscriptions began to be executed in "copperplate" text and the symbolism became less macabre and more sublimely figurative. The edges of these tombstones too became finely carved with many of the tombstones forming the lid of a sarcophagus or raised on fine baluster legs. The diversity is legion. Wealthy patrons of the 17th and 18th centuries, not content with the limited expressions of grandeur that such recumbent tombstones could afford, commissioned some of the most flamboyant memorials to mortality that the country has ever seen. These flights of fancy were mostly executed with the most classically inspired and sophisticated Renaissance detail that had not yet been employed within their own country houses of similar date. Sublime examples still exist at Marnoch and Banff St. Mary's. With the dawn of the 19th century the memorials became more restrained in their forms and generally took their inspiration from classical Greece rather than from the earlier local monuments. The detailing employed to decorate these new forms, whether it be on fine marble plaques to the local aristocracy or on less flamboyant monuments, their stylistic motifs were redolent of those also used on secular architecture and in the designs of fine furniture, completing an aesthetic oeuvre that has never been paralleled. It could be argued that the disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843 brought to an end the aspirations and joyful memorials of death,

as the tombstones began to take on a more restrained and commonplace appearance, - neither rejoicing in the commemoration of their patron nor possessing any great aspiration of design. Though, however mundane the general form of the monuments became, they were still executed with panache until the decline of the High Victorian period between 1860-70. Many of these more sober expressions can be found in most of the historic kirkyards though an exemplary collection is contained within Inverurie kirkyard.

The advent of the 20th century has seen the tombstone sink to even greater depths in terms of uninspiring design. Though the time is perhaps drawing near when our modern memorials should be invested with a greater level of 'jeu d'esprit' as symbols of our own mortality. - On my travels within the shire I have only encountered one exemplar dating from the 1980s.

There are many other physical aspects contained within the kirkyards that are redolent of a former way of life, or as a protection in death from the morbid actions of the Resurrectionists. The development of the mort-safe from a coffin-shaped stone slab to a cast iron coffin-shaped box placed over the coffin, to protect the cadaver sufficiently until it was of no medical benefit, is fascinating with the only two cast-iron mort-safes to be found at Banchory-Devenick and Durris. The necessity of creating a watch-house was primarily due to the ineffectiveness of the mort-safe, though the wily inhabitants of the N.E. developed the mort-house as an often subterranean safe constructed from granite blocks with an iron door. Many of these

mort-houses still exist in good condition and display many ingenious features, though most notably example is the one at Udney, which is unique in form. This genre is something of a peculiarity to Aberdeenshire.

Aberdeenshire Council are, at present, unique in commissioning such a report as a record of the physical and historical importance of each individual historic kirkyard. This report incorporates a structural survey to determine the extent to which each kirkyard will need a programme of conservation repairs and an analysis their contents for future interpretive potential. Yet if these national treasures are to be observed and appreciated by future generations, there are many factors that must be considered regarding their general maintenance. These recommendations listed in the following pages must be employed to maintain and explore the kirkyards to an enviable level.

During my all too brief exploration of the historic kirkyards of Aberdeenshire I have encountered many who enthuse at the prospect of being enlightened of such architectural and historical gems, though without informed care for their preservation, many of the kirkyards are in danger of losing their lustre.

D. M. Nigel McDowell
Aberdeen,
December 1998.

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