

## **KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF** **GRAVEYARDS**

Every parish in Scotland (some 900 plus) has a church and almost every one of these has a graveyard. Churches and their surrounding graveyards have been in use for hundreds of years. They can therefore reveal a great deal about the lives of those who once lived in the area.



First, the gravestones themselves. In medieval times, only the richest and grandest parishioners had their graves marked, often inside the church and with a horizontal stone set into the floor above their burial place. These **grave slabs**, unearthed at the early monastic site of **Govan, Lanarkshire**, may originally have been housed. Out of doors, in graveyards, raised mounds of grass may indicate the location of early burials.

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From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there was a great flowering of artistry in the carving of gravestones, both horizontal and vertical. The carvings show several



classes of objects. First, there may be biblical scenes, such as the Garden of Eden; second, 'emblems of mortality', such as a coffin, skull, hour-glass and crossed bones; third, winged souls, suggesting ascent into Heaven. All of these are represented on this gravestone at **Logierait, Perthshire**.

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Another element in gravestone carving, and one which lingered on into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the depiction of tools of the deceased person's trade.



These are of historical interest in giving some indication of the design of the tools used in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The **intricate carvings** on this **gardener's gravestone**, at **St Fillan's churchyard, Forgan, Fife**, show a rake, a line and reel, a spade, hoe, hammer, shears, watering can and axe.

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The gravestones of the later 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards are comparatively plain, though there was still considerable scope for elaborate structures to commemorate the rich or famous. This small but 'polite' piece of architecture, at **Tongland churchyard, Kirkcudbrightshire**, marks the grave of James Beaumont Neilson, whose 'hot blast' technique revolutionised iron smelting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.



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But there is more to graveyards than just graves. The enclosing walls may be of considerable age, especially where the site enclosed is round rather than rectangular. There may be ingenious means of access which allow people to come and go, but not livestock. There may also be buildings within the graveyard other than the church itself.

There may be a **mortuary**, where the dead person would have been housed pending his or her funeral. This example, at **Rosyth, Fife**, is built onto the graveyard wall.



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Some graveyards, especially those within range of cities, may have a **watch-house**. This is a vestige of the times in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a ready market for fresh corpses in anatomy classes. This little building at **Oldhamstocks, East Lothian**, may have originally served that purpose. Parishes which possessed anything so grand as a hearse might also have had a building to house it.



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Beyond the kirkyard wall there were other buildings connected with the kirk. Every minister had a patch of land – the *glebe* – on which to grow crops and graze animals. This picture of **Kirkmichael Glassay, Argyll** shows (left to right below the road) the church in its graveyard, the former manse (where the minister lived) and two ranges of buildings forming the glebe steading – the buildings used in farming the glebe lands.



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***To find out more:***

Willsher, B. *Understanding Scottish Graveyards*. Edinburgh, 1985

Willsher, B. and Hunter, D. *Stones. A Guide to Some Remarkable Eighteenth Century Gravestones*. Edinburgh, 1978

## **Looking at graveyards**

Graveyards are usually beside a parish church, unlike cemeteries, which were set up by private companies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or by local authorities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Visit** a graveyard and ask yourself:

- **Why** is it, and the church where they are? Is it the middle of the parish? Convenient for a bridge over a river which is difficult to cross? There are many other possibilities. In some places kirk roads and coffin roads were named from their use.
- **What** are its walls, fences and other boundaries like? And the gates? They give an idea of the way in which the graveyard was respected and valued in the past.
- **What does it contain?**
  - **Gravestones?** How old are they? How do they differ according to the date they were made? What sort of symbols are there on them, and can you find out what they mean? Did more people die young in past centuries?
  - **Monuments?** What sorts of people had these, rather than just ordinary gravestones?
  - Other things, such as **sheds** for burial and grass-cutting tools, **watchtowers** for looking out for **body snatchers**. **Trees**, particularly **yews**. Why might yew trees be particularly useful in a graveyard?

Looking at all the things in and around the graveyard, you can ask how they have changed over time.

Examine a second graveyard and compare it with the first.