

## The Old Kirkyard

Located on the crest of the Avon valley, the kirkyard is exposed to ever changing environmental conditions in Scotland. The graveyard possesses a great variety of monuments, some of historical significance, some of great sorrow and others of amusement and intrigue. Together they provide a greater insight and understanding of the people who inhabited the village in the past.

The [earliest recorded burials](#) are those of the Bronze Age (c4000-1200BC). These stone mounds, or cairns, contained earthen pots (beakers), in which the cremated ashes of the dead were placed. In some instances the deceased was only buried beneath the surface of the burial mound. Several such sites are to be found in the parish of Stonehouse, such as Cairncockle. These cairns are well documented in local publications.

Early Christian missionaries, such as Ninian, travelled around Scotland building churches and preaching the word of God. Some of these churches were established on pagan sites of religious importance, such as [standing stones](#). This practice was common in causing as little disruption to the pagan way of life, while phasing out the old forms of pagan worship. Many Christian festivals and annual celebrations of today, relate to events of the pagan calendar. December 25th originates from the Roman Winter festival of Saturnalia and April 1st is the Spring festival of Lud, pagan god of humour.

One method of discovering an ancient site of historical, or religious importance, is that of plotting ley-lines. These are imaginary lines discovered around 1920, whereby two or more lines crossing in a cemetery, indicate a good probability that the site was of historical antiquity long before the present site was used as such.

In many kirk yards throughout Scotland, standing stones and other prehistoric finds have been found. Around 1937 a prehistoric burial cist was said to have been discovered within the walls of the old kirk, though I can find no other references of the find in our National museums. However, its presence if correct, would suggest that the old kirkyard may have been a prehistoric site of religious significance, long before the present church was established. That being the case, it would not be unthinkable to presume that other such burials exist here undiscovered. The word 'cist' is an old Scots word for chest, or coffin. The earliest recorded burial around a church is thought to date to at least 752AD at Whithorn, Wigtownshire, where it is said an area of about 30 feet around the kirk was secured for the purpose of burials.

Prior to the Reformation of 1560, burials within churches and kirkyards were mainly confined to the local lairds, his immediate family, ministers and the well to do. Parishioners, with the consent of the landowner had the right to be buried in the church or kirkyard. The poor of the parish were buried outwith the kirkyard and without a burial stone, while outsiders had to obtain the consent of the heritors to do so. Following the Reformation the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1588 made it illegal for burials within church buildings.

Parishes were established around the Middle Ages, created on an ecclesiastical basis around the church. The parishioners were responsible for paying a tax, which was collected by the clergy and provided for the maintenance of the church buildings and the priest. Known as a 'tithe', or 'teind', this was sometimes paid in livestock or manual labour. This usually represented a tenth of a parishioners income. The laird, under the feudal system of land tenure was responsible for providing a church for his tenants to worship. It later became common practice among the lairds to gift these churches to the Abbey's and Cathedral's of the diocese. By the time of the Reformation 85% of the churches had been gifted by local landlords.

In 1368 Archibald, Earl of Douglas erected Bothwell Church and united the 'teinds' of Stonehouse, Hessildene and Kittymuir for the upkeep of the three prebendaries in his Collegiate Church. Thereafter, the kirk in Stonehouse was reduced to the level of a vicarage, served by vicars supplied from Bothwell. The lands for these vicars lay between the village and the Avon, and was known locally as 'Viccars land', thus the present 'Vicars Road'.

After the establishment of the reformed religion in 1560, Scotland was divided into five districts, over which superintendents were allotted to look after the spiritual interests of the people. A number of parishes were combined and placed under the charge of a minister and under him a class of probationer styled readers. One was appointed to each parish to read common prayer and scriptures, until such times as a suitable minister could be found. The first reader in the parish of Stonehouse was William Hamilton in 1560. Only a year later the vicarage of Stonehouse was given up by the provost of Bothwell.

The coming of the Reformation saw the destruction of many religious buildings prior to 1560, of which only a few survive today. It also brought about changes in the practices and customs of burials throughout Scotland. The local lairds had the first choice of the burial plots, whilst the parishioners in order of their descentance from the laird chose their plots respectively. The parishioners began to mark these burial sites with simple headstones, which over the years led to more elaborate stone carvings. This in turn led to a boom in business for local stonemasons, of which there were many in Stonehouse.

To prevent any conflict over ownership of the family plots, cemetery plans were created, with each plot numbered and measured in relation to adjacent features within the kirkyard. Most plots were numbered on an East-West axis, with the headstones at the West of the plot facing east. This practice was common place; the reason being that it is believed the Lord's second coming will be from the East as the sun rises and thus welcoming his arrival.

No pre-Reformation memorials are visibly present in Stonehouse kirkyard today, the oldest stone being that of James Hamilton in 1651, not Andrew Hamilton of 1663, as stated in 'Damn few an' they're a' deid'. Both individuals are mentioned on the same 'cope' stone (130).

The term 'cemetery' means a place of burial for all denominations. At present the local authorities are responsible for the ground maintenance of cemeteries throughout Scotland, though they are not liable for the condition of the monuments, or family lairs. The headstones are the responsibility of the family descendants, even if they have emigrated and despite the historical significance of some headstones. However, some councils such as the former Hamilton District Council were supportive of projects to preserve and restore graveyards. Local authority planning departments have the legal authority to build on cemeteries, removing the contents of such, except those of historical importance, provided it advertises its intentions to do so locally and there are no objections from the families of the interred.

### **The kirk and boundary walls**

The word 'Kirk' is a corruption of 'Kil', a type of subterranean vault or 'cell' where early missionaries were said to meditate and preach. The origins of the Stonehouse kirk are said to date to the 9th century but the first reference I can find dates to 1267, when Sir Roger, 'the rector' is recorded in association with the church of Stonehouse.

Restored in 1734, the kirk fell into disrepair during the latter half of that century, around the time of the construction of the new church, in New Street in 1772. The fallen remains may have been used to assist in the building of the new church, or used in the construction of the nearby Manse and surrounding walls. Built in 1761 the Manse was later upgraded in 1781, 1806, 1816 and 1905.

The use of gravestones and ruins to build other structures was not uncommon. Previous restoration work can be clearly identified in what remains of the kirk. Recent preservation work in 1993 is more visibly apparent in the belfry. Ornate decoration can be seen in the pillar sections supporting the top piece of the bell tower and the overhanging edge of the remains.

Many parish churches, such as the old kirk, possessed a belfry where you will often find a groove worn in the stone bell tower. This was caused when the bell ringer pulled the rope against the gable end of the church. The bells themselves were rung as a warning of attack, mourning, call to service, or occasionally as a means of timekeeping. The old kirk belfry is typical of other 17th century churches in Scotland, though the former adjoining walls of the belfry tower may have been considerably older, possibly 16th century. As Stonehouse kirk predates Glassford kirk, built in 1633, this theory is most likely. An inner structure is visible on the East facing wall of the belfry ruins. Whether or not this was internal roof supports, incorporated into the church, or part of an older, previous church, is uncertain.

A quote from a newspaper in the 1860's, as contained in 'Damn few an' they're a' deid', describes the inside of the church in some detail. The building before its demise was said to have been a long narrow structure with an open roof, with no ceiling or seats. The pulpit was located against the south wall, midway along the building, with the bell tolled from within. The article refers to parishioners "finding their own stools, like Jenny Geddes". Jenny Geddes was a member of the congregation at St. Gile's Church, Edinburgh, where she was said to have thrown her stool at a minister who had been preaching under the authority of Scottish Bishops.

Classified as a 'B' listed monument, with the graveyard in 1971, the remains of the old kirk stand today as the oldest historic building in our parish. Further references are given in the 'Time line' of the church, as described in 'Damn few an' they're a' died'. Across the valley, three standing stones in the parish of Glassford can be seen from the cemeteries northwest corner. I believe that several thousand years ago such stones existed under the site of Stonehouse old kirkyard.

### **Stones of historical importance and local interest**

Covenanter burials are numerous throughout South West Scotland and Stonehouse is no exception in this respect. Our village lies in the heart of [Covenanting country](#) and many of her sons, and indeed daughters, were to die in the cause of religious freedom. The exploits of those who fought and were persecuted are well documented in 'Wha's like us?', of which, several are said to be interred in the old kirk yard.

The sole surviving monument is that of [James Thomson](#) of Tanhill, who was to die from his wounds, inflicted at the Battle of Drumclog in 1679. The stone was only erected in 1734, for to commemorate such a martyr in this period would have been dangerous in itself. The original headstone is still in fairly good condition and was renewed by his descendents in 1832, in the form of a table stone. The original memorial is also known locally as the 'Bloodstone'. This extract from 'Wha's like us?' tells the eerie tale of how the headstone was to come by its unusual name;

*“Told to me many years ago, I neither believed the story, nor found evidence of its existence, until of late. As a child I had been told of a gravestone in the old cemetery with a hole in it, whereby inserting ones finger in this hole, it was said to come out covered in blood! I dispelled this as a myth until out walking one Summers day in the cemetery. To my amazement and by sheer coincidence, I found the said hole in a headstone, more commonly known as the Covenanters’ stone. The hole is located on top of the headstone, directly below the mouth of a carved skull. When I found the headstone I immediately remembered the tale told to me as a boy and hesitantly stuck my finger into the hole. Pulling out my finger, it was indeed red, not with blood but with red ochre dust. This is due to a vein of red ochre running through the sandstone within the headstone. When raining, however, the red ochre could give the impression of ‘blood’ to the younger and more imaginative mind.”*

Another supporter of the Covenant to be buried in the kirk grounds was [Margaret Law](#) of Loudon, wife of prominent covenanter John Nisbet of Hardhill. After suffering great hardship whilst in hiding near Hazeldean, (possibly with John Robertson), Margaret Law and her daughter died of starvation in 1683. John Nisbet carried her lifeless body to the kirk to be buried, where the minister at the time (possibly Rev. John Oliphant), refused to allow the burial of his wife and daughter in the cemetery. However, after being threatened by a local mob, the minister was forced to let the burial go ahead. There is no memorial present within the kirkyard but her faith and adherence to her husband and religious beliefs, will long be remembered in the Covenanting history of our parish.

Although not buried in the cemetery, [John Robertson](#) of Hazeldean had a connection with the kirk in so much as he was reported to have affixed a paper, in defence of the Covenant, to the door of the old parish kirk in 1680. A staunch supporter of the Covenant, he was to meet his death at the Grassmarket in Edinburgh, where he was hanged along with his friend John Findlay.

In June 1880, [Rev. Laing](#) of the Free Church officiated at a gathering of 2000 inhabitants of the village in the old kirkyard to celebrate the 201st anniversary of the Battle of Drumclog. Open air services were not uncommon until the turn of the 20th century. Rev. Laing is also recorded as preaching to a congregation of 1500 at the Watstone Burn in 1878. Similar services were regular occurrences on the banks of the Avon.

Several Ministers were buried in the old kirkyard including; the [Rev. John Scott](#) , [Rev. Henry Angus Paterson](#), Rev. John Gray, Rev. James Scott Naismith and [Rev. Archibald Foyer](#) (c1668 -1734). It was during Rev. Scott's ministry that the Old Kirk was restored in 1734. The funeral procession of Rev. Paterson is detailed in several Lanarkshire publications. A popular figure in the community, the funeral was attended by the majority of the inhabitants of Stonehouse in a slow procession from the United Presbyterian Church, Lawrie Street to the auld kirk cemetery.

The oldest surviving memorial to a local minister is that of Rev. John Scott who died in 1759. His headstone is in fairly good condition considering its age. Having served through the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and the '45, he would appear from his epitaph to have been held in high esteem by his congregation.

The majority of the headstones present today are of the 19th century but there are many fine monuments from the 18th century and several from the 17th century, including years; 1694, 1651, 1699 and 1676. The headstone of Alexander Smith appropriately depicts the trade symbols of a 'blacksmith'. There may be other headstones present of the 17th century but unfortunately weather erosion has defaced many of the older inscriptions.

Local poet John Walker died in 1882 and was buried in the old kirk cemetery. Robert Naismith wrote of him with great admiration in his book 'Stonehouse Historical and Traditional' in 1885. He informs us John Walker was a tailor, photographer and repairer of clocks and watches. A man of many talents, he published a volume of his poems and prose in 1867. Several other members of his family are interred in the lair including one of his daughters with the unusual name 'Tirzah' (Biblical name deriving from Greek 'pleasant').

An unusual inscription is that of "JOHN ANN CROW", daughter of John Crow and Christian Craig. Possibly pronounced Jo'ann she was presumably named after her father.

## **Manse Road Cemetery**

In 1902 the old kirk cemetery was said to be in such a condition of disrepair that the [Heritors](#) asked the local [Parish Council](#) to close the cemetery. The Parish Council thus instructed that a survey be carried out to investigate the extent of the problem and identify whether or not the cemetery required to be extended or a new site established to cope with future demand.

The survey was carried out in early 1903 revealing a total of 533 lairs, consisting of around 1600 breadths of which most were of three breadths (8ft allowed for 3 breadths). A few lairs were of four and five breadths. It was further stated that there had been no burials in the cemetery since 1882.

In consultation with the Heritors, a request was made to the Sheriff Substitute in Hamilton to have the cemetery closed after inspection, under the Burial Grounds (Scotland) Act 1855. This was with the exception of spouses of the previously interred; all heritors and householders on the 1901/02 valuation role, including their families, provided there was appropriate room in the respective lairs.

The Parish Council then sought to purchase the grounds next to the Manse to extend the existing cemetery. However on seeking Rev. Wyper Wilson's views on the matter, he informed the Parish Council that he had to refuse such a request as the legal distance between a house and a cemetery was 100 yards. He suggested that the Parish Council may wish to remove the Manse to another location and thus extend the cemetery to within the confines of the Manse walls. This being a costly option, the Council hastened to look elsewhere.

Some discussion and disagreement then ensued between the Parish Council and the Heritors regarding the proposed location of a new cemetery. Sites considered included land at Udston and Newfield farm. However, after extensive investigations, sample borers were taken at a site adjoining East Mains farm and an area of land was bought at the price of £375 per acre. Tenders were then sought for the works to be carried out to which Robert Bruce was the successful applicant as the main contractor undertaking the foundations and drainage at a cost of £229. Blacksmith, James Frood was also successful in being awarded the 'smith works' (quote £38), provided he resigned as a Parish Councillor due to his conflict of interest. The cemetery was completed around 1907.

## **Reconstruction of Old Kirk**

Little is known of the old kirk ruins. Last restored in 1734, it probably fell into disrepair during the latter half of that century, as the new church, in New Street was opened in 1772. The fallen remains may have been used to assist in the building of the new church, or, used in the construction of the nearby Manse and surrounding walls, built in 1761.

The ruins were classified as a 'B' listed monument, along with the graveyard in 1971. The belfry is typical of other 17th century churches, such as, Craig of Auchindoir Church in Grampian and Cambusnethan Church, over the Clyde river. The former adjoining walls of the belfry tower may have been considerably older. An inner structure is visible on the east facing wall of the belfry ruins. Whether this was internal roof supports, incorporated into the church here, or, part of an older, previous church, is uncertain. A more detailed study by an architectural historian may reveal more.

In the 1860's annual gatherings were established between ex-natives of the village, resident in Glasgow and the inhabitants of Stonehouse. At one such event, in the Merchants Hall, Glasgow, a Mr Thomas Muter gave a description of the old kirk during his speech, in which he states, *"The old church was built by the Roman Catholics, and was dedicated to St.Ninian. The ground occupied by the old church can be traced to this day. I have unquestionable authority for saying it was a long narrow building with an open roof, no ceiling and no seats, so that worshipers had up to its last days, to find their own stools, like Jenny Gedder. The pulpit stood against the south wall, mid way along the house; and the bell was tolled by a rope passing through the roof and coming down inside"*. Using this information and photographic evidence of similar constructions, I illustrated a reconstruction of how the kirk may have looked when in use. I believe the structure was approximately 15m in length.

In the not too distant future, we may see the demolition of the [old Parish Church](#) in New Street, paving the way for another housing development. Fortunately, we have a number of pictorial references of the building before the turn of the century, with a detailed description of its interior. This will at least enable us to recreate and provide residents with a fairly accurate picture of the building in its heyday. In other buildings, such as the old kirk, or former castles, we are not so fortunate, but utilising what knowledge we do have of these sites in comparison with contemporary structures, it may be possible to illustrate a fair representation of these historic sites.