

The Moray Burial Ground Research Group

Recording Inscriptions or Carvings on the underside of Table Stones

By Stephen Leitch

(In consultation with Bruce B Bishop, M Helen Mitchell and Keith L Mitchell)

Whilst conducting the survey of Monumental Inscriptions at Elgin Cathedral in 2006, it was discovered that the underside of 14 Table Stones had inscriptions or other carvings on them. This represented some 10% of the total number of Table Stones on this site. Two table supports also had carvings on them. Due to the possible difficulties and potential Health and Safety hazards, which the recording, photographing and drawing of these inscribed faces may present, it was felt necessary to devise a short methodology to cover these circumstances.

1.0 Health and Safety

- 1.1 With table stones often being several hundred years old, issues relating to their stability, as well as personal safety, must be paramount when planning and investigating them on site.
- 1.2 If the table is cracked, badly eroded, sloping or damaged, its stability may be in question, and should be approached according to existing guidelines.¹
- 1.3 It is worth noting that a small number of Table Stones may visually appear quite stable, while in reality their actual condition in safety terms, poses an unseen danger to varying degrees. For example, two such unstable Table Stones were found in the Elgin Cathedral precincts. To safely check the condition of each Table Stone being assessed, it will be necessary to check whether or not the table top demonstrates any unusual amount of movement. This can easily and safely be done by using a suitable rod or pole placed against one end of the table top and applying a constant but limited pressure on it to see if there is any movement. This should then be repeated at the other end. If there is any movement, then work on this stone should immediately stop, and the situation reported to the appropriate authority. If not, then work may proceed as described below.

2.0 Checking the Underside of Table Stones

- 2.1 There are several processes by which the underside of these table tops can be thoroughly and safely studied. These are outlined below.
- 2.2 Place a waterproof sheet on the ground by the side of the stone, lie sideways on this and look up under the table slab. If lying down causes a problem, you may be able to view the underside by using a suitable kneeling pad. Be careful not to lean on, or use the table stone for support when going to kneel or lie down.

¹ Please refer to Recording Buried Tombstones, by MBGRG and CSA, 2006.

In poor light levels using a strong torch may enhance the viewing of any carving or inscription.

- 2.3 The inside surfaces of the supporting ends should be checked for inscriptions.
- 2.4 Under no circumstances should the researcher lie under the stone to investigate it, or to record its details. Though the stone may look stable, this may not be the case.
- 2.5 To get as comprehensive a view of the underside as possible, it is suggested that use of a good sized mirror will be found most effective. The most appropriate size to accommodate a full-length continuous view is approximately 2ft wide by 47" high (61cms x 119.5). The mirror should first of all be placed on a suitably sized sheet, or cover, with available material at both ends that can easily and safely be held in the hands. This will also save the reverse of mirror from becoming scratched or otherwise damaged. Using a minimum of two people, the mirror should be placed lengthways on this cover, and placed carefully under the table top. A good view of any carving should now be revealed. It is also worth noting that care should at all times be taken when transporting or handling a mirror of this size.

Using a smaller or handheld mirror may be more convenient but this will impair the size of the viewable image, and so accuracy of recording and photographing the image.

- 2.6 For tables that are 30cms or less above present ground level, accessing the reverse could be a problem. This may to some extent be obviated by inserting the mirror width wise instead of length wise, surveying the reverse sections.

3.0 Recording the Image

- 3.1 Using the mirror approach is an ideal method to use for recording the details on the reverse of the stone. A photograph of the image on the mirror should provide a good reproduction. Using photo-editing software will allow you to reverse the mirror image, so providing a correct view of the engravings.
- 3.2 You may need to take the photographs in sections depending on the size of the mirror used. Changing the angle of the mirror on the ground will alter the view of the image you are able to photograph.
- 3.3 In line with current requirements, the underside of the top of the Table Stone, and any other relevant information should be drawn as a permanent record. During the drawing process all of the aforementioned Health and Safety issues should be taken into consideration.
- 3.4 Depending on the style and amount of lettering, it may be possible to make a transcription of the text with reasonable accuracy on site. However, as any view seen from a mirror will be reversed from normal, any transcription should be checked against any photographic or drawing evidence prior to publication.

15th February, 2007

S.L., B.B.B., H.M, K.L.M.