

Betty Willsher, author of *Scottish Epitaphs* (1996) is a member of TMBGRG

Recovering Buried Tombstones

Recently I went up to Elgin to the fourth AGM of a very special society, formed in August 2003 and named, The Moray Burial Ground Research Group (TMBGRG). Its numbers have increased from a nucleus of three founder members

– Keith and Helen Mitchell and Bruce Bishop

– to 32 Ordinary members and 29 Associate

members (some of these

from abroad). I would

say that the former are

Extraordinary members

in their enthusiasm,

teamwork, ability in all

aspects of the project,

patience with the weather,

and cheerfulness. The group has worked with

the Aberdeen and North East of Scotland

Family History Society and other bodies.

The object of TMBGRG is made plain

in its publications – the fruits of its labours,

(working on gravestone inscriptions may make

one wax biblical). The title on each book is,

'Monumental inscriptions including Buried

Tombstones' and the relevant parish. There

is a short history of the parish. A map shows

the location of all stones in the graveyard. The

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lists of inscriptions include information from previous recordings. The record of buried tombstones is accompanied by photographs and accompanying sketches showing measurements.

Completed graveyards are; Buried

Tombstones of Dipple; Essil and St Andrews

Kirkhill; Lhanbryde

Old Churchyard and

Lhanbryde New

Cemetery; Urquhart and

Spynie Churchyard;

The Churchyard of Old

Drainie (not accessible

to the public); and the

Buried Tombstones of Kinnedar and Burghead

Old Churchyards. Rafford Churchyard was

recently completed comprising 180 stones,

and Rafford New Cemetery with 181. Also Old

Spynie Churchyard with 219 stones, and Bellie,

with 1,200 stones ranging from the years 1600.

Four volumes of 'The Forgotten Tombstones of

Moray' are now in print.

Work in Elgin Cathedral graveyard is

ongoing with about 80% of the roughly 1200

gravestones recorded. It is a huge task, as

was the similar recording at St

Andrews Cathedral undertaken by

students under the supervision of

Mrs Edwina Proudfoot. At Elgin a

number of hidden stones, some

re-used in steps, doorways etc.

have been found. The work at

Birnie is also ongoing; the team

is concentrating on 60 odd buried

tombstones!! There is a previous

Iron Age fort near the site and the

team has been asked to sieve the

soil for finds. For this purpose they

made a two-tiered riddle, partly on

wheels, from an old wooden bed

frame. A special probe was devised

for use without damaging the

buried stones, 'a form of resistance

meter and twin probe kit.'

At the end of October an

exciting discovery was made while



TMBGRG's adopted badge,
from a tombstone at Birnie

working at Elgin Cathedral Ground. Member Stephen Leitch was interested in the webs of a spider. These webs went down the side of a tablestone top. He bent down to see more, and discovered to his amazement that the whole of the underside face of the tableslab was CARVED. A recycled slab – or was it a bargain line by some mason – a 'turn-over stone' for further use? On investigation another 14 tablestones were found to have inscriptions/carvings on the underside. The team is devising a suitable and safe methodology for taking photographs of these under-faces.

It seems paradoxical to say that there is always something new to interest or to delight in a graveyard. My favourite quotation recently was from a headstone in Birnie Churchyard. The phonetic spelling of the mason caught my fancy:

Erected by WILYAM WINCHESTER
In de memory of hiz beloved
Spuz
ISABELLA SIM
Hui did at Elgin Oct.16 1815
Aged 51
And WILYAM Dar sun ----

The last two words are, 'for Their son'. The word 'spuz' (spouse) should be resurrected! There is a lot more I could write, but I must complete this with one important thing – the website of TMBGRG. It is, www.mbrg.org



Work in progress, Birnie Churchyard, September 2006
(courtesy Betty Willsher)