

**PROJECT**

# The Forgotten Tombstones of Moray



Left: Parch-marks show buried stone locations at Birnie. Inset: Probing the ground near a string-line. The probes have plastic tips to avoid damage to the buried stones.

Follow **Mary Evans** on the quest to find long-buried gravestones and record these treasures for the generations to come.

**F**ra birt to graif na rest we haif'. This inscription, an acknowledgement perhaps of a busy life, is from the gravestone of Alexander Anderson, buried in 1571 in Alves. Over 400 years after it was carved it has become part of The Moray Burial Ground Research Group's logo.

Extending along the beautiful Moray Firth coast the County of Moray, or Elginshire as it was known, was bounded by Banffshire, Nairnshire and Inverness-shire. Today the unitary council area of Moray, with its famous whisky trail, lies between the Highland region and Aberdeenshire and includes parts of Banffshire.

If you come to this lovely part of north-east Scotland in search of your ancestors, you will no doubt be visiting some of the graveyards. From the one surrounding the grandeur of Elgin Cathedral through those tucked away in quiet valleys such as that at Kirkmichael to 'The Loneliest

Graveyard in the North-East', as the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* for 29 August 1932 (see [www.scalan.co.uk/scalannewsed012.htm](http://www.scalan.co.uk/scalannewsed012.htm)) described the 18 graves at Buiternach, almost all will be beautifully maintained with mown grass and clear paths.

As in other areas, a dedicated group of volunteers has set out to record all the monumental inscriptions, photograph all the tombstones and produce plans and publications for all the graveyards. But The Moray Burial Ground Research Group goes a step further. Working in consultation with Moray Council, the Council for Scottish Archaeology, Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland, long-buried stones are carefully uncovered, cleaned, recorded, drawn, photographed then carefully covered over again.

Originally a small local group of members of Aberdeen and North-East Scotland Family History Society,



Top: Shallow turf can be rolled back to reveal a stone. This grave is at Alves. Above: Turf being carefully removed by Gordon and John at Rothes.

Images: turf removal at Rothes, cleaning stone at Rothes and Kirkmichael © Mary Evans; all other images © Keith Mitchell/MBGRG.

# UNEARTHING THE PAST



Cleaning a stone at Rothies.



Bruce drawing a gravestone at Dundurcas.



Bruce drawing, Helen recording and Mary taking a photo at Kinloss Abbey.

the Moray group was formed in 2003 specifically to produce an in-depth study of all the graveyards and to record every stone in Moray, visible and buried. Early guidelines on uncovering and recording buried stones evolved into a 20-page A4 handbook, *Recording Buried Tombstones*.

Left: Carved shield at Alves, 1604.

**Your projects**  
 We'd love to feature your family history group's projects in *Family Tree* too. Please email Helen.t@family-tree.co.uk with details.

While some members record or check the visible stones in the current graveyard, others check for buried ones. Sometimes parched rectangles in the grass indicate stones below but otherwise likely areas are marked out in strips with string-lines. These areas are then surveyed with carefully constructed probes, plastic-tipped and engineered so that they will only probe to the approved depth of 15 cm (6 inches). If it appears that there is a stone below, the outline is marked at each corner and the position recorded on the site plan.

The next step is to assess the ground conditions before carefully removing the turf. A shallow depth can usually be rolled up but for a greater depth a cut is made round the stone with a turf cutter, at least 7.5 cm (3 inches) beyond the stone's edges to avoid damage. The turf is then cut into manageable-sized sections and these are removed and placed on plastic sheeting on the ground alongside in

Below: Group members admire the 1604 and 1571 stones at Alves. Keith Mitchell, group chairman, is standing third from left.



'Fra birt to graif na rest we haif', Alves 1571, now adopted as part of the group's logo.



Images: turf removal at Rothies, cleaning stone at Rothies and Kirkmichael © Mary Evans; all other images © Keith Mitchell/MBGRC.



**Don't forget**  
 If you'd like to undertake similar research in your own area, it is essential that you have permission from the local authority and/or any other relevant body.

Left: The Banks family of Alves, recorded mostly under initials.

light, perhaps provided by a torch, can make a surprising difference to the clarity of any inscription but usually at least part of the stone needs more than this. Careful brushing with a soft brush followed by a fine spray of water are the next stages. Even then it can take some time to read the words that were carved centuries earlier.

Once the stone has been measured, fully recorded, drawn, and photographed, the area is backfilled with soil and the turf re-laid with each section in its original position. Soon there is nothing to indicate that the stone that lies beneath has been revealed for a very brief period of time, usually no more than 1-1½ hours from start to finish. The stones are always



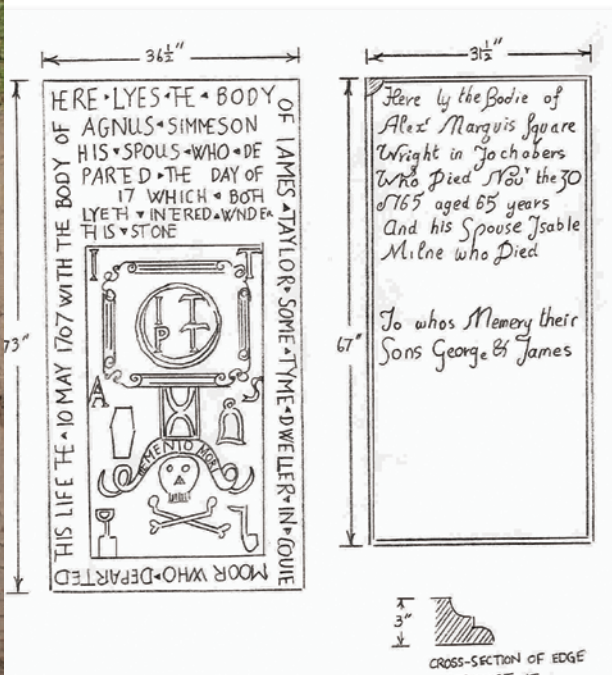
A Bellie gravestone with a cross and carved serpent.

re-covered, both for safety and for the continued protection of the stone.

So what has been uncovered? Twenty-one graveyards with buried stones have been explored to date including, with the cooperation of the Kinloss Abbey Trust, the abbey graveyard. From these graveyards around 800 buried stones have been revealed. As Keith Mitchell, chairman of the group, points out, if so many

exactly the same order.

It is always an exciting moment when the hidden stone is finally revealed. Will there be an inscription? Is it still decipherable? How old is it? Different angles and a different



have been found within a small proportion of the graveyards in Moray, how many would there be if this was carried out across the country?

The oldest dated stone is one from 1571 in Alves from which the logo inscription has been taken but an undated stone that still shows part

Far left: A lovely carved panel from 1707 in Bellie.

Left: The drawing for the stone at Bellie.

Images: turf removal at Rothies, cleaning stone at Rothies and Kirkmichael © Mary Evans; all other images © Keith Mitchell/MBFGG.

## UNEARTHING THE PAST

of a Calvary cross, a quatrefoil and a sword has been dated by the National Museum of Scotland to around the 14th century.

Sometimes the stone has only initials and perhaps a date like that at St Peter's, Duffus, which records simply 'WA CS 1685' while others might record whole families such as the stone in Spynie to 'ANE HONEST MAN CALLD LEONARD BAIRD' buried in 1717. The stone also records his spouse Janet Laing, seven children and four grandchildren. A stone in Dipple even includes 'A BOY DEAD BORN IVN 18 1663'.

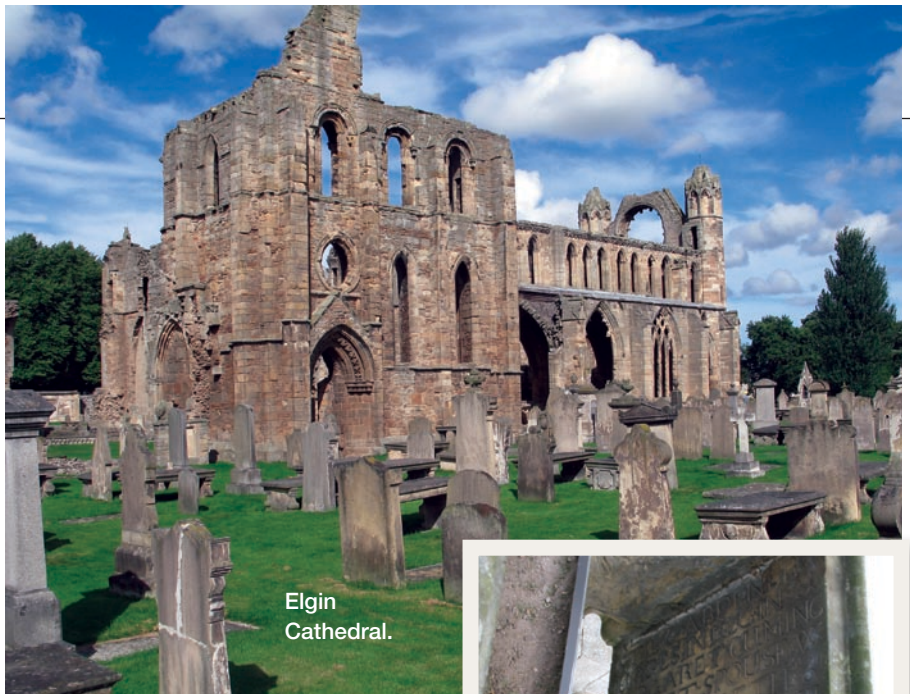
Emblems of mortality abound – skull and cross bones, skulls with a bone in the mouth, coffins,



Praying hands at Dallas.



Water has enhanced this lovely 1696 stone at Spynie.



Elgin Cathedral.

hourglasses and deidbells (deadbells) – as do occupational symbols. One of the more unusual ones was found in Bellie. The name and date are sadly lost but it is for the 'MALSTER COOKE TO THE MARQVES OF HVNTLE' and shows not only a skull and cross bones but also a serpent coiling round a Celtic cross. Unusually, a lengthy Latin inscription to the Rev Witherspoon, minister of St Andrews, Lhanbryde, who died in 1715 was found in Kirkhill.

And not all forgotten stones are buried. When recording a table stone at Elgin Cathedral, group member Stephen knelt to look up at a spider spinning a thread down from the stone and realised that the underside of the stone also had an inscription. Several others then turned out to have this, too. Gravestones were clearly being recycled!

To find out more, visit the website or write to Keith & Helen Mitchell, 127 Morryston Road, Elgin, Moray, IV30 4NB. 🐦

**REVIEWED**

Find details of The Moray Burial Ground Research Group's booklet on page 61, and of Banffshire booklets too.



A mirror image of the underside of a table stone at Elgin Cathedral.



'The Loneliest Graveyard in the North-East' at Buiternach.



Kirkmichael.