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# FORGOTTEN TOMBSTONES OF MORAY

## Who said that Churchyards are boring!?

### *With The Moray Burial Ground Research Group*

On the 8th August the Friends of Bellie Churchyard (nr Fochabers) and members of the Moray Burial Ground Research Group ([www.mbgrg.org](http://www.mbgrg.org)) - a voluntary group formed in 2003 who survey burial grounds in Moray - held an open day at Bellie Churchyard. They were demonstrating the uncovering of buried stones and introducing the group. Bruce Bishop FSA Scot., prolific publisher on tombstones and Keith Mitchell (Chairman) introduced the subject...

"Our main aim is to produce an in-depth study of all burial grounds and tombstone memorials in Moray, previously the old County of Morayshire. Those benefiting from our endeavours include amateur and professional genealogists, historians, archaeologists, as well as those involved in the conservation and study of burial sites in general. All the work we do, whether in local churchyards or cemeteries, or seated hunched over a computer is wholly voluntary, and as such forms a small but relevant part of the important work carried out with the supportive assistance of the Moray Voluntary Service Organisation (MVSO). During our first few years we also were in consultation with The Council for Scottish Archaeology, the Carved Stones Adviser Project, Historic Scotland, and last year the group became a member of the Scottish Association of Family History Societies (SAFHS). It is also worth noting that much of our early recording work was done in conjunction with the Aberdeen & North East Scotland Family History Society (ANESFHS).

Currently we have over 50 members many of whom are of course local, but our tentacles have spread far and wide, reaching as far away as Melbourne, Vancouver and Zurich. Many of our hard-core workers (those that clean and record monumental inscriptions) tend to be of a vintage where grey hairs are less of a problem, so it is good to see that recently we have begun to attract a number of younger people. This of course is vital to the future success of what we are trying to achieve on a long term basis."

**Keith Mitchell**



**Members and visitors enjoying the sunshine at Bellie Churchyard**



**The turf is removed, carefully laid out and then replaced after recording.**

The first phase of our research was to create an Inventory of burial sites.

The second phase was to build up a history of each site, including bibliographic and possible archaeological information.

Phase three involves the construction of a site plan for each burial ground or church on which to identify the location of all the tombstones, memorial tablets, etc.

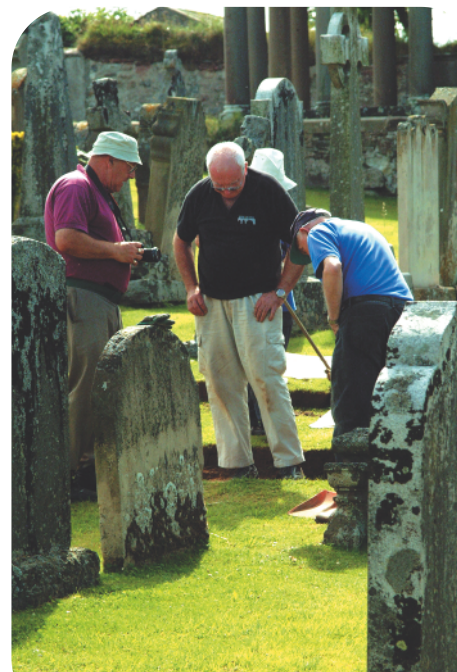
The fourth phase is in two sections, which may or may not be undertaken simultaneously. The first section, which has been ongoing since 1999, is to make a careful, complete and accurate record of all Monumental Inscriptions at each burial site. These tombstones are de-turfed, recorded both by drawing and photography, and then re-turfed for safety and preservation purposes. So far we have published in excess of these 800 buried tombstones from this amazing hidden archive. At this point it is perhaps worth noting that if these results were to be extrapolated nationwide, we must assume the existence of thousands of buried gravestones, many dating back to the 17th century. These surely must be considered as a National Treasure of primary source information worthy of every effort to record and preserve for future generations of genealogists and historians!

The final phase is of course publication. In 2003 we began our "The Forgotten Tombstones of Moray" series, which now runs to six booklets, comprising the Buried Tombstones at Alves, Bellie, Birnie, Burghead, Dipple, Essil, Drainie, Kinneddar, Kirkhill, Lhanbryde, Spynie and Urquhart. Those at Rafford were published along with the MIs, while examples from Dallas are in the process of being readied for printing.

Our own MI publications cover the following churchyards and burial grounds:- Bellie, Boharm, Buiternach, Chapletown, Dallas, Downan, Duffus (New), Dundurcas, Elgin Cathedral, Macallan, Rafford, Tombae.



**Plastic tipped probing tool**





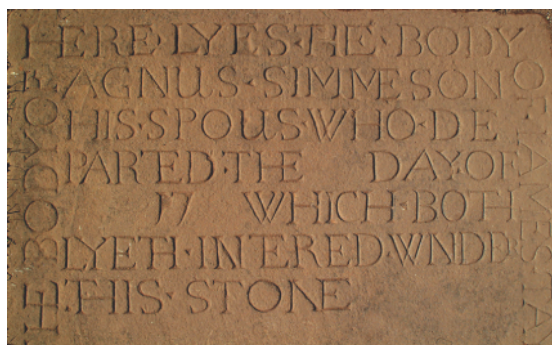
During the day a couple of tombstones were uncovered. The first one pictured right with details — around the edge is the following:

HERE LYES THE BODY OF JAMES TAYLOR SOMETIME DWELLER IN COUIEMOOR WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE THE 10 MAY 1707 WITH THE BODY OF AGNES SIMMESON HIS SPOUS WHO DEPARTED THE ..... DAY OF ..... 17.... WHICH BOTH LYETH WNDER THIS STONE.

Regrettably due to time constraints they are in general unable to conduct in-depth historical research into the people they record, so unfortunately at this stage they are unable to give any further details about this couple. It is, however, interesting to note that James died in the same year as the English and Scottish parliaments became one, which puts their lives into a useful historical perspective.

The second stone (below) was much more problematic. Here we have a record of one of the Marquis of Huntly's employees - his Master Cook, but unfortunately his name and year of death, if recorded, have been obliterated by wear. What is of considerable significance is the representation of a serpent nailed to the Cross. This symbolic representation has several possible explanations, which may have its seminal roots in early Judaic history. Certainly there is a story here to complete!

**Below: Cleaning, then the design is filled with special flour to bring out the detail for recording. This really is 'hands on history.'**



**His Wife Agnes was left space but the date was not inscribed...below date of 1707**



**'Bells, skulls, spades, hourglass and coffin - symbols of death and burial**



**Tombstone of James and Agnes Taylor, Bellie Churchyard. Illustration and recording from 'The Forgotten Tombstones of Moray' (MBGRG Publications), J & B Bishop, 2005**

"So why do we do it?

There are of course many individual reasons, but to give a first-hand account, we could perhaps do no better than listen to the words of Mary Macdonald, one of our long-standing members."

"A new hobby has been acquired through being a member of a family history society and the Moray Burial Ground Research Group. I have been researching ancestry for years and have had a share of going around graveyards looking for particular family stones. However, nothing compares to recording all the inscriptions in a particular churchyard or cemetery. Here we find a whole community of people who have lived in the area. We find families who have been there for generations. We see connections through marriages, various occupations of the time, names of places where they lived, many of which still exist - farms, crofts etc. All this information almost brings the people back to life, and we can picture them going about their daily chores. It is a fascinating pastime especially on a beautiful summer day with the sounds of the countryside all around. Of course we always go prepared with waterproofs and Wellington boots!"

This year, it was agreed to hold the event at Bellie, courtesy of the Friends of Bellie, who very kindly provided gazeboes via the local Scouts and a goodly selection of refreshments. On this occasion two tombstones were uncovered, pictured here. Thankfully it remained dry for most of the day, and a steady trickle of visitors proved that the event had certainly been worthwhile."

New volunteers are always welcome, indeed necessary to the continued progress of MBGRG. No experience is necessary as full training is given - in easy stages. A good sense of humour is not essential, but always welcome, and having suitable transport is a considerable advantage. If you are interested in helping, even in a very minor way, please contact Helen our Field Co-ordinator on 01343-546620; we will be delighted to meet you. Alternatively visit our website [www.mbgrg.org](http://www.mbgrg.org) for more information.