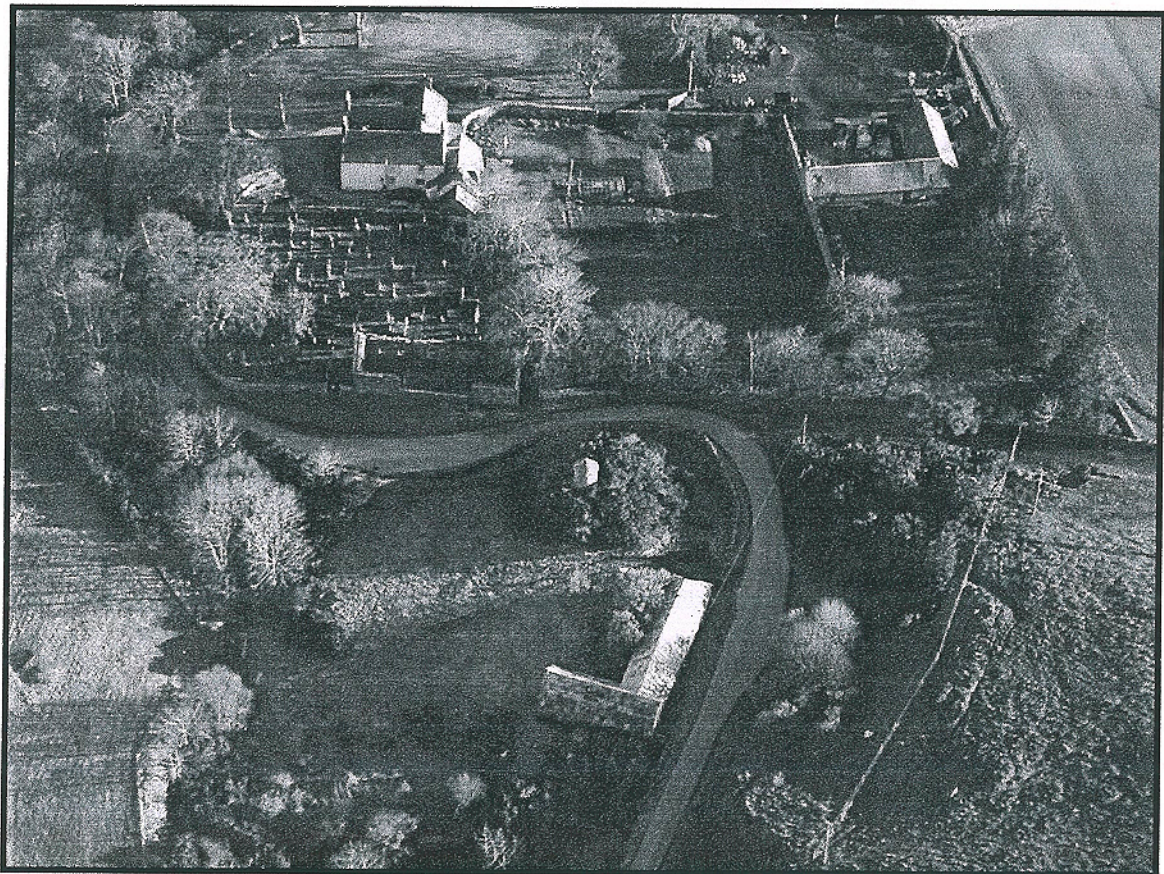


THE CLYNEKIRKTON PROJECT:

Regeneration of a Local Disused Graveyard



Aerial view of Clynekirkton Church, Graveyard and Bell-Tower

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The Clynekirkton Project; Regeneration of a Local Disused Graveyard.

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Abstract

Clynekirkton Graveyard, near Brora in Sutherland, probably established in the early Christian period, has been largely out of use since being superseded by Clyne (New) Graveyard in 1895. The Highland Council has maintained Clynekirkton since they became its owners in 1921. The old parish church on the same site, was replaced by a new church within the village in 1906, and now stands as an unroofed shell in the enclosed graveyard. An adjacent, scheduled, circular bell-tower, dating from the 17th Century, stands on a prominent mound on private ground across a public road.

Over the years, with a declining maintenance programme, all three distinct sites had become somewhat neglected and had been overtaken and subsumed by a thick woody growth of vegetation. The local community's heritage group decided to take independent action to clear the sites of the choking vegetation, which, by 2002, had taken a firm stranglehold, especially within the graveyard.

After in depth consultation with all interested public and private parties, including Historic Scotland and the Council for Scottish Archaeology, in the Spring of 2002, volunteers drawn from Clyne Heritage Society tackled Stage 1 of the Clynekirkton Project: the vegetation clearance. A carefully planned programme of work was prepared in advance, and strict guidelines were adhered to for work in these sensitive locations. The wider community was kept informed of progress with regular reports and articles in the local press, and several talks and lectures were given by the organisers subsequent to the completion of Stage 1.

During Stage 1, several new and important discoveries, both from the site itself and stories and research about the site were made. The most noteworthy of the discoveries was a flatstone with an inscription written in French, which appears, from subsequent research, to be unique, certainly in Highland graveyards. Other discoveries included a watch house and other 'new' gravestones with inscriptions and carvings, and a carved stone built into the internal fabric of the church remains. The community at large also added to the project; a photograph of the graveyard taken in around 1908 showing the now-demolished north wing came to light, and stories rich in oral tradition were added to the folklore of the site.

The project has helped to highlight the need to protect this site and establish a management plan for future conservation work at the graveyard. This has since been completed by Historic Scotland, who has added Clynekirkton Graveyard to their list of Scheduled Ancient Monuments. A second, less-intensive, follow-up vegetation clearance programme is scheduled for Spring 2003, and grants have been awarded, for work which has already begun, to stabilise the bell-tower mound. Plans for interpretation of the site are also underway for the Summer of 2003.

Introduction

Clynekirkton Graveyard and church ruin is situated around 2 miles to the NW of the East Sutherland coastal village of Brora, in the parish of Clyne (see Appendix I). It forms the last resting place of probably several hundred, if not many more, people than the 711 who can be determined to be buried there from the inscriptions on the existing legible gravestones.

Following years of neglect, the historic site had become largely overgrown by a thick growth of woody vegetation, which had had a damaging effect on several of the gravestones as well as the fabric of the church ruin. It was also beginning to have an effect on the harling of the bell-tower.

As the custodians of the local heritage, members of Clyne Heritage Society had become concerned at the gradual, but continually detrimental effects that the vegetation was inflicting on the site, as well as its overall untidy and neglected appearance which was presented to locals and visitors alike. The Clynekirkton Project was initiated in an attempt to address these problems and to try to restore the graveyard to its former, manageable state and to fully discover and record all of the features contained within.

Site History

The Clynekirkton site consists of a disused historic graveyard, a ruined church, an inhabited former manse, a bell-tower, a watch-house and the eastern end of a coffin road, which stretches from Oldtown in Strath Brora, over the hills to the church.

The present kirk as we see it today was erected in 1775, but the finding, in the 19th Century, of two 'Type 1' Pictish Stones in the graveyard and a 'Type 3' Pictish Stone in the east wall, shows that the site probably dates back to the early Christian period, and may have even earlier origins.

The church is sited outwith the relatively modern village of Brora, which only became a population centre following the Strath Brora Clearances in the 1820s. Prior to this, the majority of parishioners in Clyne came from the then heavily populated Strath Brora, stretching from the coast for some 17 miles inland. In the 17th Century, the parishioners were called to church by the ringing sound of a bell, hung in the free-standing circular bell tower, which still stands opposite the church, on a glacial mound.

The current church ruin incorporates a 1775 datestone, on the south-facing kneeler of the E gable wall. This construction date is confirmed by documentary evidence contained in the Sutherland Estate Papers collection in the National Library for Scotland in Edinburgh, which also has a reference to the preceding church which was demolished and replaced.

The general layout of the 1775 church was similar to its remains today, i.e. rectangular, except that two of the windows in the south elevation were doors, there was an internal gallery at both west and east ends, the west door (now blocked) was still in use and the inner (vestry) wall had not been built.

With a growing congregation, the kirk was enlarged in 1826 to house 1000 people, with the addition of a northern wing, also with a gallery, on what is now a patch of grass on the south side of the public road at the front of the church ruin.

Also, at this time, the bell-tower opposite was made redundant and the bell was housed in a belfry on the new north wing. Until the production of the photograph of c.1908, the placing of the belfry had been speculation, but was proved by the photographic evidence to be the case. Around 1840, the manse, built immediately to the south side of the graveyard, was enlarged and it is possible that the present graveyard wall was constructed then too.

Ironically for Clynekirkton, shortly after the increase in capacity, 1843 brought the 'Disruption', when the Free Kirk split from the Church of Scotland and the congregation at Clynekirkton fell instantly by 70%. Subsequently reacting to this, the kirk was made smaller by the removal of the galleries, and by 1853, the two doors on the south side were converted into windows.

In 1855, due to surface water entering into the west wing of the kirk, it was decided to block up the west wing door and to isolate the wings, resulting in the formation of a vestry in the east and a storeroom in the west. No evidence remains for the latter, but the vestry wall still remains. Presumably at this time, the main door would have been from the road into the north wing.

With the majority of the population of the parish now in Brora, following the Clearances, a new kirk was constructed and Clynekirkton closed in 1906 and in 1921 the building and graveyard was sold to the Council. The roof was stripped and the timbers taken, along with the kirk furniture, and the north wing was demolished and the present low north wall was built, leaving the kirk as it is today.

The Graveyard, which largely went out of use in 1895 when it was superseded by Clyne New Cemetery, is still owned and maintained by the Highland Council, who took it over in 1921. It is still actively visited by members of the local community and by relatives (many of whom live abroad) who have ancestors buried in the graveyard.

Graveyard Layout

The gently south-sloping ground of the graveyard at Clynekirkton is enclosed by a stone wall, which also encloses the church ruin and also forms the east wall of a watch-house, built onto its exterior in the north section of the west wall. The level of the interior of the graveyard is up to 1m higher than its surrounding terrain, outwith the graveyard wall, indicating that it has been built up over the centuries by innumerable interment. The entrance to graveyard is from the north, adjacent to the E gable end of the church ruin.

The internal layout is fairly planned, with the majority of the lairs forming roughly aligned north-south rows of east-west orientated plots. There are some exceptions to this and there are also seven stone-walled enclosures topped with iron railings, containing burials of some of the more influential members of the parish of Clyne, including some of the first sheep farmers imported into Sutherland following the Clearances. No formal pathways exist in the graveyard.

A wide range of gravestones are found in the graveyard. There are small tablets, headstones, tablestones, flatstones, obelisks, pillars and a bed-stead, generally fashioned from sandstone, granite and slate, the latter two varieties especially being exotic to the local area.

The graveyard is also a haven for a range of wildlife and flora, including a carpet of snowdrops that covers the interior ground of the ruined church and has gained many admirers over the years. The value of the natural heritage is just as important as public presentation and improvement of the site. The aim of the project was to tidy, rather than to sanitise, so that the character and serenity of the graveyard would be preserved, allowing the concealed gravestones to be exposed from beneath their cover of unchecked vegetation.

A rare insight into the past condition of the graveyard, prior to Highland Council ownership, was indicated in a photograph taken at the beginning of the last century, which came to light during the project. It showed that the graveyard was completely overgrown with vegetation, such as wild grasses and hogweed, which was left to grow wild, as high as the headstones, and filled the entire graveyard. It was also observed that the no ivy or ash was present. This reflection, on the past lack of maintenance in the graveyard, demonstrates how its appearance has changed over the last century. The implementation of the Highland Council's more structured maintenance methods over the last 80 years, has given the graveyard a more landscaped look. Latterly, this maintenance level has reduced substantially as budgets have inevitably been tightened and disused graveyards like Clynekirkton, become less of a priority, and this had culminated in the graveyard's appearance prior to the current clearance work.

clynekirkton cemetery early 1900 a. (2310x1478x24b jpeg)



Previous Research Work

During the 1980s Cowper & Ross undertook a pre-1855 monumental inscription survey of all of the burial grounds of Sutherland. Being date-selective, their immense work was naturally incomplete for Clynekirkton graveyard which, even though superseded by Clyne New Cemetery in 1895, recorded its last burial in 1965.

A few years prior to the Clynekirkton Project taking place, one of the authors (2) had undertaken a complete transcription of all of the gravestones in the graveyard. Together with recording 'new' information which Cowper & Ross had chosen not to record, there were also found to be many inaccuracies and omissions in their, albeit valuable, work.

From the author's own research (see Appendix II for complete summary), there were found to be 284 graves visible in the graveyard, although this figure does not take into account any which were buried under the surface, of which there are many clear examples. Legible on the gravestones, there are the names of 711 people, of which 361 are male, 323 are female and 27 are of unknown gender. All of the gravestones conventionally face east, apart from two which face south, two which face west and one faces north.

The oldest recorded burial is that of a David Ross, tacksman of Easter Brora, and his wife Katherine, both dated 1747. The oldest person recorded in the graveyard is a Mary (nee Sutherland) Ross of East Clyne, who was 103 when she died in 1905, and she is one of three centenarians there. The most recent burial is that of Donald Ross, also of East Clyne, who died on June 10th 1965, in an existing family lair.

Project Initiation

During Autumn 2001, Clyne Heritage Society was approached by an Internet-based organisation, acronymised as POSH (Preserve Our Sutherland Heritage), which sprang from a website called Highland Hearts (www.highlandhearts.com).

Many contributors to Highland Hearts and the linked Sutherland Rootsweb Family History discussion groups had been concerned with the deteriorating nature of many of the Sutherland graveyards, cemeteries and burial grounds and especially Clynekirkton. Visitors to these graveyards had been, at worst, deeply shocked at the state of neglect in which they found the cherished resting places of their ancestors. This, sometimes poor state of affairs, does not reflect well on the local community, contrasting often with the esteem and general high state of care and maintenance afforded to graveyards overseas. Clynekirkton was selected as being arguably the most worthy case and the wheels were set in motion, with Clyne Heritage Society taking on the responsibility of organising the necessary consent needed to begin the clearance work.

This involved contacting the relevant official bodies (Highland Council Archaeology Unit, Conservation Officer and Planning Service) and other interested parties (landowner and tenant farmer), and meant a lot of preparatory paperwork. The Society contacted Historic Scotland (HS), who supplied the necessary 'Scheduled Monument Consent' needed to clear the Bell Tower mound of damaging whins. The HS Scheduled Monument warden was always on hand to give us invaluable advice and support on how to proceed with work in the graveyard.

The aims of the partnership were to record the inscriptions of all the gravestones, including information on their current condition, and this was to form the basis of a 'Conservation Plan' for the graveyard. The long-term aims were the selective repair of some of the gravestones, iron-railings, as well as the future interpretation of the site for all visitors to the area.

Current Maintenance Levels

The current maintenance remit of the Highland Council includes cutting the grass and removing any loose or broken stones to the periphery of the graveyard. Clyne Heritage Society and POSH members believe that the level of care is not comprehensive enough and the current policy has actually enhanced the deterioration of the gravestones themselves. The Society members were also concerned about the methods used over the years to manage the site, e.g. the use of strimmers around the gravestones. The vegetation in the recent past had been left to grow completely out of control, poorly managed, and as a result whole parts of the graveyard were engulfed and without any means of access.

From the experiences gained through the project the Society will approach the Highland Council and discuss a more appropriate programme of maintenance for the graveyard and encourage a partnership role with the local community.

Methodology

As part of the project research, information was gathered concerning maintenance methods adopted in other historic graveyards. It was observed that in some instances in other graveyards, the usual turf surround of flat gravestones had been completely removed and replaced with uniform colour beds of gravel. This strategy has minimised the need to cut grass thus reducing maintenance costs. An example of this strategy can be seen at St. Andrew's Churchyard, in Golspie, Sutherland. The gravel beds cover nearly three quarters of the graveyard and removing the turf has exposed an entire horizon of flatstones, which are exposed to the salty coastal elements without any protection. As a consequence, the inscriptions on these stones have been observed to deteriorate rapidly in the last 15 years. The gravel is so small and angular that it spreads onto, and can attach to footwear and abrade the surface of the stones. It can be argued that in this case, the historic character of this rural graveyard has been lost, and it is this character which should be preserved as part of our cultural heritage.

It was important from the outset that the appearance of the graveyard should be retained and that any intervention would not distract from its character. The Society was fully aware that the volunteers would be working in a sacred burial area and it was the Society's responsibility to maintain a high standard of work and sensitivity at all times. Any human bone that was retrieved during the clearance work was carefully bagged and re-buried in a suitable location in the graveyard.

Prior to the clearance work commencing, a photographic record of the areas affected by vegetation was made. This exercise identified those areas that were relatively unaffected by damaging vegetation and were also recorded.

A sign was attached to the front gate of the churchyard notifying the public that a programme of conservation and clearance work was being undertaken by the Society, as well as providing contact details for potential enquiries regarding the project.

A set of guidelines was drawn up using information from Historic Scotland's '*Conservation of Historic Graveyards, Guide for Practitioners 2*'. It provided a useful range of information on tackling problems associated with vegetation and provided a theoretical background to difficulties the project might encounter in the graveyard. However, it was anticipated that putting the theory into practise would mean a revision of techniques as the project proceeded and as the volunteers gained more experience. The guidelines were given to all volunteers before commencing work in the graveyard, to ensure a consistently high standard of care would be observed.

Initially, a short talk was given to all volunteers on how to approach working safely in the graveyard and this was supplemented with the written guidelines. These guidelines included information on Health & Safety in the graveyard, how to tackle the vegetation, as well as setting down a working policy of not removing any material from the surface of the gravestones throughout the duration of the project.

The areas in the graveyard to be tackled were identified prior to commencement of work. The project co-ordinator was responsible for allocating suitable tasks to the volunteers. It was important to realise from the outset that the volunteers would have different levels of experience, from individuals with expertise, keen gardeners and some younger helpers. A strategy was devised so that a given task could be achieved within certain time limits, and where possible, working parties included a supervisor, and was monitored regularly.

Initially the organisers had to make sure that the graveyard was a safe place to in which to work and volunteers were made aware of potential hazards. This involved cutting back all the bramble

bushes with sharp thorns and this made it easier to get at the vegetation. The iron railings with their spiky finials were sometimes obscured under the vegetation and great care was needed when working within their proximity.

A daily log was kept throughout the duration of the project with a list of volunteers, and a record of any issues that arose during that would and have to be dealt with, or advice sought.

Ivy was the main vegetation problem in the graveyard. It had been left growing unchecked for many years and had gained a formidable grasp on individual gravestones, the burial enclosure iron railings, as well as choking the mature trees. The ivy roots had invaded the graveyard floor in most of the area around the perimeter, and areas extending into the body of the graveyard, as well as the stone boundary walls themselves and the fabric of the enclosures and church.

Different approaches were adopted to tackle removing the ivy. Where it formed a thick carpet on the graveyard floor, the most effective approach was to carefully pull up as many ivy roots as possible to prevent future growth. It was thought that this method would only prove successful if a long-term programme of controlling the ivy, selective poisoning and re-seeding was adopted by the Society. The thicker sections of ivy, some the thickness of an upper arm, were cut in sections and removed and this made it easier to dislodge the remainder from the iron railings and tree branches.

The graveyard was split up into specific areas requiring different levels of attention. Smaller groups of two or three volunteers concentrated their efforts on clearing the larger areas, e.g. the NW corner of the graveyard. Individuals took on the responsibility of clearing single tablestones or small groups of gravestones.

Ivy was also found to be very damaging to the monuments themselves, especially on soft, sedimentary rocks, such as sandstone. The majority of gravestones in Clynekirkton Graveyard are carved from this formerly locally quarried material, and these are the monuments most at risk through deterioration of inscriptions and wholesale erosion of the stones themselves, and is a common cause of them literally breaking apart.

Tidying up smaller areas was less time consuming and resulted in an almost immediate improvement to the appearance of the graveyard. The more demanding areas showed a gradual reduction in vegetation and helped to open up the graveyard. The overall result was that sunlight was able to penetrate the graveyard, and areas which had been completely covered were able to be viewed.

The feedback from the volunteers, who carried out the work, was a sense of achievement and pride, and some were lucky enough to make some of the major discoveries.

Vegetation Clearance

The following material was collated using information derived from the project log and from the volunteers who gave useful accounts of how they went about their specific tasks.

The NW corner of the graveyard had been unseen for generations and it initially took 3 volunteers, 2 weekends to cut down the jungle-like tangle of ivy, which helped to reveal 4 stone and iron railing enclosures. The next step was to ascertain the condition of the enclosure walls and then to continue clearing the ivy.

One of the enclosures had a memorial plaque commemorating a James Hall (an early sheep farmer from Sciberscross) attached to its 2m high back wall, and surmounting this there was a canopy of ivy a further 1.5m high. It took nearly a day to carefully remove this mass of vegetation and a great cheer followed its final descent from the volunteers.

The top of the stone chimneystack of the watch house also had a cover of ivy over one metre high, which has been cut back and left to wither, making its future removal easier.

An example of a full day's clearing exercise involved the removal of ivy from around two tablestones in close proximity to each other, by one volunteer.

The first task for the volunteer was to assess the current condition of the tablestones, as far as could be discerned, through the thick mass of vegetation. It was recorded that the two tablestones were partially covered with ivy and had potentially damaging, previously cut stumps with fresh growth, threatening their stability. The next stage was to proceed by removing the top layers of the ivy's foliage to identify from where the ivy was growing, and whether it may be damaging the stones in any way.

It was observed that the ivy was not seriously damaging the tablestones. The vegetation, which was growing around the stones, was carefully peeled back and the most accessible sections cut away. The ivy that was covering the tablestones was delicately lifted away from the stone's surface, without disturbing any lichen or other surface materials. This can be a painstaking task as ivy can develop a firm grip on the stone surface. In situations where the ivy had become attached to the fabric of the stone, it was cut off at its roots and left to die to make removal easier in the future.

The next stage was to work around the bottom of the tablestones, removing ivy from around the legs of the stones. Any ivy roots that were growing from underneath the legs were cut back as far as possible and left in situ, to prevent any destabilisation and any damage to the stones. The majority of ivy roots were removed from around the tablestones to expose the stone itself and to discourage re-growth, as well as providing a relatively ivy-free earth in which to sow grass seed.

The whole procedure can take a considerable length of time and it was noted that frequent monitoring visits to discuss potential problems and tactics, was very instructive.

The two tablestones were initially in a relatively stable condition, and this position was maintained after the cleaning process had been completed. On this occasion there was a great sense of achievement and their condition will be monitored in the future. Complete clearance is not always achievable due to different factors and circumstances; each setting has to be approached on its own individual merits.

The experience gained through these exercises highlighted the need to make regular assessments about the condition of the gravestones and enclosures, which equipped the group with the

necessary information needed to make judgements on when to proceed or to halt at a specific stage in the clearing process.

The invaluable information gleaned from the project showed that a combination of providing field guidance notes, frequent assessment of the clearing process and adopting appropriate removal techniques, was the best approach to the vegetation.

Apart from ivy, another threat to the gravestones was the ash and sycamore stumps in close proximity to the gravestones, which had been previously cut back. The stumps had been left untreated, and regenerated growth had since caused some stones to become unstable, some of which had even toppled over. The effects of this regenerated growth had caused some stones to become displaced, where the headstone had become detached from its base and in other instance tablestones had become separated from their legs. It was necessary to cut back this regenerated growth and begin a programme of poisoning to arrest future growth from the stumps.

In the NE part of the graveyard, there is a burial enclosure of Gabriel Reed, another of the early sheep farmers in Sutherland. Standing to the E of the enclosure, two yew trees were being choked by the strangulating ivy, and were in danger of being consumed by it. Steps were taken to remove as much of the ivy from around the branches of the trees, and sections of ivy were cut away from the trunk to discourage future growth.

It was the project policy that the cut vegetation would be cleared, as the project progressed. At the beginning of the project, a skip, donated for the use of the project by the Highland Council, was used to hold the cleared vegetation from the graveyard. It needed to be cut down to small pieces to use the space in the skip, rather than wholesale branches placed in it, which would have filled it extremely rapidly. This method was found to be far too time consuming and very labour intensive. During following weekends, an area of rough pasture next to the bell-tower was used to stockpile the cleared vegetation, and at the end of the project the large heap of vegetation was burned.

In total, six out of the seven enclosures were cleared from vegetation. The other enclosure, in the NW corner, had ivy removed from its railings but the remainder of vegetation inside was left as a control, to monitor in the future. About 30% of the stones in the graveyard had specifically been involved in the clearance project.

A total of 31 volunteers participated in the clearance project over the 8 weekends. The volunteers worked whole days and half days. These 31 volunteers turned up at the graveyard a total of 78 times during the project. The total number of working man-days was 77.5. The project schedule lasted 8 weekends in March and April 2003.

Ironwork in the Graveyard

Iron was used for a variety of different purposes in Scottish graveyards, such as boundary railings, chains and pillars enclosing burial lairs, gates and memorial markers. Railings or borders became particularly popular in the 19th Century and replaced the need for earlier footstone markers, complementing the headstones, which are more frequently seen nowadays.

Though a significant portion of this ironwork was removed from graveyards all over the country for munitions purposes during the Second World War, many graveyards still retain much ironwork. Clynekirkton graveyard, is one such site which has many fine surviving examples which can all be discovered in the graveyard, and some of these are particularly ornate and delicate. Perhaps the most spectacular varieties and forms on view include ivy leaves, fleur-de-llys and crosses, many of which had been previously painted white. The largest and most striking examples are the formidable spiked or barbed railings which top all of the 7 stone-built enclosures, found at Clynekirkton.

The two main types of metalwork used in the graveyard environment are cast iron and wrought iron and the corrosion which has continued unabated in some cases, for nearly 2 centuries, is the primary conservation problem associated with this historic ironwork.

As the name suggests, cast iron is cast to any shape required in moulds and its primary use is for ornamental purposes. Cast iron rails or chains set through a series of small stone or iron pillars were commonly used to mark out burial lairs, as observed at the graveyard. Many of these, however, after the passing of time have become displaced, due, for example, to tree root activity and need to be reset into their original upright position using a technique similar to resetting gravestones. Many of the rails are still in situ at Clynekirkton, but only some of the chains linking these corner posts have been discovered in the dense undergrowth.

Recommendations for the ironwork include a future plan of appropriate maintenance and regular inspection, following any necessary painting which can significantly extend its life. Some of the more corroded parts will require some welding for its consolidation and the Society will put forward all these recommendations to Historic Scotland.

The Society proposes to restore a few of the best selected examples of the iron railings within the graveyard and highlight them as part of the later interpretation of the church, graveyard and bell-tower for visitors.

Discoveries

Many exciting discoveries were made during the vegetation clearance stage of the project, the most remarkable of which was that of a gravestone with an inscription carved in French. It was discovered following removal of vegetation from a tablestone with a beautifully carved inscription in English, celebrating the lives of William and Mary MacKay of Dalvait, who both died in 1779. Next to this was a flatstone with an inscription, carved in the same script and presumably by the same mason, commemorating a John MacKay, also of Dalvait, who also died, coincidentally, in 1779. This inscription however, is carved in French, and in full, it reads '*Isit corps de John MacKay Dalvait mort l'annie 1779*' (Here is the body of John MacKay Dalvait died in the year 1779).

After many lines of enquiry, including to the National Museum of Scotland, The Council For Scottish Archaeology, Highland Family History Society, as well as expert local historians, it appears that no other gravestone in the Highlands has been recorded as being inscribed in French. This indicates that this one maybe absolutely unique and, therefore, extremely important from an archaeological and family history perspective.

At the moment, however, the Society can still only speculate about its significance, but it may be that there is a military reason for this particular French connection. Maybe John MacKay was a mercenary or served with the French forces after the Jacobite decline. But how does this account for the inscription being in French *after* his death? But why carve an inscription in probably what was not his native tongue? How did the mason know what to carve? Maybe John MacKay had a French wife? There were links with France still at this time, but what this man's link with the 'Auld Alliance' remains a mystery.

Other gravestone discoveries have included around half a dozen simple, unmarked, roughly hewn headstones, and a similar number of initialled small desk tablets, which have been revealed from underneath the vegetation cover. Several initialled, but undated flatstones have also come to light. Prior to this project commencing, there were only 2 known gravestones at Clynekirkton on which were carved the 'skull and cross-bones' mortality symbol. A third, in excellent condition but undated (possibly indicating that it is the oldest of the three), has also been located and bears the initials 'WG' and 'TG'. Just as important and exciting has been the coming to light of a simple flatstone bearing the beautifully inscribed initials of 'AR' and a more simply inscribed date of '1720', which now makes it the oldest dated gravestone on the site. Underneath the date, there is a puzzling inscription of '8 R', the significance of which is unclear. It could be that the buried person was 8 years old or perhaps the '8' was a misleading form of the letter 'B', making the initials 'BR'.

A local resident confirmed that the blocked up window discovered in the north end of the west boundary wall, was a 'watch-window' and part of the watch house built onto the wall exterior. He related that his mother had told him, in the small watch-house behind the wall, men would watch over the graveyard for three nights following every funeral when the danger of Burke and Hare-style grave-robbing was perceived to be a real threat.

Finally, built into the interior fabric of the church ruin is a sandstone block with two deep parallel curvilinear incisions, carved into the long side face of the block and now exposed facing inwards on one of the lower courses. It is possible that this was a carved block from the former, demolished church which stood on the same site, much of the stonework from which was probably reused in the building of the new church in 1775.

Publicity

The project was promoted initially by posters in the village of Brora and by appeals and announcements in the Northern Times, a weekly newspaper for Sutherland. During the project, the wider public was kept informed of progress in a series of weekly articles with photographs in the Northern Times, detailing what had happened during the preceding weekend and whether there were any new and exciting discoveries. Following the discovery of the French inscribed stone, there was interest from further afield, and an article and photograph, followed by several follow-up articles appeared in the Press & Journal, a daily newspaper covering the whole of the north of Scotland.

Many talks and lectures have also been given by the authors at various local society meetings, as well as at workshops organised by the Council for Scottish Archaeology and the Highland Heritage Association, and at Highland Council's Archaeology Week seminar in Inverness.

Conclusions & Future Proposals

Once the major clearance work had been completed, the Society had to start thinking about the conservation of the stones in the graveyard. The work carried out in the graveyard so far, has highlighted the need to monitor the condition of the stones. After initial inspection, a considerable number of the stones were identified as unstable. During the course of our tidying up programme, one gravestone had to be taken apart for safety reasons; the sandstone layers had split along the bedding planes and the inscription had been entirely lost. A capstone was dislodged from another gravestone during the work in the graveyard, and this type of incident has been all too common over recent years.

Many recent visitors to the graveyard have recalled incidents where stones have toppled over in the last few years, showing that without frequent and regular monitoring, this sad fate will be the inevitable outcome for more stones in the graveyard.

The Society contacted Dr Susan Buckham, Carved Stones Adviser for the Council for Scottish Archaeology, and learnt more about the Carved Stone Decay in Scotland Project and why it was important for the Society to participate in the survey.

Recording the present condition of the gravestones will give tangible information to monitor the stability and legibility of each stone and the different kinds of biological or vegetation material that covers the stone's surface. The information collected at Clynekirkton Graveyard will be kept on a database and used in the long-term monitoring of the graveyard as well as help determine the stones most in need of repair in the future.

A practical workshop on recording, managing and conserving gravestones has taken place at Clynekirkton, and the Society hopes to complete a full survey of gravestone condition and decay, as part of Stage 2 of the project.

A programme of selective weed control and grass re-seeding will form part of the Stage 2 works at the graveyard, and only long-term management will realistically control the regenerated growth.

In the research stage of the project the Society had to decide what the aim of our project was and how it could be achieved. The Society was prepared to take on the long-term responsibility of maintaining the graveyard, in partnership with the Highland Council, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the level of care in the graveyard. As a part of this long-term strategy, a management plan is currently being discussed with Historic Scotland, and this will enable the conservation of the graveyard to become a priority in the future stages of the project.

Clynekirkton graveyard is an important historic site, intrinsically linked with the infamous Highland Clearances. It is hoped that the future interpretation of the site will endeavour to tell the stories of the people buried in the graveyard, who they were, where they lived and ultimately died, as well as conveying the fascinating history of the church and bell-tower. The Society hopes to produce a leaflet that will help visitors guide themselves around the graveyard.

The success of the project so far, has helped to promote Clynekirkton graveyard as a place to visit within the local community. It is hoped that visitors from abroad who arrive on their pilgrimage to the graveyard will find it easier to identify the gravestones of their ancestors and also have access to survey information derived from the project.

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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the following people for their invaluable assistance, advice and support throughout the duration of the project.

Ann Coombs, Ancient Monuments Warden, Historic Scotland

Sabina Strachan, Area inspector, Historic Scotland

Noel Fojut, Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Historic Scotland

John Wood, Local Authority Archaeologist, The Highland Council

Murdo Ballantyne, Tenant Farmer, Clynelish Farm, Brora

Christine Stokes, Chairperson, POSH

John Duncan, Conservation Architect, The Highland Council

Susan Buckham, Carved Stones Adviser, Council for Scottish Archaeology

Campbell Stewart, Protective Services, the Highland Council

Adam Robertson, Balranald, Brora

North of Scotland Archaeological Society

Cunninghams of Brora

Brighter Brora

Finally, we would like to thank all the volunteers who religiously turned up each weekend, and whose efforts have helped to give Clynekirkton Graveyard an optimistic future.

Appendix 1 – Location Map

Appendix II – Graveyard Statistics

Total No of Graves	284
Unreadable/Fallen/ Without Names	23
No of People	711
Male	361
Female	323
Gender Unknown	27
Facing South	2
Facing North	1
Facing West	2
No Age Recorded	108
5 or Under	55
18 or Under	96
80 or Over	127
Centenarians	3
Most Recent Burial	Grave No 158 Donald Ross 10/06/1965, aged 79 Son of Gordon Ross, East Clyne
Oldest Person	Grave No 56 Mary (nee Sutherland) Ross, East Clyne Died 22/01/1905, aged 103
Oldest Recognisable Burial	Grave No 32 David & Katherine Ross Tacksman, Wester Brora Both dated 1747

Appendix II – Plates

Reflections of Clynekirkton

Still as the grave
Those restful bones
Live yet in fond remembrance
Beneath the Ivy's coat

A table stone made for a child
Protects a mother's loss
French words bury their story deep
Stone fragments mark the spot

No witty verse or telling sketch
Colour those vibrant hearts
A name, an age, an empty page
A fleshless silhouette

A man who changed the farming ways
And filled the hills with sheep
Was laid within enclosure walls
An ornamental keep

The church of everlasting life
Held high the nobler men
Now a roofless breeze sings praise
On snowdrops bowing heads

A token with symbolic mark
Gave folk the communion rite
To break the bread and drink the wine
For those who could recite

The watch house still espies the dead
Who goes there, and why?
Though woody fingers take their grip
No Burke and Hare survive

Raised aloft above the scene
The wise old bell tower stands
And muses on the coffin road
And darkened figures shouldered load

A marble pillow eases rest
Iron railings make the bed
The cover is but ivy leaves
Of ever living dead

By Leoma Aitken

Clynekirkton Church – A History

The present kirk as we see it today was erected in 1775, but the finding in the 19th Century of two 'Type 1' Pictish Stones in the graveyard and a 'Type 3' Pictish Stone in the east wall shows that this may have been a religious site before the 10th Century.

Written evidence exists for a kirk and a manse on the site going back into the 17th Century, but it is the existing standing structure which we will deal with here.

From inside the graveyard, if you look high up to the right on the south facing exterior wall, you will see the date stone carved 1775, this being the date of the latest construction of the main structure. The general layout was as we see it still today, except that two of the windows were doors, there was an internal gallery at both west and east ends, the west door was still in use and the inner (vestry) wall had not been built (See Figure 1).

With a growing congregation, the kirk was enlarged by 1826 to house 1000 people with the addition of a northern wing, also with a gallery, on what we see as the patch of grass by the road at the front of the church shell. Also, at this time, the bell-tower opposite was made redundant and the bell housed within the kirk, possibly in the new north wing (See Figure 2).

Around 1840, the manse was enlarged and it is possible that the present graveyard wall was constructed.

1843 brought the 'Disruption' when the Free Kirk split from the Church of Scotland and the congregation fell by 70%. Reacting to this, the kirk was made smaller by the removal of the galleries. We also know that, by 1853, the two doors on the south side were converted into windows, so it is interesting to speculate that all of this work could have been carried out at the same time.

In 1855, due to surface water entering into the east and west wings of the kirk, it was decided to isolate the wings, forming a vestry in the east and a storeroom in the west. No evidence remains for the latter, but the vestry wall still remains. Presumably at this time, the main door would have been from the road into the north wing (See Figure 3).

In 1877, some work must have been carried out to the east wall, as this was when the Pictish slab was discovered.

As the people of Clyne Parish had been so tragically cleared from the Strath, Brora became the new centre of population and the kirk was seen to be too distant from its congregation. A new kirk was constructed and Clynekirkton closed in 1906 and in 1921 the building was sold to the Council. The roof was stripped and the timbers taken, along with the kirk furniture, and the north wing was demolished and the present low north wall was built, leaving the kirk as we see it decaying today.

Clynekirkton kirk had a life span of 131 years, but in that relatively short time it altered greatly. This, too, is only a brief history, as a result of what are only the initial attempts at research and field work and hopefully we will know much more in the years to come.

Clynekirkton Project Guidelines

(Stage 1 : Vegetation removal from graveyard and around bell tower.)

In the past, Clynekirkton Graveyard has not been the focus of a strict maintenance regime. Today it presents a rich, natural legacy, a combination of many years of interaction between people and nature.

Project Aim

The aim of this project is to remove vegetation from certain affected areas within the graveyard and uncover gravestones, which have been hidden from view. Absolute tidiness is not desired and Clynekirkton's slightly overgrown façade will be preserved and will continue to provide an important sanctuary for wildlife.

Health & Safety

A qualified 'First Aider' will be on site as a necessary precaution.

Gravestones

It is important to remember that not all the gravestones in Clynekirkton graveyard are set firmly into the ground and over the years some have literally toppled over. **Great care should be taken not to lean on any of them.** It has been decided that the majority of the work will entail removing excess vegetation from around the gravestones, **not from on or within them.** This means we will not be removing any moss or lichen from the surface of the gravestones or any roots which may be holding the gravestones in place.

Vegetation

Some of the vegetation in the graveyard (such as brambles) has sharp thorns which can give nasty scratches. It is advised that people work in small groups. Individuals can then help by holding it back, cutting the stems and removing it in garden bags to the stockpile area.

Tools

The equipment will mainly consist of handheld tools, such as secateurs, loppers and edging shears. Some of these, naturally, are very sharp and care must be taken when using them.

Trees & Hedges

- No tree felling will take place in the graveyard.
- Bushes should not be too dense or too numerous to obstruct the view of stones.
- Weeds and plants with woody stems should be removed.

Ivy

Ivy can be very damaging, particularly on soft thinly bedded sedimentary rocks, e.g. gravestones and walls.

- Ivy which has just started to grow up walls should be removed.
- For well established ivy, a section should be cut out near the root level and a 'poison' applied to the cut. The ivy will then take two years to die and then will be removed. To speed up the process the ivy should be sprayed with a systemic herbicide. To prevent re-growth the root should be dug up carefully or a herbicidal paste (ammonium sulfamate crystals) applied to the stump.
- Ivy on trees should not be removed.
- Mature ivy on walls may form some kind of support – seek advice in these cases.

Ground Maintenance

Areas immediately around gravestones, boundary walls and tree bases should be trimmed carefully using edging shears.

CLYNEKIRKTON PROJECT

(Stage 1 : Vegetation removal from graveyard and around bell tower)

WORK SCHEDULE					
(Month)	(Date)	(Times)	(Morning)	(Afternoon)	(Name)
March	3 rd	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	9 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	10 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	16 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	17 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	23 rd	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	24 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	30 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
March	31 st	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
April	6 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....
April	7 th	9am-5pm	9am-12am	1.30pm-5pm	.....

These times are subject to weather conditions and a flexible approach will be adopted for each working day. Depending on how quickly the clearing process takes we may finish the project earlier than estimated. Everyone who volunteers will be kept informed how the work is proceeding.

Working Attire

It is recommended that all volunteers wear old clothes and bring extra to change into afterwards. It would be advisable to wear a warm jacket and sturdy footwear, preferably wellie boots. A packed lunch and hot drinks are essential, but refreshments will be available at other times.

As far as possible we will try to supply volunteers with the necessary tools. If anyone can bring along equipment it would be very much appreciated, e.g. secateurs, edging shears. Volunteers will be given a set of guidelines and informed about health and safety issues when they arrive on site.

So if you're fit and eager to participate in the project, please fill in the volunteer form and let me know when you would be available. Even half a day working on site would make a real difference. Clynekirkton is one of those sacred places that deserves to be looked after, for the living, as well as for the dead.

Directions to Clynekirkton (Grid Ref NC 89463 06090) from the South

- 1) Follow A9 through Brora village and continue north.
- 2) On the northern outskirts of Brora you will see signs for Clynesh Distillery on your left.
- 3) Follow this single track road past the distillery entrance until you come to a crossroads (around 1km or half a mile from the A9).
- 4) At this crossroads, (with a small hump-backed bridge to your left) turn right.
- 5) Follow this windy road for another half mile, past the large, cream-coloured manse house on your left, to the church and graveyard.
- 6) Park in the lay-by in front of the church ruins.

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BRORA, SUTHERLAND FROM THE OLD MANSE

D 7896