

The Old Graveyard

There are two distinct burial areas around Dunfermline Abbey church. The northern graveyard was used to bury Dunfermline's dead from the early twelfth century until 1896 and the area to the south and east of the church was opened for burials in 1823. The small church that existed before the building of the first Abbey church in the twelfth century may have had graves on both north and south sides, but when the Abbey was established in 1124 the cloisters were built on the south side of the new church, which was completed in 1150, leaving the only north side to be used for the town's burials.



**An Aerial View of the Church and Graveyard
Taken from the North**

Where did all the bodies go?

In order to understand how thousands of burials could have been fitted into the northern graveyard over the centuries there are two main things to keep in mind. In the first place the evidence of an early sixteenth century feu roll duty roll shows that medieval Dunfermline was a very small town. Feu duties cannot be increased once they have been set, so the lowest feu duty mentioned in a feu roll will be that charged on the earliest tenements. The lowest feu duties in the Dunfermline roll, of one penny per tenement, were charged on eighteen properties on the north side of the High Street (between the present Bruce St and Cross Wynd) and a block of similar size at the foot of the west side of the New Row. The roll lists only about 250 houses in Dunfermline in its time, representing a population of about 1500 adults, and this figure had only doubled by the mid-eighteenth century. A nineteenth century plan of the graveyard shows that it had space for just over 1200 burials and mid-eighteenth century records specifically mention that the eastern portion of the graveyard was little-used. This first graveyard only became inadequate when the town's population exploded in the nineteenth century.

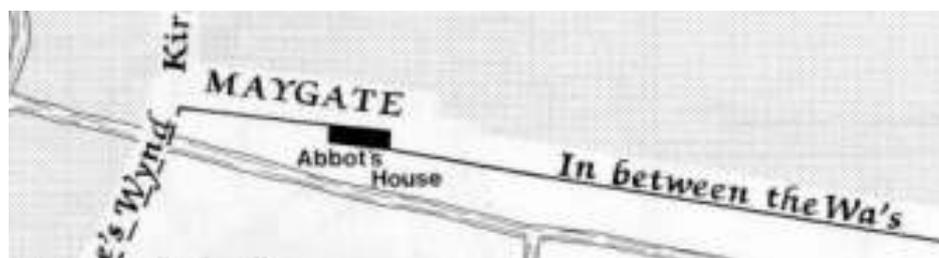
We also need to adjust our idea of what a graveyard should look like. We are used to the Victorian model, with corpses buried six feet down in substantial coffins. The graves are lined up in neat rows with a space between each plot and a substantial headstone to mark the spot. In Medieval and later times the picture was very different. No neat rows here – archaeologists who

have dug in old graveyards have commented on the difficulties this caused them. Graves were crammed tightly together, often with the later ones intercutting the earlier. The only common feature is that all were orientated east to west, so that on the Last Day all the faithful would be able to stand up and face Christ, who would appear in the east.

It was standard practice to pile burials one on top of another. As bodies, bones and coffins decayed, any remains would sink to the bottom of the grave, leaving room for many new corpses to be placed in the initial excavation over the years. If the natural processes of decay were not sufficiently rapid, people had no problem about digging up old graves and starting again. Reverence for human remains in general is a comparatively modern phenomenon in the West, recently reinforced by New Age notions of respect for 'the ancestors'. In former times the graves of the great and the good were revered because these were people everyone wanted to remember. For ordinary folk, most of whom would have had no headstone, once their immediate relatives had joined them no-one remembered them, so there was no problem with digging up their remains to make space for newcomers.

The Early Days

When the Tayside and Fife Archaeological Unit excavated Abbot House, at the northern end of the graveyard, in 1992 they were puzzled by the fact that the wall against which the house had been built, which had always been assumed to be the precinct wall of the Abbey, did not line up with the known line of the precinct wall further east in 'In between the Wa's' (Canmore St) being about twelve feet further north¹



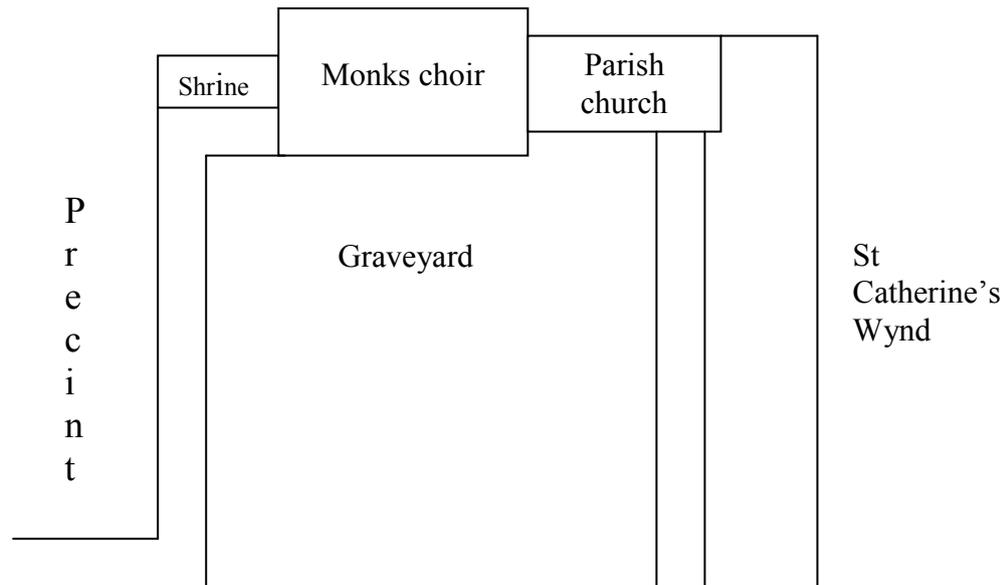
There is in fact no problem here, as the wall in question was not and never had been the boundary of the precinct; it was the northern wall of the graveyard itself, as is born out by a number of facts:

- Women were not allowed within the precinct of a male religious community, so the burgh graveyard, to which women always had access, could not have been within the enclosure of the Abbey.
- In the sasines of the properties that bounded the precinct, its wall is always called the 'the wall of the Monastery', but the properties on the south side of the Maygate are referred to as being 'on the Kirkyard Dyke'. There could be no confusion here over which wall was which; in the absence of drawn plans the boundaries described in sasines were always very precise.
- The sasines of the first phase of the Abbot House itself always refer to its eastern side being bounded by 'the way under the Monastery wall'. In other words it was the back wall of the house that was roughly in line with the precinct wall. It may also indicated that at a point just to the east of the building the precinct wall turned south, with a path running along its western side, possibly giving access to the shrine of St Margaret at the eastern end of the Abbey church.
- The graveyard never belonged to the Regality of Dunfermline, which comprised all the former possessions of the Abbey in Fife including the Abbey precinct.

The current eastern wall of the old graveyard probably preserves the line of the precinct boundary line and it has been suggested that the path mentioned in the sasines had originally been laid to give access for pilgrims to St Margaret's shrine. This path and the one leading to

¹ TAFAC Journal vol 2, 1996, p 110

the north porch of the parish church would have been the only paths in the kirkyard; the present complex of paths in the graveyard having been established comparatively recently.



Conjectural early layout of the graveyard (not to scale)

The Thorn Tree

Before moving on to the factual history of the graveyard, we will pause to consider the hawthorn tree that stands in the centre of it and the two traditions that surround it, for neither of which is there any factual evidence at all. The first tradition is that the tree marks the site of a Weeping Cross that was destroyed at the time of the Reformation. Both the Oxford and Webster's dictionaries define a weeping cross as one that stood by a wayside or highway for penitents to pray at. As no highway passed through Dunfermline's graveyard, if there had ever been a cross on the site, for which there is no evidence, it would not have been a weeping cross.

The other and best-known tradition is that the tree marks the site of the burial of William Wallace's mother. This idea rests on the flimsy evidence of Langtoft's Chronicle, which states that Wallace and his mother spent a night in Dunfermline on their way from Dundee to Linlithgow and that Wallace later hid in the forest around Dunfermline. There is no way of knowing whether or not Wallace's mother is actually buried here and even Ebenezer Henderson, who was often happy to accept tradition as quasi-fact, thought it more likely that if she was buried here at all it would have been in the church itself². It is unfortunate that tourists and local children are sometimes told that the thorn tree marks the burial place of Wallace's mother as a fact rather than as a tradition.

There is no record of the date of its planting and may not even have existed before the eighteenth century, when it is first mentioned in the kirk records. It was a large old tree when it was blown down in a storm in 1784 and a cutting from the old tree was planted in its place. The current tree is a replacement for the 1784 tree, which was itself destroyed in a storm in 1896.

The Graveyard – Abbot House Excavation

The earliest features found in the northern part of the graveyard – dated to the twelfth century – were two consecutive metal-working workshops, presumably making iron objects for the building or repair of the church and the Abbey buildings. The placing of burials would have started near the church and spread northward and it is clear that this northerly area of the graveyard was unused at this date, when the town was still extremely small.

The two twelfth century workshops were succeeded by two more and then came a layer of worked stone and glass fragments that was identified by the archaeologists as possible debris

² *Annals of Dunfermline* p 110

from the sacking of the Abbey by Edward I in 1303. The excavators considered that this layer had been deliberately dumped to seal off the workshop floors and level the ground for use for burials.

A relic of these times still stands in the cemetery – part of a recumbent gravestone, carved with a cross motif that was widely used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on high-status gravestones, has been re-used as a grave marker in the eighteenth century and dated 1787. The thirteenth century motif consists of two interlinked crosses with fleur de lys finials and is called a ‘diamond cross’ because of the eight-sided figure at the centre of the interlink. Part of a similar gravestone was used as a fireplace lintel in the seventeenth century tower of Abbot House. The two fragments are not from the same stone as the one in the kirkyard has a plain circle surrounding the motif and on the one over the fireplace has an elaborately decorated border. Some complete examples of this type of gravestone have been re-used as door lintels in the small disused Culross West Kirk.



Above - A complete motif from the Culross West Kirk

Left - The partial motif on the stone in the Abbey kirkyard



The motif on the Abbot House fireplace lintel

The Early Burials

Nine burials were found in the Abbot House garden excavation, dated by the pottery evidence to the fourteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries, so by some time in the fourteenth century the more southerly area of the graveyard was filling up and the grave plots were spreading northwards.

The earliest records of the Dunfermline Merchant Guild give us a glimpse of part of the ceremonial surrounding a burial at about this time. On 27 October 1459 the Guild minutes recorded that:

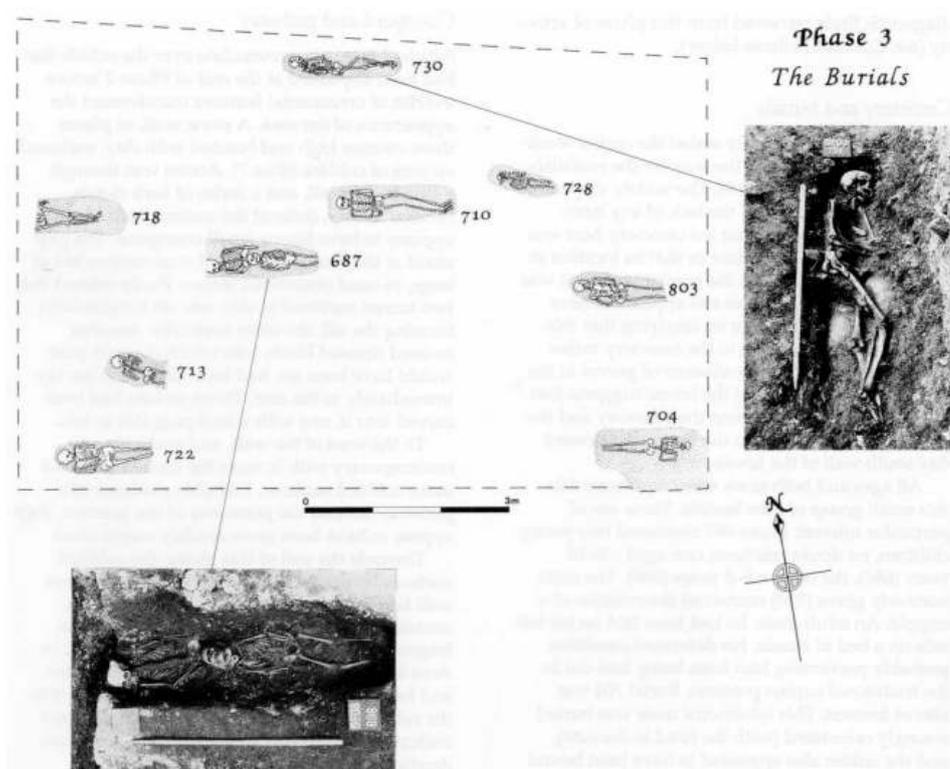
It was statute that when a guild brother dies the sergeant of the guild shall warn all the guild brethren the night before to pass with the corpse to the earth. Each guild brother shall have a mass said for the soul that day or within 8 days at furthest. Any guild brother who does not do this will be fined 12d which will be given for a mass for the soul.

The burials found in the Abbot House garden were widely spaced and although all but one were correctly aligned east-west the placing of them was otherwise quite haphazard, as was typical of early graveyards. The west-east orientation of burials has been noted in other places and was probably due to heavy shrouding of a body which made it difficult to distinguish the head from the feet or to early coffins being a plain rectangular shape, unlike the modern elongated lozenge which clearly shows which is the head end.

The published report of the excavation does not give full details about the burials but it does comment on a few of them.

Feature no 687 The remains of two young children, one aged 8-10 and the other 5-8.

Feature no 704 The remains of an adolescent, incorrectly aligned with its head to the east and with its ankles appearing to have been bound together. The binding of the ankles is not uncommon on medieval corpses.



Feature no 728 The remains of a very young child, the only grave that contained evidence of a coffin. Many pins were found in and around the other graves, indicating shroud burials.

Feature no 730 The remains of a cripple who had been laid on his left side on a bed of stones, presumably because his deformity meant that he could not be laid out in the normal supine position.

Features nos 710, 713, 718, 722 and 803 presumably had nothing unusual about them.

This part of the graveyard ceased to be used after the mid-fifteenth century, when the first phase of Abbot House was built.

More Houses on the Kirkyard Dyke

The earliest surviving documentary reference to Abbot House comes in 1520, when William Wellwood inherited from the late John Wellwood, his father, a slated house 'in the street called the Maygate, on the northern side of the parish church and cemetery'³. This house had a

³ Erskine Beveridge, transcript of the Dunfermline Court Book 1484 – 1584, p 287

‘common vennel’ on its eastern side and this feature is mentioned in all the later sasines that definitely refer to this building.

By 1520 a house belonging to Robert Sharp had been built to the east of Abbot House. By 1598 this house had passed through at least two owners, and now belonged to a tailor called John Drysdale. The tenement was two-storied and double-fronted, with a pended ‘transe’ between the two halves giving access to the rear of the property. A sasine of 1610 mentions a brewhouse, stable and storeroom on the ground floor of the eastern half.

In 1570 James Murray of Perdieu bought the Lodging, as Abbot House was known until the nineteenth century and considerably extended it to the east.

In 1543, to the west of Drysdale’s house, there had been a vacant plot belonging to the burgh. West of this plot was a house belonging to George Bennet, then another vacant ‘rood’ that also belonged to the burgh. The fact that the vacant ground belonged to the burgh at a date before the Reformation of 1560 is further evidence that the graveyard was not within the Abbey precinct. Another indication is that the feu duties charged on the houses in the kirkyard were not included in the list of the feu duties paid to the Abbey and later to the Regality, but were always mentioned separately in the annual accounts under the heading of ‘kirk dyke’.

By the second half of the sixteenth century six tenements had been built within the kirkyard, along the southern side of the Maygate. Owing to the incomplete survival of the records it is not clear in what order in they were built, although half of the one at the extreme western end was built over a pend that gave access to the entrance to the kirkyard, giving the impression of having been built last and squeezed into the remaining available space.

Drainage

Water-logging of the heavy clay sub-soil in the northern graveyard was a problem that was never satisfactorily solved. The earliest surviving Kirk Session records (1640) mentions a ‘gutter’ in the kirkyard but there is no way of knowing when it was dug. In February 1641, however, the kirkyard was ‘so taken up with dub and water that scarcely there can be had therein a dry grave for the dead’ and the Session organised a collection to pay for drainage works. James Somerville, a mason who was often employed by the Session for work on the church, and the bellman Andrew Thomson, who was also the beadle and responsible for the digging of the graves, undertook ‘to make the said kirkyard sufficiently dry’ and Alexander Clerk, laird of Pittencrieff, was asked to provide stone and flagstones from his quarry.



The problem of water-logging in the graveyard has never been entirely solved.

Photograph taken in autumn 2012

In the following month part of the kirkyard seems to have become a pond, as people were soaking their webs of linen there as the first stage in bleaching them. Andrew Thomson was ordered to throw them out. There is no record that the proposed drainage work was ever carried out, but if it was it was not very effective because in March 1649 another attempt was made. James Muirbeck attended a meeting of the Session ‘it being reported that he was skilful for that effect’ and agreed to make a drain as long as the Session arranged ‘quarry leave’ for him and collected the money in advance. This is the only mention of James Muirbeck in the records but he was probably related to Tobias Muirbeck, who was the overseer of the coal heuch at

Crossgates and would have known a lot about drainage as it was so crucial in the working of coal mines.

Once again there is no record of any drainage work actually being carried out in 1649 and in April 1660 the Session minutes noted that most of the kirkyard had been useless for many years past and needed to be drained so that it could be used for burials. 'Skilful men' were consulted who advised that a drain should be made below the level of the graves 'and an open cast for conveying the water away under Mr William Oliphant minister his house, to cause it to run into his gutter under his house' (this house was in the Kirkgate and the 'gutter' presumably discharged into the Tower Burn). This time the work was definitely done because in August it was noted that £156 had been collected to pay for it and the accounts had been cleared. This may be the 'syver' (drain) that is mentioned in later burial plot records as running somewhere to the south of the thorn tree.

The Northern Wall

Until 1735 the kirkyard extended right up to the back walls of the houses on the south side of the Maygate, but in January of that year the Kirk Session was alarmed to note that the owner of the Lodging was starting to build a wall in the kirkyard to enclose a small garden behind the house. A meeting of representatives of the Town Council, the Heritors⁴, the owners of the adjoining houses and the Kirk Session was convened on 27 February to discuss the situation and came to the following decision:

...that a stone and lime dyke six feet high shall run from the south pillar of the west kirk stile next bailie Rolland's house, east through the north side of the kirkyard, to be a fence and boundary thereof in time coming, on the proportional charges of the whole proprietors of the several tenements on the north side of the kirkyard, and that the proprietors shall pay in to the session for the behoof of the poor of the parish for the ground without the said dyke opposite to their several tenements, at the rate of five merks scots per rood, which ground shall thereupon be their several properties in time coming and that the said heritors (ie owners of the tenements) shall grant obligation to the Heritors, Town Council and Session that they, their heirs or successors shall not build close to the Kirkyard Dyke so to be built, at least shall not strike out any lights, windows or entries thereon, nor have any easing drops on the said Dyke or Kirkyard but keep the same freely upon their own ground and that they shall keep the Kirkyard free of all middens and nastiness whatsoever opposite to their several tenements.

On 6 March it was further decided:

that there shall be a sufficient laid syver with sides and roof driven and made more as a grave's depth close to the root or north side of the said dyke to be built for the fence of the kirkyard, from the east to the west ends thereof, on the proportional charges of the proprietors of the tenements on the north side of the kirkyard. And that...John Hay (tenant of Grange) or any others who shall lose their old burial places by the said dyke, shall be allowed to choose new burial places in any convenient vacant place of the kirkyard, of the same extent with and in lieu of their said old burial places.

The eastern end of the 1735 drain was found during the 1992 excavations, near to the wall of the Abbot House garden, with water still running in it from east to west. It presumably eventually discharged into a gutter in the Kirkgate and thence into the Tower Burn.

John Hay and his son Patrick were assigned a new burial plot near the church and at least one other grave was re-located, according to a petition presented to the Kirk Session by a shoemaker called Robert Williamson in May 1757. Williamson stated that the burying place of his wife's father was within the spot marked off for the former owner of a tenement on the south side of the Maygate. In compensation his mother-in-law was allowed to choose any vacant place as near her husband's grave as she could find, which she did and had Peter Shorthouse the grave digger re-buried her husband's bones in the place she had chosen. Soon

⁴ The Heritors were local landowners who were obliged to pay for any work on the church building or the kirkyard which would cost more than the Kirk Session could reasonably afford. Their funds were collected by an assessment of a percentage of each Heritor's rental income.

afterwards she herself was buried with her husband and Williamson had since buried several of his children there and he asked for permission to set up a headstone on the spot.

However, not all the corpses were re-buried, as was discovered in 1914 by workmen digging foundations on the site of the former Masonic Hall on the south side of the Maygate. The Dunfermline Journal of 31 January 1914 reported this 'gruesome discovery' of 'a considerable number of human relics' which had lain undisturbed because they had been buried six feet down and were a foot or more below the foundations of the previous building. Presumably the families of these individuals had either died out or left the area before 1735, so that the unmarked burials were unsuspected at the time.

Overcrowding

Although the population of Dunfermline increased after the seventeenth century it had only reached 3,000 by the second half of the eighteenth and further growth was slow during the first half of the nineteenth. In 1823 a new graveyard was established to the south of the church and both graveyards continued to be adequate for the number of burials they had to accommodate. However, by the 1850s population growth in Dunfermline and throughout Scotland in general was putting a strain on the existing burial grounds and in 1855 the Burial Grounds (Scotland) Act empowered Parochial Boards and District Councils to provide additional burial ground in towns where the existing one was no longer sufficient. Communities throughout Fife suddenly woke up to the disgraceful condition of their graveyards and there were many calls for reform in the local press (see *What the Papers Said*). In Dunfermline in 1859 the Parochial Board, which had hitherto been responsible only for taking care of the poor, was ordered by the Town Council to buy land and establish a cemetery – the current cemetery in Halbeath Road, which was opened in 1863.



A Plan of the Old Graveyard. made in 1855

In July 1860 the *Dunfermline Saturday Press* published a letter complaining about the state of the graveyards which had this to say:

...the old kirkyard especially being in a disgraceful state of neglect, such as would scarcely be tolerated in the most remote country village. Many stones are invisible from the length of the grass, docks and weeds; and it looks very like as if the pluralist superintendant, in addition to his other emoluments, meant to do a little in the hay-making business this season.

Weeds, however, were not the only problem. In the following month the *Press* published an article on the state of the graveyards complaining that the Parochial Board seemed to have done little about providing a new burial ground. The article included the following:

...It has been so far fortunate that during the present summer we have had comparatively little hot weather; but during the little we have had, it was impossible to step into the Abbey Kirkyard without feeling the air laden with the odour of the dead....Before dismissing this topic we desire to call attention to what makes the nuisance of which we complain considerably worse. In the south-west corner of the grave-yard, piled close up by the windows of the Abbey Church, may be seen the wrecks of numerous coffins and besides these wrecks of coffins is a public convenience kept in a state of filth so disgusting that one could only expect to equal it in the back slums of some of the lowest districts of our large cities.

The Closure of the Old Graveyard

After the Halbeath Road cemetery had been opened in 1863 the Parochial Board approached the Heritors with the suggestion that, among other measures, the Old Graveyard should now be closed for burials, a suggestion which the Heritors repudiated on two grounds. In the first place there were still many family burial plots there and future family members should be allowed to exercise their rights of sepulture. In the second place, and probably more importantly, payments for the digging of graves went towards the salary of the kirkyard superintendant and the Heritors had no intention of giving up this source of income. They stated that they would cease burials in the Old Graveyard if the Parochial Board paid the £30 a year salary of the superintendant. The Board in its turn rejected this suggestion with the comment that the Heritors could well afford to pay the superintendant themselves which, as there were over fifty of them, would have been perfectly possible. In the end the Heritors agreed to sell no more burial plots in the Old Kirkyard but insisted that family burials would continue there.

Nearly thirty years later, in 1889, the condition of the Old Graveyard had become so intolerable that the Dunfermline Sanitary Committee commissioned a report on it by the Medical Officer of Health who stated that one reason why the Halbeath Road cemetery had been opened was that the ground in the Old Graveyard had been found to be 'so saturated with animal matter' that it had been considered unfit for further burials. Since then there had been about 3350 burials there and he considered that it should now be closed as 'the emanations from it must be very injurious to those living in the vicinity and more or less so to the community in general'. The report was sent to the Heritors, who once again refused to close the graveyard for burials as they saw no need to do so.

There the matter rested until the spring of 1895 when the Sanitary Committee again commissioned a report by the current Medical officer of Health. This is what he had to say:

In obedience to the instructions of the Board I have on two occasions examined the condition of that part of the Burying-ground attached to the Abbey which lies to the North.

I have no hesitation in stating that the result of my examination was that this portion of the Abbey grounds is unfit for the purpose of human interment, that the state of the soil constitutes a risk to public health and that the conditions in which bodies are interred in this Kirkyard is a public scandal.

On the first of my visits (24th May) I met the Provost and several members of the Local Authority, together with the Town-Clerk, Medical-Officer and Sanitary Inspector, and in their presence made a general survey of the ground.

On the members of the Local Authority leaving I proceeded, with the assistance of the officials, to make a more minute examination; and the Sexton at two points used his boring rod and in both cases, in close proximity to the North door of the Abbey, the presence of coffins within 3 feet (2½) of the surface was ascertained. At other points the soil was examined which, at a depth of half-a-foot was found to represent a *dark greasy* appearance, clearly dependent on a large access of organic matter and a *dense compact* surface. A strong odour was emitted by the specimen and a portion when gently heated became still more objectionable.

On my second visit (28th May) I had an opportunity of examining five pits which had been dug in various parts of the Kirkyard. The state of the soil down to a depth of five feet was most objectionable. At 2½ feet water began to collect and through this foul liquid, gas escaped in considerable quantity of a most offensive character. Human debris in the form of fragments of bone abounded and also pieces of wood, evidently from coffins. In several of the pits the sides of coffins of comparatively recent interment were disclosed.

I was confirmed in the opinion I had formed as to the over-crowded state of this portion of the Abbey Kirkyard and as to the unfitness of the soil to secure the speedy dissolution of human remains, and to the risk to health attendant on the exposure to sun and air of such a highly contaminated soil.

I have further to report that in my opinion the Local Authority should be called on to take action under section 16(j) of the Public Health (Scotland) Act 1867, to have this portion of the Kirkyard closed.

I enclose a sketch Plan with which I was favoured by the Burgh Surveyor, in which the portion to be dealt with is coloured pink. In this area were counted 673 flat gravestones and 181 upright, giving a total of 854, of which upwards of 30 have been recently erected.

To the west it will be observed that interments are going on within 20 feet of inhabited houses in St Catherine's Wynd and through the high retaining wall here, abutting on a thoroughfare, we have the oozing of fluid saturated with organic matter. The various patches of garden ground shown to the east have at one time formed portions of this Kirkyard and therefore tend to aggravate the evils complained of.

I also append a Statement furnished by the Sanitary Inspector⁵ as to the number of interments during the last ten years in this portion of the Kirkyard. While it may be said that there is no common ground, still, from the free and easy way in which so-called rights to interment have been transferred, the number of burials is easily accounted for of parties having no claim to the privilege.

While my instructions limited my inspection to this – the Northern – portion of the Abbey grounds, I could not but observe with regret that to the South interments were also freely carried on. And it struck me that the present would be a favourable juncture for seriously considering the question of shutting up, so far as interments were concerned, the whole of the Abbey grounds, and of devoting these to recreation purposes – thus securing for parishioners attending the religious services and the public generally of Dunfermline, a healthier state of matters in connection with a public edifice in the heart of the town.

Signed Henry D Littlejohn MD
Edinburgh 31st May 1895

PS Dunfermline is amply supplied with Cemetery accommodation. On 1 July 1863 the first interment took place in the new Cemetery, having an area of ten acres. Prior to this date the number of interments in the Abbey Kirkyard as a whole numbered fully 500. HDL

This time the Committee did not even bother to consult the refractory Heritors but presented a petition to the Sheriff of Fife to have the graveyard closed. At the hearing a number of the owners of lairs there objected and in August the Court commissioned a further report by Linlithgow's Medical Officer, which confirmed Dr Littlejohn's conclusions. The legal process ground on and in November fourteen householders who lived near the graveyard sent a petition

⁵ The Inspector's report had found that burials had averaged more than 50 a year.

to the Sheriff asking him to declare that the Old Burial Ground was so crowded with bodies as to be injurious to health. On 29 December the Sheriff Substitute pronounced an interlocutor in which he found that the graveyard was so crowded with bodies and was so conducted as to be offensive and ordered it to be closed for burials. The objectors, however, appealed and it was not until 20 June 1896 that the Sheriff Principal upheld the interlocutor and the Old Graveyard was finally closed.



**The Old Graveyard
picture taken after 1870**