

John Law and Barbara Stewart



In the northern graveyard, next to a path and close to the entrance to the Abbey Church, lies the oldest gravestone yet discovered whose inscription is at least partly legible. It is of pink sandstone and the inscription is arranged in a style typical of the early seventeenth century – a central panel surrounded by a wide border.

The legible part of the right-hand border now reads (MER)CHAND BUR(GESS) and in the left-hand border (BA)RBARA STEWART SPOUSE. The inscriptions in the top and bottom borders have been erased in the eighteenth century and replaced with the initials of the current owners RD and (his wife) MB and the date 1732. The inscription in the central panel is now largely illegible, but when Andrew Jervise, an avid collector of gravestone inscriptions, visited the Abbey graveyard in the 1870s both the central panel and the border were less eroded and he faithfully recorded what he saw:

Border

Left-hand side

(MER)CHAND BURGESS AND GILDBR(OTHER)

Right-hand side

(BA)RBARA STEWART SPOUSE

Central panel

IN THIS TOVNE

QHA DIED THE 3 IVNE 1625

HIR AIGE 77

THY QUALITIES TO COMPREHEND

THY HALIE CONVERSATIONE

THY GODLY LYFE THY BLISSED END

HEIR NOV SEALS THY SALVATIONE

In other words the stone commemorates Barbara Stewart, the wife of a merchant burgess and Guild member, who died on the 3rd of June 1625 aged 77. Who were these people?

Fortunately for the purposes of identification, Barbara was an uncommon name in Dunfermline in those days and Barbara Stewart is the only woman of that name who is recorded in the earliest Parish Register. Her husband was John Law, merchant burgess and Guild brother (member of the merchant Guildry). The couple were married on the 11th of June 1570 and their eldest son, Andrew, was born in 1571. During the next twenty years eight more children were born:

1573 Janet	1576 Margaret	1578 Peter	1583 David	1584 Catherine
1587 Bessie	1589 David 2 (duplication indicates that the previous David had died young)			
1591 Janet				

Children may have been born to the couple between 1592 and 1598, when the records are missing, but as Barbara was forty-two in 1591 there would probably have been only one or two more.

John Law was entered to the Guildry in 1587 as the husband of a Guild member's daughter, providing a clue to Barbara Stewart's possible parentage. A Guild member called Andrew Stewart had died in 1570 and if Barbara and John followed the custom of naming sons after their grandparents it seems likely that Andrew Stewart had been Barbara's father. It was more usual to name the eldest son after the paternal grandfather, but the couple may have reversed the custom because Barbara's family was of higher status than John's – her brother David Stewart was already a bailie when he entered the Guild as heir to his father in 1570 and John and Barbara's son Peter, when he became an adult, was a baptism witness for several babies born into the family of the Stewarts of Beath.

John Law had died by 1607, when his sons Andrew and Peter were made burgesses and entered to the Guildry. Andrew married Elspeth Naismith in August 1609 and their only child, Janet, was born in March 1610. Eleven years later Andrew was elected Dean of Guild but he enjoyed his status for only a short time; by November 1622 Elspeth Naismith was a widow. Her daughter Janet later married William Wellwood, who owned half the estate of Touch and after he died, James Mitchell in Balbedie.

It would have been Peter, by that time a successful merchant, who had the handsome and expensive gravestone laid over his parents' remains after his mother's death in 1625. His choice of epitaph breathes a great affection and respect for his mother.

On the 9th of February 1608 Peter Law married Margaret Walker, daughter of the prominent merchant John Walker. They had thirteen children at roughly two-yearly intervals, the first being Barbara, born in June 1609 and the last Margaret, in January 1632. There were the usual childhood deaths; Margaret was their second child of that name and two Davids were born to them, the first in 1621 and the second in 1629. There were six other sons – John (1615) Andrew (1617) Patrick (1619) Harry (1623) James (1626) and William (1628) and two more daughters, Janet and Bessie.

Peter Law was one of the Dunfermline merchants who traded directly with Danzig in lint and iron until this trade came to an abrupt end after the Dunfermline fire of 1624. Like many other townsmen he was also a small farmer, leasing land in Baldridge and in Dunfermline's own lands north-east of the town. He served on the Town Council and was Dean of Guild almost continuously between 1626 and 1634. He also served several terms as a bailie and was provost in 1637/8, 1639/40 and 1647/8.

His son Andrew went into the ministry and later moved to Ireland, inheriting his aunt Janet's properties in 1675. In 1656 Peter Law mortgaged all his own property (a large tenement at the western end of the north side of the High Street, a yard on the west side of the New Row, and a maltings at the head of the Collier Row) to his son Harry. Peter's debt to Harry was still unpaid when he died shortly after this deal, so Harry became full owner of the properties. He, however, died in 1658 and they came to his brother Patrick, as his heir.

Patrick had served his apprenticeship as a dyer and was now living and working in Elie with his wife Agnes Nairn. He came to Dunfermline for a while after the death of his father but soon returned to Elie, having sold his Dunfermline possessions. In 1664 he sold the seat near the pulpit in Dunfermline Kirk, which he had inherited from his father and brother, to the merchant Robert Douglas and his wife Janet Izatt. There is no record of Patrick selling his grave plot, but this often accompanied the sale of a Kirk seat and the RD of the 1732 inscription may have been the son of Robert Douglas and Janet Izatt.