What The Papers Said

Here is a selection of articles and letters about the Abbey Graveyard from the local press. Most of the cuttings come from *The Dunfermline Saturday Press* which began publication in 1859. There are a few from other newspapers and these are titled seperately.

4 June 1859

HERITORS' COMMITTEE MEETING.—A committee of the heritors of the parish, held a meeting on Thursday relative to the urinal and drinking fountain lately erected by Mr Ker at the south-west corner of the churchyard. The public are far from satisfied either with the site chosen for these new erections or with the taste displayed in their architecture, and many and loud are the complaints they have called forth. The committee resolved that an inquiry be made at Mr Matheson, of her Majesty's works, whether the urinal and fountain are upon the Crown's or the heritors' lands; and if they are on the latter, their immediate removal is decided upon. We trust, however, that such useful erections will not be lost, but that they will be placed on a more appropriate site.

2 July 1859

HERITORS' MEETING.—A meeting of heritors was held on Thursday, in the vestry of the Abbey Church, to consider whether or not the drinking-fountain and urinal lately erected in the churchyard should remain, as numerous complaints had been made regarding them,—it being considered by the inhabitants that they are offensive and not in keeping with the noble architectural ruins. The meeting agreed to order the removal of the urinal, but decided that the drinking fountain should for the present remain.

The drinking fountain was situated near the Fratery, where it remained for many years.

3 December 1859

From a report on a recent meeting of the Heritors

the assessment applicable to repairs. Erskine Beveridge, Esq. of Bruceficld called the attention of the meeting to a circumstance of importance to the heritors in connection with the sale of burying-ground at the old churchyard. He had been led to understand that, when a piece of ground lapsed as grave room into the hands of the purchaser, it was the practice of the kirk-session to appropriate the proceeds. He asked the meeting if such was the case? If so, he thought the kirk-session were appropriating what really belonged to the heritors. It was not that the heritors would grudge to lose the mere trifle of proceeds; but the circumstance, trifling as it might seem, involved a question of principle, and for the heritors to acquiesce in this appropriation was to give up a right. The meeting concurred in this view of the case; and Mr Wilson, the Registrar, having been called in, stated that the practice of the session in this respect was, as pointed out, to appropriate the proceeds of the sales. After some deliberation, and at the suggestion of Mr E. Beveridge, a small committee was authorised to inquire into the extent of sales of grave rooms in the old churchyard, and to ascertain the grounds upon which the proceeds have been appropriated by the session. It was also remitted to a committee to make arrangements for a trial of keeping the fountain open on week-days, as well as on Sundays. It was agreed by the meeting that the large poplar tree to the north east of the burial ground, and which has recently been destroyed by the wind, should be taken out. The following gentlemen were then appointed as a managing committee for the ensuing year:—Sir A. P. Halket, Provost Robertson, James Kerr, Esq., of Middlebank, James Stenhouse, Esq., of North Fod, and John M'Donald, writer—Mr Kerr to be convener.

The Heritors were local landowners who were paid for repairs to and upkeep of the Kirk and Graveyard that cost more than could be taken out of church funds. There were over 50 of them and to raise funds each year they contributed a small proportion of the money they collected in rents.

14 July 1860

THE CHURCHYARD.

TO THE EDITOR.

SIR,—Can you or any of your readers inform the public how the churchyard is managed? We have a superintendent—a paid official, I presume—who annually sends round the beadle with a list, to collect money from the surviving relatives of persons buried there. I had supposed that this was in consideration of extra official duties in tending and trimming the graves belonging to parties subscribing; but having myself so subscribed, I was somewhat chagrined in noticing, that, in so far as I am concerned, no equivalent has been rendered for the money, and that the churchyard generally, is in worse order than it has been since the opening of the new churchyard—the old churchyard 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 superintendent, in addition to his other emoluments, meant to do a little in the hay-making business this season. Having called attention to the subject, I hope the heritors will take up the matter.—I am, yours, &c.,

A CITIZEN.

Dunfermline, July 13, 1860.

18 August 1860

Because the Abbey graveyard was so overcrowded the Parochial Board was in the process of buying the land on which the present Halbeath Road Cemetery was begun but had run into legal difficulties. The new Cemetery finally opened in 1863 .
The 'trophy of the Crimean War' was the Russian Gun that currently stood on the south side of the churchyard (see the separate article on this website).
The pauper's graves were in the area that had formerly been the monk's graveyard, according to a plaque that now stands on the spot.

WHAT ABOUT OUR NEW CEMETERY?

What about our new cemetery is a question that has been frequently put to us within the last month or two. It is now some fifteen months since the committee appointed by the Parochial Board to look out for a new burying-ground, recommended to the Board the upper half of the easter Town-green as an eligible site. That recommendation was, we believe, approved by the Board; and the inhabitants generally, were under the apprehension that there would be little difficulty in securing it on reasonable terms. It seems, however, that now, after more than a year has elapsed, we are no nearer a settlement of this important sanitary measure than at the beginning of the inquiry. We have no doubt, whatever, that very satisfactory reasons for the dead-lock into which the matter has fallen will most likely be forthcoming. We are, however, not careful to inquire whether the reasons of the delay are or are not satisfactory. It is enough for us to know that the long delay has taken place, and that the condition of the present burying-ground brooks no delay. 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 Churchyard, without feeling the air laden with the odour of the dead. For almost the whole summer, the corner of the graveyard in the immediate vicinity of that trophy of the Crimean War, Government was so gracious as furnish to our good town, the ground has been almost always open; or if not exactly open, at least very imperfectly closed. The place appears the burial mound of the very poor—misery has marked it as her own. Thither the children of the work-house are borne; and with that wretched economy that distinguishes our Scottish Poor Law Boards, are seemingly grudged a decent covering of mother earth. It seems not to occur to those in the management of these pauper interments, that though this ignominious treatment of poverty can do the dead no injury, it may do the living much harm. From this quarter it is that those noxious gases arise, which, when the south-western breeze blows fresh, become so distinctly perceptible. If it be pleaded that in the present state of the old burying-ground, the crowding together of the nameless dead is inevitable. We have to ask, Why inevitable? If there are insuperable legal obstacles in the way of the acquisition of the ground fixed for the new cemetery, then let the town seek a cemetery somewhere else. This way in which enterprises are begun, but never finished, is far from creditable. Were it merely some matter of taste thus left in abeyance, there might be some excuse for the delay. But delay in prosecuting so important a sanitary measure is in a high degree criminal. Before dismissing this topic, we desire to call the attention to what makes the nuisance of which we complain considerably worse. In the south-west corner of the grave-yard, piled up close 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. We have more than once heard complaints respecting this gross indecency, from members of the Abbey Church; but not deeming "the care of the churches" any special function of an editor, we refrained from remark, in the hope that the Abbey Session would interpose its authority to effect a speedy removal of the nuisance. This not being done, sanitary, if not sacred considerations, compel us to speak out against what is certainly not more an offence to decency than dangerous to the public health. We hope that not another day will be permitted to pass before this double nuisance is swept away. What ideas strangers visiting Dunfermline may form of the habits of our people, if so unfortunate as to get sight of the unseemly spectacle of which we write, we know not. Assuredly they must be anything but flattering. The Abbey Churchyard, otherwise so interesting a spot, by this lack of any sense of propriety, or respect for the fitness of things, is being rapidly converted into a loathing and abhorrence.

The Dunfermline Press
9 July 1861

From various quarters and in various forms, orally and written, we have had complaints made to us of late respecting the outrage to decency sometimes perpetrated in Dunfermline burying-ground. It seems that from some cause or other the graves are dug too short, and as a consequence, on more than one occasion of late, the grave-digger might be seen jumping on the top of the coffins to get the dead squeezed into their last resting-place. We forbear giving details in corroboration of the statement now made, simply because these details are of a character too repulsive to be made public with propriety. But for the fact that the complaints to which we now allude have reached us from totally independent sources, we might have ascribed them either to mistake or perchance caprice; but the parties who are our informants, while likely to fall into the one, are altogether incapable of the other. There must surely be something wrong when undertakers having charge of funerals find themselves often compelled to give a personal superintendence to the grave-digging, in salutary dread of the unpleasant scenes that might possibly result from their absence. We believe that Dunfermline stands alone amongst the towns of Scotland in requiring that attention should be called to such a matter. We should hope, for the honour of humanity, that a subject so revolting will not again require to be touched in these columns. Surely there is some authority, to whom those in charge of the graveyard are amenable, who will see to it that the decencies of Christian burial are not outraged, whether by stupidity or cupidity.

11 January 1862

BURNING *VERSUS* BURYING THE DEAD.

TO THE EDITOR.

Sir,—Please allow me to make a suggestion. One morning lately—where I had been is nobody's business—but I was coming up Dirt Street towards the Pends a good while before daylight. It was a dismal, thick rhyney morning, and the mud of Dirt Street was frozen as hard under foot as the slag of an iron furnace. Past the mill corner, I walked into a broad glare of light which fell across the street, making visible the stifling fog, and showing me my whiskers grey with the clinging cranreuch. It did not come from the smithy, which stands there as a monument to the taste of the house of Pittencrieff. Bellows and anvil were silent, and all was dark. The smith, honest man, had some hours of his night's sleep still due. I looked up, and saw the mouth of the great cannon, old Sebastopol, grim in the yellow glare. A peculiar, pungent, greasy smoke fell in heavy flakes from the churchyard on the street below.

I slipt quietly through the Pends, clomb the churchyard wall, and held along in the direction of the middle walk. A great fierce fire, mighty enough to burn a witch or two, was blazing and crackling beside the cannon. I came as near as I could to the out-edge of the darkness—near enough to see that the burning pile was entirely composed of *coffins!* The fat smoke crept round me with a carrion smell that made me sick. I turned away, and will honestly confess that I washed that horrid stench out of my throat with something stronger than cold water. On making enquiry, I found that the fire which I had seen was the usual burning of poor people's coffins, which takes place quarterly or so, and is an institution in Dunfermline churchyard.

Our burial-ground is so crammed and packed with dead that it is impossible to wait till the bodies mix decently with kindred dust. The awful process of corruption is disturbed when half completed. I am credibly informed that bodies have been taken up, which, if set against the wall, would have stood alone! The coffins, saturated with animal matter, are broken and burned in scores, as stealthily as such an operation can be performed in so public a spot. Now, sir, I suggest that it would be better, decenter, and cheaper to burn the dead at once. Let us build a proper furnace, and consume them to ashes. We shall then at least be sure that their remains are treated with no indecency.

Our new cemetery will probably be ready some time; but it seems to take as long in getting ready as if it had to come into existence by geological formation. I am, yours, &c.,

THREE O'CLOCK.

Dunfermline, January 8, 1862.

1 August 1863

At the end of the summer term the pupils all the schools in the town underwent a public oral examination before they were dismissed for the holidays. These examinations were big occasions, attended by local clergy and important townsmen and the parents of the children. They were also reported in some detail in the local press.
This is an excerpt from the talk given to the pupils of Wilson's Institution in the New Row by the Rev Mr Mackenzie

for speaking about that matter in this town. It was the reproach of the British people, that when they were let into a public park or garden, unless they were watched well by keepers and policemen, they would be sure to break down and destroy everything beautiful that came in their way. He was sorry to say Dunfermline was not free from that disgrace. It was at least as bad as any other place he knew. Take for example the Abbey grounds, which might be so beautiful, and see what goes on. The public were freely admitted; and at almost any time of the day, apprentice boys might be seen breaking off the tops of the young trees, or tearing the branches of the shrubs; nursery-maids might be seen plucking the flowers; and even decent-looking householders came from the High Street and carried off handfuls of flowers. About a year ago, a beautiful vine grew on the front of the Abbey. Some wretched creature cut it through with a sharp knife near the root, and the evil not being discovered till the withered leaves of the plant pointed out the mischief, nothing could be done to remedy it. Such practices were a great disgrace to the town, and as they had in prospect to get a new and beautifully laid out park, they ought particularly to give their encouragement to any movement to induce a greater love of flowers than that which led to destroy them, and a proper respect for what was not our own. It was a most revolting thing to see a big man or woman plucking the flower which some poor widow, perhaps, had planted over the grave of her son. He had, himself, seen a woman who by her weeds was shown to be a widow, plant a flower over a newly-made grave, and not long afterwards, not only was the flower plucked, but torn up by the root by two young men from whose appearance better things might have been expected. Perhaps if it had not been for the prospect of their getting a new park, he would not have adverted to this topic, but he thought he had a fair opportunity here of contrasting the conduct of these stupid miserable creatures who could not keep their hands to themselves, nor understand that it was equally an act of theft to pluck a flower which did not belong to them, as to steal any article of property, with the decorous conduct of the children before him. He hoped the example of these children would be taken by the elder members of the population. (Applause.)

The benediction having been pronounced by Mr Montgomery, the school was dismissed for the holidays.

14 November 1863

MEETING OF HERITORS.

PARTIAL CLOSING OF THE CHURCHYARD BURYING-GROUND.

A special meeting of the Heritors of the parish was held in the session-house of the Abbey Church, yesterday, to consider a memorial from the Parochial Board, praying for the partial closing of the Churchyard burying-ground. On the motion of Mr J. A. Hunt, Pittencrieff, seconded by Provost Whitelaw, Sir P. Arthur Halkett, Bart., Pitfirrane, was called to the chair.

The CLERK stated that the memorial which the present meeting had been called to consider had been laid before the Managing Committee, but the matter was so important that a full meeting of the heritors was considered neeessary to dispose of it. The Clerk read the memorial, which set forth that the Parochial Board, having considered the present over-crowded state of the churchyard burying-ground, and the injurious influence which it exercised on the health of the inhabitants in its neighbourhood, had purchased and laid out a new burying-ground beyond the walls of the city, which was now open for interments. The Board felt that their object in opening the New Cemetery would be frustrated unless the use of the old ground was, as far as possible, discontinued, and they, therefore, petitioned the heritors to stop the sale of fresh burial-rooms in their Cemetery, and also, to interdict the use of the common ground at present set apart for paupers and strangers. The memorial further stated that provision had been made for the last mentioned purpose in the New Cemetery.

The CHAIRMAN having re-stated the reason why this memorial had been brought before a general meeting of the heritors—viz., that it was considered too important to be dealt with in an off-hand manner by the Managing Committee—asked if there was any objection offered on the part of any one to the proposal of the Parochial Board.

The CLERK said there was no objection so far as the stoppage of the sale of the new ground was concerned.

Provost WHITELAW asked to be allowed to make a statement in supplement of the memorial. He stated that a portion of the old burying-ground had for many years been overcrowded, and while one portion might for a time have continued to afford burial rooms to some of the inhabitants, it had yet been thought advisable to get a new cemetery. The Parochial Board had gone into that proposal at considerable expense. At the time when the proposal of a new cemetery was first mooted there was a clear understanding that the old burying-ground would not be entirely shut up for a considerable time, but that the number of burials would be as far as possible limited. In order to meet the feeling of existing proprietors of rooms in the old burying-ground who might wish to lie with kindred dust, it was proposed not to shut up the old place just at once. This having been provided for, he did not expect that any hardship would be entailed upon any person by granting the petition of the Parochial Board.

Mr DICKSON (who appeared for the Earl of Elgin's trustees) asked if the only reason for stopping the sale of the remaining rooms in the old churchyard was the economical one, that, by continuing the sale, the success of the new cemetery, financially, would be endangered?

Provost WHITELAW said that was of course one reason, but not the only one. There was a sanitary, as well as an economical reason.

Mr HUNT said the portion of the ground where the poor were buried was over-crowded.

Mr SPOWART represented that there were certain people, not at present proprietors of ground, who might prefer to be buried in the old burying-ground; but, of course, these would be exceptional cases.

Mr DICKSON—But, should we preclude these persons from gratifying their wishes?

Mr HUNT said it would be impossible to draw a distinction between such parties and the general public.

Mr DICKSON said that after thinking over the matter he saw that it would not work very well to sell to one and refuse to sell to another. He had merely started the question.

Bailie BROWN said there was another view of the case he thought should be taken into consideration. There could be no doubt that if the present condition of the Churchyard were laid before the Secretary of State, he would order the place to be closed at once. Such a representation might be made by the Parochial Board at any time. They ought to keep that in view, and look upon the present proposal in the light of a compromise.

Mr SPOWART said there was no doubt a strong feeling on the part of the Secretary of State—whether rightly or not—to go along with the popular feeling, which was to have all burying-grounds beyond the walls of towns.

Mr HUNT—I believe the popular feeling in Dunfermline is in favour of keeping the ground open at present.

Provost WHITELAW—Yes; and it is to meet that view, that this proposal is made, to which if the Heritors give effect, there will be no need for shutting up the old ground. We will just allow the rights of existing proprietors to die out.

The question having again arisen, whether the condition of the Churchyard Burying Ground was prejudicial to public health,

The CHAIRMAN gave it as his opinion that it was.

Provost WHITELAW—No doubt of it. At night you may see the gases playing over the graves.

Bailie ALSTON said he had had occasion to walk through the Churchyard at night, and he had found the smells rising from the graves very offensive.

After a long desultory conversation, the Clerk drew up a minute granting the prayer of the Parochial Board's petition, provided that the Parochial Board should relieve the Heritors from the expense of keeping the ground in order, by paying the salary of £30 at present given to the Superintendent for that purpose.

The CHAIRMAN proposed the adoption of the minute, which motion was seconded by Mr HUNT, and unanimously agreed to.

It was also agreed that the arrangement should take effect from the date of the meeting.

On the motion of Mr HUNT, a vote of thanks was awarded to Sir Arthur Halkett for his conduct in the chair, and the proceedings terminated.

6 February 1864

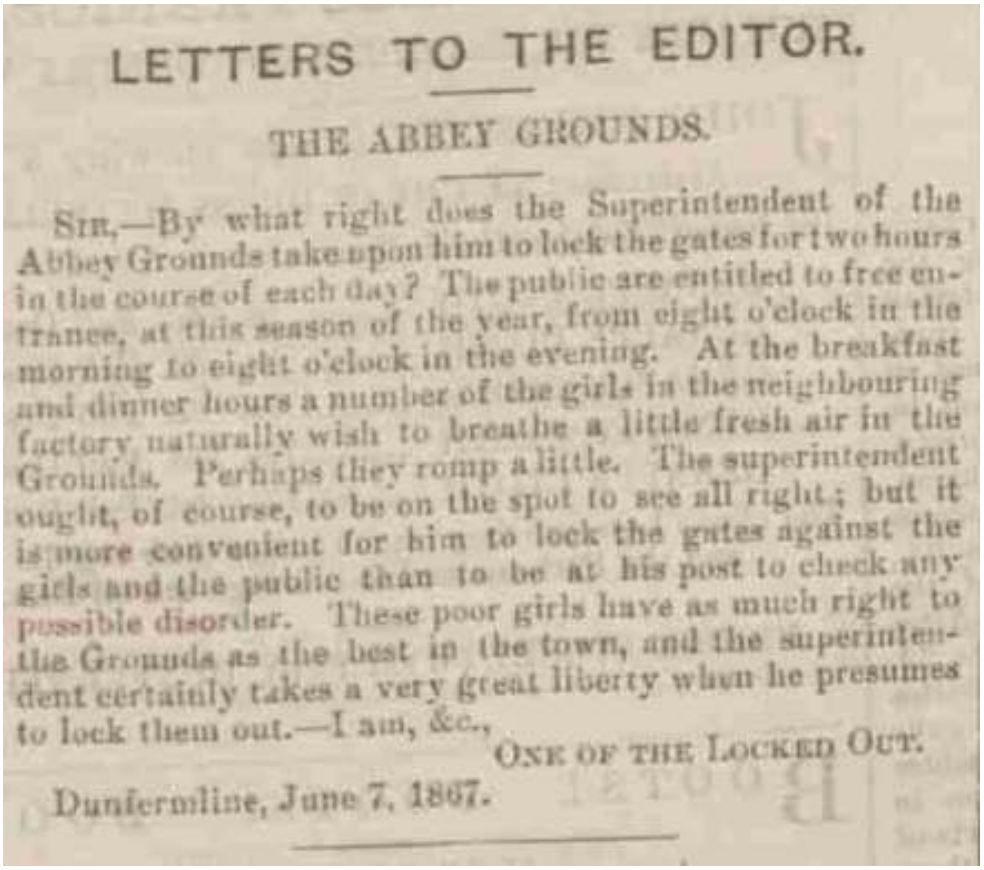
PAROCHIAL BOARD.—On Tuesday the Parochial Board refused to accede to the request of the Heritors to contribute £30 per annum to the Keeper of the Abbey Burying Ground. In this resolution, we think they are perfectly correct. The funds at their disposal, and of which they are the administrators, were never meant to be used for such a purpose. If the Heritors are disposed to do generously to an old servant, the generosity would be more apparent if it came out of their own pockets. Few changes can be made, however beneficial, that do not bear hard upon some one. The general good cannot, however, be sacrificed to personal feeling or personal interest. It is more than time the Abbey Burying Ground was closed. We feel convinced that if the facts respecting it were fully known, the Home Office would order it to be closed immediately. Provost Whitelaw, we may mention, dissented from the decision.

29 July 1865

The Rev Mr Mackenzie drives home his message to the pupils of Wilson's Institution

the school. The Rev. Mr Mackenzie said that before examining the school within, he had examined it from the outside. With the exception of St Leonard's School this was the only school that had a flower-border at the side of the playground, and from the condition in which he found that flower-border, he easily learned what kind of discipline prevailed in the school. The people of Dunfermline were notorious for stealing and destroying flowers. The condition in which the Abbey ground was, was perfectly disgraceful. Not only are the flowers planted by mourners on the graves of their dead friends, plucked, but they are actually pulled up and entirely destroyed. Persons caught stealing flowers ought to be sent to prison for at least a month, and he hoped the Provost would try to put the practice down.

8 June 1867



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

THE ABBEY GROUNDS.

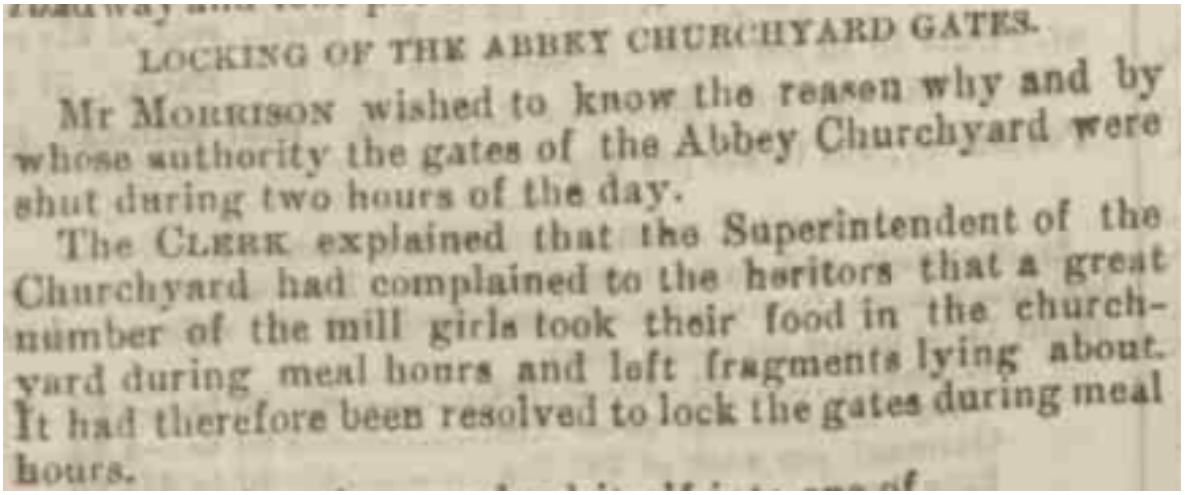
SIR,—By what right does the Superintendent of the Abbey Grounds take upon him to lock the gates for two hours in the course of each day? The public are entitled to free entrance, at this season of the year, from eight o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock in the evening. At the breakfast and dinner hours a number of the girls in the neighbouring factory naturally wish to breathe a little fresh air in the Grounds. Perhaps they romp a little. The superintendent ought, of course, to be on the spot to see all right; but it is more convenient for him to lock the gates against the girls and the public than to be at his post to check any possible disorder. These poor girls have as much right to the Grounds as the best in the town, and the superintendent certainly takes a very great liberty when he presumes to lock them out.—I am, &c.,

ONE OF THE LOCKED OUT.

Dunfermline, June 7, 1867.

15 June 1867

From a report of a meeting of the Town Council



LOCKING OF THE ABBEY CHURCHYARD GATES.

Mr MORRISON wished to know the reasen why and by whose authority the gates of the Abbey Churchyard were shut during two hours of the day.

The CLERK explained that the Superintendent of the Churchyard had complained to the heritors that a great number of the mill girls took their food in the churchyard during meal hours and left fragments lying about. It had therefore been resolved to lock the gates during meal hours.

29 June 1867

Excerpt from
A Stranger's Impressions of Dunfermline and Neighbourhood
(*From a Lady Correspondent)*

court. This grave-yard, and particularly the part of it in which we are at present—that south of the Abbey—is a favourite resort of the people of Dunfermline. Nor is this to be wondered at. The flowers, the ruins, the splendid prospect, even the quiet graves, added to the associations which give a charm to the homeliest scene, all conspire to render this a spot of no common interest. To be sure, it does strike one as a little incongruous the sights and sounds which greet one here most hours of the day; for we have visited the place pretty frequently, and do not recollect ever having seen it wholly tenantless. Of a morning, for instance, what so common as to see perhaps half-a-dozen gentlemen, in couples, pacing up and down the gravel paths, heads bent earthwards, holding sweet converse concerning stocks and shares, the state of the market, or the leader in to-day's *Scotsman*; or, if on Saturday, in that modest and most meritorious publication, the town's oracle and exponent of its virtues and privileges—the *Dunfermline Press*. These worthy gentlemen are waiting for the hour that calls them to business, and have come here to beguile the time in profitable discourse. A little reflection will do