

Fisher Street Graveyard

By Callum Webster

Secreted along a lane near the junction of Church Street and Fisher Street is an old burial ground, which was linked to an ancient chapel dating from before the Reformation period. Some historians assert that the Earl of Angus bequeathed the lands of Broughty to Arbroath Abbey during the twelfth century, and on this basis it is thought that the Abbot of Arbroath oversaw the chapel at North Ferry, as it was then known. Another theory exists that the chapel and surrounding lands belonged to the Parish of Caputh in Perthshire; it was not unusual in medieval times for a church to own land that was geographically detached from its parish, and located nearer to another parish. This debate is not a recent controversy. Back in 1678 some men were caught salmon fishing off Broughty Ferry on the Sabbath. The case was referred to Monifieth Kirk Session, but one culprit refused to recognise their authority because "*Broughty Castle belonged to Caputh*".

Whether owned by Caputh or Arbroath, a chapel existed near present-day Fisher Street. The date of its closure is unknown. Records from the 1650s reveal that the proprietors of Broughty financed the repair of Monifieth Parish Church, which implies that Broughty Ferry had been annexed to Monifieth by this era, and thus the chapel was no longer in use. The threshold stone at the entrance to the graveyard confirms that the surrounding walls and the Mort House were repaired in 1780.

Writing in 1880, the historian Alexander Warden recorded that "*the remains of the church or chapel, surrounded by a small graveyard, enclosed by a stone wall, are still to be seen*". An ordinance survey map from 1901 identifies the site of the chapel where the tenements at 4 and 6 Church Street now stand. This claim is confirmed by J Malcolm who, in 1910, wrote that tenements had been built upon the location of the chapel's precincts. The current graveyard is probably only a fraction of the original burial ground. J Malcolm continued "*formerly of much greater extent, this graveyard was some time ago encroached upon ... a great slice of it being utilised as a joiner's woodyard ... the present environments of the old burying ground must form a dismal contrast with those of its past*".

The joiner's yard referred to was situated along a lane that still runs off Church Street between the tenement at number 6 and the house at number 10. This yard was owned by joiner James Roberts (1828-1895), a native of Inverbervie, who was married to Mary Sturrock (1825-1914), the daughter of a Broughty Ferry fisherman.

East of the burial ground, where Bell Rock Square now stands, was a thoroughfare called Chapel Lane. This L-shaped lane ran from Fisher Street to the graveyard gate and then east to Dundas Street. A tenement called Paraffin Land, or Littlejohn's Land, once stood on Chapel Lane and was owned by David Littlejohn (1822-1903), town clerk of Broughty Ferry. Immediately south of the graveyard is Tayview Cottage at 9 Fisher Street, an old fisherman's

house. The tenements at the corner of Fisher Street and Church Street used to be the site of a dung depot operated by Broughty Ferry Police Commissioners.

Although the chapel had closed by the mid-seventeenth century, the burial ground continued in use for another two hundred years. According to a survey carried out during the nineteenth century, the earliest identifiable tombstone was dated 1689. The burial ground was the principal place of interment for Broughty Ferry's fishing community. Gravestone inscriptions record the names of long-established local families, including Anderson, Ferrier, Gall, Knight, Lawrence, Lorimer, Norrie, Ross, Sturrock, and Webster.

Some tombstones are very interesting. Lying flat near the centre of the yard is an overturned gravestone in memory of James Cappon (1767-1843) and his wife Margaret Webster (1795-1877). James was born into a seafaring family, and served as a gunner on a Royal Naval warship under Admiral Nelson. After retiring from naval service James became a sea captain and resided at 19 Ambrose Street. He married Margaret Webster, the daughter of a Broughty Ferry shipmaster. In 1867, when the burial ground was officially closed, the legislation included an exemption for fifteen specified individuals whose spouses were already interred there. Margaret Webster was one of those exempted from the Order in Council which shut the yard.

In the last row of graves before the western wall, in front of an ornate pillored monument, is a grave commemorating two infant daughters of John Methven (1789-1871) and Margaret Caithness (1791-1858). The rest of the inscription is now exfoliated. Born in Dairsie, John Methven came to Broughty Ferry in the 1810s and opened a shoemaker's business in Brook Street. In later years he also established a coal and oil merchant's enterprise. John moved to a mansion, Camphill Lodge, at 61 Camphill Road. Two of John and Margaret's children moved to England, one to Portugal, and another to Jamaica. Their grandson invented the Methven Screen for measuring the illuminating power of coal gas. John donated money for the building of Broughty Ferry Congregational Church, but faced the sorrow of outliving his wife and seven of his eight children.

A gravestone built at the behest of Andrew Spence (1774-1859) and Marjory Isles (1786-1866) is situated at the top end of the cemetery. On the inscription Marjory's name is misspelt as Margery. This commemorates four of their children who died young. Andrew hailed from Aberlemno Parish, where his family were farmers at Milldens, near Balgavies Loch. He moved to Broughty Ferry to work as a timber merchant and builder. In November 1807 Andrew married Marjory Isles from Kilspindie and they made their home in Dundas Street, beside the timber yard. As a leading local businessman Andrew lobbied Dundee Harbour Trust to build a proper harbour at Broughty Ferry. During the 1840s he also supported Broughty Ferry Gas Light Company in bringing lighting to the town. Round the corner from the graveyard, off Dundas Street, is a sheltered housing complex called Spence Place and Spence Gardens. This development is named in memory of Andrew Spence.

During the mid-1860s a cholera pandemic ravaged across Europe. The disease thrived in places with poor sanitation and contaminated water. It spread to the British Isles, and in November struck Broughty Ferry's fishing quarter. The first victim was five-year-old James Horn of David Street. He died on the 6th of November, after twenty four hours of illness. Between the 20th and 28th of November fisherman George Donaldson faced the heartache of losing his wife, his sister-in-law, and three of his four children to the killer. Graham Knight, a young widow in Fisher Street, perished leaving her five children as orphans. Thomas Lorimer of Bell's Lane lost two infant sons in quick succession. Margaret Thomson, baby daughter of a stonemason in Ambrose Street, was the final victim on the 20th December. The total death toll of the 1866 cholera epidemic in Broughty Ferry was twenty persons, and the old graveyard was being taxed to its limit.

Broughty Ferry Police Commissioners began to look at sanitation and samples from forty-three wells were tested. One doctor reported that the water was unfit for domestic purposes. Another concluded that it was contaminated with "*decomposition of animal and vegetable matter; and ... the overflowings of cesspools running into the wells*". Arrangements were made to rectify the supply by installing a new water main from Monikie. Handbills were distributed to property owners instructing them to provide an alternative supply for tenants. Legal action was taken to close contaminated wells.

Three local doctors were specifically assigned to attend to cholera sufferers. The fishing community was in difficult circumstances in November 1866 because prolonged stormy weather had hindered the fleet from putting out to sea. Dr Ramsay visited a fisherman's cottage where four people with cholera and diarrhoea were sleeping in one room.

A soup kitchen was established in the Free Church Schoolroom to provide nourishment for poor residents. After addressing the water contamination and the needs of cholera sufferers, public attention turned towards the graveyard. A petition was gathered calling for an enquiry into the burial ground and stating that it had become a health hazard. The Courier appealed for action: "*when a burying ground comes to be so crowded that interments can only be made two feet under the surface of the ground, and that, too, when the Cholera Fiend is reaping his deadly harvest in the immediate neighbourhood, the time has come for the most supine of local Bumbledons to bestir themselves*".

In December 1866 the Inspector of Nuisances to Broughty Ferry Police Commission surveyed the burial yard and reported that the offensive smell from the charnel house gave him a headache. One grave was opened and eight skulls were turned out, four of which had flesh and hair adhering to them! The yard was described as a Chamber of Horrors. Two months later a public meeting was convened in the Victoria Hotel, Gray Street. Medical practitioners outlined concerns about the close proximity of houses and a fish curing business operating to the north of the cemetery. The doctors unanimously agreed that public health was endangered and recommended closure of the graveyard.

The feeling of the fishing community was at variance with the opinion of the medical officials. Newspapers reported that at the meeting "*a large number of fishermen were present, two of the most obstreperous of whom gave vent to their feelings ... in language anything but complimentary ... these two gentlemen occasionally interrupted the business, and had to be put out*". One nearby resident, Mrs Anderson of Chapel Lane, argued that "*it is a great sin for anyone to speak of shutting it up ... the graveyard was granted by the Lady of Caputh to the poor people in Broughty Ferry, and also for drowned persons who might be cast on shore for burial purposes 'as lang as grass grows and water runs'*".

After considering the various findings Sheriff-Substitute Smith gave his verdict at Dundee Sheriff Court the next day. He ruled that it was dangerous to public health to allow interments to continue there. Legislation was passed, under the terms of the Burial Grounds (Scotland) Act 1855, closing the graveyard on the 25th of May 1867.

Undeterred by this legal ruling, the fishing community persisted in using the graveyard. When Mary Lorimer died of tuberculosis on 23rd of July 1867 her father arranged for her interment in the yard four days later. Some fifty people attended the burial. On the 2nd of August James Archibald, a shipmaster from St Vincent Street, died of a stroke. His widow, Margaret Norrie, arranged for his burial in the yard that weekend. The authorities were soon made aware of these illegal interments and the involvement of the gravedigger William Skirving, and the undertaker Matthew Deas. The two men were brought before Dundee Sheriff Court and fined £5 and £2 respectively. When news of Sheriff Smith's penalties reached Broughty Ferry a collection was held and within an hour and a half enough money had been raised to cover the fines. A group of fishermen gathered at the railway station to greet Mr Skirving off the Dundee train, and six fishermen carried him in triumph along Brook Street and King Street in an arm chair, with three girls leading the procession and waving flags. The crowd then marched to the home of Matthew Deas in Fort Street and gave him three resounding cheers. The fishing community then had to make use of the burial ground at the Parish Church in Brook Street, until the opening of Barnhill Cemetery in 1869.

After years of closure, this old burial ground can now be visited by members of the public who – after hiring a key at The Ship Inn in Fisher Street – are able to inspect the surviving gravestones.

This paper first appeared in the booklet “The Memory of Broughty Ferry” prepared by the Broughty Ferry Community Council in 1913 to mark the centenary of the incorporation of the Burgh of Broughty Ferry into its neighbour, Dundee.