

# THE HISTORY OF CHURCHYARDS

A rich history is waiting to be discovered in the churchyards of the Carse of Gowrie and Strathmore. Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust's Historic Churchyards Project was established to enhance the appearance and improve the condition and future management of these important sites. Priority has been given to the conservation of gravestones, monuments and significant buildings that are at risk with a view to sharing these special places.

**Come and explore east Perthshire's historic churchyards, experience their unique heritage and enjoy their peace, beauty and tranquillity.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work of the Mitchells and the numerous publications, photographs, manuscripts and books of Betty Willsher, which she kindly permitted the project to use, are gratefully acknowledged, as is the help and volunteer support of the Friends of Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust.

This project has been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Gannochy Trust and Perth and Kinross Council.



## THE PICTS

Pictish carved stones have been found in a number of churchyards in east Perthshire, which was once part of south Pictland. The most significant site is Meikle churchyard, where



*Pictish Designs*

thirty outstanding carved stones were found in and around the churchyard in the nineteenth century. They are now displayed in the adjacent Historic Scotland museum. Some carvings feature strange and beautiful mythological animals, perhaps relating to pre-Christian religious beliefs, or simply to hunting. There are also more abstract symbols, such as looking glasses, 'tuning forks', Z-Rod and V-Rod symbols, which are less well understood. The Pictish period drew to an end after the Viking victory over the Picts in AD839. Out of a period of political upheaval which followed, emerged Kenneth MacAlpin (Cináed mac Ailpín) to unite the Picts and the Gaels, and Pictish culture was gradually eclipsed by a national identity.



*Pictish coped grave stone at Meikle*



## GREEN GRAVEYARDS

East Perthshire's churchyards are sanctuaries for the living, as well as the dead. The project has sought to improve the habitat for a range of wildlife with the support of the Tayside Biodiversity Action Fund.

Locally rare bats and birds, red squirrels, reptiles and amphibians feed and roost in the nooks and crannies of the stonework of ruined stone churches and boundary walls. It has been possible to enrich the natural habitat and sustainable management initiatives for mowing and maintenance have been developed with Perth and Kinross Council. Wildflower meadows have been established around the headstones and biodiversity hedges have been planted to encourage insects, birds and small mammals. Graveyards are an important green resource for people and wildlife, where nature and history combine in harmony.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust website [www.pkht.org.uk](http://www.pkht.org.uk) and publications, including: Defending the Dead: The Legacy of the Body Snatchers and Churchyard leaflets series, including Meikle and Kettins, Collace and Coupar Angus Abbey Church and Bendochoy.

The Corpus of Medieval Churches: <http://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/~cmas/>

Perth and Kinross Council Family History Keekin for Kin booklet: AK Bell library, Perth.

Family History Groups, such as the Tay Valley History Group, have recorded gravestone inscriptions: [www.tayvalleyfhs.org.uk](http://www.tayvalleyfhs.org.uk) Tel: 01382 461845

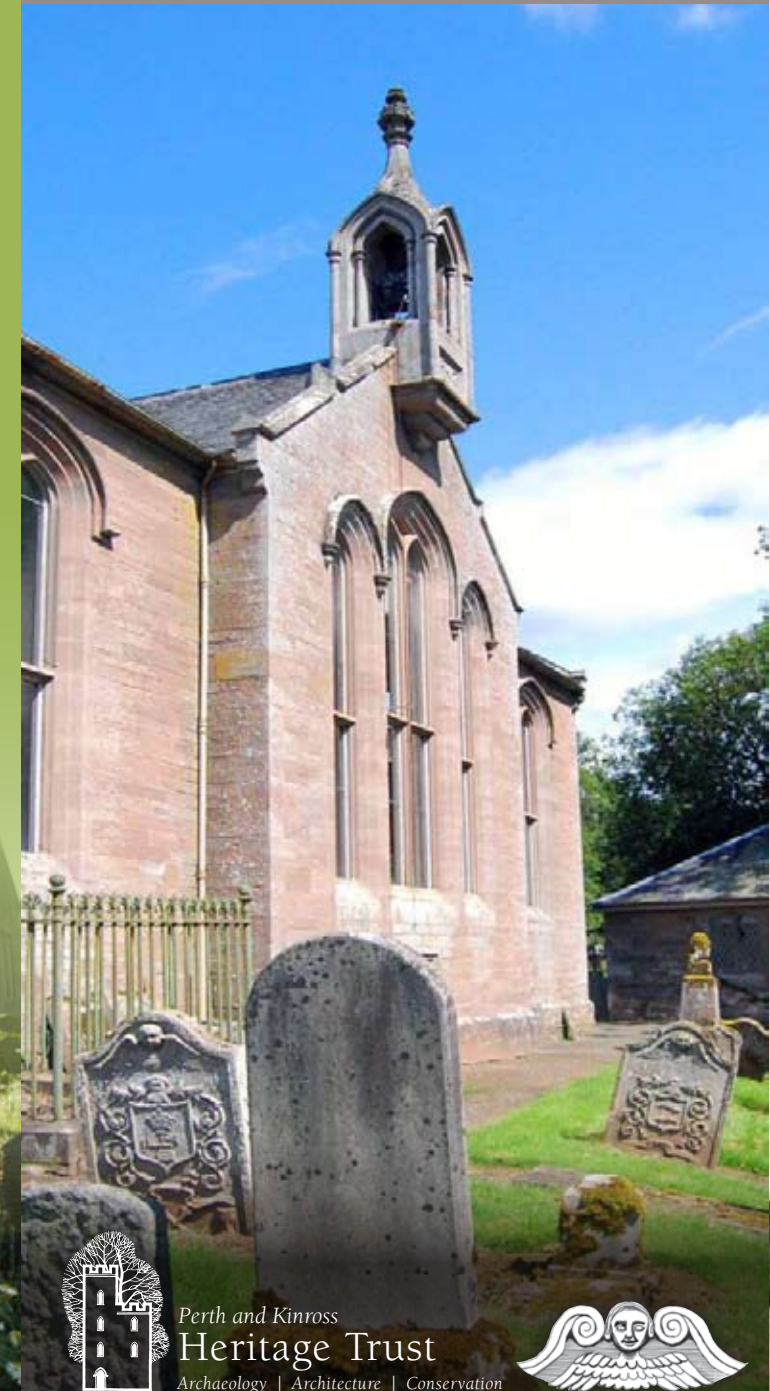
Parish and genealogical records are held at Perth and Kinross Council's Archives and Local Studies at AK Bell Library and Perth Registration Office at 5 High Street.

Burial records are held by Perth Crematorium.

*Wildflower meadow at Meikle*



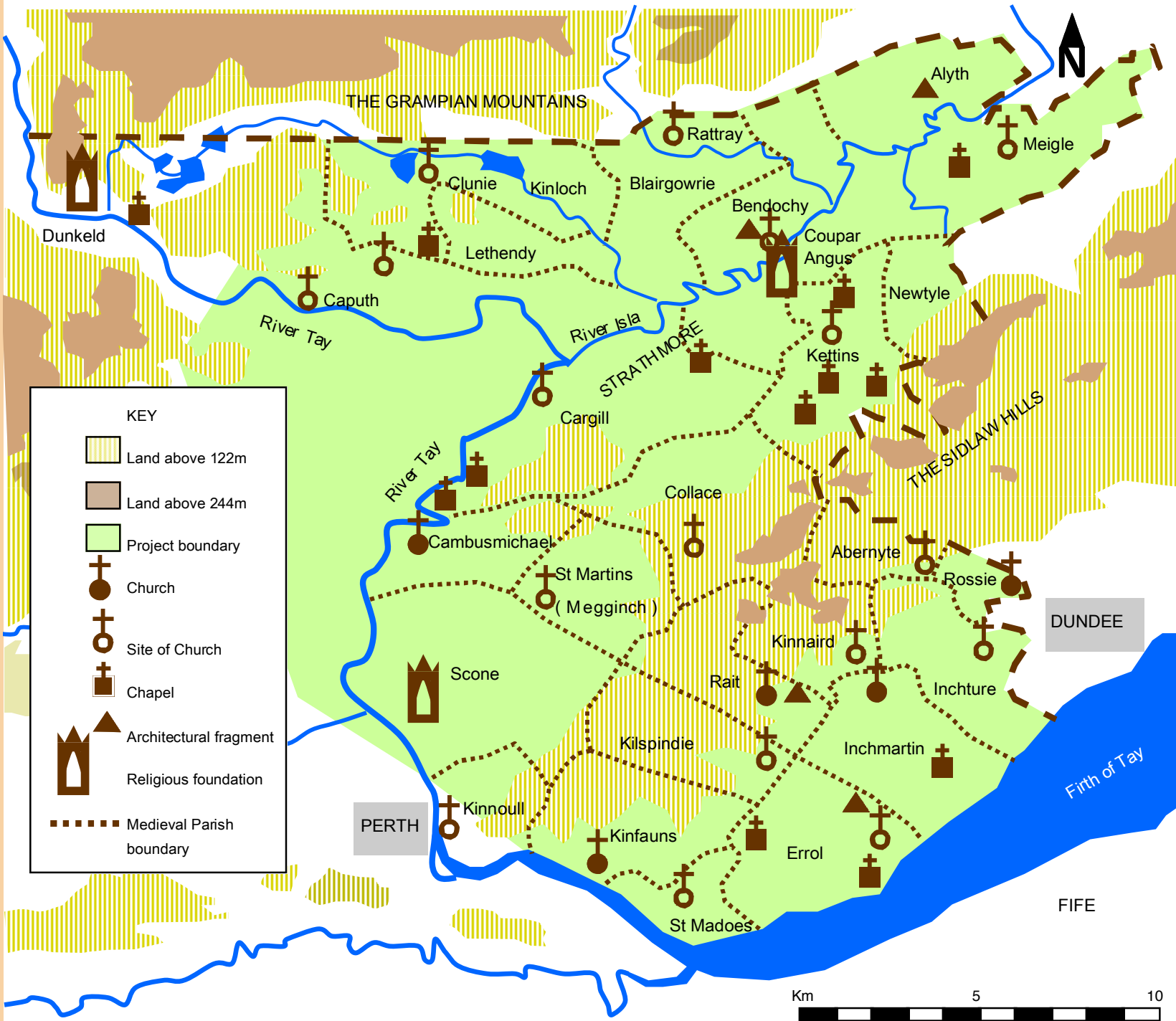
# Historic Churchyards in East Perthshire



Perth and Kinross  
**Heritage Trust**  
Archaeology | Architecture | Conservation



# Medieval Parishes (after South-east Perth an archaeological landscape)



**KEY**

- Land above 122m
- Land above 244m
- Project boundary
- Church
- Site of Church
- Chapel
- Architectural fragment
- Religious foundation
- Medieval Parish boundary



# THE HISTORY OF CHURCHYARDS

## EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Some pagan sites, particularly wells, are known to have been subsequently adopted as Christian sites. The churchyards in Rait and Kinfauns are both near wells. Saint Columba is commonly credited with bringing Christianity to Scotland in the sixth century, establishing the Abbey on Iona where the Book of Kells was written. For several centuries, Christian observance was influenced by the Irish Culdees, or missionaries, rather than by the church in Rome. Among the Culdees active in east Perthshire were Saint Modocus (St Madoes), Saint Bridget (Logiebride) and Saint Moluag (Alyth). Travel was difficult by land, and many of east Perthshire's early Christian sites were accessed by boat via the Tay and its tributaries. Many early churches in the Carse and elsewhere, such as Inchmartin and Inchtute, were sited on islands for practical reasons (inch is Gaelic for island). In the Braes of the Carse and Strathmore, church sites on low hilltops and near river crossings were favoured for ease of travel and for trade, in which churches were involved.



St Columba



The Book of Kells

## MEDIEVAL

The abbey at Arbroath, Scone, Dunkeld, Brechin and St Andrews, were at various times the seats of the bishops who oversaw a diocese which included a part of east Perthshire. Increasingly, Roman Christian practices prevailed and churches were dedicated to Roman saints. These included St Michael's, St Martin's and St Peter's. The tiny chapel of St Margaret's at Edinburgh castle indicates what these early chapels would have looked like. The established monasteries, abbeys and priories grew and commanded rich farmlands, trade and industry.



Burial Effigy

The Cistercian Abbey at Coupar Angus was one of the largest in Scotland, second only to Newbattle in the borders. It held lands over a wide area. Nothing now remains of the abbey, save a ruined arched 'gatehouse' and the footprint of its precinct, some architectural fragments and stone coffins lying near the arch.



Gateway at Coupar Angus Abbey

Those of high status were buried inside the church, preferably near the altar at the east end, facing Jerusalem. The map of pre-Reformation parishes, many of which are recognisable today, indicates the power of the church in organising and controlling so many aspects of society over the centuries.



St Margaret's Chapel

Viking-style burial slabs were typically coped or hog-backed with a carved roof slate pattern. This coped style persisted throughout the medieval period. These are occasionally inscribed with a sword and a disc cross, as can be seen at Kinfauns and at Westown, where they have been re-used as lintels over openings. Elsewhere, effigies of knights can be seen in Dunkeld Cathedral and the Coupar Angus Abbey Church dating from around 1420. The sepulchral slab at Longforgan, which depicts a knight in armour, dates from around the same time.

## THE REFORMATION

From 1560 onwards, Scotland separated from the Church in Rome and Protestant churches were established. Idolatry was not tolerated in the new religion and statues and other fabulous decorations were destroyed. Many churches were burned down and demolished and, within a century or so, only a few remained in use. At Kinfauns, Westown, Rait and Cambusmichael, medieval churches survive as picturesque ruins. Rare decorative memorial plaques survive in the Charteris Gray Aisle at Kinfauns, indicating the richness of what has been lost.

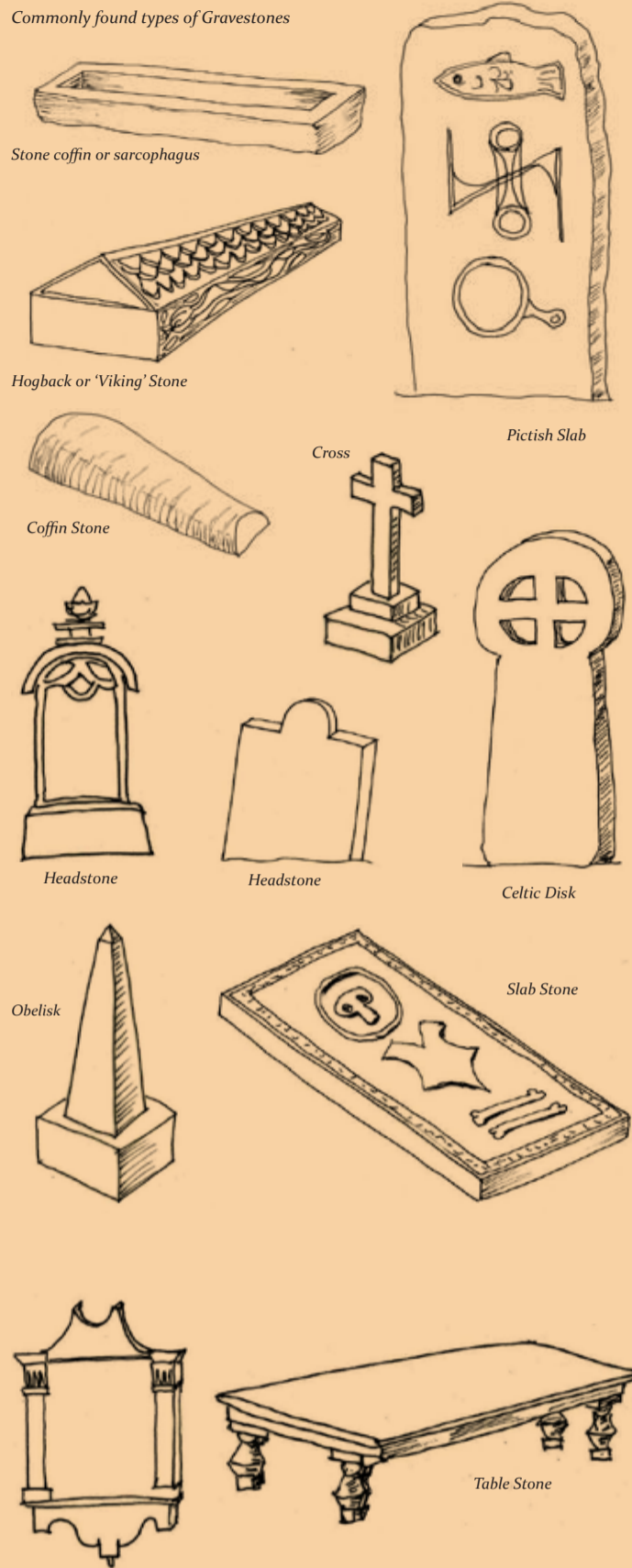
Cambusmichael old parish church



## GRAVESTONES THROUGH TIME

The shape, form, carving and inscriptions of gravestones reveal much about the time of their creation and the history of the place and its people.

Commonly found types of Gravestones



Stone coffin or sarcophagus  
Hogback or 'Viking' Stone  
Coffin Stone  
Headstone  
Obelisk  
Wall Plaque  
Burial enclosure  
Table Stone  
Cross  
Celtic Disk  
Slab Stone

## SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

Gravestones from the sixteenth and seventeenth century are relatively uncommon in the churchyards. They are usually flat grave slabs featuring death symbols and have relief block lettering. Written inscriptions are generally restricted to names or initials and dates, with any other message generally in Latin.



Kinfauns

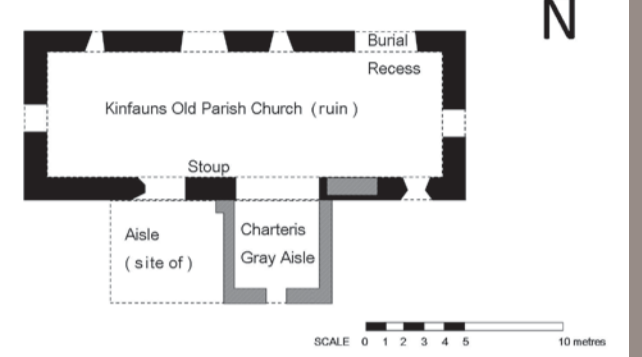


Grave slab from Bendochy

## ARCHITECTURE AND LAYOUT

A graveyard boundary which is rounded or irregular in plan is a good indication that it is of medieval, or earlier, origin. Before the Reformation, medieval churches were typically stone, rubble-built narrow rectangular buildings, aligned from east to west. These small buildings were enlarged by the construction of side chapels, which in many cases served as private chapels or burial aisles for the landowners of the parish. 'Lofts', or galleries, were later added to provide a more comfortable place for heritors (landowners) to sit than the stools on the cold stone or earth floor below. Medieval ruined churches can be seen at Rait, Cambusmichael, Kinfauns and at Westown, where conservation work has been carried out.

Plan of a medieval church



After the Reformation, some of the churches which had not been destroyed were remodelled, widening the nave to make a space more fit for Protestant services centred on the pulpit. Abernyste has a Medieval core which was converted to a T-plan. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries bell towers were constructed. Bells were rung from the church towers for marriages and deaths. Several belfries or bell-cotes now stand apart from their buildings, such as those at Bendochy and Kettins where the bell in the bird-cage bell-cote is Flemish in origin, dating from 1519.

From the seventeenth century, mausoleums were built by wealthy families in the churchyard, some of which were adapted from earlier structures such as at Kinfauns, Collace, Alyth and Caputh. Others, such as Collace and Clunie, appear to have re-used the masonry, in both cases Romanesque arches, of the old parish church.

Bendochy, like Abernyste, is another church in the area which, although greatly altered, retains much of its original medieval fabric. Elsewhere, as settlements grew and the need to enlarge the church arose, new buildings of various styles replaced or greatly adapted the old church. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, neoclassicism influenced church and monument design, but this movement was largely

replaced by neo-gothicism, which became the prevailing architectural style for churches. The Gothic Revival began around 1740 and was at the height of its popularity in the late nineteenth century. Churches in that style include St Martins by Andrew Heiton Sr, and Alyth by Andrew Heiton Jr. James Gillespie Graham designed Coupar Angus in 1813 and John Carver designed Meigle in 1869. There are some beautiful and interesting churches in the project area. Details of who to contact to gain entry are available at each active church and most have websites.

Some small buildings in the churchyard have also been addressed through the project. At the beginning of the nineteenth century watch houses and mortuaries, or mort houses, were built to defend the dead against body snatching. The mort house at Collace has been conserved as part of the project. A watch house was in use for the same reason at Coupar Angus, and will be repaired by the project. It is hoped that other small buildings, including gatehouses and bothies, which have been identified for enhancement will also be conserved.

Bellcote at Cambusmichael



Westown before restoration



Bellcote at Westown

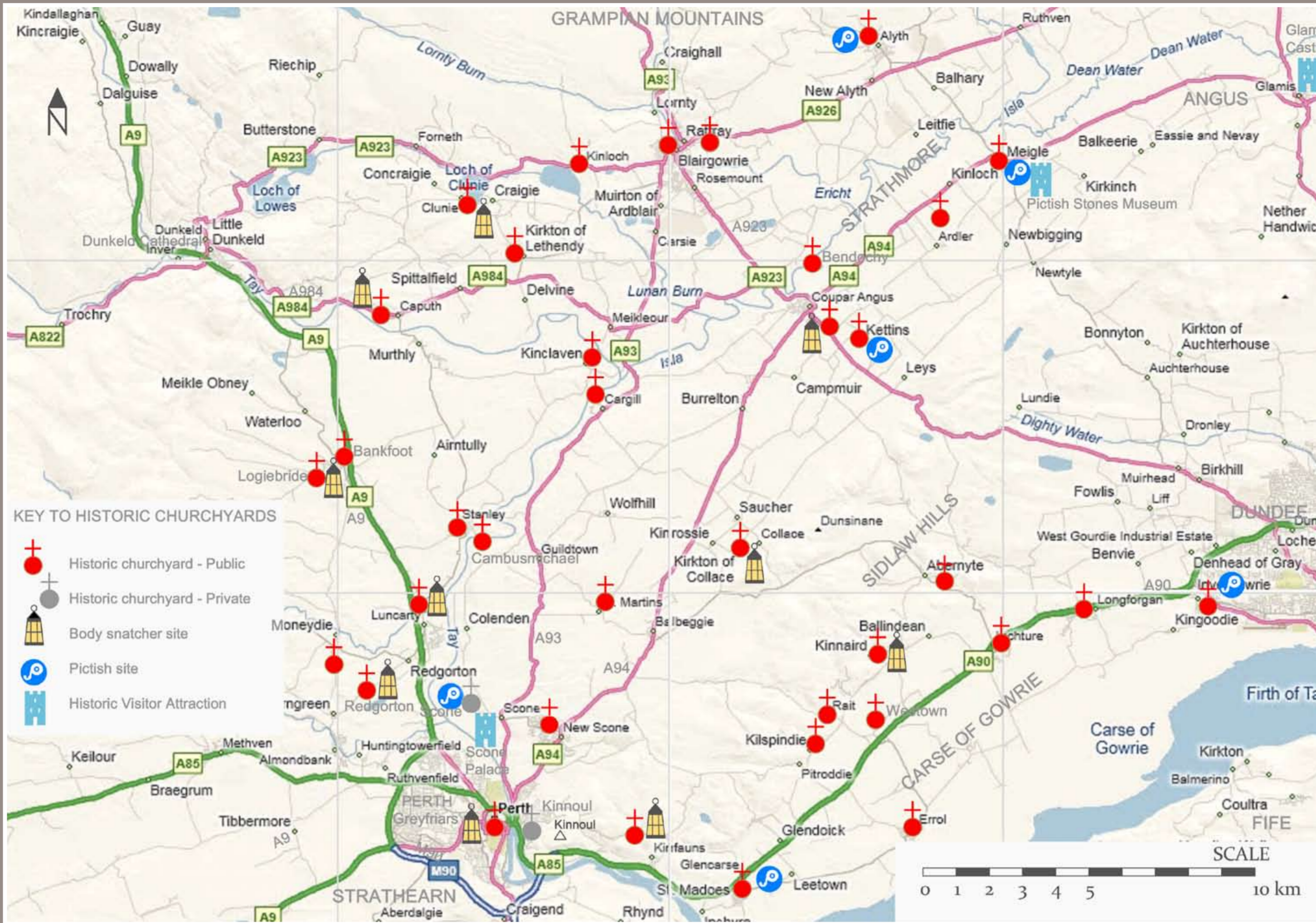


Bellcote at Bendochy



## CHURCHYARD TIMELINE

- 0 Birth of Christ
- 43-410 The Romans
- 43 Defeat by Druids at Hill of Beal?
- 340 Drest, 1st King of the Picts - Strathearn?
- 430 Arrival of St Patrick in Ireland
- 563-900 St Columba and the Culdees
- 724 Pictish King Nechtan founder of monasteries
- 843 Kingdom of Scots (Kenneth MacAlpin)
- 1094 Abbot Gregory at Dunkeld appointed Bishop by Rome
- 1127 Brechin was made Mother Church of a Diocese by David I
- 1163-73 Monastic orders and schools established in Perth under Dunfermline Abbey Battles of Independence
- 1164 Cistercian Abbey at Coupar Angus
- 1180 Sir William Wallace, spent his boyhood at Kilspondie (Blind Harry)
- 1225 Brechin cathedral founded
- 1297-1314 Battles of Independence
- 1309 Robert The Bruce crowned at Scone Abbey
- 1320 Treaty of Arbroath
- 1472 St Andrews become the Archbishopric
- 1560 The Reformation
- 1635 National Covenant
- 1643 Solemn League and Covenant
- 1652 Honours of Scotland smuggled out of Dunnottar Castle
- 1654-1660 The Commonwealth
- 1715 Earl of Mar raised the standard at Braemar
- 1735 First secession from the Church of Scotland
- 1746 Battle of Culloden ends Jacobite challenge
- 1761 Second Secession
- 1822 Anatomy (Scotland) Act passed
- 1843 The Great Disruption
- 1900 United Free Church formed
- 1929 Union of United Free Church and The Church of Scotland
- 1929 Local Authorities responsible for Churchyards



## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

East Perthshire has a particularly fine collection of eighteenth century stones partly because the local sandstone is good for carving. Social and economic changes made gravestones more affordable and popular for ordinary people. However the stone most used in this part of Perthshire was often poor quality brown sandstone, prone to erosion and decay, and thus many are at risk.



The character of these gravestones of relatively ordinary people is distinctive as to the time of carving and of the local area of several churchyards, often indicating the work of a particular mason. Eighteenth century stones tend to conform to a standard arrangement in three parts from top to bottom of the gravestone.

Top: There is typically a winged soul, or angel's head with wings, which symbolises the soul rising up to heaven. The individual facial characteristics often have a considerable naïve charm and may be a portrayal of the deceased.

## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Middle: There are heraldic shield and/or a tradesman's symbols with carved initials or names and dates. There are easily recognisable symbols such as ships, ploughs, looms and shuttlecocks, lasts, hammers and pistols. There are less easily identifiable tools and trade symbols which are no longer commonly seen, such as the mill wright's tools and agricultural implements.

Bottom: There are the death symbols or symbols of mortality, including a skull and cross bones, which, contrary to popular belief, bears no relation to pirates, hour glasses, coffins and sickles. There may also be an inscription such as memento mori (remember you must die), or tempus or hora fugit (time flies).



## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Victorian monuments tended toward the ornate and sentimental, such as weeping angels and willow trees. With the growing use of imported marble, many figurative monuments were made. Increasingly, however, granite was the stone of choice for memorials and this material has proved to be durable in comparison to the local sandstone. In this period, Public Health Acts saw the development of public cemeteries away from churches which, in contrast to the small and crowded churchyards, often functioned as attractive public parks.



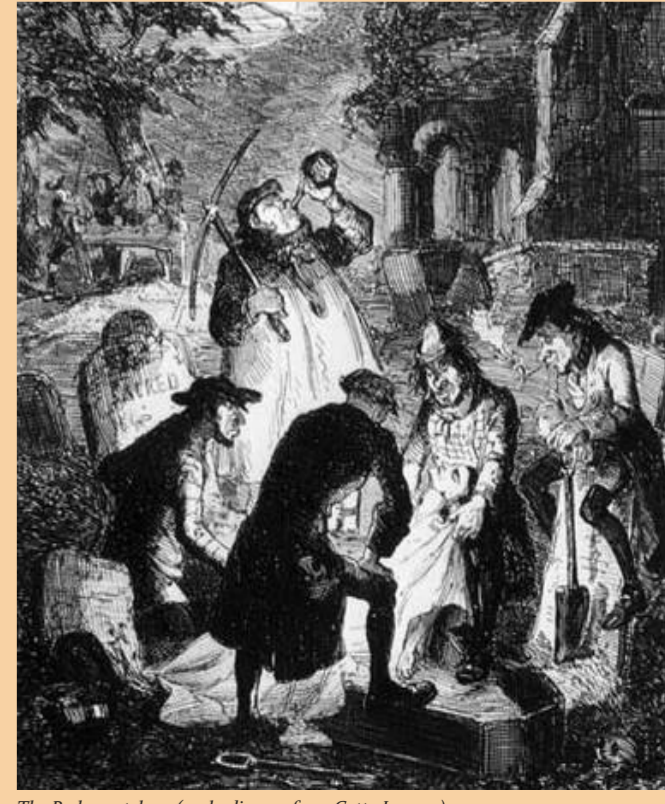
## BIBLICAL THEMES

There are some wonderful biblical carvings and inscriptions which feature in the historic churchyards of east Perthshire: Adam and Eve, the tree of life and Abraham and Isaac, were popular early themes. The Resurrection, Trumpets of Doom and winged souls are also prevalent, particularly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After the Scottish Enlightenment (around 1760 to 1820), more people were educated and gravestones became more elaborate and contained an increasing amount of written and decorative carving. Instructive biblical texts are found which demonstrate the faith of the deceased and serve as a reminder to the living.



## THE BODY SNATCHERS

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, bodies were dug up and sold for dissection to anatomy schools. Burke and Hare were the most famous grave robbers in Edinburgh, but the practice was widespread and certainly took place in Perthshire. At the time there was a literal belief in the resurrection after death, for which the body was required. Little wonder that the ghastly crime of body snatching was so abhorrent since it threatened to deny the dead of their chance to rise again on the Day of Judgement. What may now seem to be extreme measures were taken to protect the dead, including the use of mort safes, mort houses and watch houses. More information can be found in the separate leaflet, Defending the Dead.



War memorial at Kinfauns

Memorial to Henry Campbell Bannerman, Meigle

Victorian angel, Abernethy

War memorial at Kinfauns

The Body snatchers (under licence from Getty Images)

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