



Glasgow
Necropolis Women's
**Heritage
Walk**

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Some 50,000 souls are buried in Glasgow's Necropolis: the 3,500 visible tombs commemorate the great and the good, with the majority buried in unmarked communal graves. The headstones of most women's graves acknowledge only their role as the wives and daughters. But there are a few notable exceptions, from a gypsy queen to a clutch of benefactresses.

Tweaking the words of an early Necropolis guidebook: "Many individuals who would never otherwise have known that such women existed in her great city, and acted a conspicuous and useful part in the world, are thus made acquainted with their history and their worth, and are inspired with a laudable ambition to imitate and emulate their example." Crumbling cemeteries can be treacherous though, so watch your step.

Glasgow's city of the dead is the earliest Scottish garden cemetery. Existing urban graveyards were not places to linger, let alone take the family on a Sunday stroll. Horror stories abound of noxious fumes and shallow graves with bones (or worse!) protruding.

When the Necropolis opened for business in 1833, death was rendered both hygienic and picturesque, and it rapidly became a must-see visitor attraction.



Route map

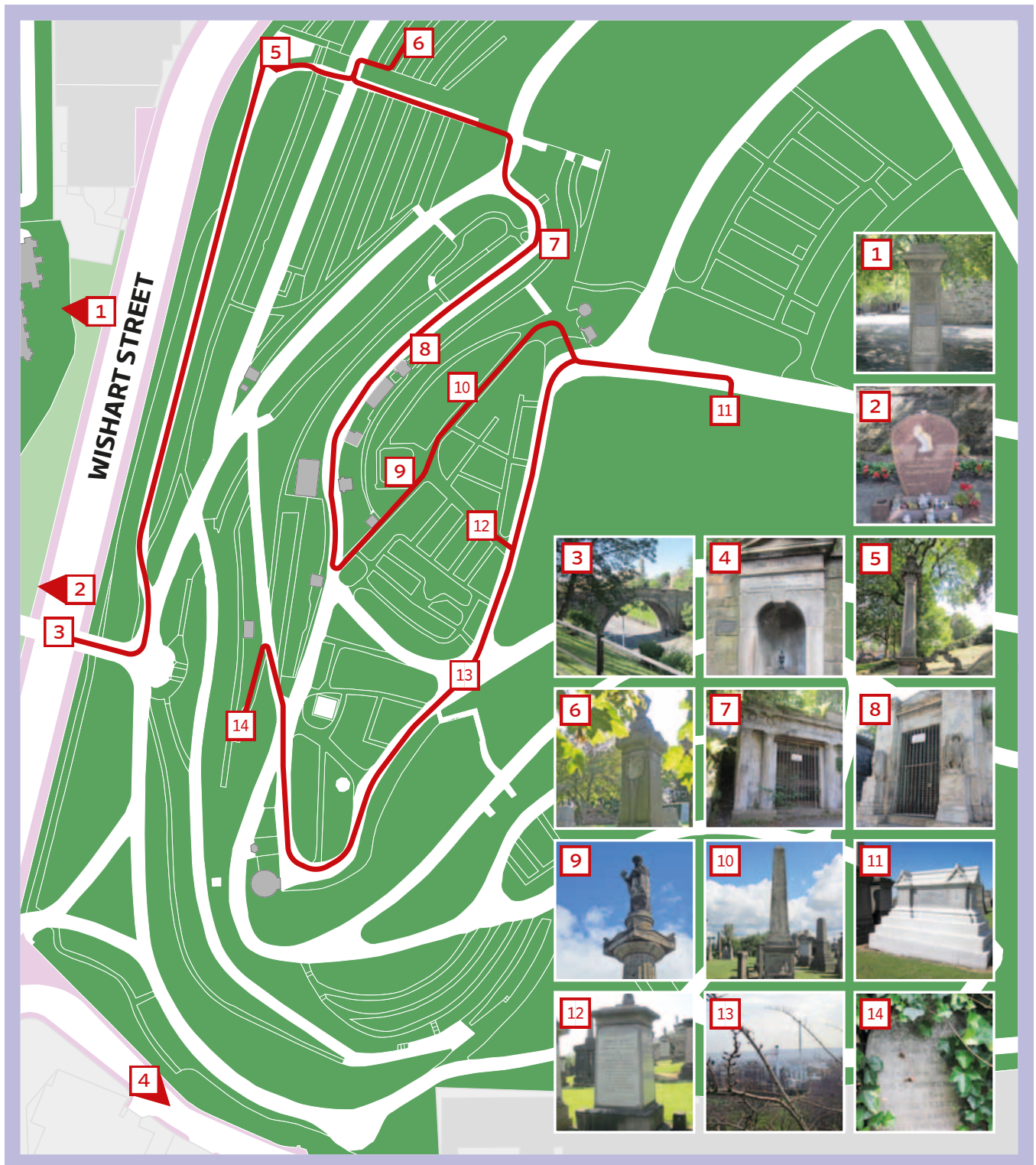


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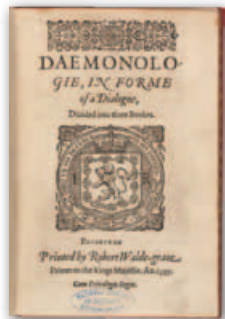
Cover image and map thumbnails, Heather Middleton; Bridge of Sighs, The Mitchell Library, Glasgow City Council; Cover of *Daemonologie*, The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland; Plan of vaults, The Mitchell Library, Glasgow City Council; A funeral procession in the 1890s, Culture and Sport Glasgow

(Museums); Jet mourning jewellery, Whitby Literary & Philosophical Society; Corlinda Lee and family, Liverpool University Library SMGC. K42.15.32; Jane and Elizabeth Buchanan, The Bellfield Trust/ East Ayrshire Council; Portrait of Isabella Elder by Sir John Everett Millais, Culture and Sport Glasgow

(Museums); Dr William James Fleming's class of clinical surgery at Queen Margaret College including Marion Gilchrist, Lily Cumming, and Dorothy Lyness, University of Glasgow Archive Services, Queen Margaret College collection, GB0248 DC233/2/22/2/82; Mourning millinery for Edward VII, from the

Ladies Field, 21 May 1910, The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland; Advertisement for mourning dress from *The Lady*, 4 October 1900, The Lady; 'Two headed' statue: Robert Miller of Belvidere and his wife Margaret Steele, Jeane Trend-Hill.

OUR WALK BEGINS in the square before Glasgow Cathedral where a monument [1] marks the position where the medieval Bishops' Palace once stood. Women accused of witchcraft were imprisoned here in the post-Reformation period when the Castle was used on occasion to hold political and religious offenders. When King James I of Scotland published his *Daemonologie* in late 1597, witchcraft was breaking news. That year **Margaret Aitken**, "The Great Witch of Balwearie" of Fife, claimed she could identify other witches by a mark in their eye and a commission took her from town to town. When she reached Glasgow, Minister John Cowper condemned many innocent women to death on her evidence. Finally someone thought to test Margaret herself by presenting her with people she'd previously accused - this time she found them innocent. The resulting outcry prompted an inquiry into the reliability of witches' testimony and Scotland would not see another panic for three decades.

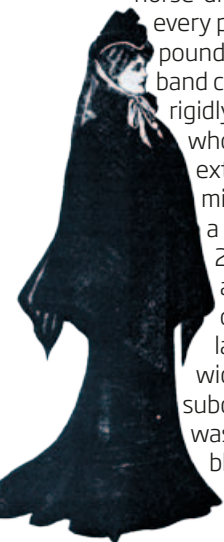


Now follow the Cathedral wall to the right to find the entrance gate of the Necropolis. (If the entrance is closed, follow the gates round the corner to enter at 52 Cathedral Square.) Just inside the gates is the Stillbirth Memorial (1999) [2]. Until the 1970s, it was common for bereaved parents not to see their babies or arrange their funerals. There are no burials here, though unmarked communal graves of stillborn children exist across the city's cemeteries.

Follow the road to the Bridge of Sighs (1833-4) [3]. The Molendinar Burn once flowed below, and this dramatic passage would have recalled biblical and classical precedents such as the Jordan, Styx and Lethe. Below the bridge, to your right, Ladywell Street curves around the bottom slope of the Necropolis. One of the oldest streets in Glasgow, the well [4] from which it takes its name is worth a visit on your way back. The site dates to the 13th century when it was used by pilgrims and travellers entering the city, but with pagan wells often rededicated by Christians, it may predate the city itself. It fell into disuse owing to its proximity to the Necropolis and was replaced by a niche and bronze urn in 1874, but still attracts offerings of flowers and coins.



The space before the entrance façade allowed room for horse-drawn hearses to turn. There were funerals to suit every pocket in the 19th century: the cheapest cost one pound, but for five, a massive hearse resembling a "circus band chariot" could be had. As for mourning dress, this was rigidly codified for women. Widowed **Queen Victoria**, whose strict insistence on mourning etiquette extended down to babies, was greatly influential. For middle class widows, full mourning lasted a year and a day (all black covered with crepe); second mourning 21 months (all black, less crepe); ordinary mourning a minimum of three months (black silk, trimmings of ribbon and jet permitted). Half-mourning could last from six months to a lifetime, during which a widow could follow the fashions of the day, but in soft, subdued colours. Only after WWI, when full mourning was considered bad for morale, did this gloomy tide of black recede.



At the façade turn left down the lower of the two paths. At the end of the avenue, you will come to a pillar and an ornamental archway that once held a cast-iron gate. This was the Jewish cemetery [5], the only area that is not interdenominational. The land was bought by the Jewish community and first used in 1832, before the Necropolis officially opened, to bury Joseph Levi, a jeweller who died of cholera. Previously Glaswegian Jews buried their dead in Edinburgh. Jewish practice involved the ritual washing of bodies and a special bath house adjacent to the Molendinar Burn was used. With bodies customarily buried one per grave, by 1851 the plot was full. Two headstones stand outside the wall. One is for **Deborah Ascherson**, (d. 1847), who was "in dispute" with the leaders of the Jewish community. The precise reason for her exclusion is unknown, though it is probable she had married a non-Jew and thus had a marginal status when alive.

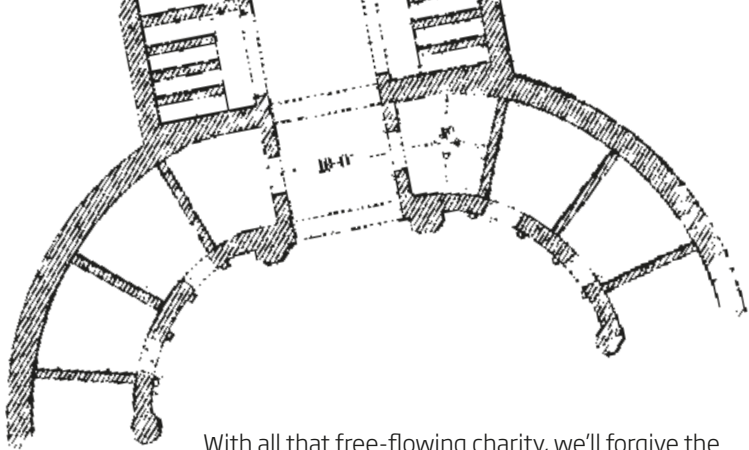
Go up the very steep steps to your right, up two further small flights of steps, then up a another set hidden behind the low wall to your left. Take the second grassy path on your left and just after the tree is the memorial to the Queen of the Gypsies, **Corlinda Lee** [6] (*below, reading palm*). Her bronze plaque is gone, leaving only a ghostly portrait behind. The memorial often has coin tributes pressed between the stones. Born 1831, Corlinda merged two important gypsy dynasties when she married the horse trainer George Smith and they became king and queen of their extended family. George capitalised on the Victorian fascination with gypsy life by taking his clan on tour, hosting "gypsy balls". Queen Victoria visited, and it is alleged Corlinda read her palm. Until recently a stall bearing Corlinda's name could be found in the Barras Market, decorated with photos of Princess Diana. After Corlinda's death in 1900, George ran into financial difficulties and faked his own death, even having 'In Memoriam' cards printed.



From here return to the main steps and continue to ascend seven more small flights until you reach a path. Turn right, and where the path splits in two, take the upper to Robert Black's Grecian mausoleum [7]. The first mausoleum to be erected in the Necropolis, this was commissioned in 1837 by merchant Robert Black for his daughter Catherine, who died aged 12. The tomb would ultimately hold five of his children, all dead before 21. Victorian families lost children at an unfathomable rate. The Necropolis internment book reveals an appalling record of child mortality, with measles a prime killer. For poor families the situation was worse, their very living conditions often proving fatal.

Continue to the next but one tomb, decorated with two draped Grecian urns, built for **The Misses Buchanan of Bellfield** [8], three unsung heroines of Victorian Glasgow. Jane, Elizabeth (*below*) and Margaret were the daughters of George Buchanan of Woodlands, a cotton baron. All outlived their male siblings and none married. The sisters felt a deep responsibility for Glasgow and their will bequeathed £10,000 to the Merchants' House, on the condition their tomb be properly maintained in perpetuity. (They are surely birling in their graves.) £30,000 founded a hospital.





With all that free-flowing charity, we'll forgive the preferential terms to those named Buchanan. They left money to many other institutions, amounting to a legacy of some £4m in today's money.

Now go up the grassy hill to the summit, where in ancient days a druidical grove stood, to the John Knox memorial [\[9\]](#), erected in 1825 on what was then Fir Hill. The summit was the most sought-after for burials, although you and your tomb had to cut the mustard. Born 1505, this preacher and instrument of the Reformation in Scotland was venerated by the Victorians, but has now become a byword for all that is dour and spoilsporting. He married twice, his second wife 16 years to his 50, a gap significant enough for Knox to be accused by Catholics of having bewitched her with a love potion. In response to the reign of "Bloody" Mary Tudor he anonymously wrote *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regimen of Women* (1558), outlining why it was against the natural order for "Jezebels" and "crafty dames" to rule. He preached venomous sermons against Mary, Queen of Scots for hearing Mass, dancing and dressing too elaborately, and after her abdication, openly called for her death.



Queen Elizabeth took exception to his views on female rule and refused him passage through England. His letters asking her to reconsider can be described as "grovelling". Knox died in 1572 and is buried in Edinburgh, in space 23 of what is now a car park.

Stand back to back with Knox, turn a couple of degrees left and head along the wide grassy path. A tall obelisk almost immediately on your right [\[10\]](#) bears a relief of four children mourning their "**Beloved Mother**" but unusually, no family name. For years the mother's identity was unknown, but recently researcher Diana Burns announced she had found her. She looked for clues in the position of the sculpture - a prestigious spot - and searched burial records, until she found **Agnes Strang**, wife of Allan Gilmour, a wealthy ship owner and merchant, who died in childbirth in 1849 aged 33, leaving behind three young children plus her new baby. Around this time, five of every thousand births resulted in the death of the mother. With contraception primitive, married women had little choice but to become a mother and raise a family.



At the end of the path, turn right past a pale octagonal kiosk to spot the striking white tomb of **Isabella Ure Elder** (1828-1905) (below) [\[11\]](#) straight ahead. A quick quiz: how many historical women are commemorated as statues around

Glasgow? (Answer at the end.) Isabella is one, dressed in her academic robes, within the Elder Park she founded in Govan. A wealthy philanthropist, she was instrumental in promoting higher education for women in Scotland. After her husband died she devoted her life to good works, which included providing premises and financial support to Queen Margaret College, the first in Glasgow to provide comprehensive higher education for women. After it merged with Glasgow University, she maintained pressure to ensure female students did not receive an inferior education. In Govan, she established a School of Domestic Economy, a library and a cottage hospital. Fittingly, when Isabella died, it was **Dr Marion Gilchrist**, the first woman to graduate in medicine from Queen Margaret College in 1894, who signed her death certificate.



Return to the octagonal tomb junction and go left. Halfway along is a stone kerb on the right of the path: go in two rows deep and four graves along, to find a stone marked James Scott [\[12\]](#). In 1850, **Lillias Ure Scott** was returning to Glasgow from Canada aboard the steamship Orion with husband, sister and daughter when the ship struck rocks. The passengers were asleep below deck, and around one quarter of those aboard lost their lives. The captain was imprisoned for 18 months.

Lillias' reasons for emigration are unknown, but many Scotswomen, considered hard-working and God fearing, were encouraged to move to Canada from the 1830s, mainly to work as domestics in rich Canadian homes, or to marry and help populate the new world.



Regain the path and continue to the end of the lane to enjoy a panorama over southeast Glasgow [\[13\]](#). Turn right, taking the left fork down the hill, and follow the loop round to another fork. Take the left fork, with the Cathedral on your left, then almost immediately take a path that backtracks to your left. In the grassy terraced clearing at its end is

Barbara Hopkirk's monument [\[14\]](#), hidden by ivy to the right of the large pink granite monument of her husband, Laurence Hill, a Necropolis founder, and his second wife. By the time she died in 1833 aged 40, Barbara had lived a life of continual pregnancy, giving birth to 13 children. In an early guidebook, she is 'the first Christian lady, moving in the upper or respectable ranks, whose remains were deposited in the cemetery.' In fact, Elizabeth Miles was the first Christian burial but as mere stepmother to the Necropolis superintendent and head gardener, somewhat 'non-U' as Nancy Mitford would say.

So, as the Bridge of Sighs hoves back into view below, we hope you have enjoyed this brief introduction to the women of the Necropolis.



Answer: there are only three historical women represented in statuary in Glasgow: Isabella Elder, Queen Victoria, and Dolores Ibarruri, La Pasionaria on Customs House Quay.



Produced by Glasgow Women's Library's 'Women Make History' project

For further reading, visit the Women Make History pages at the website address below. For more insight into women's history contact Glasgow Women's Library to find out when our two hour guided walks of the Necropolis and other areas of Glasgow take place. You can also take your own tours by downloading podcasts from our website.

About Glasgow Women's Library

Glasgow Women's Library (GWL), launched in 1991 is a unique organisation in Scotland. It is a key information hub on women and gender. In addition to its lending library and archive collection, it has exciting programmes of events, activities, courses and other learning opportunities and has dedicated projects that support women to develop their reading, writing and numbers and a project tailored for Black and Minority Ethnic women. It has a national lifelong learning programme that works with women across Scotland.

About Women Make History

Women Make History is GWL's women's history project. Volunteers research and deliver pioneering Women's Heritage Walking tours in Glasgow and related maps and podcasts. Other aspects include talks, workshops, recording the histories of living heroines, tour guiding, training and ongoing women's history detective work. For more details contact GWL.

How to get involved

Glasgow's women's history is still largely hidden from the general public. There are many ways to get involved to address this. Why not become a women's history detective? Or maybe you would like to join our research or tour guide teams? You may have information you think could be added to this tour or suggestions how it could be improved. If so, we want to hear from you. Some people have chosen to show their support of GWL and the aims of Women Make History by sponsoring a book, shelf or Library section and dedicating it to one of Glasgow's forgotten heroines. This fundraising campaign is called *Women on the Shelf* and you can donate at the website address below. Others have chosen to become *Friends of GWL*. More information on this scheme can also be found on our website.

With the assistance of:



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Contact us

To find out more about GWL, Women Make History, our guided tour dates and maps of other routes, visit our website: www.womenslibrary.org.uk, or email us at info@womenslibrary.org.uk

Thanks to the Friends of Glasgow Necropolis. Their own tours contribute to the upkeep of the Necropolis, with a special appeal to restore the Buchanan Sisters mausoleum: www.glasgownecropolis.org

Glasgow Women's Library, 15 Berkeley Street, Glasgow, G3 7BW
Tel: 0141 248 9969; Email: info@womenslibrary.org.uk
www.womenslibrary.org.uk

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