

## Kiltearn Old Kirk Gravestone Inscriptions

As part of the Evanton Community Trust's project to investigate Kiltearn Old Kirk, a group of volunteers recorded and photographed inscriptions on gravestones in the old kirkyard, led by Susan Kruse of Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands (ARCH). The project was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Kiltearn Community Council, Archaeology Scotland and Clan Munro Association.

The survey took place in 2017. In all 378 memorial stones, 72 lair markers and 48 stones which were either lair markers or headstones were recorded, ranging in date from 1670 to 2014. Many were extremely worn and indecipherable. In some cases the inscriptions were only partially interpreted, and future work, perhaps using photogrammetry, may help with these inscriptions.

The group first made a plan of the kirkyard, dividing it into zones using lines from the church. Stones were then plotted using offsets from baselines. There is inevitably distortion, but the plans should enable people to find gravestones.



Two types of lair markers survive: stone markers in several forms and metal ones, presumably later. Few lairs preserve all the stone markers, and in some cases the recorders were unable to determine if the stone with name and sometimes date represented a headstone or lair marker. The metal markers are presumably later. Over 50 were found scattered throughout the kirkyard, a few still with their lair, but many



tucked away out of the way. The Highland Council has a lair plan dating from 1905, and a document survives in the Foulis Castle papers is a lair list probably dating to the later 1800s. Interestingly, most of our older stones are at locations marked 'unclaimed' on the lair list, suggesting that the knowledge of these old lairs had gone by the time the plan was made.

When Hugh Miller visited the kirkyard in the early 1800s he wrote: 'The parish burying-ground, thickly sprinkled with graves and tombstones, surrounds the church. It is a quiet, solitary spot, of great beauty, lying beside the sea-shore...I could trace in the rude monuments of this retired little spot, a brief but interesting history of the district. The older tablets, grey and shaggy with the mosses and lichens of three centuries, bear, in their uncouth semblances of the unwieldy battle-axe and double-handed sword of ancient warfare the meet and appropriate symbols of the earlier time.' (*My Schools and Schoolmasters*, p. 549)

This implies that in the 1800s some medieval tombstones with swords still were visible, but none were found. However, over 50 stones dating before 1800 were recorded, generally slabs on the ground, some just under the turf. These are characterised by



symbols of mortality and immortality, sometimes with heraldic symbols and inscriptions running around the edge. Most of these do not have names, but rather initials. Eleven were decorated with 'red eagles', the Munro of Foulis crest.



The stone on the right is the memorial of Thomas Hog, minister of Kiltarn (d. 1692). When first viewed, only the deeply cut initials were visible. But with good sunlight it became clear that there is an inscription running in two lines around the edge and several lines above the initials. Fortunately Hugh Miller recorded part of this inscription for us:

'GREAT.MAN.OF.GOD.AND.FAITHFUL.MINISTER.OF JESUS.CHRIST.

THIS.STONE.SHALL.BEAR.WITNESS.AGAINST.THE.PARISHIONERS.OF.KILTEARN.IF.THEY.BRING.ANE. UNGODLY.MINISTER.IN.HERE.'

The kirkyard has 46 table tombs and chest tombs as well as some fragments, most dating to the 1800s. These have suffered the most from exposure, with the inscriptions completely worn away on many. The most elaborate is the white marble table in the Novar enclosure at the west of the church, which is now black due to environmental conditions.

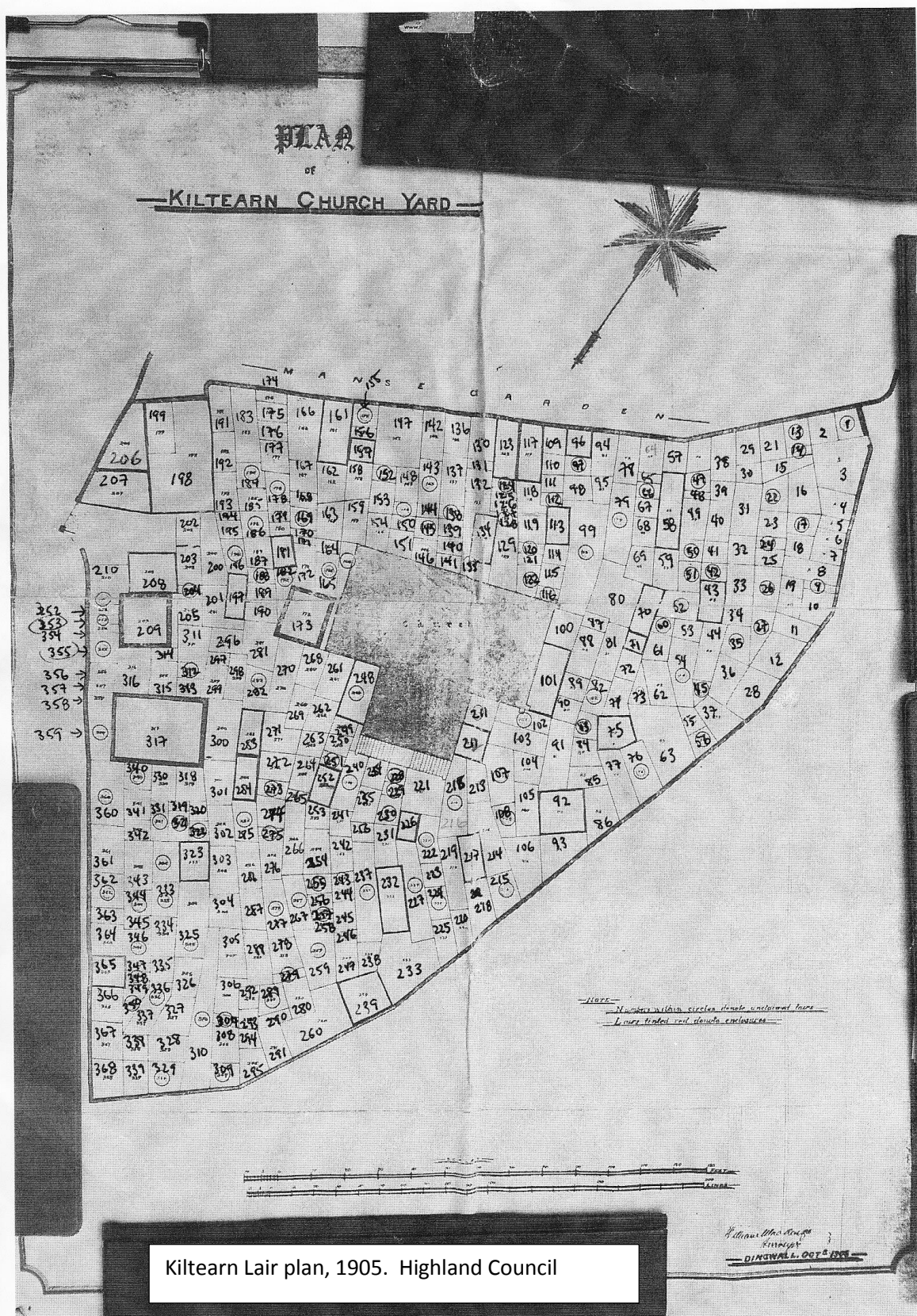
A database has been compiled of all the recorded stones, including information about each stone and the people commemorated on them. The full archive is deposited at Cornerstone Café in Evanton and the Highland Archives in Inverness in their family history search room. Future work could augment this with the inscriptions in the kirkyard extensions.

I would like to thank Stuart Farrell and John Durham of the Highland Family History Society for advice and assistance and Alexander Gallacher for database and GIS mapping work. Special thanks to the team of recorders who spent many hours in all sorts of weather.

Susan Kruse  
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Kiltearn Lair plan, 1905. Highland Council



The lair plan was superimposed on the plan of recorded graves. While clearly not to exact scale, the resulting maps provide a useful way to link graves, lairs and the lair list.





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