

# UNDERSTANDING SCOTTISH GRAVEYARDS





UNDERSTANDING  
SCOTTISH  
GRAVEYARDS

**Betty Willsher**

**Revised and expanded by  
Susan Buckham**

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Maps were made in QGIS using the following datasets:

Pre-1975 Ordnance Survey Historic Boundary Line shapefiles (<https://osdatahub.os.uk/data/downloads/open/BoundaryLine>)

OpenRoads shapefiles, filtered for motorways and A roads (Ordnance Survey: <https://osdatahub.os.uk/data/downloads/open/OpenRoads>). Boundary-LinesTM and OpenRoads both licenced under Open Government Licence v3.0 (<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>)

Shire lines for Morayshire and Nairn, re-drawn according to 1950 boundary lines shown on Scotland Boundaries Viewer (National Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/boundaries/#zoom=9.7&lat=55.60919&lon=-2.44557&b=1&o=100&dates=1950&point=0,0>)

Water data: HydroATLAS Project (RiverATLAS and LakeATLAS, CC-BY 4.0): <https://www.hydrosheds.org/hydroatlas>  
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Site location data from [trove.scot](https://trove.scot).

## Preface to the 2005 Edition of Understanding Scottish Graveyards

The writer on Scottish historical subjects has a meagre store of original sources on which to draw, but in many fields he or she is likely to be faced with a bewildering array of information and opinion in numerous secondary sources. Any statement may be second- or even third-hand. Therefore it is surprising that for the original edition of this book, which has a historical slant and is on a subject with a wealth of material – the graveyards themselves – there was comparatively little serious, relevant literature. At the beginning of the 20th century David Christison, then secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, opened up the subject of churchyards and monuments in the Lowlands of Scotland. There followed a series of articles by Alan Reid and others. However, interest dwindled after some years only to be rekindled in the mid-1960s by Angus Graham and John di Folco.

From the mid-1960s onwards there has been a more general understanding of the importance of this subject and its fascination, although it was not until 1982 that a full survey appeared to have been made of any Scottish graveyard; nor, up to that point, was there any published research on the identity of the masons who made the thousands of carved monuments.

Thus the major first-hand source drawn on for the original book was the material amassed by Doreen Hunter and myself during visits to graveyards in all parts of the Scottish Lowlands over the years. We were first motivated by curiosity and the satisfaction of discovery, and then, in hope of getting others to share this pleasurable pursuit, we wrote *Stones*,<sup>1</sup> which was published in 1978. Subsequently we continued to make further records, and were much encouraged by the assistance given by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. Growing awareness of the large amount of recording to be done, together with real concern over the loss of graveyards and of monuments, made the writing of the original book something of a mission.

That the book was written and published at all was entirely due to Edwina Proudfoot, Chair of the Council for British Archaeology Scotland<sup>2</sup> (as the Council for Scottish Archaeology was then known). It was she who saw the need for such a book, who commissioned me to write it, who worked out the format, found a publisher (W & R Chambers 1985), and edited the first edition. (A second edition was published by Canongate Press in 1995)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Willsher and Doreen Hunter, *Stones: A Guide to Some Remarkable Eighteenth-Century Gravestones* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> The Council for Scottish Archaeology is now called Archaeology Scotland.

<sup>3</sup> A third edition was published by the National Museums of Scotland and Archaeology Scotland in 2005.

Edwina Proudfoot initiated the campaign, presently co-ordinated by the CSA's Carved Stones Adviser Project, to interest Scots in recording, researching and conserving our heritage before it is too late.<sup>4</sup>

Acknowledgements are due to the following, for whose help with the original book I am indebted and am most grateful: the aforementioned Edwina Proudfoot; Dorothy Black; Anne Seaton; Doreen Hunter; Penelope Walker; and John di Folco. Robert Rodger was responsible for drawing the illustrations; and I am grateful to Pamela Burgess for allowing me to quote from Frederick Burgess's *English Churchyard Memorials*.<sup>5</sup>

Betty Willsher OBE  
1915 - 2012

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<sup>4</sup> The campaign baton passed from Edwina Proudfoot and Archaeology Scotland's Carved Stones Adviser onto Archaeology Scotland's Adopt-A-Monument and Treasured Remains Projects.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Burgess, *English Churchyard Memorials* (London: Lutterworth, 1963).

## Foreword to the 4th Edition

Archaeology Scotland is delighted to be involved once again with the republication of *Understanding Scottish Graveyards*. This much-loved classic is now in its 4th edition and has been enjoyed by generations of armchair enthusiasts, local community researchers, students and heritage specialists alike.

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland directly supported Betty's fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s and holds her archive of work. It is fitting to note that its successor body, Historic Environment Scotland (HES), continues to curate her archive of field notes and photography and has grant-aided this publication. Access to Betty Willsher's archive is freely available via HES Archives in the public searchroom and through **trove.scot**, a platform that brings together HES's unique and diverse collections in one convenient place.

It is no small testament to Betty Willsher's expertise and accessible communication of ideas that her book remains the seminal work on Scottish historic gravestones. We recognise that *Understanding Scottish Graveyards*, first published in 1985, bears historical importance as a document in its own right. With this in mind, we have sought a light touch approach to updating the text of the 3rd edition published in 2005. Remarkably, Betty Willsher wrote *Understanding Scottish Graveyards* at a time when fieldwork, research and publication were pre-digital. This 4th edition is created very firmly in the digital era. The open access e-book format aims to ensure that this work remains accessible for future generations. Throughout the text there are links to online information held by HES on **trove.scot**. This website launched in early 2025 and showcases a growing collection of records relating to Scotland's past and ways to get involved. Further information from the Betty Willsher collection can be found in HES Archives.

The 4th edition is an expanded as well as an updated version of *Understanding Scottish Graveyards*. For the first time it provides regional summaries of the carved symbols that Betty Willsher encountered through her astonishing survey of over 664 sites across Lowland Scotland. This regional guide has been written by Dr Susan Buckham using Betty Willsher's field notes and photographs. It is our hope that this new edition will inspire recorders to survey the areas Betty Willsher did not visit while returning to those sites she did record to help us better understand how well our historic gravestones are surviving.

No one person possesses the ability to see and record everything. However, every cause begins with a single champion, someone who inspires others to join them and helps to shape and direct their work. It is our sincere desire that Betty Willsher's legacy will endure by bringing new generations to visit, record and support Scotland's historic graveyards. We know that since Betty Willsher produced her records and books many gravestones and carvings have been lost to the hands of time, the elements, public indifference and cemetery management practices. But, if we act now, together and armed with new technology to record, research and

share information, we might collaborate to better understand Scottish graveyards. Only through a shared understanding of this rich and varied resource will we be best placed to enjoy, value and protect the treasures within our graveyards for the future.

We are aware that the long-term lack of regular gravestone maintenance and the effects of climate change mean many historic graveyards and their memorials are at an increased level of risk. Gravestones are heritable property and thus the responsibility of families to maintain. However, few owners of historic gravestones are traceable today or even aware of their duty to maintain family memorials. Furthermore, no organisation is responsible for maintaining and repairing the stones; the graveyard manager's duty is only to ensure the health and safety of visitors. Warmer, wetter conditions accelerate stone decay and encourage the growth of woody-stemmed plants. On historic monuments and walls, these plants trigger structural movement and instability, which, combined with stone decay, ultimately results in the loss of the historic fabric. Crucially, as many graveyards are under-recorded and under-documented, we face losing this heritage entirely.

Dr Susan Buckham was Archaeology Scotland's Carved Stones Adviser from 2001 until 2006. In this role she worked collaboratively with community groups, local authority cemetery managers and heritage professionals across Scotland to create comprehensive best practice guidance for graveyard recording, research and conservation. Archaeology Scotland provides support to community groups working with historic graveyards through their Adopt-a-Monument Project, and a wealth of graveyard information and guidance is available on the Archaeology Scotland website <https://www.archaeologyscotland.org.uk/projects/scottish-graveyards/>.

Dr Susan Buckham  
Centre for Environment, Heritage and Policy  
The University of Stirling

Eila Macqueen  
Director of Archaeology Scotland 2004-2022