

St Medden's Kirk
Aberdeenshire
A Right Midden!



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2007

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St Medden's Kirk, Aberdeenshire.

Introduction

I was researching St Modan (Or Medan) the patron saint of 'The Broch' (Fraserburgh) for my new book and I found on the ordnance survey map a church with the name 'St Medden'. The church is situated near Aberdeen on the north side of the river Don. Ordnance Survey grid reference NJ873156. Thinking it could possibly be connected to our St Modan I went to have a look on the 30th November 2005. Never in my life have I seen a graveyard in such a state of neglect, there were hoof marks everywhere, stinging nettles covered the graves, and rabbit runs riddled the ground making most of the ground soft in way of the graves. Its condition is a disgrace to the Aberdeenshire Council and the whole of Scotland. It's such a shame because as I wandered around the Kirkyard I could see several historic artefacts which to my mind are well worth preserving and as far as I know so far unrecorded.



St Medden's Mediaeval Kirk.

A Knight Templar's Grave

In the graveyard I found an interesting old rough undressed stone engraved with a cross (Possibly Maltese) and a dagger, and it crossed my mind could it be a 14th century grave of a 'Knight Templar'.



A 14th century Knight Templar's grave?

Pictish Symbol Stone?

Nearby there is another rough undressed symbol stone possibly class I Pictish, which is lying flat on the ground covering another interesting grave.

The stone has simple carvings, two of which look like some sort of circular disc with a cross in it and four small lugs on its circumference, these are placed one at the top of the stone and one at the bottom. Also below the top carving are two other carvings one of which is possible the figure of a man the other is not recognisable. If this is a Pictish stone then who lies under it? It must be someone important; a Pict Mormaer or king perhaps? Further investigation is surely required!



St Meddens Kirk - Pictish carved stone?

No Takers For My Soul

As I wandered amongst the nettles and the leaning grave stones I thought to myself this is appalling.. I stood next to a headstone inside the kirk and my foot dropped into the top of the grave, I got the scare of my life! The ground had become so unstable due to the burrowing of the rabbits that they had made a hole just below the surface and this collapsed with my weight.

St Medden's (2005)

I ventured into the ancient graveyard of St Medden's,
surprisingly I spied a stone that was really quite new,
but the place looked more like St Midden's,
it looked like a herd o' cattle had recently passed through!

Alone I walked into the roofless old kirk,
there were rabbit holes and nettles everywhere,
I stood on a grave and my foot fell in,
oh what a fleg! What a scare!

I thought my time had come,
about to meet my maker,
but as I landed on my bum,
for my soul there was no taker!

So it wasn't my time after all,
I'll live another day,
but in my mind it was a close call,
one memory that'll never fade away!

I reported it to the council,
they'll check it out and get it repaired,
but will I go back and check?
No, I'm too blooming scared!

Aberdeenshire Council Notified

I reported the Kirkyard to Aberdeenshire Council by e-mail that day 30th November 2005, I got a reply on 6th December 2005 from 'Bob' in Peterhead with a ref number ACE/39409 he said he would "put the cemetery on their winter refurbishment programme". See Appendix A and B for copies of the e-mails

An interesting visit but I learnt nothing about the illusive 'St Modan', maybe I will another day. Thinking to myself that the graveyard will now be tidied up by Aberdeenshire Council it wasn't a wasted trip after all.



An overgrown Kirkyard (November 2005).

Note - St Modan's feast day is 14th November.

St Medden's Kirk (2007).

I returned to St Medden's on the **7th November 2007** only to find it in the same terrible condition as it was two year ago. It seems that the Aberdeenshire Council have done nothing to put right the disgraceful condition of this kirk and cemetery.



Nettle covered graves in St Medden's Kirk.



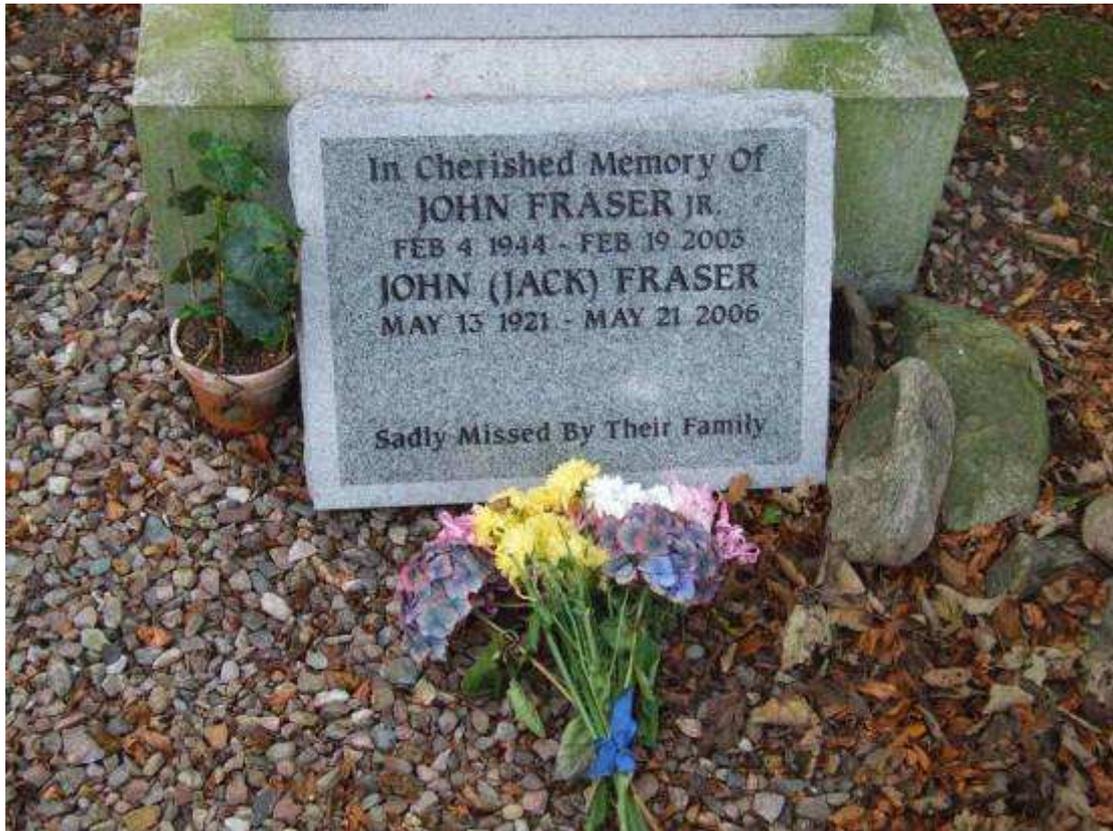
Graves overgrown and a rabbit hole.

A Recent Death

I also noticed one grave with flowers and on the grave it read 'to the memory of John (Jack) Fraser May 13 1921 to May 21 2006'. So since my last visit two year ago a man has either been buried here or perhaps his ashes spread and the reason for this seemed plain to me - other members of his family were buried here including his son, and perhaps it was his wish to be buried alongside them. To my mind this is a special place and I can see the attraction if only Aberdeenshire Council would do their job and sort the place out. It could even become a tourist attraction like the 'Chapel of St Fergus' which stands on the other side of the river.



A New Memorial at St Medden's Kirk.



I was so disgusted with the condition of the Kirkyard and Aberdeenshire Council's broken promise I decided to take photographs and give them to the press, Historic Scotland, the Society of Antiquities and anyone else who could help, thus the production of this booklet.



A moss covered mediaeval stone, St Medden's Kirk.

Mediaeval Stone?

I then discovered another ancient grave, a simple stone covered with moss I scraped off most of the moss to find carvings on it – these appeared as what looks like a Celtic cross, a crown or a thistle and some ancient writing, it seemed to me that this stone could date as far back as the 1500's or possibly even earlier. I asked myself “who lies under this stone?” It is obviously someone important perhaps a Bishop, a former minister or a laird.



Mediaeval Headstone with moss removed, St Medden's Kirk.

Sir John Forbes

Also buried in the kirk is 'Sir John Forbes' (1863 to 1934) 9th Bart of Craigievar and 18th Lord Sempill, Colonel of the Black Watch, and his wife Gwendolen even their graves are unkempt.



The unkempt grave of Sir John Forbes.

Lieutenant R.A. Forbes

There is also attached to the wall a wooden cross memorial which needs preserving before the woodworm take it, it is in memory of Lieutenant R.A. Forbes Sempill of the 5th Gordon's who was killed in action 2 June 1915. This man did his duty of his country during WW1 and it is our duty to pay respect to his memory before it's too late.



Lieutenant R.A. Forbes Sempill Memorial Cross.

Construction Of The Kirk

The kirk is made from stone and lime and what is left of the roof is stone, at the top of the walls you can still see some stone tiles, which shows this is a very ancient kirk possibly 13th or 14th century.



St Medden's Kirk stone tiled roof.

St Medden's Kirk Sacrament House

Sacrament houses are a 16th century version of the medieval 'hanging pyx', basically a more secure way of preserving and sometimes displaying consecrated hosts. So this artefact is about 500 year old and needs protection.



St Medden's Kirk Sacrament House.

No Grass only Nettles

The cemetery is so overgrown that there is no grass visible only nettles.



Three ancient graves overgrown with nettles.



St Medden's grave stones stand ominously amongst the sea of nettles.

Inside The Kirk

Is St Medden's the worst kept church in Scotland?



More Disgraceful Photographs

I just cannot believe the condition of this place!



Inside the Kirk Gate.



Grave of Margaret – daughter of Sir John Forbes



Inside the Kirk.



A Mass of nettles.

Dieing Weeds

Grave stone becoming more visible as the weeds die down.



St Medden's Kirk Hidden In The Trees

From only a short distance the church cannot be seen for the trees.



St Medden's Kirkyard from the entrance gate.



St Medden's Kirk and path as viewed from the road.

Conclusion

After taking all of these photographs it was clear to me that this kirk is something special and urgent action is needed to rectify the years of neglect that have occurred here. I thought of the restored 'Kinkell Kirk' upstream near Inverurie which to my mind is very similar, it too has a 'Sacrament House' and some unusual stones. So why has Kinkell Kirk and many other churches in Aberdeenshire been restored and not St Medden's? Why has Aberdeenshire Council's 'Historic Kirkyard Project' not reached St Medden's, and why has 'Bob' from Aberdeenshire Council not acted on my e-mail as he promised?

St Medden's kirk is likely to date from the 13th or 14th century and should to my mind be registered as a historic monument and a 'building at risk'. The five hundred year old 'sacrament house' itself is worth saving. The three ancient stones in the cemetery are well worth further investigation by someone more expert than myself, perhaps an expert from 'Historic Scotland' or the 'Society of Antiquities', and 'Sir John Forbes' lying at rest here may have turned in his grave many times as a result of the neglect visible here.

What really annoys me about St Medden's is that two years on the place is in the same disgusting state as I reported it to Aberdeenshire Council in 2005, and in June 2007 (this year) Aberdeenshire Council scooped a national gold award at the International Green Apple Awards 2007 for the Built Environment and Architectural Heritage (See appendix C). This award was given in recognition of its work to preserve historic kirkyards throughout the area for future generations. St Medden's Kirk is not even included in Aberdeenshire councils list of Formartine churches and if the body giving this award were to see the neglect as shown in this document perhaps the award would be withdrawn from Aberdeenshire Council.

Stanley A. Bruce

BSc; I.Eng; MIMarEST.

7th November 2007.

APPENDIX A

Copy of e-mail sent to Aberdeenshire Council 30th November 2007.

From: Bruce, Stanley

Sent: Wed 30/11/2005 14:42

To: inverurie.registrar@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Subject: St. Medden's Churchyard

I visited St Medden's churchyard on the northern banks of the river Don and was disgusted at the state of the cemetery, overgrown with nettles, rabbit holes everywhere, it even appeared as if livestock has been wandering through the cemetery. I noticed that one of the graves was dated 1992 which makes me think the state of the place is a recent phenomenon. Are you aware of this and is there a plan to rectify? It's ironic that within view across the Don is the chapel of St Fergus which is in a great condition, even a bit of a tourist attraction.

Stanley Bruce.
Strathearn House,
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APPENDIX B

Copy of e-mail received from Aberdeenshire Council 6th December 2007.

From: inverurie.registrar@aberdeenshire.gov.uk Sent: Tue 06/12/2005 14:01

To: Bruce, Stanley

Subject: Re: [ACE/39409] St. Medden's Churchyard

Sir,

I will have a look at this old cemetery in the next few days. I must admit that this isn't a cemetery that I have visited recently. If it is as you claim I will put the cemetery on our winter refurbishment programme once I have had a word with the local foreman.

BOB.

APPENDIX C

Aberdeenshire Council News Release 25th June 2007.

Aberdeenshire Council scoops top green award.

Aberdeenshire Council has taken a major prize at the International Green Apple Awards 2007 for the Built Environment and Architectural Heritage.

The authority scooped a National Gold Award in recognition of its work to preserve historic kirkyards throughout the area for future generations.

The trophy was presented by top botanist and TV personality Professor David Bellamy OBE in a ceremony at Kensington Roof Gardens in London.

The trophies are awarded annually in recognition of building projects that enhance the built environment and/or protect our architectural heritage.

The judges commented: "Dating from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, these Kirkyards have important architectural and historic significance.

"To prevent further deterioration a survey was conducted and a comprehensive programme of maintenance and repair adopted, saving these key locations for future generations."

Environment Planner (Built & Cultural Heritage) Richard Leith, who was the lead officer for the project, spoke of its importance to the area after receiving the award.

"This Council recognises the value of its built heritage and the contribution it makes to a wide range of interests, including the economy through the tourism industry and the support provided to traditional trade skills," he said.

"The commitment made to the Historic Kirkyards Project is considerable and as a consequence it can be justly proud of the recognition it has received through this prestigious award."

The award-winning project will be featured in the next National Treasures guide and the council will also be presented with a prestigious Green Plaque later in the year, during a special ceremony at the House of Commons.

The Green Apple Awards are run by The Green Organisation, an independent, non-political, non-profit organisation that recognises, rewards and promotes environmental best practice around the world.

Supporters include the Environment Agency, the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and other professional bodies.

National Organiser Roger Wolens said: "We had around 550 nominations this year and presented about 60 awards, so Aberdeenshire Council did particularly well to triumph against some very strong competition."

Article found on - <http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/news/release.asp?newsID=446>