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MORTUARY HOUSE

HISTORIES IN WOOD AND STONE

What can carved objects tell us about the culture of early modern Scotland? A significant part of the country's artistic output during that period consisted of carvings in both stone and wood which could be found in kirkyards, above doors, on gentlemen's fireplaces, set into the walls of public buildings, and in many other locations throughout Scotland's human landscape.



Gentry luxury at
Crail: the carved pew
of the Cunninghams
of Barns as
photographed by
Erskine Beveridge,
c.1890. Crown
Copyright: Historic

The Crail kirkyard contains 16 funeral monuments built between 1598 and 1723. These, together with eight carved pews within the kirk (1594 and 1605), reflect the wealth and tastes of the merchants and lairds of east Fife, as elaborate neo-classical monuments jostle for space with baroque architectures carved in newly-imported continental styles. They also map out the power of the burgh elite; parishioners entering at the edge of the kirkyard would pass through a gauntlet of monuments inscribed with laudatory inscriptions to previous generations of burgesses, baillies and town clerks. This patrician elite perpetuated their status by creating a physical space which both memorialised their forebears and quite literally herded the burgh's more humble inhabitants into the kirk like watchful grey sheepdogs.

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There is a conspicuous absence of gentry amongst these ranks of monuments, only one of the leading landowning families in the parish is represented here; the rest are commemorated in richly carved armorial pews which were erected inside the church a generation after the Reformation.

The Scottish Kirk put pressure on parishes to forbid the erection of artefacts of gentry aggrandisement within kirks, but were not always successful; indeed, the Crail kirk session reported gloomily in 1611 'that the abuse of burial in the kirk was again creeping in'. This offers a window onto a rich material culture of gentry self-representation that thrived even in the iconoclastic decades after John Knox.

It is notable that there are two separate spheres delineated here: the gentry within the kirk, the merchants in the kirkyard. Their segregation highlights the conflicting interests of social groups during this period, as traditional gentry families found their longstanding privileges challenged by nouveau riche shipmasters whose vessels full of Riga hemp, Gothenburg timber and Bordeaux wine once rode at anchor outside the harbour of Crail.

In Crail, at least, they made an uneasy truce, dividing up the spiritual heart of the burgh into separate camps, and leaving the rest of its inhabitants to make their way through that fraught iconographic landscape as best they could. The remains of that landscape—the carvings which still survive—tell us a rich and fascinating story about the life of this community 400 years ago.

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CRAIL PRESERVATION SOCIETY

The Crail Preservation Society (Scottish Charity No 016960) is made up of residents of the historic royal burgh of Crail, in the beautiful East Neuk of Fife, whose goal is to preserve the unique character of our coastal village while ensuring it grows and prospers in the twenty-first century.

OFFICE BEARERS & COMMITTEE

Hon. President - David Mann

Hon. Vice-President - David Jerdan

Chairman - James McCallum

Vice-Chairman – Dennis Gowans

Hon. Treasurer - Derek White

Hon. Secretary - Stephen Illingworth

Committee – Anne Black, Jude Gallon, Paul Hutchison, Kelsey Jackson Williams, Derek Maclean, Sutherland Madeiros, Laura McKay, Ian Ramsay, Sandy Young.

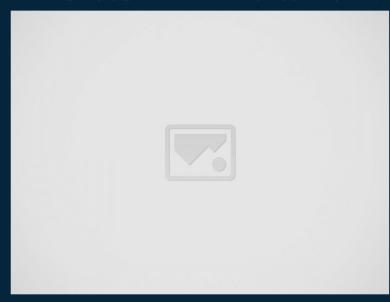
www.crailpreservationsociety.org

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CBAIL KIRK



CRAIL KIRKYARD

CRAIL PRESERVATION SOCIETY
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