

## 4. Mearnskirk Graveyard Project

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The churches of the original seventeen Renfrewshire parishes are a core part of the history of the region. All have been rebuilt or altered at various times. The kirkyards are older than the churches, thus potentially even more important. The Parish Church of Mearns and the Graveyard which surrounds it at Mearnskirk constitute an important part of the heritage of East Renfrewshire. The monuments and the inscriptions recorded there provide a unique link with past centuries. The 'A' listed Church building, with its original Session House and distinctive sentry boxes to ward off grave robbers at the entrance, will celebrate its bicentenary in 2013. The site has known religious activity for many centuries, probably dating back to the era of the Celtic Church.

In the spring of 2005, recognising that many of the memorials in the graveyard had weathered badly and were in danger of becoming irretrievably lost, a small group of concerned individuals began the painstaking task of recording the inscriptions.

A detailed plan of the layout of the graveyard was first plotted and then sections were allocated to the recorders. Their recordings were then checked and cross checked. The type and condition of each individual headstone was recorded as was the type of inscription and any mason's marks.

Initially the plan was to produce a map of the graveyard, a book and a CD ROM. After discussion it was decided to apply for a grant under the 'Awards for All' Lottery Fund in order to include the production of a website in the exercise. This decision was influenced to some extent by the current interest in Genealogy. The application was successful enabling us to produce a website but also to include a photographic record of each memorial which has been undertaken by Eastwood Photographic Society.

A record of the headstones which pre-dated 1855 can be found in *Renfrewshire Monumental Inscriptions*<sup>1</sup>. In the process of our work it became evident that approximately 10% of these recordings had weathered so badly that they were no longer legible. The Scottish Genealogy Society has kindly given permission to make reference to these inscriptions where necessary for clarity.

The inscriptions on 232 headstones have now been recorded, giving a database of over 600 names. The oldest legible inscription we have discovered is dated 1611. We have uncovered several recumbent stones not previously recorded and have exposed several others under the gravel to the left of the main entrance to the Church. We are delighted that, as a consequence of the growing interest in the work, Newton Mearns Area Forum recently allocated £2,500 for the erection of several fallen headstones and the stabilisation of others. Fourteen stones have now been restored.

### **Mearns Families**

One fascinating aspect of the recordings has been the re-emergence of the story of the world-wide entrepreneurship of some Mearns families. One such family was active in the Canadian lumber trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - The Polloks of Titwood and Fa'side, the Gilmours of South Walton Farm, the Ritchies of Langton Farm, the Rankins of Mainhouse and the Hutchisons connected with Middleton Farm. These

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell J.F. and S., *Mitchell Monumental Inscriptions of Renfrewshire*, Vol. 2 (Scottish Genealogy Society 1992).

names are all represented in the Kirkyard although their achievements have been largely forgotten.

The firm of Pollok, Gilmour Ltd was set up with a capital of £3000 between 1804-1806 by John (1778-1858) and Arthur (1781-1870), the younger sons of Thomas Pollok of Fa'side with Allan Gilmour (1775-1849). All three were pupils of Mr Jackson at the Parish School at Mearns.

This firm initially traded in timber with Scandinavia and Russia and later with Canada. Fourteen subsidiary firms subsequently evolved, largely staffed by members of the Mearns families already alluded to. They were:

Arthur Pollok & Co., Grangemouth. (This company was in existence prior to the setting up of P.,G. &Co Ltd and continued in business).  
Gilmour, Rankin &Co. Miramichi, New Brunswick.  
Robert Rankin &Co., St John, New Brunswick.  
Allan Gilmour &Co. Quebec.  
William Ritchie and Co., (afterwards Gilmour &Co.) Montreal.  
Gilmour &Co. Ottawa.  
J. Young & Co., Hamilton, Ontario.  
Arthur Ritchie &Co. Restigouche, New Brunswick.  
Ferguson, Rankin & Co., Bathurst, New Brunswick.  
Rankin, Gilmour & Co. Liverpool.  
Hoghton, Rankin & Co. New Orleans USA.  
Pollok, Hoghton & Co. Mobile USA.  
John & William Pollok, Calcutta.  
Gilmour, Rankin, Strang &Co., London.

The parent company was to become a major undertaking. Within a few years it was heavily engaged in the area south of the St Lawrence River acquiring forests, operating saw mills and building their own fleet of ships. According to Dr Thomas C. Welsh <sup>2</sup> over three hundred cargoes of timber were shipped in 1834 from New Brunswick and Quebec, the firm was reported to have 5,000 employees in 1835 and by 1838 owned one of the largest merchant fleets of the day, numbering between 100 and 130 ships with names such as Mearns, Fa'side and Broom.

Their first office premises in Glasgow were situated in Stockwell Street and from 1823 in 19 Union Street. The Glasgow residence of the three partners was at 24 Carlton Place but about the mid 1820s the Polloks built Broom House (now Belmont House School, Newton Mearns) as a country residence for themselves.

This caused much dissension in the firm and eventually to the dissolution of the partnership. Allan Gilmour, who purchased the estate of Eaglesham for £200,000 from the Earl of Eglinton, resigned in 1838 and died 11 years later in Hazeldean House. The firm continued in existence until 1873.

The Polloks and Allan Gilmour themselves chose their burial places in the Mearns Kirkyard - the Polloks' lair is in the south west of the graveyard against the boundary wall and Allan Gilmour chose as his resting place a site almost directly opposite the Polloks' memorial against the north west boundary wall. Strangely no inscription was ever recorded on the Gilmour lair. The Polloks' inscription reads:

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<sup>2</sup> Welsh, T.C., *Eastwood District History and Heritage* (1989).

SACRED  
 TO THE MEMORY OF  
 JOHN POLLOK  
 OF BROOM  
 who died 14<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 1858  
 aged 80 years  
 ARTHUR POLLOK  
 died 30<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 1870  
 IN HIS 90<sup>th</sup> YEAR  
 also  
 BARBARA THOMSON  
 WIFE OF ARTHUR POLLOK  
 who died in 1821

Two flat stones near the original entrance to the church (i.e. facing south) commemorate members of the Rankin family of Mainshouse (the single storey ruin of which can be seen on the hill in the centre of the Nine-hole Golf Course in Waterfoot Road). The first is a memorial to James Rankin (1752-1815), his wife Helen Ferguson of Auchentiber (1764-1838) and their son Robert who died in 1800 aged 2 years. The Rankins had six children, Alexander (1788-1852), Arthur (1790-1838), Marion 1792-1856, John (1794-1815) and two Roberts (1798-1800) and his 'replacement' brother(1801-1870). It reads:

SACRED  
 TO THE MEMORY  
 [OF]  
 JAMES RANKIN  
 who died on the 11<sup>th</sup> day  
 of March 1815  
 aged 6[3] years.  
 And  
 HELEN RANKIN  
 His wife  
 who died on the 29<sup>th</sup> day  
 of January 1838  
 aged 71  
 And  
 ROBERT RANKIN  
 their Son  
 who died on the 28<sup>th</sup> day  
 of March 1800  
 aged 2 years.

The five sons went into trade: Alexander founded the firm of Gilmour, Rankin & Co. with James b.1782, the brother of Allan Gilmour, in Miramichi, New Brunswick in 1812 and Robert (1801-1870) the 'replacement Robert' founded Robert Rankin & Co. in St John, New Brunswick. A second Rankin memorial which is now barely legible commemorates two daughters of Robert Rankin. Helen Rankin aged six years and four months and Agnes aged four months. They died from the effects of scarlet fever on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1838 respectively at Hazeldean House. The family had returned to Scotland earlier that year at the time of the dissension between Allan Gilmour and John and Arthur Pollok. According to the firm's history, the Rankins had already suffered the loss of another child in St John earlier that year <sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Rankin, J., *A History of Our Firm* (private publication 1909).

Another example of the involvement of these five Mearns families is the inscription on a Ritchie Memorial. It reads:

ERECTED  
B[ ]  
J[AMES] RITCHIE  
TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
[HIS] FATHER  
J[AMES] RITCHIE  
LATE FARMER IN [MEARNS]  
WHO DIED [6<sup>TH</sup>] APRIL 1[8][ ] 1  
[AGED][ 4] [YEARS]  
ALSO  
IN MEMORY OF HIS MOTHER  
J[EAN] [HUTCHISON]  
WHO DIED[2][ ] AUGUST 18[3]1  
AGED[ ] YEARS  
[ ]  
OF HIS SISTER  
ELIZABETH RITCHIE  
WHO DIED [ ] 7 OCTOBER 18[1][0]  
[AGED] [8] YEARS  
THE ABOVE  
JAMES RITCHIE  
[WHO]DIED AT SEA ON BOARD THE [SHIP]  
CALEDONIAN ON THE 17<sup>TH</sup> JULY ON HIS  
PASSAGE HOMEWARD FROM DALHOUSIE  
NEW BRUNSWICK AND HIS REMAINS  
WERE INTERRED ON THE NECROPOLIS AT  
LIVERPOOL ON THE [ ] AUGUST 18[5 or 3] 8  
AGED 21 YEARS

The story of the entrepreneurship of these hard working five Mearns families should not be forgotten. Nor should the role of the schoolmaster, Mr Jackson, who is thought to have taught fifteen of those involved in the various enterprises at the Parish School.

These are only two stories amongst the hundreds which this project provides the potential to illuminate.