

defENDING the dead

*the Legacy of
the BODY SNATCHERS*



The Resurrectionists (under license to Getty Images)



Perth and Kinross
Heritage Trust

Archaeology | Architecture | Conservation

what was a BODY SNATCHER?

The 'Resurrectionists', ghouls or body snatchers, were criminals who dug up fresh corpses to sell to anatomy schools for dissection. In the 1820s, when the practice was at its height, a body could fetch up to £12, a considerable sum roughly equivalent to a weaver's annual pay. Nowhere was safe from the threat of body snatching, even the seemingly peaceful country churchyards of Perthshire.

WHY WERE BODIES SNATCHED?

In the early days of anatomy, each student was expected to supply his own corpse to dissect. The supply was limited, however, because it was only legal to dissect the bodies of executed convicted murderers, which were few in number. The growing demand for surgeons and for training, due to advances in medicine and the need for surgery during the Napoleonic wars, caused the demand for bodies to rise further. At the same time there was a universal abhorrence of dissection, due to the prevailing religious belief that the body was needed for the Day of Judgement. Thus the crime of body snatching flourished.

were there BODY SNATCHERS IN PERTH AND KINROSS?

The practice was prevalent in the first thirty years of the 19th century during which time bodies were transported surprising distances. Churchyards throughout Perthshire provided a source of corpses for the anatomy schools in Aberdeen, Glasgow, St. Andrews and Edinburgh. In the Fair City of Perth, there was a passageway was known as Resurrection Close, because a 'sack-'em-up man' lived there. As far back as the 17th century, bodies were dug up and transported across the Tay from Kinnoull graveyard to a hospital at Atholl House in Perth (which stood on the site of the Sheriff Court). It is recorded that students found the stone steps on the banks of the Tay a convenient landing place for delivery to the house and that there was an underground tunnel or secret passage to the dissection room in the cellar.

In one case in Perth, such was the condemnation and outrage felt by the public, that a young wright who had aided body theft from Greyfriars around 1724 had to flee for his life. His shop sign

was hung from a tree close to the violated grave as a warning to others. In general, body snatchers faced stiff fines or could be whipped and pilloried. In contrast, although members of the medical profession, from the lowest student to the most celebrated surgeon, were often implicated in the crime, they were in effect immune from prosecution. In one high-profile case in 1820, a Perthshire surgeon named Drysdale procured the theft of a body from Greyfriars who turned out to be James Taylor, a gardener to the Earl of Mansfield at Scone. Despite the fact that the Earl pursued the case, Drysdale himself escaped punishment.

WHEN DID BODY SNATCHING END?

The situation came to a head nationally when the infamous Burke and Hare (wrongly termed Resurrectionists since they murdered rather than dug up their victims) were convicted in 1829. The Anatomy Act of 1832 allowed corpses to be procured by prior consent and from unclaimed bodies from work houses, creating a regular, legal supply and an end to the practice.



Inside Collace Mort House-modern timber props



The Moody-Stuart Mausoleum, Kilspindie

what measures were taken to defend the dead?

Across East Perthshire what may today appear to be extreme measures were taken to protect the dead from the Resurrectionists (remaining signs are shown on the Body Snatcher Trail). The wealthy were able to bury their dead in iron or lead coffins, under heavy stone slabs or in stone cists and in heavily locked vaults or mausoleums. As the problem persisted, affordable protection was organised by public subscription. Mort safes (wrought iron cages) were the earliest form of communal protection in the 18th century. These heavy cages were placed around the coffin for a period using a lifting frame, usually for a fee. Logierait, in highland Perthshire has three mort safes, which may have been used on a communal basis. Later on, and particularly in the first three decades of the 19th century, mort houses were built which stored the dead, for a temporary period of an average of six weeks, or until the body was no longer usable for dissection. Collace has one of only eight mort houses listed nationally by Historic Scotland. It is a small stone building, in which the dead were laid out. Guarding and watching over fresh graves also became necessary. At first the watchers huddled in canvas tents and rough shelters, but eventually watch houses were built, some of which had the comfort of a hearth. Watch houses can be seen at several graveyards including Coupar Angus, Kinnaird and Kinfauns. Watch notices and rotas were drawn up and these survive for Greyfriars. Armed vigilantes were even posted and on one occasion at Kinfauns churchyard, the trigger-happy watchmen found when daylight dawned that they had mistakenly shot a cow which had wandered into the churchyard. Simple techniques were employed, such as placing pebbles over the grave, which made digging harder and more audible, or using trip wires.

Mortuary Slab at Coupar Angus



Architectural fragments inside the Coupar Angus Watch House



The Perth Burying Ground

PROTECTING ASSOCIATION.

Mr.

You have been balloted along with others, to Watch the *Grey-friars' Burying Ground*, on the night of first,—The Watch will assemble at the Burying Ground Watch-house, at o'clock evening precisely. *Strict punctuality is expected.*

By the LAWS of the ASSOCIATION, a Member who finds it inconvenient to give his personal attendance on the Watch, may, in his place, send one of his Family, (if above Sixteen years of age,) or one of his Shopmen, or Clerks, or Journeymen, or a Substitute belonging to the Association, and approved of by the Committee. The Committee will provide a Balloted Substitute if you give the Officer notice to that effect, and pay him

☞ You will please inform the Officer whether you will Watch personally or how?

WILLIAM GREIG, Secretary.

PERTH,

185

Please bring this Ticket with you.

J. Cressar, Printer, Perth.

BODY SNATCHER trail



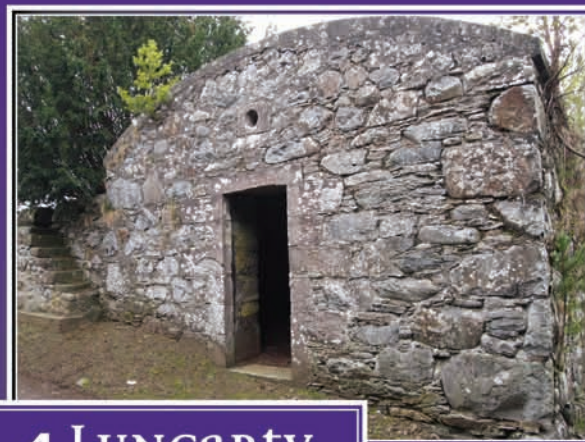
Historic Churchyards Project



6 CLUNIE
(Mausoleum / Mort House)



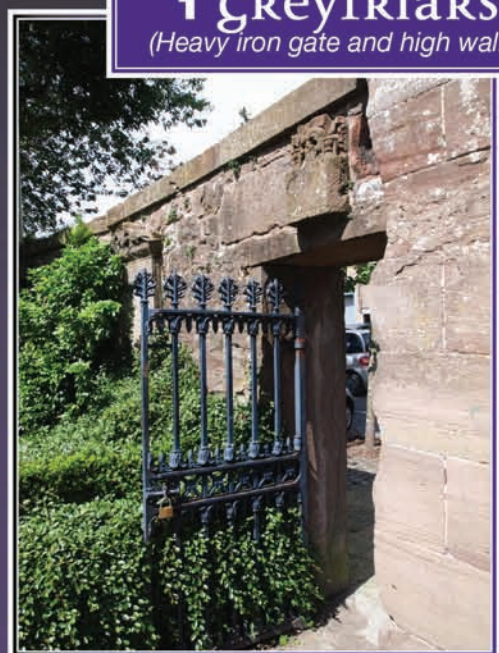
8 KIRKTON OF COLLACE
(Mort House)



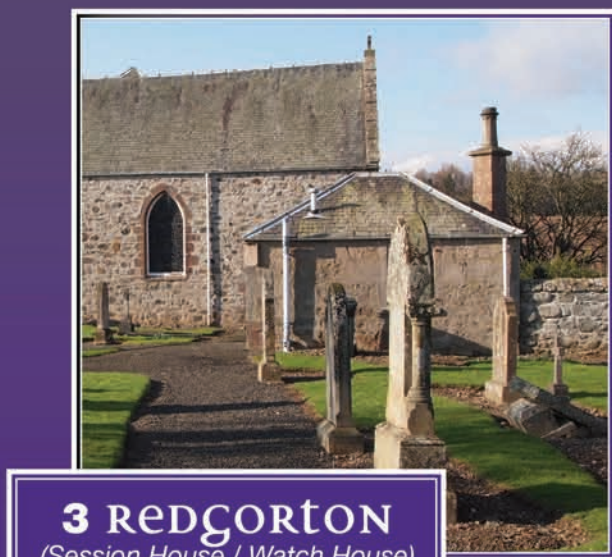
4 LUNCARTY
(Mort House)



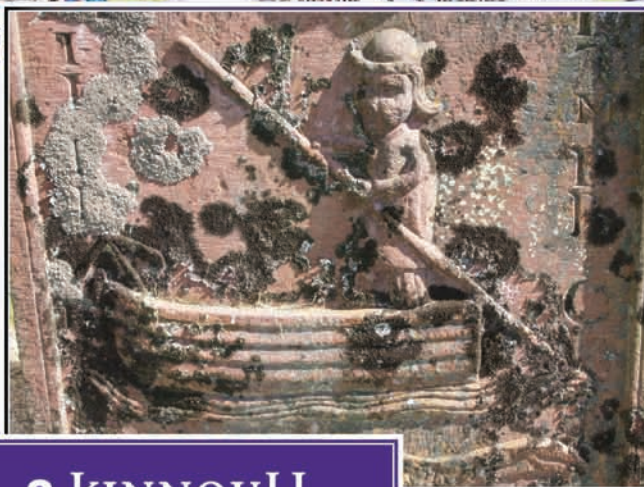
5 CAPUTH
(Pebbles to deter body snatchers)



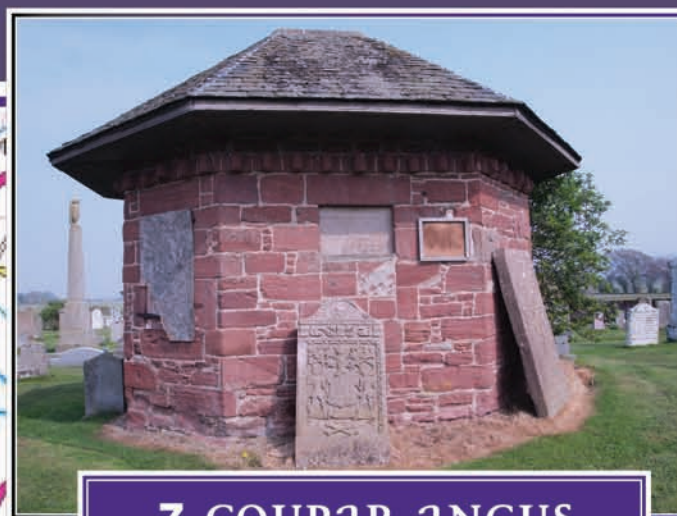
9 KINNAULD
(Watch House)



3 REDGORTON
(Session House / Watch House)



11 KINFAUNS
(Watch House)



7 COUPAR ANGUS
(Octagonal Watch House)



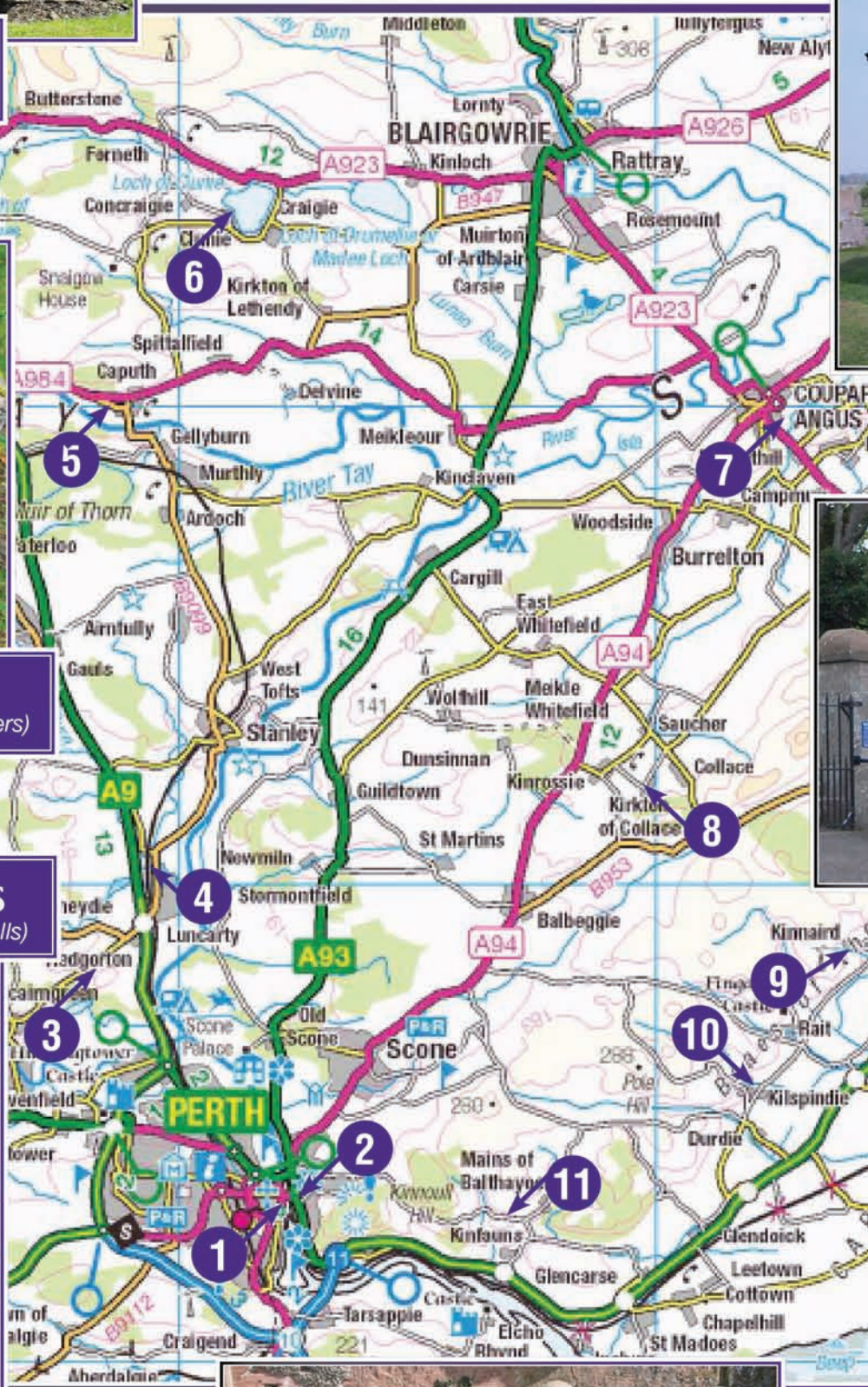
9 KINNAULD
(Watch House)



10 KILSPINDIE
(The Moody-Stuart mausoleum)



11 KINFAUNS
(Watch House)



2 KINNOULL
(The gravestone shows a coble (boat) which transported bodies over the river)

Further information

Holder, Geoff (2009). *Scottish Bodysnatchers-A Gazetteer*

Ritchie, James (1920-21). *Relics of the Body-snatchers*.
Proceedings of The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Vol.55

Various publications from Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust,
from the website www.pkht.org.uk



Mort safes at Logierait (in Highland Perthshire)

Footnote

William Burke was hung for his crimes and, not only was his body condemned to be used for dissection, but a purse was made from his skin. A plaster cast of his death mask can be seen in the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh.



Death mask of William Burke



Historic Churchyards Project

This leaflet has been produced as part of the Historic Churchyards Project by Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, The Gannochy Trust and Perth and Kinross Council. The leaflet has also been part-funded by The Scottish Government and Rural Tayside European Leader funding.



LOTTERY FUNDED

The Gannochy Trust

