

# PORT GLASGOW'S THREE ANCIENT GRAVEYARDS, AND THE CRUEL FATE OF ONE OF THEM

By

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## **Introduction to the three ancient graveyards**

The idea of this study was to find more about three old disused cemeteries in Port Glasgow. The town used them until the mid-nineteenth century. This was before the main Port Glasgow Cemetery was built. What I wanted to know was who had used them? What happened to them? What state are they in now and what is their possible future.

All three cemeteries still exist. The first is the Blackstone, or as it was known, the East Burying Ground.



The second is St Andrew's, or Parish Burying Ground



The third is Newark or the Chapel Burying Ground.



Two of the cemeteries – Newark and St Andrews - have not been greatly altered. The Blackstone cemetery however is quite different from its first shape.

I will start with the Blackstone Cemetery as it is the oldest in the town. It is in the west end of the old village of Newark. Newark existed before Port Glasgow, which came into being in 1668. The cemetery is a few hundred yards from Newark Castle. The village was very old, going back to the thirteenth century, so Blackstone may have a long history.

The St Andrew's cemetery surrounds St Andrew's Church, at the head of Church Street. The church was built in the early eighteenth century when the town was owned by Glasgow.

The Newark cemetery is beside the Chapel of Ease, or the former Newark Church at the top of Balfour Street, and was opened about the late eighteenth century.

In 1855 a Cemetery Act instructed towns not to have graveyards near where people lived. Greenock had already opened a new graveyard and Port Glasgow was well on the way for approval of its own. However, there was opposition to the complete closure of existing graveyards. People who still wanted to use the graveyards put their cases in front of a sheriff. One famous petitioner was John Wood, the shipbuilder, who was still alive at that time, and had more than one lair in the Chapel Cemetery. Each old cemetery was evaluated. The cemeteries in Port Glasgow were finally closed after 1859 when land was set aside for a new cemetery at Woodhall.

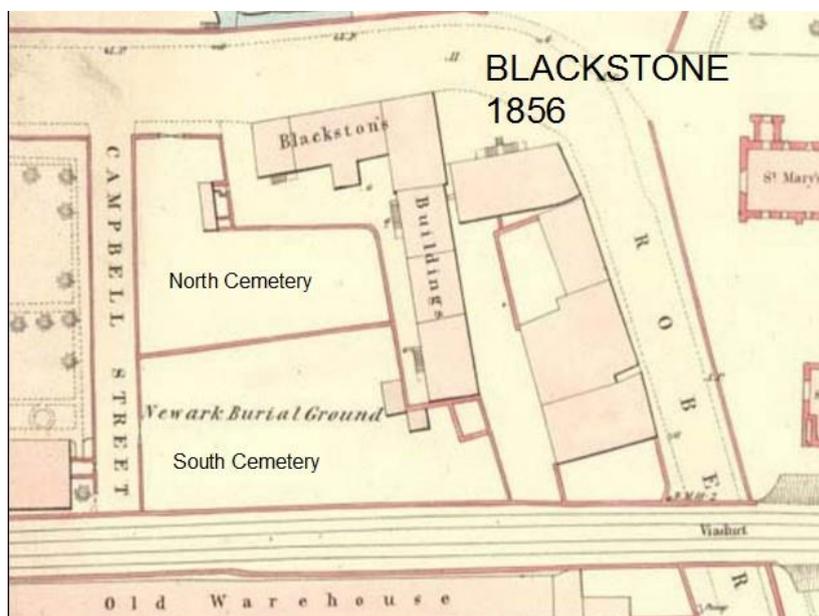
The practices of Victorian burials were graphically shown in testimonies in 1859, as people who still wanted to use the graveyards put their cases in front of a sheriff. The petition by the Town Council to Sheriff Tennent was that all three should be closed, based on lack of decency, offensiveness and danger to health. However, there was a leniency to those families who wished to use the lairs for family members in the future.

### **The Blackstone Cemetery**

The Blackstone Burying Ground fronts Bay Street and Campbell Street. It is old. There was no known church associated with it. In the 1830s it was used to bury cholera victims. It was used in the past for Non-Conformists such as Quakers, and possibly Catholics too. There are no well-known Port Glasgow people buried there although it is thought there were some very impressive gravestones at one time.



The complete graveyard was enclosed by a high stone wall. In 1859 there was a north and south internal division separated by an east-west wall. The northern division was used entirely as a burial ground for poor people. The southern division was for private individuals who paid. The area of each piece was approximately the same. The cemetery was surrounded by developments. There was a large mill, the Gourock Ropework, nearby. On the south-east, there were houses within 9 feet. In the north-east, there were dwelling houses that overlooked the graveyard.



The three cemeteries were set up principally for those who could pay to be buried. The Blackstone northern division was the most important graveyard for the poor where paupers and charity victims could be buried in Port Glasgow. The northern section of the cemetery was very crowded. Four feet of additional earth was added to allow more burials. Interments were laid as close as possible. The gravedigger as he dug a new grave would come across the next lying coffin and the one below. There was very little earth between them. In seven years, the common division had been filled twice over. The gravedigger was tasked to remove coffins where he saw that the body had decayed sufficiently enough to leave space for the next occupier. The topmost coffin was only two feet from the surface.

The southern division was very ancient. The oldest date on a gravestone was 1702, though there may be older ones. It was used for private lairs. It was good ground. Part of the southern division was taken by the Railway Company in 1841, and they added additional soil to this part to allow more burials.

In four years until 1859, there were 160 burials in the northern division and only 14 in the southern division. The local surgeon thought the interments were much too near the surface.

### **The Chapel Cemetery**

The Chapel burying ground is to the west of the main town. It is the resting ground of three of the most famous sons of Port Glasgow. It is where John Wood Sr, John Wood Jr, Charles Wood, and their families are buried. John Wood Sr and Jr contracted with Henry Bell to build the *Comet*, the first sea-going steamship in Europe. John Wood Jr completed the contract when his father died, and in subsequent years became the most respected builder on the Clyde. He was contracted to build the first four Cunard ships and built the *Acadia* in 1841. Charles Wood was John's brother and was well known for innovative ships. He built one of the Cunarders, the *Caledonia*.

The Chapel graveyard was crowded and there was no room for walkways. There are only eight to ten burials per year in the 1850s. The Newark Church is in the middle of the burial ground and the ground slopes down towards Chapel Lane. The burying ground is ten feet above the lane, which had fifteen houses. The soil was wet and clayey. In winter water had to be bailed from the graves. It was the practice to open old coffins and if bodies are decayed, remove them. Many bodies were not decaying.

The argument for closure was not that there were too many buried but that the ground was not suitable for a graveyard.

### **The Parish Cemetery**

The Parish Burying Ground was the ground used by Presbyterians since the town was founded in 1668. The graveyard came first and the present church is in fact built on stilts over the graves. The town belonged to Glasgow and the church was built by Glasgow money. There are many graves in the cemetery and they reflect Port Glasgow's past. There are sea captains and Glasgow merchants. There is also a slave merchant, Robert Allison, who prospered with his brothers and rose to own large estates from their slave dealings to Africa and the West Indies.

Dr Grieve gave evidence in 1859 of overcrowding in this graveyard, dangers to health and a situation contrary to decency. An undertaker said the graveyard was often shut for burials because of the overcrowding. The coffins were very closely packed. There were also five tiers of coffins in the common ground. People talked of nearby cellars having offensive smells. There was liquid oozing out of the graves and there were great difficulties with the clay soils in wet weather.

So in face of all criticisms all three of the graveyards were closed except for those who wished to be interred in an existing family grave. Sheriff Tennent's only stipulation was that the graveyards were to be properly preserved in perpetuity.

### **What has happened since the closures?**

The Newark Church building has been converted to flats, but the graveyard, with its war memorial intact, still exists. The gravestones for the Woods are still there.

Similarly, St Andrews Church is still used and the building is well maintained. The church stands at the head of Church Street and overlooks a town centre, laid out as it was in the 1700s. The graveyard is looked after and is still retained within its original walls. All of its gravestones appear to be in place.

Over the years, there have been major changes at Blackstone, or East Burying Ground. The site around the graveyard was bought over completely by the Gourock Ropeworks. High walls surrounded the upper and lower burial ground, but there were still some low railings through which small children could make their way into the ground to explore.

The upper ground had many gravestones still and they could be read, although in great disrepair.



There was still a reluctance to build on the land but in the late 1950s the Ropework wanted to use the land to build a warehouse on. The Town Council agreed that something should be done for a large business in the town. They decided to move the graveyard occupants to a new resting ground. This was to a common grave up in modern Woodhall Cemetery. This was planned for 1960. Fortunately, a volunteer historian from Roseneath heard of their removals and took time in 1959 to record all the legible inscriptions on the headstones that remained before the move happened. In 1960 all the gravestones were dumped or lost and the human remains moved. There is now a mass grave in the Port Glasgow cemetery with a single modern headstone.

A warehouse was built in 1970. The Gourock Ropeworks then folded as a company and the land that was used for the graveyard became waste ground and the beautiful Ropework Building, a rich man's apartment block. In the conversion, some of the graveyard on the west side became a car park. Small amounts of bones were found during this work, but little notice taken.

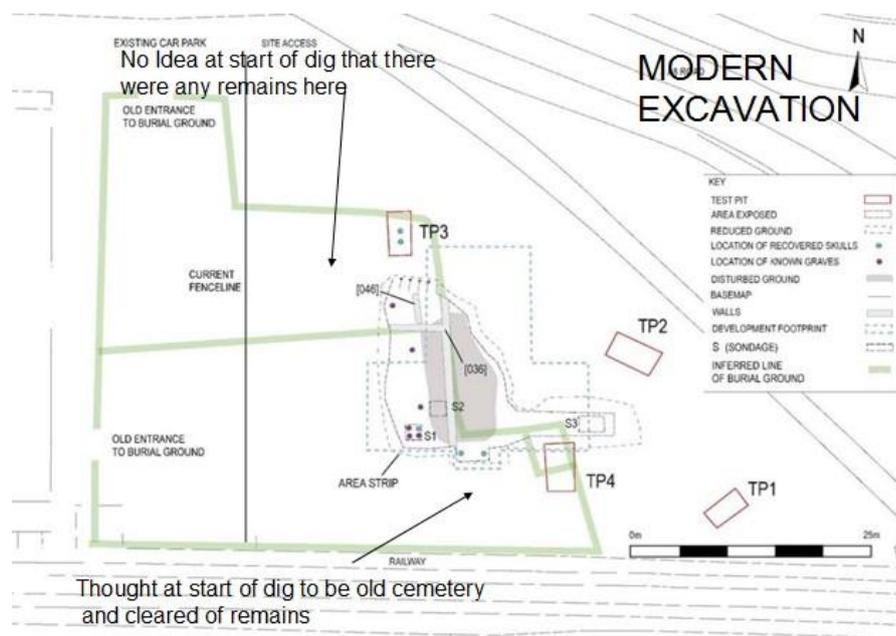
### **The Archaeological Survey of 2008**

In 2008, planning permission was granted to Clyde Homes of Bay Street, on condition proper archaeological checks were carried out. The plan was to build apartment blocks on both sides of the large Gourock Ropework building. Rathmel Archaeology was the company asked to do this.

There were two parcels of land, east and west, each side of the Gourock Ropework building. The west side of the mill building had no issues whatever and all results said that the land was free of any hindrances for building.

I was concerned only with the east parcel. There were two issues that the survey looked at on the east parcel of land. One was an historical burial ground (the East Burying Ground) that was thought to have been cleared, and the other was possible medieval settlement along Bay Street associated with Newark Castle. These would have been very important as they were thought to be directly linked to the castle perhaps as servants' quarters. Unfortunately, nothing was found of the possible medieval remains.

The eastern survey was carried out with four test pits in the area to the east of the Ropework Building. From the map in the Report, Test Pit 1 and Test Pit 2 were expected to be outside the area of the graveyard whilst Test Pit 4 was in the expected area of the graveyard and Test Pit 3 was also expected to be outside the graveyard area.



*Test Pits*

Test Pit 3 was the shocker. It was to the north of Test Pit 4. Numerous bones were found. The police were called in and the dig stopped. When the police were satisfied that there was no recent criminal incident the dig was continued. It appears that the survey team was surprised to come

across the bones in Test Pit 3. However, from studying the 1859 comments in the *Greenock Advertiser*, dealing with the proposed closing of the cemetery, the archaeologists had placed Test Pit 4 in the private section and Test Pit 3 in the common pauper section. It now seems that when the graves were moved in 1960 the part of the graveyard to be cleared was only the private section to the south of the cemetery dividing wall.

Many, many more burials have been left undisturbed in the northern part of the old graveyard. (The survey has a minimum estimate of over 300 interments but this may be doubled or trebled).



There has been little activity at the Blackstone site until recently. The eastern piece of land has a fence round it and the scrub grows wild in the area. I believe that if there are more burials found, approval for each body to be moved and interred has to be by a sheriff and that must be a large headache for the developer

The ground is now being built on at the west side of the Gourrock Ropeworks Building but there is no similar activity on the east side where the graveyard is.

There are major questions that arise from the Blackstone episode. It appears that the council in 1960 only did a partial job and left a large area untouched and perhaps hundreds or thousands of burials. They also

destroyed some of the heritage of Port Glasgow by destroying the gravestones that had been standing in the southern section.

### **Old West Kirk Example**

Yet they had had a local example they could have followed. In 1917 it was decided to increase the size of Harland and Wolff's yard at the west end of Greenock. This required the knocking down of the Old West Kirk. The community said that was allowable but the church had to be stripped down and moved stone by stone and rebuilt. More than that, the headstones were all to be moved as well, repositioned in the new churchyard, and preserved. A similar preservation of the tombstones could have taken place at the mass grave site in the Port Glasgow cemetery.

### **What of the Future?**

What does the aborted activity at the Blackstone Graveyard tell us about our authorities' promises to properly preserve these historical sites, now and in the future? What, for instance, happened to the physical remains of the gravestones at Blackstone? What, for example, will happen to those interred still at Blackstone? Is there a plan being formulated to remove them with dignity? Alternatively, is the plan to let their remains lie there in peace?

Some day there will be a need to reuse the Newark site or the Parish site. Will we follow Greenock's example of the old West Kirk or bulldoze away our heritage? It will need some careful watching by those who care for our forbearers and their dignity.

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