



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC198

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM11988);

Taken into State care: 1912 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KIRKCONNEL CHURCHYARD



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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KIRKCONNEL CHURCHYARD

SYNOPSIS

The Kirkconnel Stones are two gravestones lying in the ancient graveyard of Kirkconnel, ½ mile west of Sprinkell House. Both are now so badly weathered that little more can be said of them archaeologically. Tradition holds that they mark the graves of 'Fair Helen of Kirconnell Lea' and her lover Adam Fleming, the subjects of a traditional Scottish Border ballad made famous by Walter Scott in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.

The ancient graveyard (not in state care but maintained by the local authority) has remains of the former parish church of Kirkconnel, as well as a fine collection of headstones, many from the 18th century. A tall free-standing cross of medieval date, known locally as 'Fair Helen's Cross' (not in state care) and said to mark the spot where she was accidentally, but fatally, shot by Adam Fleming, stands at the edge of the field to the north of the graveyard, where the long-deserted medieval village of Kirkconnel once stood.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **1609** – Kirkconnel parish is incorporated into the adjacent parish of Kirkpatrick-Fleming and Kirkconnel Church closed for worship. It becomes the mausoleum of the Maxwells of Sprinkell, whilst the graveyard continues in use.
- **1772** – Thomas Pennant visits Kirkconnel graveyard and records the inscription on one of the two stones as HI[C] JACET A[D]AM FLEMING.
- **1794** – the first *Statistical Account of Scotland* (OSA) includes mention of the ballad of 'Fair Helen of Kirconnell Lea'.
- **1802** –Walter Scott includes the ballad of 'Fair Helen' in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.
- **1912** – the two stones are taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

Nothing is known of the archaeology that might be associated with the two gravestones. The fact that both stones are supported on stubby stone blocks strongly suggests that they do not lie *in situ*.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The two gravestones are thick slabs with chamfered margins. Both are now badly weathered. The smaller slab, 1.42 by 0.47m, is marginally better preserved, and bears the faint outline of a sword with depressed quillons carved in false relief. The inscription on it, now well-nigh illegible, was recorded by Pennant as reading: HI[C] JACET A[D]AM FLEMING ('Here lies Adam Fleming'), in Lombardic letters. The larger slab, 1.58 x 0.47m, is largely featureless, save for its chamfered margins.

Both stones possibly date from the 16th or 17th century, making them the oldest visible in the graveyard. There are numerous fine 18th-century gravestones around them, and a free-standing cross just beyond the graveyard.

Social Overview:

Not formally assessed. However, the story of 'Fair Helen of Kirkconnel Lea' and her lover, Adam Fleming, is still well known in the locality. The ballad was recorded by Scottish folk singer Emily Smith in 2003 which made it more widely known. The ballad also provided inspiration for Andrew Grieg's 2013 novel "Fair Helen".

A summarised account from the [Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches](#) website: 'This old ballad tells the story of Helen Irvine of Kirkconnel. Kirkconnel Lea was a small hamlet close to the village of Eaglesfield in Dumfriesshire. The bower in which Helen lived was within the grounds of Springkell Estate. She had two suitors, one of whom shot at his rival, but Helen, thrusting herself in front of her lover, Adam Fleming, received the fatal wound instead. Fleming killed the assailant on the spot, but fled the country to avoid the legal process, and enlisted in the Spanish Army. Years later, he returned to Kirkconnel and died by Helen's grave. He was interred alongside her. This tragic event took place in the 16th century. Burns extensively reworked the ballad for both Johnson and Thomson, writing to the latter in 1798 that the original is "silly, to contemptibility".'

The graveyard itself is no longer in use, though the lair of the Johnson-Fergusons, of Sprinkell House, situated just beyond the graveyard on its SE side, continues in use. It is not known how many people visit the place, though the graveyard and its association with Fair Helen is mentioned on various local walks websites.

Spiritual Overview:

The two gravestones clearly play a commemorative role in their association with the long dead lovers and this association, while not strictly spiritual, is the key point of their cultural significance.

As with any graveyard, the whole place provides a connection to previous generations.

Aesthetic Overview:

The graveyard itself has a certain romance and atmosphere about it, with many fine gravestones ranged higgledy-piggledy around the two stones and the ivy-entwined ruined mausoleum of the Maxwells of Sprinkell forming a suitably forlorn backdrop.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Is this the original location of the stones and if not, when and by whom were they moved?

- Do human remains lie beneath the gravestones, and if so whose? The relationship of such remains to the stones must be questioned, given that the stones appear not to be *in situ*. Modern archaeological techniques may help resolve these questions.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The two gravestones are closely associated with a Border ballad collected by Walter Scott which is still sung in the folk tradition in the present day.
- The stones are prettily situated in a long-abandoned, and atmospheric, graveyard.
- What was the full story of the taking of these stones into State Care in 1912.

Associated Properties:

Keywords:

gravestone; post-Reformation; Fleming; Walter Scott; Border Ballad

Selected Bibliography:

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OSA *The Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1794)

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RCAHMS *Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of Dumfries* (HMSO, Edinburgh, 1920)

Scott, W., *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (ed. A Noyes, Edinburgh, 1979)
