

## Symbols of Mortality

The tablestone commemorating David MacCulloch and Isobel Davidson of Achnagarry bears a marvellous assemblage of symbols of mortality, emphasising the importance of their families.



Below a shield and their initials, from left are:

**dead bell**, rung at funerals

**hourglass**, to show your time is running out

**coffin**, speaks for itself

**riband**, usually bearing "**Memento mori**" meaning "remember that you too will die"

**skull and thighbones** (sometimes skull and crossbones) symbolising death

**one sided spade** for cutting the turf of the grave

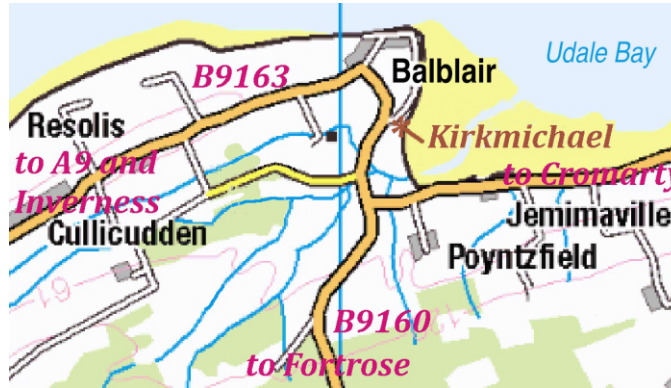
**gravedigger's shovel** for digging out the soil

All beautifully carved but sombre symbols of mortality.

## Getting to Kirkmichael

The historic site of Kirkmichael lies 16 miles from Inverness, beside the beautiful bird reserve at Udale Bay on the north side of the Black Isle.

From the A9, follow the B9163; satnav IV7 8LQ



Discover more about Kirkmichael and the families, heritage and graveyards of the north at [www.kirkmichael.info](http://www.kirkmichael.info) and <https://www.facebook.com/kirkmichaeltrust/>

The buildings at Kirkmichael were on the verge of collapse when they were rescued by the community through the Kirkmichael Trust. We were supported by the many funding bodies and private donors set out on our website and on our funders' on-site plaque.

Please help to maintain our buildings, display of ornate medieval gravestones and interpretation of the site and the area. You can donate via our website or by our on-site donation box.



LOTTERY FUNDED  
MAOINICHTE LEIS  
A' CHRANNCHUR



Text by Jim Mackay.

Photography by Andrew Dowsett and Jim Mackay.

## Guide to Graveyard Symbols at Kirkmichael and Cullicudden, and across the Highlands



Urquhart of Braelangwell memorial, one of the "doorway" pedestal memorials found in Kirkmichael, Alness, Tarbat and Tain.

The deceased, often a minister, passes symbolically through the doorway of death to eternal life. Death is symbolised by skull, crossbones, hourglass and skeleton; immortality by the winged souls and cherubs blowing their trumpets to raise the dead.

## Pre-Reformation symbols

Before Scotland became Protestant in 1560, the memorials to the great and good bore very different symbols. Our ornate medieval carved stones from Cullicudden and Kirkmichael are remarkable survivals. In the Highlands, most of these stones were destroyed or have worn away, although one or two may also be seen at Contin, Cromarty and Fortrose.



**Stepped Calvary base** representing Christ's steps to his crucifixion on Calvary Hill.

**Ornate cross**, so ornate at times it can be hard to find the cross, occasionally double-headed, and sometimes bearing leafed branches – the tree of life?

**Sword** – an influential family would protect the area.



**Pierced hand** of Christ and **chalice**.  
**Interlocking loops**, terminating in **fleur de lys**.

## Family Crests — and Marriage

Influential families erected enclosures adorned with their family crests.



Above, **three crowns** of Grant of Ardoch, **three cushions** of first wife Florence Dunbar and **stag's head and star** of second wife Kate Mackenzie. On right, **three boar heads** of the Urquharts, in Cullicudden.



Several stones bear a couple's entwined hearts; this one outside the nave door conveys a poignant message from the grieving widow whose husband had died just a few years after their marriage.

## Trades — and Wigg'd Skulls

Gravestones of the Highlands occasionally bear symbols of the family trade, in Kirkmichael the shears of the tailor and the crossed swords of the former soldier. Note the skull. If your family could afford a substantial gravestone, you would, in the 1700s, wish to be seen wearing a wig — even in death.



## Flowers

Flowers, representing rebirth, pop up everywhere on Highland gravestones. The lily and the fleur-de-lys contrast with the simpler floral carvings.



## Metalwork

The metalwork in our graveyards tends to be overlooked, but don't miss out: all around you are extraordinary creations.



Urns are common symbols, but what are some of these weird and wonderful objects, all found in Kirkmichael?

