



Bangor Abbey Graveyard

The burial ground adjoining Bangor Abbey has been in use for over a thousand years and is one of the most important places of interment in North Down and the Ards. The site contains one of the best collections of memorials commemorating persons who died in the 17th century. Those now inside the church, some of which were removed there from the churchyard, are dealt within the page on Bangor Abbey Church. Below are a few of the highlights of the graveyard that show the diverse history contained within.

A tanner's headstone

Though modest in size compared with some of the other memorials in this churchyard, the small headstone to James Armure is one of the most interesting. It commemorates a man who had been a tanner in the parish of Bangor. Aged 71, he died on Thursday, 20 June 1672, and with a precision unique to a 17th-century Ulster tombstone, at 12 o'clock.

The headstone features a carving of a tanner's knife, one of the tools associated with the trade of the deceased. The use of such symbolism is extremely rare in an Ulster graveyard.

A Presbyterian minister's gravestone?

Now standing upright against the south wall of the church tower, slab of Castle Espie limestone, bearing neither name nor date, features the Hamilton coat of arms and the motto *Fortis non ferox* (strength, not ferocity). It has a most interesting inscription in Latin. This has been translated as Here lies a presbyter, himself sprung from great-great grand-sires, great-great-great grand-sires. As well as from a grandfather and father [who were] holy presbyters. If thou considerest years, he perished a youth; But if either acquirements or virtues, as an aged man he departed.

In 1744 Walter Harris believed that this stone commemorated Rev. Archibald Hamilton, a former Presbyterian minister of Bangor. There was a dissenting minister of this name in Bangor in the latter part of the 17th century. He was the son of Rev. Patrick Hamilton, the youngest brother of Sir James Hamilton, Lord Clandeboy, and had had been minister in Wigtown until persecution in Scotland had forced him to move to Ireland. He settled in Bangor c.1672. It is interesting to note that around the same time that he was ejected from his pulpit in Scotland on account of his Presbyterianism, his older brother James was filling a pulpit in Dundonald that had been vacated by a Presbyterian.

Rev. Archibald Hamilton returned to Wigtown around the time of the troubles of 1689 and died there on 29 June 1695 aged 75. A fine tombstone to his memory survives in the old graveyard there. Leaving aside the fact that he died in Wigtown, his age at death would preclude this Archibald Hamilton from being the person commemorated



on the Bangor stone for it is clear that the deceased was a relatively young man.

Rev. Archibald Hamilton married his cousin Jane, daughter of Rev. James Hamilton, who had been the minister in Ballywalter. All three of his sons – John, Archibald and Henry – became Presbyterian ministers (John in Comber, Archibald in England and Scotland, and Henry in Donaghadee). It has been suggested that Rev. Archibald Hamilton was succeeded briefly in Bangor by a grandson of the same name. Rev. John Hamilton of Comber had a son named Archibald (who died before January 1703), and possibly this stone commemorates him.

The memorial window in First Bangor listing Presbyterian ministers who have served the congregations includes Rev. Robert Hamilton who was minister here for only a short period in 1692-3 (see below). Might he have been another son of Rev. Archibald Hamilton? There is no certainty about any of this and the origin of the gravestone in Bangor is something of a mystery.

A memorial to three Presbyterian ministers

A sandstone tablet of c.1800 fixed to the road wall west of the church reads:

Here lies the bodies of the Revd Gilbert Ramsay, Revd James Ramsay, Revd Robert Hamilton and his wife Mrs Mary Hamilton.

Posterity are desired to take care that the ashes of the dead in this burial place may not be disturbed by strangers.

The Rev. Gilbert Ramsay was a Presbyterian minister at the Abbey from 1646 to 1661, when he was ejected by Jeremy Taylor. He died in 1670. The Rev. James Ramsay, his son, was minister of Anahilt from 1694 to his death in 1708. The Rev. Robert Hamilton was, as noted above, minister of Bangor 1692-3.

The Cleland stone

A memorial secured to the north wall commemorates members of the Cleland family, among them John Cleland, late provost of Bangor, who died in 1714 [1715] aged 49. A portion of the inscription that was added in the early nineteenth century, clearly in an attempt to emphasise the lineage of the family, states:

Patrick Cleland of Bangor Esqr, son of Alexander Cleland of that ilk Esqr, died 1682 aged 57. Janet Blackwood, his widow, daughter of John Blackwood, Esqr Provost of Bangor, died 1689.

This Patrick Cleland had been living in Bangor since at least the late 1650s. In 1659 he was leasing lands from the Countess of Clanbrassil. He was then a merchant, but in a later deed of 1678 he is denoted a gentleman. His rise in status was no doubted related to his intermarriage with the prominent Blackwood family. In the Clanbrassil rent roll of 1681 Patrick Cleland's rent for property in Bangor far exceeded nearly all the other tenants in the town. The inscription indicates that Patrick was the son of



Alexander Cleland of that ilk', i.e. originally of the lands of Cleland in the parish of Dalziel in Lanarkshire.

The Nicholson Stone

Another family that was prominent in Bangor from the latter part of the seventeenth century was the Nicholsons. An altar tomb in Bangor Abbey churchyard, probably cut in the mid 18th century, records that Mr William Nicholson of Ballow died in 1661 aged 74, and his wife Jannet Brown in 1680 aged 80. A William Nicholson of Ballymagee who appears in the subsidy roll of 1663 was possibly the son of this man.