

.....The first and most interesting church I looked at was the long demolished East Parish Church in Chapel Street. It had begun life as a 'Chapel of Ease', that is, it was built by the Established Church of Scotland to 'ease' the burden on the overcrowded parish church which was and still is, situated about 2 miles north-west of Airdrie at the village of Glenmavis. A search of the Heritors Records of the time for New Monkland Parish (then called East Monkland) yielded nothing about the Chapel of Ease. (*National Archives of Scotland HR779/1*) Unfortunately, there turned out to be huge gaps in the 1780's & 90's book. What I did discover was a certain snobbish attitude by the Heritors, made up of course of the rich landowners of the parish, towards the inhabitants and feuers of the small plots of land in the village of Airdrie.

For example, at a Heritors committee meeting in December 1776 plans were drawn up for a new, larger parish church at Glenmavis. The Heritors agreed, "*The feuers of Airdrie should contribute to the building & upholding their fourth part of said church*". The new church was to hold 1200 souls. Some Heritors, at a meeting early in 1777 disputed the right of the inhabitants & feuers of Airdrie to a place in the new church. So in March 1777 "*12 respectable inhabitants of Airdrie, who met in the house of David Anderson innkeeper at East Monkland Kirk, signed a bond relieving the Heritors of the parish of a 4th part of the expense of the church, which is to be allotted to them*".

It was obvious that Airdrie was in need of a church within the town, so why did the Heritors continue to ignore the needs of the villagers? There was good local precedent for a chapel, Old Monkland had built one at Shettleston and another had been erected at Chryston in Cadder Parish. Cambusnethan had one at Morningside, so it looks as though the Heritors of East Monkland didn't want to spend any more than they had to. I knew that a Secession church (a Burgher Church) had been established in the town in 1789, six months before the Chapel of Ease, and I suspected that this had been the catalyst. A search of the Presbytery of Hamilton records (*CH2/393/6/115*) provided the evidence. At a Presbytery meeting on 26th January 1791, a petition, address to the "*Reverend Presbytery*" was handed in, signed by 436 inhabitants of Airdrie & other Heritors of the Parish of East Monkland. It went on to say *has of late, prompted (by) the Dissentions of the Burgher association to attempt at getting a settlement in the village which will cause a division in the parish, which the subscribers wish to prevent, being all firmly attached to the Established Church. The subscribers have long had it in their eye to get a Chapel of Ease erected for the accommodation of the numerous old & infirm persons in the village who are unable to attend Divine Ordinances at East Monkland.* It goes on for quite a length and was beautifully worded; the Presbytery just couldn't refuse.

The Chapel was subscribed and quickly erected. On the 1825 map of the Burgh of Airdrie (*Discovery Room, Airdrie Library Ref 171*) the Chapel of Ease is shown on the south side of Chapel Street, then a quiet lane with a few houses. It was, according to Macarthur's History of New Monkland Parish (1890) the first church in Airdrie to have a bell. As it was probably only the 2nd church to be erected this isn't all that surprising. The burial ground must have been in use from shortly after the completion of the Chapel and the earliest inscription handed down to us is from 1798.

There is an interesting map in Airdrie Library (Ref 54) dating from 1851 that shows plans of ironstone workings in Chapel St & North Bridge St. By that time, almost the whole of the town centre had been undermined, something hardly imaginable half a century earlier. It marks the East Church, as the Chapel of Ease had become after the Quad Sacra Act of 1834 and also marks the "Jenny Lind Pit workings". Poor old Jenny, one can't help but wonder if the famous "Swedish Nightingale" knew that an ironstone pit had been named in her honour!

Although the church was still on the map, it had almost certainly been abandoned earlier in the year due, as Macarthur puts it, *to working of the minerals underneath*. Mr Macarthur quotes at length from the Session Minutes but a thorough search of the National Archives, where all Established Church records are now held, produced nothing. No Session or Management Committee Minutes anywhere. There should have been almost 60 years of records, where are they? The congregation was forced to abandon the "Old Chapel" and merge with the West Parish church at the foot of the Wellwynd but, they left behind and continued to use, their burial ground.

At a meeting of Airdrie Town Council on 5th November 1879 concern was expressed at “the condition of the graveyards within the Burgh”. It was the Council’s opinion that they were overcrowded & unhealthy and, at the next meeting it was decided to limit future internments to present lair owners & their children, there should be no sale or transfer of lairs to other parties. From existing monumental inscriptions for Chapel Street it is difficult to find a date of death in the 1880’s and the latest one appears to be 1904. There may of course have been internments after that date but they are not recorded and I doubt if there would have been any by the end of World War I. So the “Old Chapel Burial Ground” became quite unused, apart from the local children for Hide & Seek and perhaps some old residenter making the odd pilgrimage to some long dead ancestor’s final resting place.

This state of affairs continued until December 1934 when Airdrie Town Council decided to use about half of the burial ground for building purposes. It was decided to exhume and remove the bodies to the council cemetery at Ryden Mains, next to New Monkland Kirk. The area in Chapel Street was marked off and as each grave was opened, the Burgh Engineer recorded the exact details of the work carried out. The headstone inscription, if one was in place, was transcribed in minute detail. He recorded the position of the lair within the burial ground and gave the measurements in exact feet & inches, the depth of the first body encountered and the condition of the corpses. As a family historian I would have been aghast at the treatment meted out to this burial site and would have actively campaigned against it. After I had finished reading the Burgh Engineer’s records I had a change of heart! It must have been a great temptation to take out a few bodies here and there, after all, some of them had been in the ground for almost 140 years and, according to the Engineer himself, all the bodies w a job worth doing. Every corpse is noted and a corresponding grave in Ryden Mains allocated to it. In some graves as many as seventeen bodies were found and recorded, more importantly, from a genealogist’s point of view, coffin plates, when found, were also recorded. I was astounded; I had never found evidence of this anywhere else. Let me show you some examples of his work. (I should mention that, “last in was first out” so all the coffin plates were in chronological order).

A headstone with the inscription “*John Shaw & Janet Shaw died 1804.*” When excavated the following were found – coffin plate for *Elizabeth Shaw aged 70 years*. Coffin plate for *Janet Shaw, died 1st October 1835 aged 72 years*. Coffin plate for *John Shaw aged 81 years died 3rd October 1804*. 5 bodied exhumed from this lair.

At another lair the headstone was so badly eroded that the only readable part of the inscription was “*his wife*” but, when excavated, the following were found – Coffin plate for *Elizabeth Brown 5 years 1891*. Coffin plate for *Hendry Sharpe 22 years*. Coffin plate for *Helen Granger aged 58 years*. Coffin plate for *William Granger aged 40, 1853*. 16 bodies exhumed from this lair. Lair measured 10 feet X 8 feet. 1st body was 1 foot from the surface. The strange thing about this lair was; the evening before I discovered this book a friend had asked my advice on how she could find the date of death for one of her direct ancestors. She had found him on the 1851 census living at Airdrie but on the 1861 census his wife was described as a widow (she married again soon afterwards). I said I was going to the Discovery Room in Airdrie Library the next day and would see what I could find. I asked for her ancestor’s name, his wife’s name, maiden surname and the name of the man she subsequently married after 1861, just in case they were all buried together. Of course, by next morning in the Discovery Room I had completely forgotten about this request, my memory having more holes than a colander. The direct ancestor the Motherwell lady had been looking for was William Granger and as soon as I saw the name it hit me like a brick! His wife’s name was Elizabeth Brown and she had later married Luke Sharpe. (What a super name) I was so excited about this find that I was almost asked to leave the room! If the burgh engineer had failed to record the coffin plates we would never have know that William Granger had died in 1853. Statutory registration did not commence in Scotland until two years later, on January 1st 1855.

Sadly, even though 788 bodies were exhumed in 1934, there were only 69 coffin plates recovered.

The headstones from the 1934 – 1935 exhumations were carefully transcribed but, to date, I have been unable to determine the current whereabouts of these stones. It could be that they were destroyed at the time.

The fate of the remaining part of Chapel Street Burial Ground was sealed early in 1963. The Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser intimated to its readers on January 13th of that year that the Town Council had it in mind to turn the old dilapidated burial ground in chapel Street into a much needed car park. A search of the Town Council Minutes reveals that on 11th February 1963 the Convenor of the Roads & Sewers Committee had had the old churchyard surveyed and, he went on to report, prior to commencement of the main work, inscriptions would be taken from the stones and that *“a small amount of excavation was necessary adjacent to Mack Street but it would be very shallow”*. On 8th April 1963 the estimate for “removing the headstones and importing & spreading ashes to a depth of not less than 12 inches” was £2.450. Work continued throughout the summer, by June more “infilling material” was required but work was still progressing satisfactorily. At the June meeting it was also decided to lower the original churchyard wall at a cost of £120. At the August meeting the Burgh Surveyor reported that material from demolished buildings was being used to form the base of the proposed car par, and by September 9th work was almost complete. As far as I could see, there was no other mention of exhumations, and my understanding is that the bodies are still “in situ” below the grassed area at the Chapel Street flats. The headstones were taken to Ryden Mains cemetery and a copy of the inscriptions can be found at the Discovery Room