

The Preacher Stone in the Bathgate Hills

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ABSTRACT

The Preacher Stone is a natural boulder in the Bathgate Hills which is inscribed with a text recording a sermon preached on 14 January 1738 by ‘the worthy Mr Hunter’. This was an event of some significance in the early development of the Secession Church. The stone has not hitherto been the subject of a detailed study, and the various published references to it are incorrect or defective in some respect. In this article we give an accurate account of the stone and its environs, we comment on the letterforms which were intended to add dignity to the inscription, and we explain the importance of John Hunter in the context of the newly developing Secession. We draw on the unpublished Minutes of the Associate Presbytery and of the Session of the Craigmaiten congregation to correct some of the misunderstandings that have arisen about the place and date of the event it records, and maintain the veracity of the inscribed text.

INTRODUCTION

The Preacher Stone (or Preaching Stone, or Craigmaiten Stone) is a sandstone boulder inscribed with a text which records a sermon preached on 14 January 1738 by ‘the worthy Mr Hunter’, an event of some significance in the early development of the Secession Church (Illus 1). It is located on the north-east slope of Witchcraig Hill in the ecclesiastical parish of Torphichen in West Lothian (Illus 2). Not much has been written about it and some of what has been published is confused. It is recorded as the ‘Craigmaiten stone’ on the Canmore website of Historic Environment Scotland ID 47987, but the NGR coordinates given (NS 994 723) are 500 metres out (they should be 9935 7283); the photograph is indistinct; there is no transcription of the text, and the date is rather oddly given as ‘unknown’. In the first report of the stone W Mackelvie (Mackelvie et al 1873: 169–70) says that it is inscribed with the words from Ezekiel

37:26, from which Hunter preached, whereas the inscription gives only a reference to the verse. Moreover, he says that it long remained as a memorial of the spot, thereby implying that it no longer existed – clear evidence that he had not seen it; and he dates the sermon to January 1739 rather than 1738, a point that will be discussed below. The same date is given by Robert Small (1904, vol 1: 668), who refers briefly to the site and the inscribed stone, and by Alex Bisset (1906: 35), who follows Mackelvie closely.

T Ratcliffe Barnett (1937: 211) refers to the ‘Preaching Stone’ in his book *Border By-ways and Lothian Lore* first published in 1925 and revised and reprinted several times. He gives a transcription of the text and conjures up a typically romantic image of the hardy Seceders with plaid and staff who first gathered there to worship God, but he confuses the issue by saying that the stone tells the passer-by that on this spot Mr John Hunter preached from a certain text on the second Sabbath of January 1738, whereas the

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ILLUS 1 The Preacher Stone. (Photograph by A M Small)

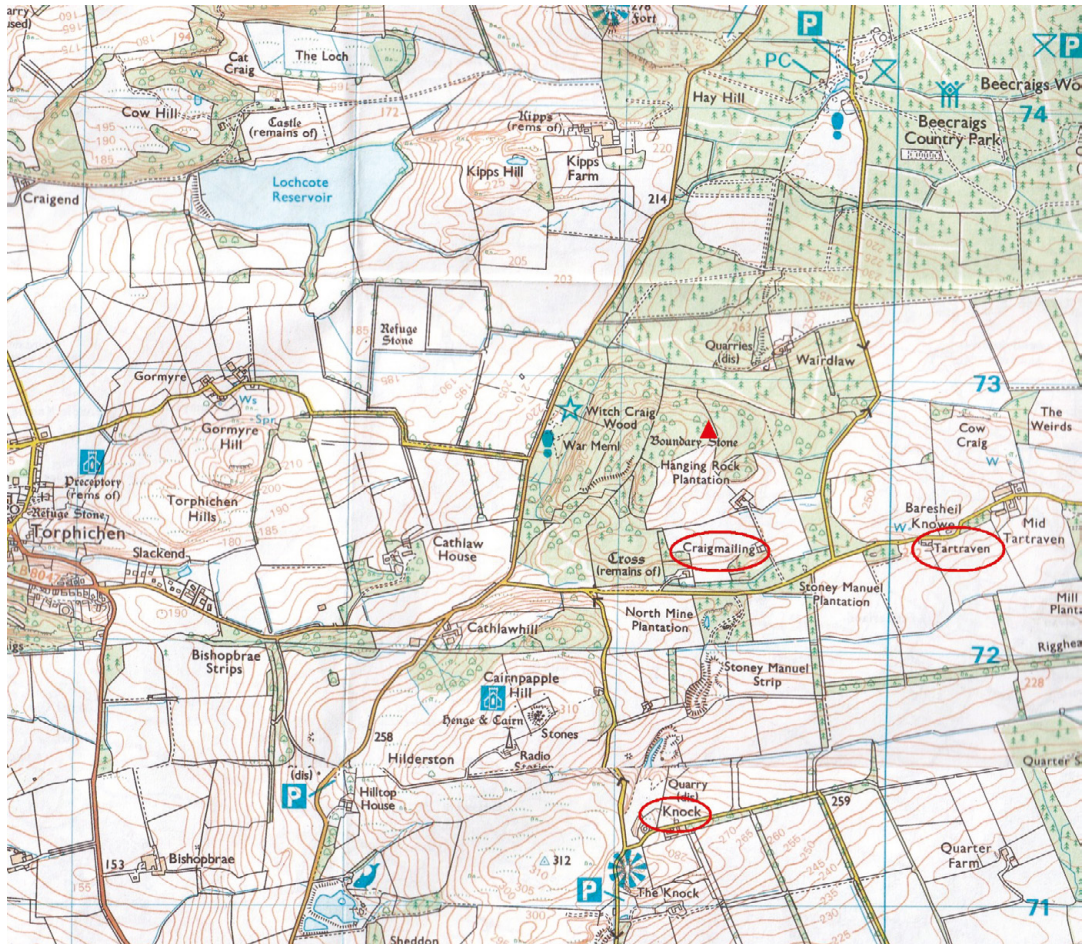
inscription records the date as 14 January, which was a Saturday in the Julian calendar in use at that time.¹

There is then a gap of rather more than 30 years in which the stone appears to have been practically forgotten. Interest in it seems to have been reawakened by two illustrated guides to the Bathgate Hills published by West Lothian Council: *Bathgate Hills Country Park: An Illustrated Guide* in 1974 and *The Bathgate Hills* in 1982 (Whyte 1974; West Lothian Leisure and

Recreation Department 1982). They give a clear photograph of the stone but no location map and no references. More recent publications are inadequate or confusing. William Hendrie in his book *Discovering West Lothian* (Hendrie 1986: 170) states that ‘a carved cross still marks the preaching stone which served as a rough and ready pulpit’. But there is no cross on the stone. Richard Jacques & Charles McKean (1994: 48) refer to it briefly in their small volume on West Lothian in the RIAS series of *Illustrated Architectural*

Guides, giving a loose transcription of the text, but no illustration. Jack Smith in his booklet on Torphichen (Smith 1997: 59) refers to the boulder which is still known as the Preacher's Stone high on the slopes of Witchcraig, in one of the fields of Craigmalen Farm, but he confuses the event which it commemorates with a highly controversial dispute in 1750 over the appointment of a new minister to Torphichen. William Millan in another book printed for local distribution

(Millan 2002: 4–5) gives a better account of the event, derived mainly from Bisset (1906), but supplemented by information from the title deeds of Craigmalen Farm, which he had been shown by the owner. He provides a photograph of the inscription on the stone and a transcription of the text, but (as usual) no location map. He argues that the stone-cutter mistook the date of the event he was recording, a view which we reject below.



ILLUS 2 The Bathgate Hills, showing the location of the Preacher Stone (red triangle). The 'Boundary Stone' some 200m to the west is a cross-marked stone associated with the sanctuary of Torphichen Preceptory. Lower Craigmalen (Craigmaling), (West) Tartraven and Knock are distinguished by red elliptical frames. Bormie (Balvornie) was situated in the vicinity of the parking lot for Beecraigs Country Park at the north end of the map. From the Ordnance Survey *Explorer Map 349*, 2015. (OS © Crown copyright 2015 FL-CS-379969-D22Z2N7)

The fact that there is so much confusion in the accounts of the stone and in the transcription of the text can be explained in part by the fact that it is extremely difficult to find. It is not marked on any edition of the Ordnance Survey maps. People who look for it now must find their way through a dense plantation of conifers to a small glade. This has been left unplanted; but much of it is overgrown with whin (Illus 3). There is no protective fence around the stone. There is good reason, therefore, to give a more thorough account of the stone and of the event which it records.

THE INSCRIPTION

The inscribed surface of the stone, which has been slightly smoothed, measures *c* 63cm wide × 36cm high. Some of the letters are rather weather-worn and others are partially covered with lichen encrustation. Nevertheless, the text can be read in its entirety (Illus 4). It reads:

JAN^Y 14TH 1738 HERE WAS
PRE^D Y^E 1ST SER^N BY Y^E MOST
WORTHY M^R HUNTER FR-
OM Y^E 37TH CHAP^R OF EZEK^L
AND Y^E 26TH VERSE •
1732

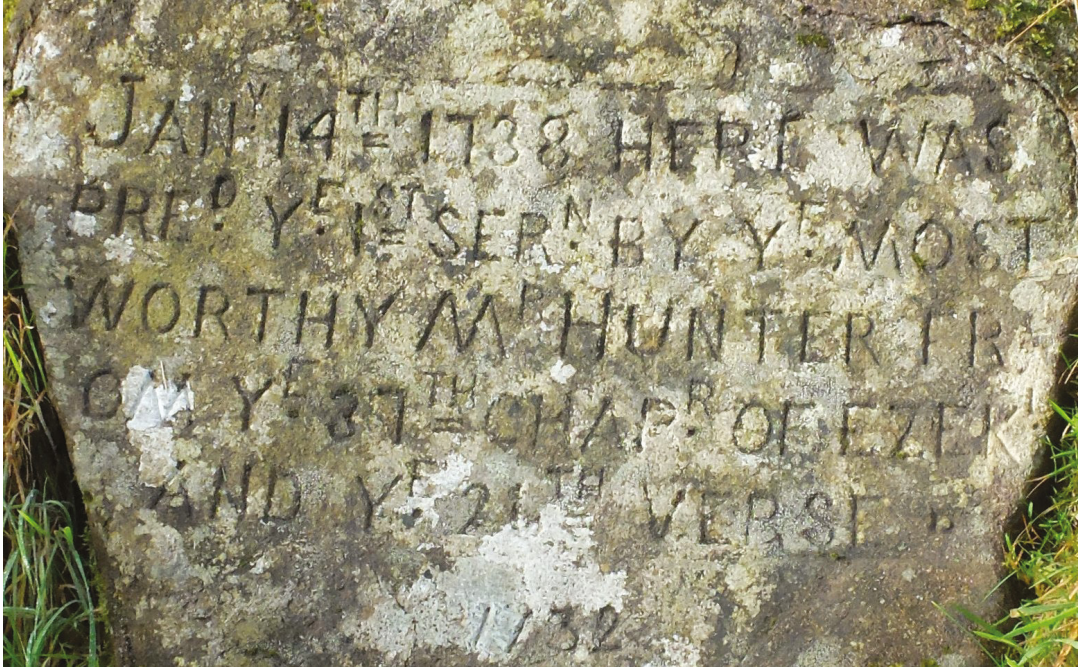
January 14th 1738. Here was preached the 1st sermon by the most worthy Mr Hunter from the 37th chapter of Ezekiel and the 26th verse. 1732

The relevant verse of Ezekiel, in the King James Version of the Bible, which Hunter would have used, reads:

Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore (Ezekiel 37:26).



ILLUS 3 Carola Small standing at the Preacher Stone. (Photograph by A M Small)



ILLUS 4 The inscription. (Photograph by A M Small)

THE LETTERFORMS OF THE INSCRIPTIONS

THE MAIN INSCRIPTION

Most letters are *c* 4cm high, though the initial J is larger (5cm), as is the initial H of Hunter. It cannot be said, however, that all capital letters are enlarged, since the E of Ezekiel remains at the standard size. Several words are contracted, with the final letter shown at a smaller size (*c* 2.3cm) in superscript and with a subscript dot. Ordinal numbers (14th, 1st, 27th, 36th) are also shown with the letters on a smaller scale in superscript, but with double underline. All the letterforms are sans-serif versions of Roman capitals with their main axis at right angles to the base line. Most of them are about 2mm deep. Among the more distinctive are the E with short central bar, the R with straight or nearly straight ‘leg’ attached to the ‘eye’ of the letter, the W consisting of two Vs, attached but not overlapping at the top, the M with slanting sides and central V extending to the

base line, and the O which is considerably less wide than high. The main part of the inscription ends with a large dot which separates it from the number 1732, which is centrally placed below it outside the smoothed surface.

Some of these features can be compared to those analysed by George Thomson (2001) in his study of 13,016 funerary inscriptions from 132 sites on mainland Scotland. In this very large sample, the E with short central bar (Thomson’s E_{short}) occurs first in North-East Scotland in 1524 and has an average date of 1810 in the whole of Scotland; the R with straight ‘leg’ (his R_{straight}) is found first in North-East Scotland in 1476 and has an average date of 1795; and the W consisting of two Vs, attached without overlap at the top (his W_{norm}) appears in Central Scotland in 1627 and has an average date of 1821. Thomson does not discuss instances of M with slanting sides,² but his tables show that the M_{long} (with central V extending to the base line) appears, like the W_{norm}, in Central Scotland in 1627. It has an average date of

1822. The most extraordinary feature, however, is the archaic letter thorn, inscribed as Y on the Preacher Stone, in place of ‘th’ in the definite article ‘the’ at four points in the text. According to Thomson (2001: 351, 368), it occurs on only two of his inscriptions: one at Portpatrick dated 1717 and the other at Brechin of 1755. The date of our inscription falls neatly between the two. Betty Willsher (1996: 87) records another, of James Winter who died at Peathaugh and was buried at Cortachy in 1732. Thorn occurs twice in the four lines of verse which follow the prose epitaph and record his exploits at a skirmish with caterans at the Water of Saughs.³

In short, the letterforms are generally appropriate for an inscription cut in the 1730s. The use of sans-serif letters is, however, noteworthy. In the areas studied by Thomson (2001: 354, table 2) sans-serif letterforms appeared first in 1648; but they were always rare, and it is unusual to find them employed in an inscription of this length and complexity. The combination of the usage of bare sans-serif letterforms with the letter thorn suggests that the stone-cutter or whoever commissioned the inscription intended the lettering to give an impression of simplicity and solemnity.

THE SECOND INSCRIPTION

The digits of the number 1732 are quite different. They are slightly shorter in height than those of the main text. Whereas the number 1 in the first text is a simple vertical line, in the second it is inclined slightly upwards to the right, as is the vertical bar of the number 7, which meets the horizontal bar at a slight acute angle, unlike the right angle of the first inscription. The most significant difference is in the number 3: in the first text it consists of two equal rounded parts whereas in the second it has a horizontal top linked by a short oblique line to the rounded lower part at rather more than half its height. It is evident from these discrepancies that the number 1732 was incised by a different stone-cutter, probably at a different time, but not necessarily separated by a long interval, since both forms are attested on gravestones of the first half of the 18th century.

INSCRIPTIONS ON BOULDERS

A trawl through the entries on inscribed stones in the Canmore online catalogue of sites of Historic Environment Scotland reveals a small number of natural boulders which were inscribed in the 17th or 18th centuries, mostly with short texts. Some are of uncertain significance. A few, however, record events of some historical importance, usually connected with episodes in the Covenanting Wars of the 17th century. So, for example, Smith’s Stone (Canmore ID 64817), a rough block of whinstone with the name ‘W Smith’ crudely inscribed on it, is said to mark the spot where the Covenanter William Smith fell when he was shot by order of Douglas of Stenhouse and Laurie of Maxwelton on 29 March 1685. Sometimes the person or event commemorated has been forgotten, as in the case of an inscribed stone found on the Western slope of the Bochel in the parish of Inveravon, which bears the letters WG and the date 1710 (Canmore ID 87428). It is thought to commemorate a certain William Gordon, but nothing is known of the episode that it records. In none of these inscribed boulders is the inscription as detailed and well executed as ours on the Preacher Stone.

THE PREACHER

The preacher is identified by Mackelvie (Mackelvie et al 1873: 269) and by Robert Small (1904, vol 1: 668) as John Hunter, whose brief career can be reconstructed from other references in Small’s two volumes (Small 1904, vol 1: 668; vol 2: 247, 250), and from an essay of consolation given by Ralph Erskine, one of the founders of the Secession Church, to Hunter’s congregation at Morebattle after his premature death (Erskine 1739: 69–87, ‘Postscript’). They can be supplemented by some notes written by Donald Fraser in his publication of Ralph Erskine’s diary (Fraser 1834: 262–5). Hunter was a native of Roxburghshire and had been a teacher at Linton in that county. He then passed through a theological course in the Established Church but was rejected along with some other candidates for

the ministry by the dominant clergy, who were wary of his evangelical ideas. He then lay low for a while before throwing in his lot with the Secession. He was the first Probationer for the ministry in the Secession Church, was licensed to preach on 6 June 1738, and ordained to the ministry of Morebattle and Stitchill on 17 October 1739. But he died suddenly on 7 January 1740, less than three months after taking up his first charge, leaving a widow and young children.

His death was a grave loss for the new church because he had already distinguished himself as an outstanding preacher. Ralph Erskine, who had preached the sermon at his ordination, published it subsequently with the postscript *in memoriam* mentioned above, in which he referred to the ‘benefit of hearing the joyful sound of the glorious Gospel out of his pleasant edifying lips’ (Erskine 1739: 69). Perhaps the greatest accolade came many years later from William Robertson, the famous Principal of the University of Edinburgh, who had heard Hunter preach when he was a youth of 16. He had been taken by his grandfather, the minister of the Established Church at Gladsmuir in East Lothian, to a fast in the vicinity of the village to hear Hunter preach. McKerrow (1848: 146) records that:

Many years after, when the Principal had raised himself to the highest eminence ... in a conversation which he had with one of the ministers of the Secession, he stated to him the circumstance of his having heard, in early life, Mr. Hunter preach, and the strong impression which had been produced upon him by Mr. Hunter’s pointed appeals; and added, ‘Even yet, when I retire to my studies, the recollection of what I then heard thrills through my mind.’²⁴

Although the site of the stone is now encircled by trees, it is still possible to envisage that it was a suitable place for an outdoor sermon. Above the stone there is a slight natural platform on which the preacher’s tent would have stood, and below it the ground levels off slightly, leaving ample space for an audience. The open view which it must have enjoyed to the south-west has been completely obscured by the recent plantation, but in spite of the trees, the voice of someone

declaiming from the stone still resonates surprisingly clearly around the space below it (Illus 5).

THE CIRCUMSTANCES

The context of Hunter’s sermon relates to the early stages of the Secession. In a series of steps between 1732 and 1740, a small group of ministers who dissented from some of the practices and doctrines of the Established Church began to sever their connection with that body and were ultimately expelled from its ministry by the General Assembly in 1740. On 5 December 1733 four of them, led by Ebenezer Erskine, formed themselves into an ‘Associate Presbytery’ in a meeting at Gairney Bridge near Kinross (McKerrow 1848: 71–2). The most burning issue was patronage, the right of a private patron to appoint a minister to a congregation, which had been imposed on the Scottish church by an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom in 1712. This exercise of the authority of the state, which violated the terms of the Act of Union of 1707, gave new vigour to the Praying Societies or ‘Societies for prayer’ as they were termed in the *Session Records* (page 1), local associations of the devout which had emerged in the Covenanting period of the 17th century, and which, without openly rejecting the Established Church, paid scant regard to the parochial system and the views of parish ministers imposed by patrons on the churches (Drummond & Bulloch 1973: 49–50; Muirhead 2015: 66–7). West Lothian was a stronghold of dissent. In 1717 there were widespread protests over the appointment of a new minister, the Revd Thomas Laurie, to the church in Bathgate. The two ministers entrusted with serving the edict for his induction had to be escorted by a troop of dragoons with drawn swords (McKerrow 1848: 34–45; Bisset 1906: 31–2).

Some of the local ministers were sympathetic to the ideas of the Seceders even if, like Principal Robertson’s grandfather at Gladsmuir, they did not approve of the rejection of the Established Church. They included John Bonar, the revered minister of Torphichen, who in 1712 had joined Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine and nine other



ILLUS 5 The view from just above the Preacher Stone, visible in the left foreground. (Photograph by A M Small)

signatories in a petition to the General Assembly protesting against the Assembly's condemnation of the re-publication of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Scott 1866: 231). This was a treatise on the compatibility of the Christian doctrine of grace with the observance of law, which later provided a theological basis for the Secession. The support of the so-called 'Twelve Apostles' for the *Marrow* in the face of the General Assembly was a critical step in the move towards the Secession but, although Bonar and Ralph Erskine corresponded for many years (Fraser 1834: 137), Bonar refused to join Ralph and the other 'marrowmen' in seceding. Another sympathiser in the vicinity of the Bathgate Hills was the minister of Muiravonside, Robert Boyd, who openly opposed the expulsion of the Seceders from the Established Church by the General Assembly on 15 May 1740 (Scott 1866: 221–3). The minister of Linlithgow, William Anderson (Scott 1866: 207), must also have been a sympathiser because, when Ralph Erskine came to preach in Linlithgow on 5 August 1737 at the request of the local Praying Societies and before his final break with the Established Church, Anderson allowed him to use his church at Linlithgow, and attended

himself. An entry in Ralph's diary for 1737 records the occasion (Fraser 1834: 274): 'Friday, Aug. 5, At Linlithgow, on my way home, I preached that evening in the church to a great many people, the minister of the place being present.' Anderson may have regretted his concession, because after hearing Erskine preach, the members of the Praying Societies threw in their lot with the Associate Presbytery. The *Minutes of the Associate Presbytery* held at Burntisland on 10 October 1738 record the accession

from the United Societies within the bounds of the Presbytery of Linlithgow and Edinburgh subscribed by fifteen Elders and one hundred and twentytwo Christian persons. The Presbytery approve the same and receive them under their Inspection (*MAP*, vol 1: 330).

The new congregation held its first meeting at Knock within the parish of Bathgate on Wednesday 15 November 1738 (*SR*: 1).

It was therefore in the period between Ralph Erskine's visit to preach at Linlithgow and the formation of the new congregation that John Hunter preached his sermon on the hill above

Craigmailen Farm on 14 January 1738, according to the text on the Preacher Stone. There is no record of who sponsored it, but we can assume that it was the members of the Praying Societies who had initiated the request to Ralph Erskine to preach at Linlithgow, and who were primarily involved in the appointment of the first minister of the Craigmailen church in 1740. Hunter's sermon is likely to have been a significant factor in rallying support for the new congregation. The fact that his text from Ezekiel refers predictively to God intending to set his sanctuary among them had therefore a special relevance.

The Associate Presbytery can hardly have been unaware of this event, although there is no mention of it in its records. That is not surprising, since it had not yet licensed Hunter to preach. It was, however, well aware of his potential. One of its most pressing problems was the training of new ministers, and to cope with this the Presbytery appointed one of their original four members, William Wilson, as Professor of Divinity on 5 November 1736. His Divinity Hall was at Perth where he was minister. His first teaching session opened in March 1737, with the requirement that students should attend sessions for at least two years before applying for a licence. Four of the six students registered in the first session duly proceeded to their respective trials in 1739. Two, however, John Hunter and Andrew Gib, had already been registered in 1736 before the first session began. Hunter's career was therefore accelerated. He was permitted to proceed to his trials, which were completed in May 1738, and was given his licence abnormally quickly in June (Whytock 2007: 176–81). He was a valuable recruit and there was good reason to promote him rapidly to the ministry. He was mature, he had already studied theology and his ability to preach must already have been known.

1738 OR 1739?

The fact that there is no mention of Hunter's sermon at Craigmailen in the *Minutes of the Associate Presbytery* has prompted scholars to question the date of 14 January 1738 given on

the Preacher Stone. According to Mackelvie et al (1873), the new congregation

met for public worship for some time after their Secession in the barn or fields of Tartraven, a farm about 3 miles south of Linlithgow, then tenanted by a Mr. Tripinie, who was favourable to the Seceders. They were organised as a congregation in November 1738. Mr. Hunter, the Presbytery's first licenciate, and at that time sole probationer, was sent to them as their first supply, and preached in that capacity at Tartraven on the 3d Sabbath of January 1739. The tent in which Mr. Hunter preached on that occasion was made up of two broad boards set on end, covered with canvas, and tied with ropes to a large stone fixed in the ground. Shortly after this occurrence, the words from Ezekiel xxxvii. 26, were inscribed upon the stone, that being the text from which Mr. Hunter preached. The stone with the inscription long remained as a memorial of the spot.

Mackelvie was followed, as we have seen, by Small (1904, vol 1: 668), who says that

Craigmailen, or The Knock, gradually came to be fixed on as a regular place of worship – a solitary spot about three miles distant from Linlithgow on the north and Bathgate on the south. The site is still marked by a stone, with an inscription telling that it was there Mr John Hunter preached from a certain text on the third Sabbath of January 1739.

The date given by Mackelvie and Small is derived from the *Minutes of the Associate Presbytery*, which record the preaching assignments given to Hunter after he was licensed. The second of these runs:

Mr Hunter is appointed to preach the 3rd sabbath of December at Falkirk, the 4th sabbath at Kilmaccolm, the 1st sabbath of January at Kilmaurs, the 2nd at Mearns, the 3rd at Tartraven in West Lothian, the 4th and 5th sabbaths of January and the two first sabbaths of February at Stitchell and Morebattle, and on his return to the Presbytery the 3rd sabbath of February at Yarrow, the 4th at Stow, the 1st sabbath of March at East Lothian and the 2nd at Linton (MAP, vol 1: 342).

Since neither Mackelvie nor Small had seen the Preacher Stone, they were unaware that the date of Hunter's sermon of the third Sabbath of January 1739 (= 21 January in the Julian calendar) was inconsistent with the date of 14 January 1738 given on the Preacher Stone. Millan (2002: 5), who had seen the stone, recognised the problem and suggested that

the mason who incised the stone with the year 1738 instead of 1739 made the mistake for the same reason as we modern people do who, at the beginning of a new year, often write the previous year's date.

But that will not do, because it is not just the year that is at variance, but also the day. In 1739 14 January was indeed a Sunday but the second, not the third of the month. Bisset must have noticed the discrepancy because he asserted that Hunter preached on the second Sunday in January 1739. But that requires changing the information of both the Stone and the *Minutes of the Associate Presbytery*.

CRAIGMAILEN, TARTRAVEN, KNOCK AND MOSSIDE

A new church building was built at Upper Craigmalen in 1742. Before its construction the new congregation met frequently in the open air at places in the Bathgate Hills where there were open slopes where a preacher could address a large number of people, and where there were sympathetic landowners or tenant farmers who allowed them to use their land. Three are mentioned in the records: Craigmalen, Tartraven and Knock. All three can be recognised on General Roy's map of the mid-18th century (Illus 6), although some of their names have changed slightly.⁵

The *Session Records* (page 3) report a petition made by the Congregation to the Presbytery for 'a Sabbath days preaching at Tartraven (alias) Craigmalen'. That might seem to suggest that the two toponyms were thought to be interchangeable, but that makes little sense in the local context, where most people must have known that

Tartraven and Craigmalen were different farms, and it is probable that the clerk who formulated the petition was using the word *alias* in its original Latin sense of 'otherwise' or 'at another time or place', so that the phrase would be best translated as 'at Tartraven or alternatively at Craigmalen'. The *Session Records* are peppered with such Latinisms: *eodem die et loco* (on the same day and in the same place); *pro tempore* (for the occasion); *in hunc effectum* (for this purpose), etc. In fact, Tartraven is not referred to elsewhere in the *Session Records*, although they frequently mention Craigmalen, which appears to have been the preferred location for the outdoor meetings of the congregation. They do, however, make a distinction between Craigmalen and Knock, so that the sums of money collected by preachers at both sites are differentiated.

Another preaching site in the vicinity of the Bathgate Hills was Mosside, which appears in an entry in the *Session Records* (page 9) recording the sum of £6 14s 0d collected when John Hunter preached there on 19 June 1739. The farm of Mosside does not appear on Roy's map, but it is shown on John Adair's *Map of West Lothian* which he surveyed in the 1680s, although it was not published until 1737. It was situated c 2km south of Bathgate near the area of the Wester Inch.

THE RECORDS OF THE CRAIGMAILEN CHURCH

The problem of where these preaching events took place can be largely resolved by reference to the *Session Records*. From the start, a minute was kept of each sederunt of the new Session, written into a volume of *Acts and Proceedings*, which was preserved in the Secession church at Craigmalen. When the church closed in 1806 the congregation was split between Linlithgow and Bathgate, and the minister went to a new church in Linlithgow East, taking the records with him. A thread of continuity leads through numerous amalgamations and relocations in the 19th and early 20th centuries to St Ninian's Craigmalen Parish Church in Linlithgow, which preserves in



ILLUS 6 Detail from Roy's map showing the Bathgate Hills.
(© British Library Board Maps CC.5.a.441 (sheet 6/6) CC-BY)

its name the memory of the original congregation of the Associate Presbytery. The records are still kept in the archive of the church, where we have been kindly permitted to use them.

THE INAUGURATION OF THE ASSOCIATE CONGREGATION OF LINLITHGOW

The *Session Records* confirm that the initial meeting of the congregation was in November 1738, and not on the same date in 1739, as Robert Small alleged (1904, vol 1: 668). They also show that the inaugural meeting was held at Knock, a farm named for a prominent volcanic crag near Bathgate, and not at the nearby Tartraven as stated by Mackelvie (Mackelvie

et al 1873: 269). Three of the leaders of the Secession, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine and James Thomson of Burntisland, all took part in the service. A collection raised £90 14s 0d Scots (a little more than £7 sterling in the currency of the time), and small sums of money were handed out to poor individuals in Linlithgow, Kirkliston, Whitburn, Queensferry and Falkirk. At subsequent meetings other disbursements were made in Bo'ness, Bathgate, Torphichen, Carriden and the three Calders (SR). The list suggests that the congregation claimed an area of responsibility that included virtually all the large communities within a radius of *c* 15km of the Preacher Stone, and this is reflected in the *Minutes of the Associate Presbytery* (pages 30, 32) which refer to the 'United Societies within

the bounds of the Presbytery of Linlithgow and Edinburgh’.

One of the first actions of the Session was to commission two Elders designate (they would have to be approved at the December meeting of the Associate Presbytery) to ‘petition for a Sabbath days preaching at Tartraven (alias Craigmalen by Mr John Hunter Probationer’ (SR: 3), as mentioned above. The petition was received by the Associate Presbytery at the Session in Burntisland, where the accession of the Linlithgow congregation was approved. It was not immediately dealt with (MAP, vol 1: 332), but on Hunter’s second tour of preaching assignments after he was licensed, he was assigned, as we have seen, to preach on the third Sabbath of January ‘at Tartraven in West Lothian’. There is nothing, however, in the *Session Records* to indicate that the sermon was given as planned, though there is a record that a sum of £5 3s 0d was collected by Mr John Hunter when he preached at Knock on (Monday) 15 January 1739 (SR: 6). Presumably the date was changed, and the location of the sermon was moved from Tartraven to Knock. A comparison between the Minutes of the Presbytery and those of the Session shows that there was at least one other instance when the instructions of the Presbytery were not implemented as intended. On 21 June 1739 there should have been a sermon given at Tartraven by Ralph Erskine (MAP), but the *Session Records* (page 9) note only the one given at Mosside by Hunter on 19 June. It is likely that there were always local factors such as the health of the preacher or the use being made of the land at the time that had to be taken into account.

OTHER PROBLEMS WITH MACKELVIE’S ACCOUNT

Mackelvie does not say explicitly where he found the descriptive detail of Hunter’s sermon, including his report that his preaching tent was tied to the stone that was subsequently inscribed. It is not recorded in the *Minutes of the Associate Presbytery*, which he had very probably consulted,

nor in the *Session Records* of the new congregation, which he had probably not seen. It is likely, therefore, to have been derived from a local informant, perhaps from a descendant of the tenant farmer of Tartraven, Mr Tripinie, whom he cites as being favourable to the Seceders. But was his information reliable? He was wrong in what he says about the content of the inscription, and he was probably wrong also in stating that the tent which Hunter used to preach from at Tartraven in January 1739 was tied to the stone which was subsequently inscribed, since the Preacher Stone is not of a suitable size or shape to be used for such a purpose.

It would not be surprising if Mackelvie was misinformed. According to John Macfarlane, who brought the *Annals and Statistics of the United Presbyterian Church* to completion after Mackelvie’s death and provided it with a biographical introduction, Mackelvie began collecting material for the book shortly after 1830, nearly 90 years after Hunter had given his sermon. If the information was passed on by word of mouth, it must have been transmitted through at least two generations. Small (1904, vol 1: viii) comments on the difficulties that Mackelvie experienced in sifting the information he obtained from local sources and his unavoidable inaccuracies.

IN MEMORIAM

It is probable that the stone was inscribed shortly after Hunter’s premature death in January 1740, and that the site was chosen precisely because it marked the beginning of his brief but illustrious career as a preacher. The fact that it gives chapter and verse of the text he used suggests that the memory of the sermon was still vivid. It may have circulated locally in manuscript form. According to Fraser (1834: 265), ‘A specimen of the evangelical and lively discourses of this popular preacher was given to the world shortly after his decease but it is now rarely seen.’ Two collections of Hunter’s sermons⁶ were published shortly after his death and frequently reprinted, but neither includes the sermon he gave at Craigmalen in 1738.

THE CONCLUDING DATE

Why does the inscription end with the date 1732 isolated somewhat from the rest of the inscription and incised by a different hand, probably at a different date, and possibly in the year it records? It is generally supposed (as by Ratcliffe Barnett 1937: 211, and by the author of the booklet of the West Lothian Council 1982: 7) to be a reference to the year when the General Assembly of the Established Church approved a motion which restricted to heritors and elders the right of nominating ministers to vacancies where the patron had not nominated within six months, ignoring the voices of ordinary members of the congregations. It was passed despite the disapproval of the large majority of individual presbyteries and led to the organisation of the Associate Presbytery in the following year. It is difficult, however, to see why this event should have been recorded on the stone without any explanation, unless it had some special relevance to the site. It may record the date of a meeting held by one or more of the Praying Societies at the Preacher Stone in connection with the events of that year, of which there is no other record. But, as the example of the inscription from the Bochel recording ‘WG 1710’ shows, inscriptions on boulders may have private meanings of significance to only a few individuals. Whatever the case, whoever commissioned the main inscription did not erase the date 1732. Instead he transformed it by adding the much longer text recording for posterity that John Hunter’s sermon, famous at the time, was preached from that spot.

CONCLUSION

The inscription on the Preacher Stone has to be taken at face value. Attempts to suggest that it refers to an event that took place a year later and has been wrongly inscribed are not supported by a study of the early *Session Records* of the Craigmalen congregation. It records an important episode in the formation of the Secession church in West Lothian and is a memorial to one of its leading figures.

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NOTES

- 1 In all cases in the Session Records where the day is given as well as the date, it is clear that the reference is to the Julian calendar, which remained in use in the British Empire until 1752.
- 2 This form of the letter must have been rare in funerary inscriptions at least until the 19th century. In 17 graveyards in Central and South-West Scotland and the Borders which we visited in the first three months of 2023 (Bathgate old Kirkton church, Carriden old church, Carsphairn, Closeburn, Cockburnspath, Coldingham Priory, Barr, East Calder, Ecclesmachan, Edinburgh Greyfriars, Linton, Linlithgow, Mid Calder, Morebattle, Polmont, Torphichen and Tranent), all of which have some gravestones of the 18th century, we have found no cases of M with slanting sides, except at Coldingham Priory where the letterform is used on the headstone of Private James Buglass, who died on 28 July 1916 of wounds received at the Battle of the Somme.

- 3 Further details can be got from the blog of Angus Folklore at angusfolklore.blogspot.com.
- 4 The anecdote is told rather differently in Fraser (1834: 265).
- 5 In Roy (2007: plate 32) Craigmalen is written Craig Mealler; Tartraven is Tartrevan and is applied to two farms separated by a burn from Craig Mealler. Bormey is Bormie (Balvormie).
- 6 J Hunter, *Jesus Christ the Unspeakable Gift of God: Being the Substance of Four Sermons; the First two Whereof were Preached at Gardners-Hall, Near Edinburgh, May 5. the other two at the Kirk of Shots, May 12. 1739. Together with a sermon upon Rev v. 12. and another upon Psalm xxiii. 5. both preached at the celebration of the Lord's Supper at Orwell, June 10 1739.* Edinburgh: David Duncan 1742. J Hunter, *The Bush Burning, yet not Consumed; or, the Church in the Furnace, yet still Preserved: In Three sermons, from Exodus iii. 1, 2. The First Preached at Lintoun, March 11th, the Other Two at Mountain, in the Parish of Inveresk, April 29th.* 1739. Edinburgh: 1743; repr Perth: Andrew Sharp 1776; Stirling: C Randall 1804 and 1806.

ABBREVIATIONS

MAP: *Minutes of the Associate Presbytery*
 NLS: National Library of Scotland
 NRS: National Records of Scotland
 RIAS: Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland
 SR: *Session Records*

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Associate Presbytery commencing on the Sixth day of December in the year One thousand Seven hundred and thirty three.

Session Records = The Acts and Proceedings of the United Session of the Associate Congregation of Linlithgow before their settlement [sic] with a Minister. Held in St Ninian's Craigmalen Church, Linlithgow.

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