

IV.

NOTICE OF THE DISCOVERY OF A GROUP OF FULL-LENGTH STONE CISTS AT THE SCHOOL HILL, OR TEMPLE HILL, LEUCHARS. BY WILLIAM REID, F.S.A. Scot.

The School Board of the parish of Leuchars, Fifeshire, having resolved to improve the condition of the playground of Leuchars public school, the work was entrusted to Mr Robert Skinner, Balcornie, Pittenweem. On 12th August 1908, while his workmen, under the superintendence of Mr James Cribbes, schoolmaster, were engaged levelling the surface of the boys' playground, an interesting discovery of full-length stone cists was made. Within a space measuring 39 feet long by 17 feet 9 inches broad no fewer than thirty-four cists were uncovered. The work at this part of the playground was continued on 13th and completed on 14th August.

The cists thus discovered at Leuchars, within the school ground—where once stood an ancient chapel, probably belonging to the Celtic Church in Scotland—would seem to belong to class 1 of Mr Alexander Hutcheson's Classification of Cists (*Proceedings*, vol. xxxvii. p. 239) viz. —“Parallel, or roughly parallel-sided, composed of several undressed slabs set on edge in the ground, long enough to contain the body in an extended position, and having similar stones for covers, but not always paved in the bottom.” The Leuchars cists lay about due east and west, with the head to the west; all were full-length, and in no instance paved in the bottom with stones. The rough sketch (fig. 1) shows a ground-plan of two of them, with samples of their covering-stones.

The average size of the cists was 6 feet long by 2 feet 10 inches broad. Three kinds of sandstone occurred in the slabs forming the cists, viz.—(1) white and soft; (2) grey, and of a medium hardness; (3) red, the hardest. In most cases the stones which formed the ends were thicker than those forming the sides, and occasionally extended beyond the latter. Most of the side stones forming the cists stood up-

right when excavated. A few had been dislodged, probably in some previous operation, and lay at an angle over the remains within, and some five or six end-stones were rounded on the top; but this, as they stood close to the surface, was doubtless attributable to footwear of the scholars.

Two of the cists, lying side by side, contained each two skeletons—

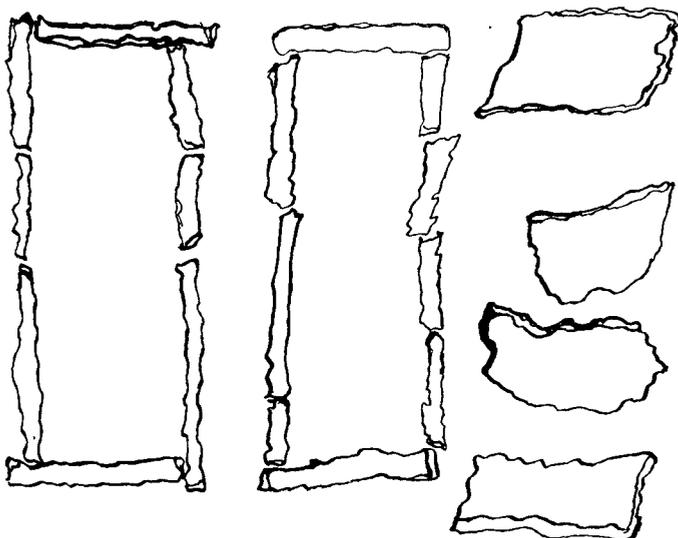


Fig. 1. Ground-plan of two of the Leuchars Cists, and examples of the covering Slabs.

the one lying underneath the other, with a layer of 9 inches of soil between. These four skeletons measured on an average 5 feet 3 inches to 5 feet $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, which, with one exception to be afterwards noted, was also about the average for all the rest. Ten inches below the under skeletons in the two cists, the spade came upon a stratum of sharp, clean gravel and sand, with shells. Over one cist, near the centre of the group, the two covering-stones were of a grey slate, quite hard, and different from any other of the covering-stones. A fair average measure-

ment for the larger side slabs would be $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet long, 18 inches deep, $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches thick.

The cists had been placed very close to each other, a space of about 4 inches only separating them lengthways, and with very few exceptions the end or head slabs formed the foot slabs of the next row. No cist opened contained fewer than five side slabs. The largest number observed was six slabs. The covering-slabs were generally of irregular shapes and thickness. Two were placed over each cist, which by no means covered the entire surface, and the cists were full of sand. The remains were fairly well preserved, and firmly embedded in the soil. In three instances the skulls were turned to the south, resting close to the right shoulder-blade of the remains.

The last cist to be opened in the playground measured 7 feet 2 inches long by 3 feet broad. This one was at a depth of 12 inches from the surface, and contained the remains of what had apparently been a powerful man. The skeleton measured from the crown of the skull to the heel exactly 6 feet. The skull was entire. The lower jaw, which was of a deep-set, square formation at the front, contained a full set of fairly well-preserved teeth, although much ground down by natural wear.

No cists or human remains were discovered in the girls' playground, which occupies the corresponding position at the other side of the school.

Although a sharp outlook was kept for relics of any kind, no trace of any such was found. The remains were carefully gathered together, and re-interred near the spot where they were found.

To further investigate the possibility of more graves existing outside the playground, Mr Cribbes, the schoolmaster, communicated with Mr R. W. R. Mackenzie of Earishall, who kindly sent one of his men to dig at another part of the School Hill. These excavations were carried out on Saturday, 15th August, with the result that another cist was unearthed 9 inches under the surface. Eight slabs of undressed sandstone, three of them broken, made up the sides and head of this cist, which measured internally 5 feet 10 inches by 2 feet 9 inches. No foot stone was found at this cist; but as the position lay only a few

inches from the playground wall, it had probably been removed when the wall was built. It was covered with four rough and rather unshapely thick slabs of white sandstone, and was not so regularly formed as those in the playground. The remains found in it measured 5 feet 3 inches, and appeared to be those of a woman. No fragment of cloth or fibre of any description was noticed, and no relics were found. The ground on which this cist lay is a public pathway to the St Andrews road, and at one time carts were driven down to a baker's establishment that once existed there; hence, doubtless, the reason of the broken condition of the slabs of this cist. At least three other cists remain intact in this pathway.

The public school of Leuchars is situated in the east end of the village, on a ridge of rising ground on which the Norman church and many houses are erected.

At the extreme east end of the village is the junction of the St Andrews road and the road to Earlishall and Reres Links, whence this ridge continues in a north-easterly direction for about 200 yards till it falls to the level of the Lady Well, about 50 yards to the north of the public road which leads to Pitlithy House.

This high part of the village is elevated about 25 feet above the road leading to St Andrews. From the main road, towards the centre of the village, the school is reached by a steep brae, known in the vernacular as "the Paith." On either side of the school grounds are two pathways, of varying widths, both leading to the St Andrews road. The ground around the public school and the two pathways referred to are regarded as belonging to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, and at times are made use of as halting-places for travelling showmen and caravan owners. From the south main wall of the school the playground extends 66 feet in a southerly direction, with a gradual slope of 4 feet, and is enclosed with a semicircular wall 2 feet high, surmounted by a spiked iron railing. A strong retaining-wall 17 feet high was recently erected next to the St Andrews road, which at the foot of the playground has been utilised in the formation of sheds, serviceable to the

children for shelter in rainy weather. At the time this part of ground was excavated, consequent upon the erection of the retaining-wall, human remains fell out of the soil, although no stone cists were visible.

In former times the hill on which the present school is erected was known as the "Temple Hill." Probably there may have been here some foundation of the Knights Templars, although so far none have been traced. At the present time the older inhabitants of the village not infrequently refer to the locality as the "Tenter Hill"; this may be a corruption of "Templar," or possibly from some connection with the place-name of the "Tents Moor."

Mr Robert Gibson, joiner, Leuchars, stated that he remembers being told that the soil, to the depth of $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet, was at one time removed from off the Temple Hill by a Mr Keddie, farmer of Leuchars Castle, and spread on a field to the south side of the St Andrews road. This particular field is directly opposite the school, and is known as the "Ostel" or "Orstlet"; and a local tradition lingers, and is still current, that the consecrated soil thus removed to the "Orstlet" field yielded bare and scanty crops, scarcely worth the labour and expense; and it is further related that the farmer lost a valuable horse while at work in the same field, which was regarded as a judgment upon him for his vandalistic removal of the sacred soil.

It appears that the site of the Leuchars school was in earlier times occupied by a chapel, and that graves had been formerly discovered on the site.

The Rev. Mr Kettle, minister of the parish of Leuchars, in the *Statistical Account* for the year 1795, states:—"A very little to the west of the present Church, once stood a Chapel called 'St Bernard's' Chapel. No remains of this Monument of Antiquity are now visible, the stones of it having been used for common purposes. Round where it stood are to be seen many graves, constructed of four and some of six stones. Some of these graves have lately been looked into, without affording anything worthy of being recorded." And he further mentions that there is near the west end of the village "an excellent well flowing with

an abundant stream of soft water," called by the name of the saint to whom the chapel was consecrated.

The minister who wrote the account of the parish for the *New Statistical Account* gives the chapel the name of "St Bennet." He says, "Where the Parish School now stands, there was once a Chapel called 'St Bennets,' of which Sir Thomas Wemyss was Chaplain at the Reformation. No vestage of it now remains, but many human bones are found near the spot enclosed in stone coffins, which, being by no means entire, point to a remote date." Leighton, in his *History of Fife*, repeats this story as to St Bennet's Chapel, and the discovery of stone coffins and human remains. The next writer whom I shall quote is more precise. Mr A. H. Millar, LL.D., F.S.A. Scot., in his *Fife: Pictorial and Historical*, referring to the founder of Leuchars parish kirk, says:—"Previous to the advent of Robert de Quincy to the district, the ecclesiastical establishment here was a chapel (Capella), which had apparently been endowed, if not founded, by Ness, the son of William, whose daughter was married to De Quincy. In the Bull of Pope Gregory IV., dated 1187, reference is made to the church (ecclesia) of Leuchars, and it is therefore probable that De Quincy had begun the erection of a more extensive building in addition to the chapel" (vol. i. p. 357).

The parish church of Leuchars was re-dedicated by Bishop de Bernham in the year 1244, and placed under the guardianship of St Ethernase. It is very likely that it was a finished church then.

The dedication of the early chapel, however, appears neither to have been St Bernard's nor St Bennet's. Rev. Dr Campbell, in his book (p. 65) on *Balmerino and its Abbey*, refers to the chapel in the village of Leuchars as "The Chapel of St Bonoc, or Bonach." In 1470 a Court-hill in the barony of Leuchars was called "Bunnow's Hill," probably a corruption of Bonoc (Fraser's *History of the Carnegies of Southesk*). In 1539 Henry Ramsay got a crown charter of the barony of Leuchars, in which he received power to hold a yearly market, called the "Free Fairs," at Leuchars, on St Bonoc's Day and the week following it.

Further reference is made to St Bonoc of Leuchars in Forbes' *Kalendars of Scottish Saints*, p. 283, thus: "Bonoc B. in the Register of the Great Seal, book 36, No. 72 (MS. General Register House), there is a confirmation by King James VI. of a charter granted 'per dominum Thomam Wemis Capellina Capellanie Sancti Bonach situate et fundate intra villam de Lucheris.' In the original charter which is engrossed, the Saint is called 'Bonoc Capellanus Capelli Sancti Bonoci.'"
