

Examination of the Site of a Long Cist Cemetery at Leuchars

by D. B. Taylor

In 1908, when the playground of the old school at Leuchars was being levelled, 34 long cists were discovered occupying a restricted area of 39 ft. by 17 ft. 9 in. within the W. part of the playground. The cists were only 4 in. apart lengthways with the head slabs of one row forming the footslabs of the next.³ From time to time thereafter single burials have been discovered both inside and outside the playground.⁴ The old school, built apparently about the end of the eighteenth century,⁵ and the playground lie about 200 yds. W. of the church, on the same ridge overlooking flat ground to the S. and immediately N. of the A919 St Andrews road (N.G.R. NO 45462138).

The demolition of the old school provided an opportunity to examine the area to ascertain if further burials or even building foundations remained. The location was formerly known as Temple Hill and the school is reported as having been built on the site of a chapel, variously dedicated to St Bonoc, St Bennett or St Bernard.⁵ At the instigation of the Ministry of Public Building and Works, and with the co-operation of Fife County Council, the site was excavated in the spring of 1969.

A base-line was established diagonally across the playground from NW. to SE. The area of the playground and the school was then excavated in a series of 5 ft. squares at 5 ft. intervals, the squares being extended where necessary. It soon became apparent that during the levelling process mentioned in the 1908 report, a large quantity of local rubbish had been used to make up the ground towards the S. boundary of the playground. The subsoil proved to be a gravelly boulder clay of a bright orange colour. This was found immediately below the former floor of the school and sloped steeply southwards towards the retaining wall of the playground. Ten feet from this wall, the subsoil had not been reached at a depth of over 5 ft. The entire area of the playground

¹ *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.* LXXIV (1939-40), 145;
Discovery and Excavation Scotland, 1958, 27; RCAM
Inventory of Peeblesshire (1967), 176, No. 375.

² *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.* LXXXIX (1955-6), 252-83.

³ *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.* XLIII (1908-9), 170.

⁴ *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.* LXXXII (1947-8), 298.

⁵ *Third Statistical Account, Fife*, 778.

had been disturbed subsequently by the insertion of drains, electricity cables and water pipes. Foundations for an additional classroom had still further disturbed the top soil. At all depths and throughout the area of the playground, from the surface down to subsoil, human bones were uncovered in complete confusion. Not a single recognisable burial was found. A few disturbed slabs from the earlier discovery rested on the subsoil, but formed no recognisable pattern.

The area formerly occupied by the school produced neither burials, bones nor traces of earlier foundations. As indicated, the floor of the school rested on subsoil, confirming the statement in the earlier report that 'the soil, to a depth of 2½ ft., was at one time removed from off the Temple Hill',¹ and it seems likely that any foundations of the old chapel must have gone with it. The writer of the Old Statistical Account for the parish states that 'No remains of this monument of antiquity are now visible, the stones of it having been used for common purposes'.²

There can be little doubt that the area of the playground had been used as a cemetery, probably attached to the old chapel, but no evidence of date or of extent was forthcoming. Long cist burials have been found immediately to the W. of the playground, and the slabs of at least two protrude through the surface of a public path leading past the school to the road below. This exercise may have produced no result, but the demolition of the school presented an opportunity to examine the site, an opportunity which had to be taken.