SECTION 3: SOURCES AND DOCUMENTS

SCRIPT LETTERING ON
SCOTTISH TOMBSTONES:
ORIGINS AND INFLUENCES

Introduction

Scottish tombstones of the eighteenth century and before are a significant part of the nation’s cultural heritage. Of particular interest are the less formal memorials sculpted by local masons and their assistants who expressed their own creative notions within a framework of contemporary fashion and traditional iconography. This extensive record of folk art and craft is, arguably, the most extensive and varied anywhere in the world. The textual information in tombstone inscriptions is of great value to historians and genealogists, but there are other aspects that tell us about the past including the form of the slabs and headstones, the choice and use of graphic images and, not least, the lettering styles and their interpretation by the masons. The letterforms that were used on Scottish tombstones altered and evolved through time as fashion and other cultural influences had their effect. These changes were complex and followed both geographical and temporal patterns that recently have been studied and analysed in some considerable detail by the author.\textsuperscript{2, 3}

This research is based on a survey of a representative sample of 132 mainland kirkyard sites and 13,016 inscriptions. The sites were grouped into broad geographical regions - south-west Scotland, south-east Scotland, Fife, central Scotland, west Scotland, north-east Scotland and north Scotland. A study was made of all legible tombstones dated up to and including 1855. Letterform attributes were recorded and analysed from digital photographic records. A number of additional sites have been included in the present study of script forms. Full details of research methodology are given in previous papers by the author.
Background

Roman style inscriptions, in a variety of forms, were predominantly used for two hundred years from the latter part of the fifteenth century. Towards the end of the seventeenth century a new form began to appear, a lettering style that can be generically classified as ‘script’. This form differs in a number of key attributes from italic with which it can be confused. Italic capitals are sloped versions of the roman style and the lowercase letters retain their serifs. Script capitals are cursive and the lowercase letters, rather than having serifs, generally begin and end with a curved line. The origin of script has been attributed to the influence of calligraphic styles and the masons’ attempts to emulate the penmanship of writing masters such as Cocker and Bickham.4 Perhaps this can be argued in the case of English memorials. However, there is good evidence that the development of script on Scottish tombstones was an evolutionary process, initially quite independent of writing styles, and that pen forms were copied only several decades after the establishment of a cursive tradition.

Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, little if anything survives that informs us why masons selected and used particular inscriptive letterforms on Scottish tombstones. With the exception of the small minority of formal memorials, mostly in major city churchyards, much of the lettering on tombstones of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was probably cut by assistants who may or may not have been guided by the master mason who himself would be the local parish craftsman.5 Consequently, even if we knew the identity of the master mason, we would not necessarily know that of the letter-cutter. In many parts of England the names of the masons and their ‘schools’ are known, even as early as the medieval period. Early American gravestones frequently carried the name of the mason and many of these individuals are catalogued by Duval and Rigby.6 In Scotland, few masons left any mark to record their names for posterity and there is virtually nothing on paper that survives to provide us with direct and firm evidence of the sources of their ideas.

Another difficulty with this aspect of palaeography is that masons, not surprisingly, put their own interpretation of any lettering used as a source or from which they copied.
The distinctive treatment of the capitals ‘S’ and ‘C’ on a 1780 stone in Kirkcudbright Cemetery, Kirkcudbrightshire (Figure 1) and the unusual capitals ‘K’ and ‘R’ on a stone of the same date in Kirkconnel Kirkyard, Dumfriesshire (Figure 2) demonstrate the masons’ individuality. Duval and Rigby suggest that the lettering on the earliest New England gravestones were derived from alphabets in seventeenth century books imported from Europe and that later inscriptions were influenced by the typography of printed ephemera. It is, however, rather simplistic to suggest this association with what were generic roman forms that were used widely and interpreted in a variety of media. Treatment of some letters unique to gravestone lettering, such as some forms of capitals ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘M’, is evidence of the adoption of a distinctive inscriptive artform.

Today, we are bombarded with lettering everywhere we go and our visual sensitivity to what we see is quite different from that of our forefathers. It is virtually impossible to identify and far less to understand the precise external influences on tombstone lettering style other than through study of the patterns of development relative to contemporary use in other media.

**Basic characteristics of Scottish tombstone script lettering**

Letterforms with cursive characteristics were found from 1643. Of all inscriptions recorded throughout Scotland for the period 1643 to 1855, 8.0% were script in one of its variants. Script lettering was most commonly used in the north-east (16.2%) and least common in central Scotland (2.7%). The percentages used in the other regions were: south-west Scotland 9.1%, north Scotland 5.0%, south-west Scotland 9.1%, south-east Scotland 8.1% and Fife 3.1%. Almost all script lettering on tombstones in Scotland was incised. Raised script, usually in the form of monogram capitals, accounted for only just over one percent of the total and was found most frequently in central Scotland.
and Fife. The occurrence of mixed styles in the same inscription, usually script with roman, increased northwards in Scotland, from about a quarter in the south to a little over three quarters in the north. However, the frequency of mixed styles in the north east corresponded with that in southern Scotland. Almost invariably, the letters were taller than broad, often significantly so. In the north and east of Scotland, about half the scripts were formed of a thin line, corresponding with a ‘light’ variant in typography, but elsewhere more than three quarters were of this weight. The size of the capital letters varied considerably and were more than, equal to, or less than twice the lowercase letter height, each approach being equally common.

The earliest fully developed script found in this survey was on a stone dated 1708 in Foulis Easter Kirkyard, Angus. The mean date for the use of script throughout Scotland was 1787 and regional mean dates were similar, with the exception of north Scotland where the mean date was 1810.

Many of the inscriptions in script lettering from about the middle of the eighteenth century were not incised as deeply as contemporary roman forms and, through the ravages of time, these memorials have become some of the most difficult to read. Emulation of a thinner pen-like line required a much shallower cut and the cutting of curvilinear shapes to greater depth was probably more difficult.

**The development of script**

To examine the changes in letterform from the earliest suggestion of cursiveness through to the most pen-like forms, inscriptions were classified into six categories.

1. roman with hints of cursiveness
2. primitive script
3. hybrid script/roman
4. script
5. near pen form (ie with some pen influences)
6. pen form

The first three categories were grouped as ‘pre-script’ and are forms that show only some slight traces of cursiveness. Script forms (category four) are those of uniform line thickness with the start and finish of the letters curved rather than having serifs. Lettering classed as ‘near pen’ and ‘pen’ forms are those that
have clear characteristics of writing such as the use of ‘looped’ ascenders or descenders, the continuous joining of letters and the thicks and thins of pen strokes (Figure 3).

From the inscriptionsal record, the occurrence of each category as a percentage of all script forms for ten-year periods from 1641 to 1850 was calculated. Figure 4 shows very clearly that the development of script form from pre-script to pen form was a gradual evolutionary process. Script lettering not showing the influence of pen-written forms was recorded almost exclusively from 1731-1780. The first use of true pen forms was between

<table>
<thead>
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<th>pre-script</th>
<th>script</th>
<th>near pen</th>
<th>pen</th>
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<td>66.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1711-1720</td>
<td>37.55</td>
<td>62.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1721-1730</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1731-1740</td>
<td>10.53</td>
<td>86.84</td>
<td>2.63</td>
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<td>4.26</td>
<td>89.36</td>
<td>6.38</td>
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<td>6.25</td>
<td>93.75</td>
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<td>11.54</td>
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<td>1841-1850</td>
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<td>50</td>
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1741-1750. There was a gradual slow increase in near pen and pen forms to 1791-1800 when just over half the script inscriptions were pen forms. By 1850 the frequency of the use of script and pen forms was identical.

Hybrid forms between roman and script can be seen as early as 1643 on a tombstone in Brechin Cathedral Kirkyard, Angus but a ‘pure’ script form is not found until the beginning of the eighteenth century. The first truly pen-influenced inscription was noted on a stone in Southend Kirkyard, Argyll dated 1742. Why this development should be first noted in what could now be seen as a peripheral region of Scotland is not as surprising as it might at first appear. Early pen-influenced scripts in other parts of the country could well be found by more extensive sampling. Also, the plantation of the lairds in the second half of the seventeenth century could well have brought central Scottish cultural influences to south Kintyre. It was not until the 1790s that the pen form predominated. Before 1740 there was nothing in the construction of the letterforms that would provide evidence of the direct influence of writing. The first hints of cursiveness can be seen in some lowercase letters especially ‘e’ and ‘r’ and a general rounding of letters that in the roman style are classical in construction. The slope in these early primitive and hybrid forms is not much off the vertical. Later developments in the direction of script are evident in the extended curvature of the descendents, lowercase ‘a’, ‘b’ and ‘f’ and the form of capitals. When true script evolved, the slope was significantly greater and new forms of lowercase ‘w’ and ‘s’ appeared (Figure 5). The final change to forms based on pen-written specimens is clearly identified by the variation in line thickness that parallels the pressures of a pen on paper resulting in the distinctive ‘thicks’ and ‘thins’. The influence of the pen is also evident in scripts where letters are linked by fine lines as in writing, initially only some letters were joined, but later the lettering is continuous (Figure 3f). Not only did the lettering itself emulate penmanship in the later inscriptions, but words with decorative flourishes around words such as ‘IN MEMORY OF’ or the deceased’s name became frequent in pen-script forms.
and also in gothic, where the pen influence was often equally evident. In some examples the decoration is virtually identical to that illustrated in eighteenth century copy-books such as that of Bickham. A headstone in Brechin Cathedral burial ground even reproduces the exact pen strokes in the lettering that are illustrated by Bickham (Figure 6). By the end of the eighteenth century, type specimen sheets and printers manuals became available to the masons and these were a further source for them to use.

It is significant that there does not appear to be parallel letterform developments in documents such as legal manuscripts and church records. In England, ‘copper plate’, ‘running-hand’ or ‘Anglaise’ was much more firmly established by the beginning of the eighteenth century than in Scotland where the use of variants of ‘secretary’ hands continued in use for almost another 100 years in more formal documents, although not exclusively. Here, vernacular writing from the late sixteenth, seventeenth and throughout much of the eighteenth century was often of a much simpler form that appears to have derived from the secretary hand, with the ascenders and descenders frequently looped (Figure 7). Some of the incised script letters are very characteristic of this period of tombstone lettering, for example the unique counter-rotated...
ampersand and distinctive lower-case ‘w’ (Figure 8).

It is curious that inscriptive script lettering on stone followed a different pattern of development from other engraved, cut or drawn lettering. Engraved script on medallions and silverware is invariably ‘copper-plate’. Some dated Scottish communion tokens show a rather crude interpretation of script and none could really be termed pen forms. Examples of script lettering can be seen on tokens from Insch (1685), Hamilton (1705), Sorbie (1726), Methven (1788) and Gartmore (1796).

Discussion

The gradual change from roman forms from the 1640s and letterform development for more than 100 years before there was any identifiable influence of the pen has been demonstrated. This suggests that the initiation of script inscriptions was not through an attempt to copy written forms. Why the masons began to make their inscriptions more cursive, a pattern of development that took place throughout Scotland, is difficult to say. While roman lettering, especially capitals, gives an impression of formality, cursiveness tends to indicate informality, freedom and a more personal touch. Perhaps the use of sloping forms and more curved shapes was simply a reaction against that austerity of the roman forms. The similarity of some of the characteristics of the earlier script forms to written forms is probably coincidental. This similarity would have been recognised by the masons who then looked to pen forms and copy-books for inscriptive sources. The fact than none of the commonly used ‘secretary’ writing styles of the later part of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries are to be found on Scottish tombstones of that period further supports this hypothesis.

The first occurrence of true pen forms in the 1740s coincided with the publication, in parts, of Bickham’s writing manual and it is tempting to suggest that this was no coincidence. There were several British writing manuals and copy-books long before that of Bickham, including those of Billingsley (1641), Gery (c.1670) and Elder (c.1680). However, the writing in these publications, especially the terminally thickened ascender, are not
echoed in Scottish inscriptive lettering, nor are the more exuberant flourishes in the well-known manual of Cocker published in 1671. One of the best known books of this period was that of John Ayres (1698), a most successful penman who was cited with some admiration by later writing masters. This, the work of Shelley (1709) and the classic work of Bickham, are possible candidates as sources used by the masons for the later pen forms. It is more likely, however, copies from these great works by little known scribes were the day to day workbooks. Heal lists over 450 calligraphers who published ‘English’ (i.e. British) copy-books, only two of which were printed in Scotland. Browne’s Calligraphia was a very early copy-book published in St. Andrews in 1622. This was followed in 1638 by another, probably printed in London, that in spite of its title, The Introduction to the true understanding of the Whole Arte of Expedient in teaching to write, has little to do with writing. In this work Browne denounces those who consider the Scots inferior.

[there remains] … a vulgare opinion against his native country of Scotland … He sheweth that it hath more excellent Prerogatives than any other Kingdom … whereby it will rather follow that a Scottishman is so much the more able to prosecute whatsoever hee undertaketh, and therefore so much the more to be respected, by how so much he is more ingenious than one of another nation.

The only other Scottish copy-book is a much later offering by Buchanan published in 1798. It is unlikely that any of these would have been as widely distributed as the works of the better-known writing masters and probably would not have had any influence on tombstone lettering.

The distinct history of Scottish tombstone art is therefore further evidenced by the development of script lettering. There are a few instances of superficially similar early script forms on English memorials, for example on a large tombstone at St. Kew, Cornwall dated 1702 and the 1726 memorial to the Goswells in Winchester Cathedral, but these differ in important detail. The script lettering frequently seen on English memorials are usually of the later style clearly influenced by or emulating writing by pen. Curiously, in North America script of any sort was very
rarely used in early gravestones, roman capitals and lowercase being the favoured form.

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**List of Figures**

1. The distinctive treatment of the capital S and C on a stone in Kirkcudbright Cemetery, Kirkcudbrightshire (1780)
2. Unusual capitals K and R on a stone in Kirkconnel Kirkyard, Dumfriesshire (1780)
3. The six categories of script used in the analysis  
   a. roman with hints - Alloway Kirkyard, Ayrshire (1691)  
   b. primitive – St. Vigeans Kirkyard, Angus (1683)  
   c. hybrid- Elgin Cathedral Kirkyard, Morayshire (1683)  
   d. script - Kirkconnel Kirkyard, Dumfriesshire (1736)  
   e. near pen - Monikie Kirkyard, Angus (1781)  
   f. pen - Portpatrick Kirkyard, Wigtonshire (1833)
4. The development of script form
5. Some roman lowercase letters and their script equivalents. Note the slope and curvature of the descenders
6. Gothic lettering from a headstone in Brechin Cathedral burial ground (1807) and a similar form from Bickham
7. Scottish vernacular writing of 1705. Instrument of Sasine Duncan Buchanan, Douchlage, Stirlingshire (in the possession of the author)
8. The inscriptional counter-rotated ampersand and distinctive lowercase ‘w’ and their equivalents from written documents.

**Endnotes**

1. This research is supported by Cumbria Institute of the Arts and a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board.
11 Martin Billingsley, *The Pens Excellencie or the Secretaries Delighte, etc.*, (London, 1641).
16 John Seddon, *The Penman's Magazine, or a New Copy Book of the English, French, and Italian hands ... adorn'd with ... figures and fancies ... after the originals of ... J. S. perform'd by G. Shelley*, (London, 1705).
18 David Browne, *The New Invention, Intituled Calligraphia: or, the arte of faire writing, etc.*, (St. Andrews, 1622).
19 David Browne, *The Introduction to the True Understanding of the Whole Arte of Expedition in Learning to Write. Intermixed with rare discourses of other matters, etc.*, (London, 1638).
20 C. Buchanan, *The Writing Master and Accountant's Assistant, Containing an Extensive System of Practical Arithmetic. With ... engravings of business writing, etc.*, (Glasgow, 1798).