

A needlecase and the story of the Virgin Martyrs' monument, Stirling

The needlecase with a photographic print of a Victorian monument to the front cover and to the back the legend "Made of oak.....bought in the Douglas Room, Stirling Castle", was a subject of local interest at the Dunblane Convention last September. The monument it depicts is situated in the Valley Cemetery, close to The Holy Rude Church, Stirling. During my stay in the area, I was able to see for myself the once splendid statuary and its protective cupola. Almost 150 years after its erection, it is now in a dilapidated state; two figures headless, one armless and the cast iron cupola devoid of its glass.

The story of those it depicts is a sad one. The marble group is of three figures - an angel keeping watch over two girls, one of whom is reading a Bible. They were Margaret and Agnes Wilson from Wigtownshire, a good distance from Stirling, and were the daughters of a committed Episcopalian, Gilbert Wilson. The girls, however, were followers of the Presbyterian group known as Covenanters, strongly opposed to the Anglican reforms of Charles II in the late 17th century. This period in Scottish history is often referred to as "the killing times", and many people were hunted down and died for their religious beliefs. Margaret, aged 18 and Agnes, 13, were arrested, together with an elderly neighbour, Margaret McLauchlan. All were tried and found guilty of high treason and sentenced to death. Agnes' father was able to buy her freedom because of her tender years but the two Margarets were tied to stakes below the high water mark of the treacherous Solway Firth and left to drown on the incoming tide. The older Margaret quickly succumbed to her fate, whilst Margaret Wilson refused to relinquish her beliefs, despite the pleas of onlookers, and perished as a result of other convictions on 11 May 1685. Tragic and fascinating as the story is, I was then curious to know why a monument to these girls should be erected in a Victorian cemetery almost 200 years later and so many miles from the scene of the terrible event.

All was revealed thanks to the co-operation of the Libraries, Heritage and Culture Service in Stirling. William Drummond of Stirling, an eminent Victorian worthy, and a wealthy and highly religious seed merchant, erected the monument. He was also responsible for the landscaping and beautification of



the Valley Cemetery in the early 1850s and, rather unkindly, it was suggested by some that his work in so doing was promoting his own interests in his trade. Be that as it may, he commissioned many fine monuments of Reformers and Martyrs in the cemetery and was often to be found meditating amongst the tombs contemplating further embellishments. The story of the Virgin Martyrs must have touched his heart, and he commissioned the splendidly named sculptor, Handyside Ritchie, to go to work. Ritchie must have been a prodigious sculptor, since he fashioned all the statues of that period in the cemetery, all but one paid for by William

Drummond. Originally, there was no cupola over the monument, but in 1867 the Sun Foundry in Glasgow cast the protective iron and glass cover, just long enough for William Drummond to see it, as he died in 1868.

Like many other buildings, monuments and views of the Victorian period depicted on Mauchline Ware, this one has survived, but only just! I like to think that the pious William Drummond would have approved of the Club's interest in his story and that of the ill-fated girls whose lives he commemorated in such a typically Victorian fashion.

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