

## ornamented

Any of the above styles can be found with embellishments and decoration, including 'shadowing' and the use of various textures. This ornamented lettering is usually used as the introductory part of the inscription and is most frequent in the first half of the nineteenth century.



Fettercairn, St Mark's 1761

## techniques and layout

Two basic methods were used to cut inscriptions on memorials. Relief lettering, used more often in the sixteenth to early eighteenth century, has the background removed to leave the letters raised, a process that is very time-consuming. Incised lettering has a v-shaped cut into the stone, a procedure that requires considerable skill to do well. Lead infill and insert letters were used in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modern techniques include laser cutting and shot blasting.

Rosehearty (Peathill), Pitsligo Old, 1680



The lettering on most early graveslabs runs round the edge of the stone in a clockwise direction, sometimes continuing in the centre. There is a great variety of layout on headstones ranging from a simple single column to complex panels and marginal inscriptions.

## look out for...

**archaic letterforms**, including early forms of A, B, G, M, Q, R and W, and early forms of the numerals 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8.



**ligatures**, that is letters joined together as a single character such as HE, and THE and mirrored letters, where the mason has intentionally or otherwise cut the letters in reverse, often seen in N and S.



Text and photography prepared for Aberdeenshire Council by Dr George Thomson



## Aberdeenshire's HISTORIC KIRKYARDS



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Supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund



## Lettering & Inscriptions



# Historic Kirkyards Aberdeenshire's Historic Kirkyards

## Speaking stones

Headstones, graveslabs or other funerary memorials are erected to commemorate the deceased. The inscription is, in some respects, the most important part. It could be said that without inscription memorials are meaningless to all but those by whom they were erected. In parts of Germany, gravemarkers are called *sprechende steine*, speaking stones. They speak to us, not only by the form in which the memorial is crafted, but also through the words and lettering of the inscription. The lettering style and its interpretation by the mason tell us something about local culture. We can identify creativity and ingenuity, observe tastes and fashions of the time and learn about the changing techniques and methodologies of a craft that spans many centuries.



Glenmuick 1726

Most post-medieval gravemarkers up to the end of the eighteenth century are vernacular, made by masons who were largely untaught and who could turn their hand to cutting gravestones, sometimes with great skill, sometimes without. The variety we see in the interpretation of lettering is due to this diversity in training.

## Lettering styles

Lettering is not a static art. It evolves and changes with time and space. It is a product of personality, culture, skill and tradition. It interacts with the medium through which it is expressed and with the environment to which it is exposed. Lettering styles cannot always be fitted into discrete categories. However, several basic styles can be recognised each varying according to how it was interpreted by the mason. The lettering on most inscriptions will fit into one or other of these.

## uncio-versal

This is a rare style in Aberdeenshire and may be absent altogether, except on Victorian gravestones in a revival form. An intermediate form between this and roman can be seen on the Elphinstone Tomb in King's College Chapel, Aberdeen.



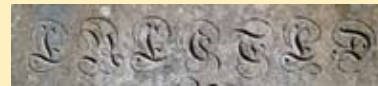
Aberdeen, King's College Chapel 1519

## gothic

Medieval 'textura' or 'black letter' was used on graveslabs and buildings in the late Middle Ages and early post-medieval period. More recent forms were used decoratively on gravestones from the end of the eighteenth century for words like 'In Memory of' and 'Erected by'.



Aberdeen, St Machar's Cathedral 1432



Banff, St Mary's 1855

## roman

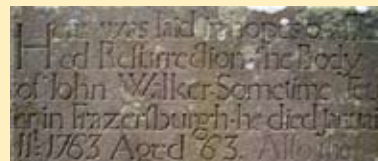
Roman lettering was the most widely used letterform on gravemarkers from the late sixteenth century, in both all capital and capital and lowercase. The interpretation of roman is often inventive. Ligatures (joined letters) are common. Sometimes letters are flipped right to left.



Banff, St Mary's 1635



Fraserburgh, Old Kirk of Philorth 1717



Fraserburgh, Old Kirk of Philorth 1763

## italic

Italic lettering rarely appears on Aberdeenshire gravemarkers until the nineteenth century, when it was invariably used with other styles, especially roman.



Banff, St Mary's 1834

## cursive and script

Lettering that sometimes resembles handwriting developed over a long period from the late seventeenth century. The early forms, *cursive* are more akin to a roman form *century* and are more common in the south of the county than in the north. Letter forms, *script* copied the handwriting styles of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between script and italic.



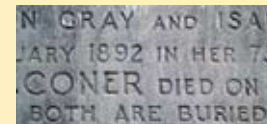
Drumblade 1769



Aberdeen, St Machar's Cathedral 1795

## sans serif and block serif

As the names suggest, sans serif lettering has no serifs and block serif has squared off terminations to the letter strokes. Although early forms of sans serif exist in Scotland, it is really a letterform of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The terminal serifs on lettering are sometimes formed by thick horizontal lines, occasionally bracketed. This style includes forms that are referred to as 'slab serif' or 'Egyptian' in typography. Frequently, as with sans serif, letters are in relief rather than incised.



Fettercairn, St Mark's 1892



Arbuthnott, St Ternan's 1836



serifs (left to right) – sans, roman, slab, linear and bracketed