

## TOMNAHURICH HILL & CEMETERY

### SSSI – Torvean Landforms

Tomnahurich is a major 19<sup>th</sup> century public cemetery with an extensive series of sculptured monuments, whose plantations add significant landscape value to the city of Inverness.

Tomnahurich has long been a focus in the social and cultural life of Inverness and the Highlands. Its conversion to cemetery use has highlighted its role and it incorporates monuments to many figures prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### LOCATION

Tomnahurich Cemetery is laid out along the summit and slopes of Tomnahurich Hill. Its western boundary is formed by the Caledonian Canal and its eastern and southern boundaries by Glenurquhart Road. The series of striking landforms to be found in this area are part of a recognised geomorphological complex known as the Torvean Landforms, which is an outstanding example of Quaternary geomorphology. The Torvean esker is one of the largest in Britain and lies alongside flat-topped kames and kame terraces. Tomnahurich Hill is part of this complex, rising up to 65m above the Inverness plain crossed by the River Ness. Thus Tomnahurich Hill is a prominent and important landmark in views from the city and one of the major, constant topographical landmarks to survive. Together with the Bught Park, Canal Park, Whin Island and Torvean Golf course it forms an important green city approach.

### EXTENT OF THE DESIGNED LANDSCAPE

Tomnahurich Cemetery originally only occupied the hill slopes and summit. It expanded progressively onto the surrounding flat ground and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it occupied a wedge-shaped site between the Caledonian Canal and Glenurquhart Road. As Inverness expanded, the cemetery's northern boundary became enclosed by housing, restricting any further expansion. The cemetery has consequently remained the same size since c.1950.

### HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON LANDSCAPE DEVELOPMENT

Tomnahurich, the 'Hill of the Yew Trees' was said by the Uist Bard MacCodrum to be the resting place of Thomas Rhymer who gained his powers from a meeting with the Queen of Elfland. It is renowned as a gathering place of the fairies affording them ample space for what were termed 'elvish orgies' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fairy queen is reputed to hold her court here – she once paid two wandering fiddlers to entertain her for an evening – however she kept them for 200 years - though they thought it had been just one night. When they returned from the hilltop and realised this, they crumbled into dust. Other legends associated with the hill are that the Gaelic adventurer-king Fionn escaped from an Irish king's enchantments by training his dog Bran to walk two of every species of animal around the hill. Also the 13<sup>th</sup> century seer Thomas the Rhymer is said to rest here together with his men and his white horses, ready to rise again and save Scotland in her hour of need. The Brahan Seer predicted that ships would be seen sailing eastward and westwards by the back of Tomnahurich and can so be said to have predicted the construction of the Caledonian Canal.

Prior to its use as a cemetery, Tomnahurich was described as a '*most remarkable hill...a beautiful, insulated mount, nearly resembling a ship, with her keel uppermost*' (OSA 1793). As a prominent landmark it had for centuries been a focus for social activity, being the site of an annual horse race on the 24-25<sup>th</sup> May which took place around the hill. In 1753 this poor quality agricultural land, yielding only a '*short, thin heath*' was enclosed and planted mainly with Scots pine. Thomas Pennant climbed to the top, pacing it out and appreciating its picturesque qualities. '*The Tomman is of an oblong form...its sides and part of the neighbouring plains are planted, so that it is both an agreeable walk and a fine object. It is perfectly detached from any other hill; and if it were not for its great size it might pass for a work of art. The view from it is such that no traveller will think his labour lost after gaining the summit.*' (Pennan 1790).

The cemetery was developed as an extramural cemetery by the Inverness Cemetery Company and opened in 1864. The site was felt to combine 'vicinity to Inverness with great natural advantages'. Charles Heath Wilson is associated with its design although the work owes most to George Grant Mackay, engineer and land surveyor. In October 1863 Tomnahurich Cemetery directors met and a report was obtained by George Grant Mackay for ...*'the repair of the road to the top , renovation of the wall round the hill, with addition of substantial wire fence all round, construction of the road to the top – twelve feet wide with an ascent of 1 in 15 and preparing part of the ground for burial, namely the top of the hill and about an acre and a half on the north terrace, at the foot of the hill cost estimated at about £500, exclusive of a porters lodge which will cost about £200 more'*. Charles Heath Wilson – was consulted as an 'eminent landscape gardener to lay out the ground'. Wilson spent the greater part of two days on the hill and advocated the retention of as much as possible of the natural wooded characteristic of the hill on the side facing Inverness and guarding against a confused mass of tombs on the slopes. This was to be achieved by separating the ground into woody glades. Wilson also suggested the 'ultimate accomplishment' of a system of vaults on the front of Tomnahurich which would be unique in Europe and have 'a very fine architectural effect'. However, only three were ever built.

The first public interment took place in May 1864 when a young child was buried on the summit on the newly established cemetery.

There are three classes of interment on the summit – company directors occupy some of the best plots. The cem company also provided for cheap burials for those who could not afford to purchase a plot. The cem company tried for many years to get the burial grounds within Inverness closed – they were notoriously overcrowded – but people made use of them for along while after the establishment of tomnahurich cemetery.

The land was feued from the landowner, Mr Baillie of Dochfour, who in 1872 permitted improvements to the approaches to the cemetery across his land. Initially, the cemetery was on the hilltop. Access to the cemetery was by way of a lodge built at its northern point, adjacent to the farmstead of Tomnahurich. There was also a gate at its southern point onto Glenurquhart road near Tomnahurich Bridge (1868 OS). The 'New' cemetery adjacent to Glenurquhart Road was opened in 1898. A new gate and lodge house designed by Alexander Ross was built on Glenurquhart Road, opposite the junction with Ballifeary Road. At the same time, the north lodge was converted into a mortuary chapel and the remainder of the field, north-east of the hill, was designated as Victoria Park, a public park for recreation with a bandstand. Its boundaries with Glenurquhart Road and Bruce Gardens were then lined with trees. Expansion of the Muirtown area of Inverness led to the development of Victoria Park estate for housing, while land within the park which lay directly to the east and north of Tomnahurich was taken into the cemetery. Thus the cemetery expanded across all the valley floor up to the Caledonian Canal. In 1909 the Burgh took over the cemetery.

The majority of iron railings and chains from around the older graves were removed during the Second World War. Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century attempts to reduce maintenance costs resulted in the removal of many stone kerb surrounds. Recent vandalism and the subsidence of sections of the hill slopes have caused damage to monuments and steps. Burials have continued on the valley floor so that the capacity of the cemetery has been reached. In the 1990s the North lodge was sold as a private residence and its own garden defined within the cemetery.

## COMPONENTS OF THE DESIGNED LANDSCAPE

### Architectural features

Tomnahurich Cemetery contains no listed buildings although many tombstones and structures are of architectural and historic interest. There is for instance a monument to Mary Anne Lyall with a version of Thornwalden's Kneeling Angel font, of about 1870, signed by Andrew Davidson. On the south side of the hill, armed angel figures guard the door of the mausoleum of Henry Christie. On Glenurquhart Road and Bruce Gardens, the perimeter walls, railings and gates make an important contribution to the townscape. The Entrance

Lodge (Glenurquhart Road) was designed by Alexander Ross in 1877 and is a broad-eaved building.

#### Drives and footpaths

The main drive leads northwards off Glenurquhart Road, to turn and climb the west flank of the hill by a series of terraced ramps before curving around the south side of the hill. On the summit plateau is a circular turning area cut into the hilltop. This drive was designed for access by horse-drawn carriages and is still used by maintenance vehicles. Pedestrian access to the hill is by a series of terraced gravel paths and steps. Expansion of the cemetery onto the surrounding flat plain saw the development of an extended road network around the base of the hill to service the burial plots. A comprehensive network of gravel paths was also developed, which adopts fan and grid patterns.

#### The Hilltop

The hilltop was modelled into a flat oval-shaped plateau, where a formal cemetery layout was established. The carriage drive enters a central, sunken turning circle reached by three flights of steps. The steps on the north and south sides lead up to a footpath which forms the central north-south axis and is lined by regularly planted Irish yew. Central to the path is a war memorial (1914-18). The open plateau is enclosed by a perimeter belt which clothes the hill slopes. The planting of specimen conifers, particularly Lawson cypress cultivars and Douglas firs, give it a strong character. It was originally surrounded by four nootka cypresses of which only one remains. An oval circuit footpath leads around the perimeter of the plateau and gives access to many of the oldest and richest monuments and gravestones. They stand near to the edge of the plateau and are subsiding.

#### The Hillside

On the south and west slopes of the hill are terraces laid out with burial plots. The terraces, lined by Irish yews and specimen broadleaf trees are interconnected by flights of steps. Some of the shrub plantings along the terraces have become invasive – particularly rhododendron. The hillside cemetery contains the most elaborate monuments including the Henry Christie Mausoleum and the Mary Anne Lyall monument.

#### Woodland

The mature Tomnahurich woodlands are a prominent landmark. They cover the hillsides, but are most dense on the steepest east side which lacks burial terraces. The woodlands comprise oak, beech, sycamore and Scots pine, the latter being remnants of 18<sup>th</sup> century planting. In general there are more beech trees on the east slopes and oak on the west. The understorey includes holly, rhododendron, laurel, Symphoricarpos, gorse, broom and heathers.

#### Lower Cemetery

The flat ground around the base of the hill was laid out in places as the cemetery expanded. It is characterised by a network of paths and lines of headstones within cropped grass. The oldest, south-eastern part of the cemetery has numerous mature specimen trees. These are prominent from Glenurquhart Road.

#### MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The main management issues at Tomnahurich relate to the condition / longevity of the woodlands and the subsidence / vandalism / damage to monuments. Highland Council TEC Services currently arrange for routine maintenance and remedial work within the cemetery.

## **TOMNAHURICH HILL & CEMETERY**

SSSI

Torvean landforms – quaternary geomorphology, eskers and kames  
Major 19C cemetery

Location – Tom Hill, rises 65m above Inverness plain  
Prominent and important landmark

Designed landscape  
Boundaries

Focus for activity  
Planted 1753  
OSA  
Thomas Pennant  
Horse races??

Prehistory – cists, carved stone ball

Myths and fairies  
Hill of the Yew Trees  
Thomas Rhymer  
Fionn and dog Bran  
Brahan Seer

1864 Inverness Cemetery Company  
good site  
overcrowding in Inverness  
Original gates and lodges, Tomnahurich farmstead  
Summit and slopes of hill

Later gates and lodges 1898 (Alexander Ross)  
Conversion to mortuary chapel  
Expansion, housing and Victoria park  
Further expansion  
1909 – Burgh take over

Baillie of Dochfour 1872  
*Charles Heath Wilson* – eminent landscape gardener  
Retain natural woodland  
Series of terraces glades  
System of vaults  
*George Grant Mackay*, engineer

**architecture –**

new lodge (alexander ross 1877), broad-eaved  
later conversion to mortuary

**drives and paths**

circle hill, gradient 1 in 16  
designed for access by horse-drawn carriages  
terraced ramps, paths and steps

**'new' part of cemetery**

series of grid and fan paths  
flat ground expansion  
SE part is oldest

**hillside**

interconnected terraces on s and w sides  
lined by irish yews, specimen broadleaves  
now intrusive shrubs  
most elaborate monuments –

**Mary Anne Lyall –**

monument is a version of Thornwaldsen's Kneeling Angel font  
signed Andrew Davidson  
c 1870

**Henry Christie mausoleum**

armed angels guard door

**hilltop**

flat oval plateau  
carriage access – central sunken circle  
planting – perimeter belt, specimen conifers (Lawson cypress, Douglas firs)  
nootka cypress  
war memorial  
oldest and richest monuments  
-company directors, prominent 19<sup>th</sup> C figures  
1<sup>st</sup> public internment 1864, child  
subsidence around perimeter

**woodland**

prominent landmark  
most dense on e side (no burial terraces)  
Heath Wilson wanted to keep woods 'facing Inverness'  
more beech on east, oak on west

**management issues**

maintenance – kerbs removed mid 20<sup>th</sup> century  
now issues are condition, longevity of woodlands, subsidence , vandalism  
HC TEC services maintain  
2WW economies – most iron railings removed

## **Designed Landscape Assessment of Significance**

Work of art – *high*

Historical – *high*

Scenic – *outstanding*

Nature conservation – *outstanding*

(Archaeological – *some*)

**Pennant** – *'The Tomman is of an oblong form...its sides and part of the neighbouring plains are planted, so that it is both an agreeable walk and a fine object. It is perfectly detached from any other hill; and if it were not for its great size it might pass for a work of art. The view from it is such that no traveller will think his labour lost after gaining the summit.'* (Pennan 1790).

**OSA** - *'a most remarkable hill...a beautiful, insulated mount, nearly resembling a ship, with her keel uppermost'* (OSA 1793).

**George Grant Mackay** - *'...the repair of the road to the top , renovation of the wall round the hill, with addition of substantial wire fence all round, construction of the road to the top – twelve feet wide with an ascent of 1 in 15 and preparing part of the ground for burial, namely the top of the hill and about an acre and a half on the north terrace, at the foot of the hill cost estimated at about £500, exclusive of a porters lodge which will cost about £200 more'.*