The Capelrig Stones

The Capelrig Stones is a public art project by artist James Winnett consisting of five carved stones installed along the Capelrig Way in Newton Mearns. Each stone carries imagery and text that draws on the rich history of carving and raising stones in East Renfrewshire.

A thousand years ago the surrounding landscape was populated with numerous carved stones and crosses. Most have been lost in the mists of time or moved for their own protection. However, others linger on, echoed in place names and local legends. The Capelrig Stones provide a material link to some of these stories whilst tapping into the mysteries that surround them.

Standing around six feet tall, the largest stone is carved with the profile of a hare on its north face and with five narrative panels on its west face. The uppermost panel shows two figures standing either side of a standing stone. To the left is a mason and to the right, a figure holding a rudimentary axe. Tools including a pick axe, shovel, mallet and chisels can be seen carved beneath. Although the scene depicted appears to show the creation of the stone itself, it may also refer to the Capelrig Cross, a thousand year old stone cross which once stood in a field 600 metres to the north east of this stone. The remaining shaft of the cross was removed in 1926 and it can now be seen in Rouken Glen Pavilion. The cross may have originally been associated with a chapel and the name ‘Capelrig’ is thought to originate from ‘chapel on the ridge’ although evidence of such a building has never been found. By the 12th century the Knights Templar held the lands of Capelrig before losing these to the Knights Hospitaller in 1309.

The panel directly below shows a bird above three lines representing a river. A fish resembling a salmon is carved beneath. The bird appears to be looking down into the river towards the fish.

The third panel depicts a lion and hare with a small church-like building positioned on a hill between them. Beneath this is a small circle carved with an ‘X’. These motifs appear to refer to a local legend of silver being buried somewhere between the ‘Capelrig Cross’, the ‘Lyon Cross’ and the ‘auld Hare Stane’. A text associated with the legend appears carved across three of the other Capelrig Stones along Capelrig Burn (see below).

The panel below shows four guardian-like figures each carrying a staff and shield. A bear motif can been seen on the shield held by the figure to the left, an animal traditionally associated with King Arthur who may in turn be linked with the 9-11th century Arthurie Cross in Barrhead.

The second figure is associated with the story of Neil’s Stone, a cross which stood to south of Neilston up to the end of the 18th century. A local tradition exists of a fight between two chiefs named Arthur and Neil who both died of their wounds and were buried at the sites of the two stones.

A horseman on the shield of the third figure is reminiscent of similar carvings seen in the ‘Govan School’ of stone carving from around the 9-11th century. Here, it appears to reference the ‘Steed-Stane Cross’ which once stood north of Barrhead alongside the road to Paisley not far from Harelaw Farm.
The fourth figure is depicted as a bearded giant with a shield that carries a carving of a stone. This is the ‘Giant’s Stone’, a great boulder hidden in woodland beneath Neilston Pad, a prominent hill to the south of Neilston. A local legend tells of how the stone was thrown from Duncarnock Fort (The Craigie) by a giant during a competition with another giant to see who could throw their stone the furthest. The giant standing on Neilston Pad threw his stone towards Duncarnock Fort but overshot. The whereabouts of this stone, known as Geordie’s Meikle Stone, is uncertain.

The final panel shows four local fortifications. The uppermost carving depicts the ruins of Pollok Castle which stood a mile away on land that is now just west of the M77. It was the seat of the Polloks who traced their ancestry back to the twelfth century and it was destroyed by fire in 1882. Depicted to the right of this are the ruins of Stewart Rais which was built by the Stewarts of Darnley around 1440 on the banks of Lavern Water between Darnley and Barrhead. It was used as a hunting lodge until it fell into disrepair and its stones were taken for housing. The last remaining stones were used for road bottoming in the 1930s. The lower carving shows 18th century Capelrig Tower which stands on a wooded hill above Patterton station. Its origins are unknown but it may have been built by the owners of Capelrig House as a viewpoint, perhaps to watch hare coursing in the fields below. The carving to the left shows Mearn Castle, a 15th century tower built by Herbert, Lord Maxwell in 1449 and now used by the adjacent Maxwell Mearns Castle Church.

Buried Silver

Three of the stones along the Capelrig Way carry an inscription relating to a local legend of buried silver:

“Yont Capelrig and Lyon Cross
And eke the auld hare stane,
There’s rowth o’ bonnie siller lies,
Wha finds the king will sain”

Although the legend talks of silver being buried between the three stones, only two of the locations are known - the Capelrig Cross, in Barcapel and the Lyon Cross, which is thought to have stood where Ryat Linn reservoir is today. The identity and location of the ‘auld hare stane’ remains a mystery and so the treasure remains hidden.

The upper surfaces of the three stones carry geographical features, motifs and text referencing local landmarks, old place names and historical events. They are orientated in the landscape and can therefore be used to explore the relationships between these local histories, geographies and legends.

For further information about The Capelrig Stones or artist James Winnett visit: www.axisweb.org/p/jameswinnett/ or search for ‘Capelrig Stones’