

BLIN' MAY'S GRAVE CAIRNBULG HARBOUR

Near the 'Monkey Pole' (formerly part of the rocket apparatus for the coastguard) there is a 'muckle stane' which my mother remembers as a child being warned by her cousin not to jump on because it was 'some wifie's grave'. Indeed, at one time, according to Johnny May of Inverallochy, the stone bore the name 'May', but due to the kindness of two women in Cairnbulg, there is now a cast-iron marker which tells May's story.

Her name was Marjory Mowat, but was known as 'Blin' Mah'ee', or Blind May. Her death during the cholera epidemic which struck the village in 1849 is tragic enough, but the fact her remains lie under the grassy dunes not far from the harbour, tells us something about the awful nature of the disease. Johnny again takes up the story, 'before Belger had a cemetery folk were buried at St Combs kirkyard. The toon folk wouldn't let her be carried through the villages with the fear of... getting unwell, so she was buried here.' According to her simple memorial, Blin' May was between 86 and 89 years old when she died.

Characterised by sickness, diarrhoea and profuse sweating, cholera first appeared in Britain in 1831; careless officials in Sunderland allowed a Baltic ship to dock and the epidemic resulted in 52,000 deaths across the country. This particular outbreak began in 1848. Information from the minutes of Fraserburgh's Police Commission reveals that in October 1849, 'householders be warned under the pains of the law, not to receive into their houses individuals from the infected district.' Cairnbulg fishermen returning from Montrose were the carriers. They arrived on 30th September with the body of their crewmate who had already succumbed. The father of another crew member was infected as he helped them unload. His family died within days. A report by health inspectors observed that the next victim had attended one of their funerals.



Blin' May's Gravestone, Cairnbulg

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The cholera swept like wildfire through both Inverallochy and Cairnbulg, taking fifty lives. Inspector Grieve attributed the rapid progress to primitive sanitary conditions: 'Water in stagnant pools. Dunghills near doors, consisting of fish refuse with seaweed and dirty water from the houses.' Grieve noted too that the disease had passed between the villages via the Stripey, the stream which flowed down a shallow gully dividing the main street. The water had been infected by contaminated clothes being washed therein.

So why was May Mowat treated thus? The real issue was the fact that St Combs kirkyard was in the neighbouring parish of Lonmay; the residents managed to persuade Peterhead's Sheriff Substitute to issue an interdict banning any burials there unless carried out by the parish gravedigger, precluding any of May's relatives from doing so. Rather than risk infection by waiting, the Belger emergency committee decided to inter the body in that lonely spot near the harbour, likely causing unspeakable grief to her surviving daughters. Blin' May's grave thus represents an act of fearful haste at a time of crisis, yet it ensured she would never be forgotten by succeeding generations.