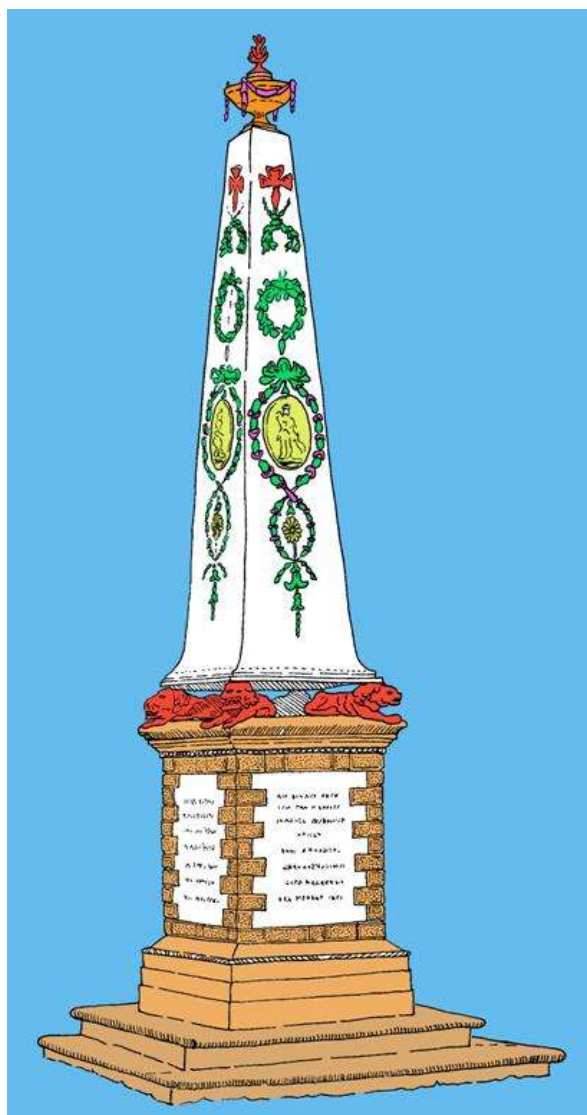


## The Bruce Monument at Larbert

**Geoff B Bailey**

In the first Statistical Account of the united parishes of Larbert and Dunipace the Rev. George Harvie wrote in 1792 that “Mr Bruce of Kinnaird, the famous Abyssinian traveller, has lately erected an elegant monument of cast metal, over the vault wherein his lady and eldest son are interred, which is much admired by strangers.” (Harvie 1799). Mary Dundas had died on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1785 and its main inscription records that James Bruce meant it as “a Memorial of His Gratitude & Affection & Her Virtues.”



**Illus 1: The Bruce Monument as built in 1785. The colour scheme is uncertain, but it seems reasonable to conjecture that the stonework on the plinth was a sandstone colour and the foliage green. The lions, like that on Falkirk's Cross Well may have been red. The Classical vase is shown as terracotta.**

decorative scheme, reproduced on each of the four sides, was of the usual leaves and buds strung out in lines to form open and closed wreaths and helical strands, in the centres of which were disposed four oval figurative plaques and four flower-head medallions. The top of each string terminated in a ribbon bow.

The elegant monument was executed in the fashionable style of that period – that of the Classical revival led by Robert Adam – and takes the form of an obelisk standing on the backs of four couchant lions placed diagonally at the corners of a rectangular block with a chamfered plinth, the whole capped by an elaborate lamp. The obelisk is 3.8m tall and the podium 1.83m, giving an overall height of 5.8m excluding the vase. The base of the podium is 1.21m square.

It was one of the earliest monuments to be made in cast iron, and certainly the most elaborate and largest of the time. It was thus a considerable technical achievement and yet it imitated its stone precursors. Not only did it have cast iron rusticated quoins on the corners of the podium, but these would have been painted to simulate stone. The corners of the tapering top, by contrast, were butt jointed and the seams filled to reproduce the appearance of a stone obelisk. This too was painted – not merely to hide the joins, but to imitate the other stone monuments. It should be remembered that many of the gravestones in the adjacent churchyard were also brightly painted.

This colouring would have extended to the delicate and elaborate decoration that adorned the sloping sides of the obelisk. The foliage here would have been coloured green in contrast to the background panel, which was most probably a pale cream. This

The oval plaques each have a draped female figure. The west and east plaques are identical and show the woman leaning with her legs crossed and her elbow on an anchor. Above the anchor is the Greek word ἘΠΕΘΕΟ, meaning Hope. That on the north shows a woman walking to the right with two birds resting on her lower right arm, which is held across her chest. In her extended left hand she carries a potted plant or flame. Behind her is a small sparsely leaved tree. The plaque on the east shows a woman cradling a bird in the crook of her left arm, whilst her right arm extends round a sheep-like animal lying on a plinth. To the right is an elephant and the Greek work ΝΠΕΟΤΕΔΟ – gentleness or mildness.



**Illus 2: Two of the oval plaques from the obelisk. These were copied in 1910 by the Carron Company and are now in the collections of Falkirk Museum.**

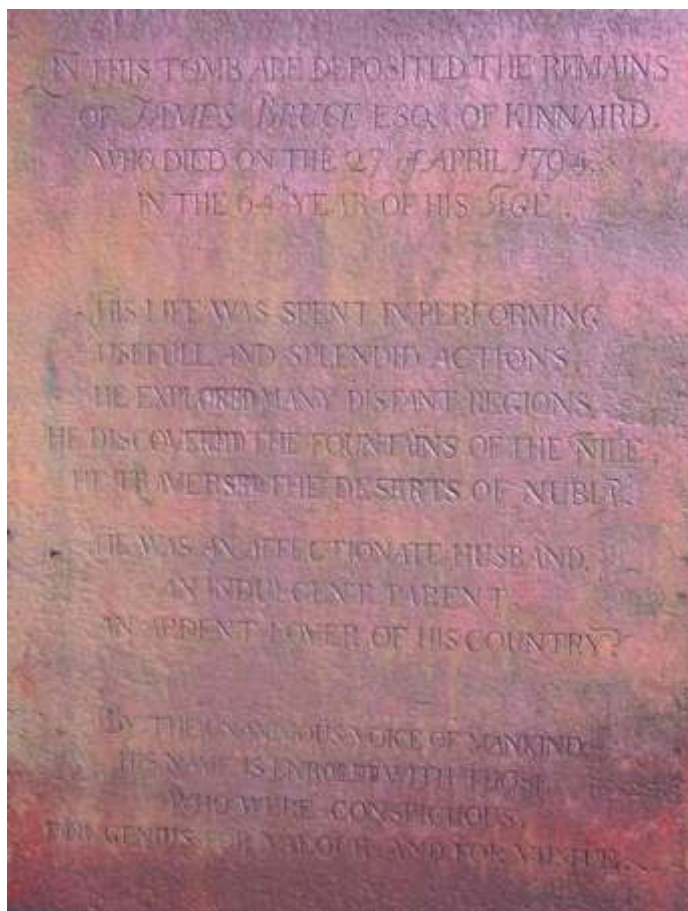


The four solid cast iron lions are not particularly lifelike, but protectively bare their teeth to visitors. They were made from one pattern and possess short manes and prominent ribs. The front paws extend out onto the chamfered upper moulding of the pedestal.

The lower block or pedestal is capped with these moulded borders, as would have been a stone monument. The corners of the block had angle brackets in the form of alternating courses of chamfered quoin stones with deep rustication and a similar course of dressed ashlar blocks ran along the top and bottom to frame the inscriptive panels. Below these is a chamfered plinth with three slightly enlarged stages. The moulded border between the top two of these is of a two strand leaved wreath; the other two being ropework alternating in opposite

directions. Finally, these in turn sit on two tiers of sandstone steps (which the paint scheme probably matched) with backset risers and rounded treads.

Three sides of the plinth now have inscriptions. The earliest was that to Mary Dundas, the second wife of James Bruce. Originally this faced north towards the churchyard (and in its current location in the car park faces east). It reads: "SACRED TO THE MEMORY/ OF/ MARY DUNDAS/ Who died the 10<sup>TH</sup> day of Feb 1785,/ AGED 31 YEARS./ James Bruce of Kinnaird/ Her Husband Erected this/ Monument a Memorial of/ His Gratitude & Affection/ & Her Virtues./ /At Her feet lies the Body of/ ROBERT BRUCE Their Eldest Son/ Who died 10<sup>th</sup> day of November/ 1778."



This was followed by the epitaph to James Bruce on the opposite side of the monument facing south across the Carron valley (now on the west face): "IN THIS TOMB ARE DEPOSITED THE REMAINS/ OF JAMES BRUCE ESQ OF KINNAIRD,/ WHO DIED ON THE 27<sup>th</sup> OF APRIL 1794,/ IN THE 64<sup>th</sup> YEAR OF HIS AGE/ / HIS LIFE WAS SPENT PERFORMING/ USEFULL, AND SPLENDID ACTIONS/ HE EXPLORED MANY DISTANT REGIONS./ HE DISCOVERED THE FOUNTAINS OF THE NILE./ HE TRAVERSED THE DESERTS OF NUBIA./ / HE WAS AN AFFECTIONATE HUSBAND,/ AN INDULGENT PARENT,/ AN ARDENT LOVER OF HIS COUNTRY./ / BY THE UNANIMOUS VOICE OF MANKIND,/ HIS NAME IS ENROLLED WITH THOSE,/ WHO WERE CONSPICUOUS,/ FOR GENIUS, FOR VALOUR, AND FOR VIRTUE."

His granddaughter is commemorated on the west face (now south): "SACRED TO THE MEMORY/ OF/ MARY ELIZABETH CUMMING BRUCE/ GRANDDAUGHTER AND HEIRESS OF/ JAMES BRUCE OF KINNAIRD/ BORN 1799 MARRIED 1820/ AND DIED AT KINNAIRD IN 1875/ / ALSO TO HER HUSBAND/ CHARLES LENNOX CUMMING BRUCE/ OF DUNPHAIL AND ROSHISLE/ BORN AT ALTYRE FEB 20<sup>TH</sup> 1790/ REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNITED COUNTIES/ OF ELGIN AND NAIRN AND PREVIOUSLY/ OF THE INVERNESS DISTRICT OF BURGHS/ DURING TEN SUCCESSIVE PARLIAMENTS/ FROM 1831 TO 1869/ DIED AT BROOMHALL JAN 1<sup>ST</sup> 1875."

All of the inscriptions are engraved into the iron plates – presumably sand cast at the foundry; not an easy operation.

The whole was surmounted by a low-profiled Classical vase from the sides of which hung drapery festoons and pendants. The finial took the form of a multi-pronged device, probably an eternal flame. The liberal use of cast iron in this manner was not only artistic, permitting



greater detail than mere carving in stone, but it was innovative. This was a time when metallurgists were experimenting with the structural use of iron and its limitations were unknown. The extravagant grandeur of the finished monument really was one of the wonders of its age and people still come from distant lands to view it. One of the earliest visitors was Robert Burns who made of point of seeing the “fine monument in cast iron” on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1787 after being refused entry into the Carron Ironworks. The monument was a great propaganda coup for the Carron Company. Not only was it technically brilliant for a firm that was only 25 years old at the time of its fabrication, and thus put it on a par with the Coalbrookdale Company at Ironbridge, but it advertised the type of artistic product then in vogue. The spine of the dust sheet for Campbell’s history of the company illustrates a contemporary stove in the same style.

**Illus 3: A Carron Company heating stove.**

This use of classical motifs at Carron was pioneered by the Haworth brothers (Watters 2010, 89). They were not merely excellent artists and wood carvers, but they were also responsible for the final appearance of such costly household items. The range of products was increasing all of the time and their design made them sought after by the stately homes of Britain. This was a new market and one that the Carron Company fully exploited. In an endeavour to expand its repertoire of these items the Company advertised “*Masons, carvers, engravers, chassers and smiths accustomed to execute work in Baffo Relievo, will find constant employment and good encouragements, in adopting their ingenuity to Cast Iron Work, by application to Carron Company.*” (Edinburgh Evening Courant 2 April 1785). This in the same year as the Bruce Monument was created.

A descendant of the Haworths has in her possession an old cabinet card showing the monument – the best depiction that we have of it in its original state. On the reverse is written “designed by William Haworth”; and this tradition is noted in the commemorative publications of the Carron Company (for example in *The Story of Industrial Enterprise* (GD58/22/3/7).

The basal steps of the Bruce Monument are founded on broken sandstone and lime mortar, which forms the roof of the burial vault. This material is covered with a layer of soil, forming a mound that projects from the sloping hillside. To the north a set of stone steps set in the churchyard retaining wall gives access from the church, which would have stood on the same axis as the steps and the monument. The steps are framed by wide rubble piers with rounded ends facing into the entrance supporting iron gates. Holes in the ends of the steps show that hand rails were attached to the piers. The wall to either side of the piers swept down to ground level in a graceful curve and continued as a capping of triangular sectioned stones. The enclosure containing the Monument is set on a terrace below the churchyard and is bounded by stone walls. That on the east is interrupted in the centre by a doorway with a stone lintel. That on the west has been raised in height to form part of the minister’s walled garden, whilst that on the south has a long depressed central portion. The reduction in height is achieved by graceful S-curves and here the quality of capstones is far superior. Across the low section of the wall are the remnants of iron railing. These railings were delicately forged in wrought iron interspersed by more substantial wrought iron newel posts that were topped with decorative small cast iron urns. They are now badly corroding and

delaminating, but nevertheless, provide an excellent illustration of the transition period between wrought and cast iron – with the use of mass produced cast iron in the finial detail and delicate craftsmanship of the forged bars and cope rails. These are amongst the earliest surviving iron railings in the world. Writing in 1866 Gillespie described the situation thus: “*Down in a sheltered enclosure to the south of the churchyard stands the spiral monument, wrapt in utter stillness*” (Nimmo 1886).

The burial plot was purchased for use by the family in 1782 in anticipation, as the legal document states:

" ... All and Hail that piece of ground being part of the Estate of Larbert, lying on the east end of the kirkyard of Larbert within the Parish thereof and shire of Stirling, bounded as follows vizt. By the east wall of the said kirkyard and the park sett in tack to Doctor Taylor on the west, the Minister's glebe on the south, by the road leading from the village of Larbert to the said glebe on the east, and by the gateway or entry to the churchyard of Larbert on the north parts thereof as now rail'd round, and contained in a disposition granted thereof to the said James Bruce deceased by William Ferguson Esq. of Raith bearing date the twenty eighth day of December seventeen hundred and eighty two years, and which piece of ground was afterwards inclosed & converted into burying ground and upon part whereof the said James Bruce erected a vault or tomb with a monument for himself and his family..." (SRO CC21/12/1: Curatorial Inventory of James Bruce 1795).

The choice of site was well considered. The Monument was placed on the axial line of the church restored by Rev. Robert Bruce, one of the most famous Scots of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the grandfather of James Bruce. Approaching it from the church the churchyard terrace gave the visitor a view down onto the monument, taking in the sweep of the steps and path. From the south it dominated the valley and the long low enclosure wall ensured that it was clearly visible from the Falkirk road. Perched on its hill the church drew attention to the site and it is quite probable that it formed part of the defences of the Royalist army of 1651 at the Battle of Larbert Bridge. The water cascading over the new weir of 1772 across the river must have added to the drama of the setting – a reminder of the Nile.

The entrance to the vaulted tomb was by a small stone rectangular building to its west, from which a passage would have led under the mound. It was apparently closed by a wooden door and allowed access without the necessity of disturbing the cast iron obelisk. Its shape is shown on the earlier Ordnance Survey maps. In 1910, long after the last burial in 1875, the building appears to have been demolished and the rubble levelled and covered by a layer of mortar to tidy up the site and to seal the tomb.



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**Illus 4: The mortar capping of the tomb entrance under investigation in 2013. Note the railings in the background.**

The Bruce family enclosure was large by any standards, but there do not appear to have been any other graves placed within it. Trees were planted along the west and east sides and the owner of the Kinnaird estate used to send two men there each year to cut the grass and maintain the fabric. This, however, ceased around 1890 and the area became

overgrown. By 1902 the rank vegetation had taken over and the monument, which does not appear to have received any remedial work, had deteriorated to a state of near collapse. After 115 years of exposure to the Scottish climate it had rusted into a condition of advanced decay. The decorative features on the sides of the obelisk had worn to wafer thinness and the thicker plates had fractured near the vertical joints.

The national importance of the monument and its occupant seem to have been forgotten in the milieu of events since 1785. International wars, social change and technological advance had left it behind. It was the local historians and a revival of Scottish nationalism that brought it to light once more. Comments began to appear in newspapers and a move was made to restoring the site. There was much to do as is shown from the following article that appeared in the Falkirk Herald on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 1902:

*"The tomb of James Bruce of Kinnaird, the Abyssinian traveller, which is situated in what is known as the Kinnaird burial ground in Larbert Churchyard, is presently in a lamentable state of decay and disrepair. "R.C." who has apparently visited the tomb lately, writing in the "Scotsman" under date September 15<sup>th</sup>, says regarding it: - "There are two tombs in Larbert Churchyard towards which most visitors to that neighbourhood try to make a pious pilgrimage – that of Robert Bruce of Kinnaird, once minister of the Tron Church, Edinburgh, whom James VI said in his early career was 'worth half of his kingdom' but who lost favour because of his outspokenness, got imprisoned, and condemned to live and die within two miles of Kinnaird. His tomb has a neat iron railing round it. The old flat stone with the Latin inscription, showing where he was buried under the pulpit of Larbert Old Church (now disappeared) has a companion stone of modern date abundantly setting forth all his great virtues. It is very different with the tomb of the great traveller, which stands amongst a belt of wood immediately at the back of Larbert Manse, in the lower part of the churchyard, which it fortunately or unfortunately has all to itself, for it is at present little better than a wilderness of weeds and tall nettles. The entrance to the tomb is a heap of rubbish, overgrown with grass; the wooden door is smashed in pieces. To get to it one must jump the south churchyard wall, landing in a rubbish heap pitched over there. The tomb here, where the traveller's body was afterwards laid, is a square building erected by James Bruce for his wife, Mary Dundas, who died in 1785. A tall obelisk, apparently of rusty iron, stands on a pedestal supported by four lions. It is difficult to decipher all the names on three sides of the pedestal. The epitaph to James Bruce is on the south; Mary Dundas, his wife, and son, on the north, and his granddaughter, Mary Elizabeth Cumming Bruce, on the west. His epitaph does not tell more than the truth – that the life of James Bruce was spent in performing useful and splendid actions. 'He explored many distant regions, he discovered the deserts of Nubia, he was an affectionate husband, an indulgent parent, and an ardent lover of his country. By the unanimous voice of mankind his name is enrolled with those who were conspicuous for genius, for valour, and for virtue.' Looking around on fair Carron River today, studded with ironfoundries and other works, one wonders if the brains and heart of our people have ceased to remember or care for James Bruce and his valour and virtue. Will the parish minister to the united parishes of Larbert and Dunipace soon to be appointed, do something to remove this scandal? Or will the Council of the Scottish Geographical Society send out an expedition to this region, and report, and raise a little healthy public sentiment? As it stands it is a disgrace. It is pleasing to be able to contrast with this neglect the zeal and enthusiasm of Falkirk antiquarians in the unveiling and preservation of stations and sections of the Roman Wall of Antoninus. Thanks to the prompting of Mr JR MacLuckie of Braeside, the Society of Antiquaries mapped and excavated the station at Camelon, of which we have*

the excellent plans by Mr Mungo Buchanan, and the description by Dr Christian in the Society's Proceedings. Now is the time to see Castlecary, which has exceeded all expectations; Mr Haverfield is even enthusiastic. Thanks to the Marquis of Zetland, backed up by his factor, Mr Charles Brown, who was on the ground with Mr MacLuckie on Saturday, the walls of Castlecary camp are now unveiled by the Society of Antiquaries, and the eight foot wall that ran round the station is now exposed, with the well and other buildings. These will never again be a quarry to any one, as they once were.

A reporter from the "Falkirk Herald" visited Larbert Churchyard yesterday afternoon and saw the monument. Meeting Mr Baxter, the assistant gravedigger in the churchyard, he inquired for the tomb, and was kindly shown the monument. The writer of the above letter has by no means exaggerated its condition. It stands in Kinnaird burial ground, which occupies the lower part of the churchyard, and is so completely obscured by bushes and trees that the casual observer is quite unaware of its existence. The gravedigger led the way over a low wall, on the other side of which was deposited a large quantity of rubbish and scrambling over this and bending down and passing underneath the low branches of the trees, where it would seem man had not been for years, one emerged into an open space where on the top of the tomb stood the monument. Nettles are growing round about the tomb in wild profusion, and, as the writer of the letter says, the entrance is a heap of rubbish, overgrown with grass, while the wooden door is smashed in. The tall obelisk which stands on a pedestal supported by four lions, is apparently of cast iron, and the whole erection is so much eaten by rust, and having been exposed to storm and rain for so many years without being repaired or attended to, will evidently soon fall to pieces; in fact the obelisk in one part is already broken. Were it not for the shelter of the trees the monument would ere now, no doubt, be lying in pieces, among the rubbish lying at the base. The obelisk has at one time been adorned with metal ornamentation, but many of these have fallen off, or been eaten away by the rust. By inquiry at the gravedigger, the fact was elicited that no one in the district, or anywhere else,



seemed to be interested in the tomb and monument of this famous explorer. When Lord Thurlow, he said, whose wife was a Miss Bruce, a descendant of the traveller's, occupied Kinnaird, he sent two of his men to the churchyard once a year for the purpose of renovating the burial ground, and they cut the grass round about the tomb and otherwise improved the appearance of things a bit; but since the Kinnaird estate passed out of Lord Thurlow's hands, the tomb and monument have been left to the ruthless hand of time, and the elements of decay. The monument is now in such a condition that it is almost beyond repair and if steps are to be taken to preserve the memory of "Abyssinian Bruce" no time should be lost in taking action."

**Illus 5: The Bruce Monument c1900 showing the overgrown state of the enclosure. Some of the ornate mouldings can still be seen on the sides of the obelisk.**

In 1908 a committee was finally set up to “restore” the monument under the chairmanship of the church minister, Rev John Fairley. This ad hoc group were concerned that the fame of James Bruce, Larbert Parish and Scotland should continue to be promulgated. They were not particularly interested with the innovative place of this unique monument in the use of a cast iron. The monument was “thoroughly examined by a practical man, who reported that it was incapable of being restored.” Their intended goal was to replicate the obelisk in granite – reversing the original concept. Estimates ranged from £193 to £445, with a further £15 for clearing up the ground and for the making of a walk from the churchyard to the monument.

The lowest offer of £200 was accepted, and with the cost of landscaping and an additional sum for future maintenance the committee made the following public appeal for £250.

*“We would point out in support of this appeal that the name of James Bruce must ever remain inscribed on the roll of Scotland's distinguished sons. Born in 1730, he was an intrepid explorer, and after suffering great hardships and dangers in his Abyssinian travels, he discovered the sources of the Blue Nile. He was also an eminent archaeologist and antiquarian, and he visited and explored the remains of many ancient Eastern cities and ruins, and part of his splendid collection of drawings, taken while exploring those places, is now in the Royal collection in Windsor Castle.*

*We venture to suggest that the movement for the re-erection of a suitable monument to so distinguished a Scotsman is one which will awaken widespread interest, and indeed that it is a matter which affects the honour and patriotism of Scotland. It seem incredible that the memory of this great and distinguished man should have been so far forgotten, and that his grave should have been allowed to get into such a state of melancholy neglect and desolation. When these facts are known we are certain that a very handsome response will be made to the present appeal, and which will have the effect of remedying a state of matters which is little short of a national reproach. We trust you will be able to assist the movement by making as large a donation as possible.”* [Falkirk Herald 16 June 1909, 5a]

Fortunately, the response to the appeal for funds to carry out the proposal was totally inadequate and the repair and restoration of the old monument was therefore decided upon. Appropriately, the work was executed by Carron Company through the personal influence of

its soon to be manager, George Pate. The ground round about was also put in order, and a new iron gate erected at the entrance. All of the work was completed by September 1911 (Falkirk Herald 6 September 1911).



**Illus 6: The Bruce Monument c1930 looking SE. Pieces of the monument can be seen lying on the stone steps.**

The work was extensive. The iron plates of the tapering obelisk had been fractured over most of their lengths and were completely replaced. The decorative mouldings that they had borne were so corroded that they could not be re-used, with the exception of the more solid oval plaques. These plaques were copied and retained at the ironworks. The new iron plates



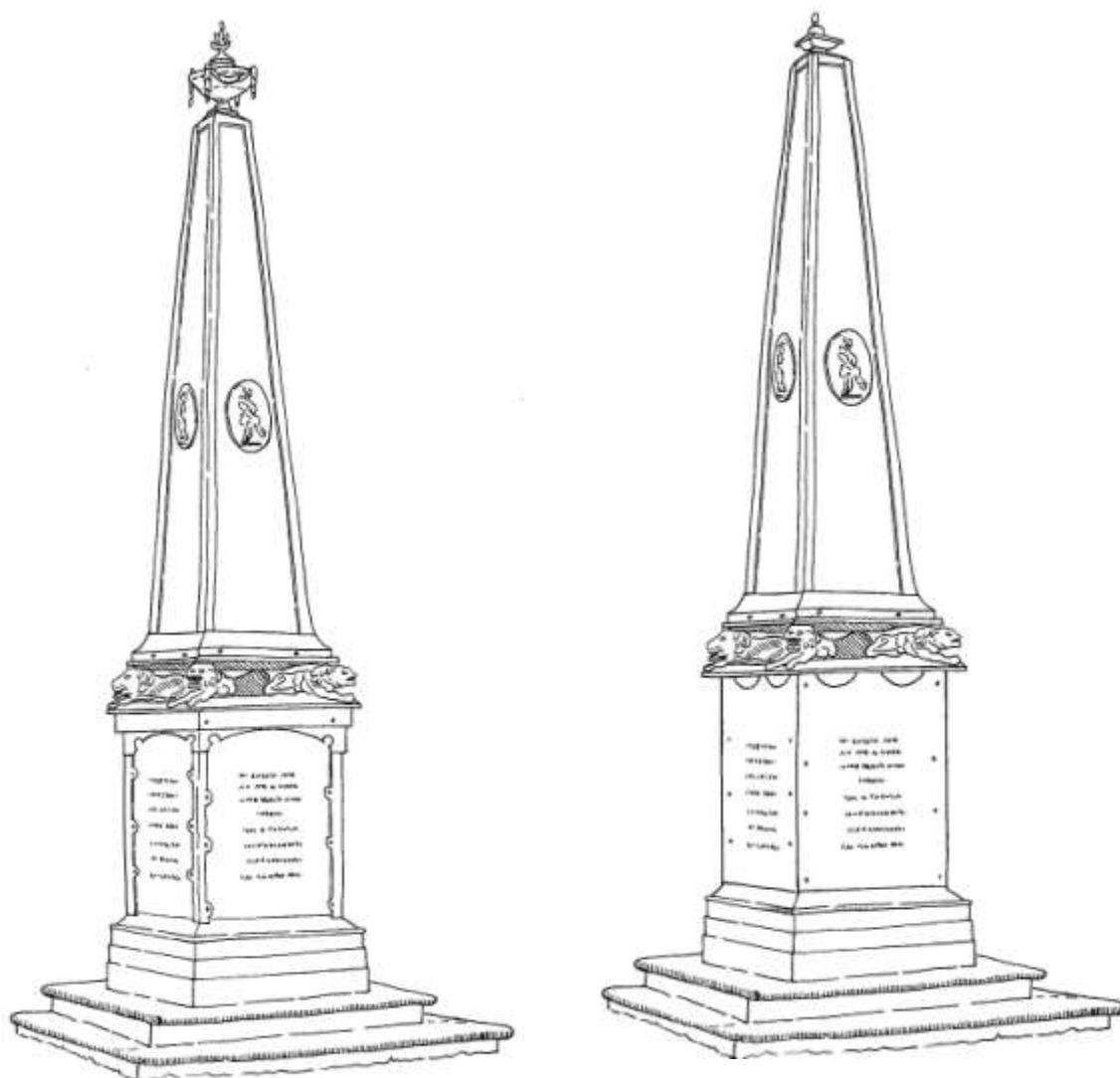
were finished at their edges, not flush as on the original, but by covering them with wide angled bars. A robust frame was inserted into the plinth for support. The lions were retained, as was most of the plinth, though the rusticated quoins went. The overall shape and look was much the same as the original, and the iron texture remained – though this was only a later feature and the bright paintwork had long been forgotten. The classical lamp finial with the eternal flame gave it a feeling of familiarity and the changes produced little comment at the time.

The centre of the Kinnaird enclosure was cleared of the tree cover and the rubbish removed. The entrance tomb was demolished and levelled. Old broken gravestones from the adjoining churchyard were then used to create a low retaining wall around the earthen mound and a hedge was planted upon it. A paved path was led from the steps to the obelisk and gravel paths placed to either side of the new hedges.

Before long more of the mouldings began to fall off the plinth and have now been lost. By 1980 it was again in danger of collapse and the Earl of Elgin, a member of the Bruce family, had it removed to the Torwood Foundry of Jones and Campbell for refurbishment. Another sub-frame was inserted and this time pieces were jointed onto the remaining plates so that the originals were kept. The whole was red-leaded to provide a protective coat. Unfortunately the urn finial was lost. It was 1993 before the cast iron monument was returned, but the delivery vehicle used did not have a long enough arm to place it onto the stone mount. Instead it was rather unceremoniously dumped in the adjoining car park. Subsequently concrete was poured into the base to provide added stability. Here it can certainly be seen, but much is lost by its displacement from its original setting. Even before its departure in 1980 the enclosure had yet again become overgrown and by 2012 the hedge was unrecognisable. Voluntary work by the Falkirk Local History Society has helped bring it back to some semblance of the 1910 scheme and the Estates Department of Falkirk Council have agreed to continue its maintenance.

**Illus 7: The Bruce Monument in 2012.**





**Illus 8: Left – the Bruce Monument as restored in 1910. Right – as returned in 1993.**

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