Patrick Copland’s grave – St Nicholas churchyard

That Patrick Copland has a gravestone in the churchyard of the city’s principal church (and a memorial plaque within the East Church of St Nicholas) is a testimony to his huge presence during his lifetime. One of his sons wrote about the burial “I never saw such a crowd looking at any funeral, the whole streets were filled and the windows”. A procession of some 400 slowly made their way from Marischal College down Broad Street and Union Street to the churchyard, accompanying the body. The flat sandstone gravestone itself, near the Union Street screen, is now seriously weathered and attracting moss. The first two lines of the inscription used to say They rest not here whose Dust lies 'neath this Stone / Since Death lays low the Earthly form alone but are now mostly gone. The inscription continues Patrick Copland L.L.D./ Professor of Natural Philosophy/ in the University of this City/ died 22d November 1822 aged 73 years. Actually he was 74. The rest of the gravestone has a lengthy inscription concerning other members of the family, given below for completeness but now not all legible1.

Copland had made his mark in the city in several ways. Possibly his most widespread influence was to put on an extensive evening lecture course for tradesmen from 1785 to 1813. Each course ran for some 70 lectures and was profusely illustrated by demonstration equipment. Copland himself was an artisan of professional competence, well in tune with tradesmen’s outlook on the world. He would have delivered his course in educated vernacular and, since he was not averse to some showmanship, it was entertaining, informative and popular. The course had a big impact in raising the level of education of local tradesmen and, surely, their competence. In recognition of his efforts, with the support of members of the House of Lords and the public praise of Thomas Telford and others, Copland was awarded a state pension in 1803. He laid the groundwork in Aberdeen for the formation of a successful Mechanics Institute in the early 1820s that did not fold like that in so many other cities and maintained an important rôle in technical education in Aberdeen for the rest of the 19th century.
In 1787 Copland brought the concept of chlorine bleaching to Aberdeen, and indeed to the UK as a whole. Its commercial practice was pioneered by Alexander and Patrick Milne in Aberdeen, under Copland’s guidance. The process was so much better than previous bleaching recipes that priority of its introduction was a matter of some prestige. Copland advised the Town on water filtration, on weights and measures, on activities when the Ordnance Survey reached this part of the country in 1817. He acted as liaison with Thomas Telford in connection with bridging the Denburn as Union street was taken west across it. In the end Telford did not supervise the bridge that was actually built. Copland erected an observatory at the Castlegate, financed by public subscription, and gained prominence by being the first in Scotland to let off an unmanned balloon from nearby, in March 1784. More details of his public activities have been given by John S. Reid\(^2\). Posthumously, Patrick Copland’s heraldic shield has been added to the heraldic ceiling of the St Nicholas room in the Town House.

You will find almost nothing about Patrick Copland in the history books of Aberdeen but in his time there were few better known names in the city.

\[ \text{John S. Reid} \]

\(^1\) The inscription continues with two more sections: *Louisa Latifer Norton or Copland/ Wife of Alexander Copland Advocate/ died 6th September 1826 aged 29 years/ Their beloved child/ George Huntly Copland/ died on the 19th February 1827/ aged one year and ten months // Also/ Elizabeth Ogilvie Copland/ Wife of the said Patrick Copland/ Died 4th March 1852/ Aged 85/ Eliza Murchison/ daughter of Alexander Murchison DD/ Grand daughter of Professor Copland/ Died 30th November 1860/ Aged 32 Years/ Elizabeth Ogilvie Copland/ Daughter of John Copland surgeon, HEICS/ and relict of Lieut. John Fleming/ Died 11 May 1883/ Aged 65 years.*