

The Making of the Tombstone Survey.

Ashburton Churchyard Tombstone Survey 1973 - 1981

When we embarked on the project of cataloguing the tombstones in Ashburton I don't know if we quite realised what we had taken on. It is 8 years now since we started, and a number of us have spent many hours in the churchyard describing the stones, writing down the words, only a few remained finally indecipherable, and most difficult of all, getting them plotted on to the plan made for us by Brigadier Shewell.

I found it a delightfully peaceful place to work, disturbed only by the cawing of rooks in the limes and the thrushes feasting on the yew berries in September, (lately this has been spoiled by the noise from the A38 and the view exposed by demolished old buildings). While deciphering the words of an epitaph my imagination would wander to the many hundreds of Ashburtonians who must be buried here and what it would be like if, as in Stanley Spencer's picture, they all came bursting up into our world.

I looked up White's Directory of Devonshire for 1850 and learned that in that year there were in Ashburton, 15 bakers, 6 blacksmiths, 3 booksellers (including one who sold printed music), 16 boot and shoe makers (including Peter Foot who was also Parish Clerk), 9 butchers, 5 cabinet makers, 9 carpenters, 3 coopers, 5 corn millers, 3 curriers, 4 earthenware dealers, 29 grocers, 4 ironmongers, 6 linen drapers, 3 maltsters, 7 milliners, 6 nursery gardeners and seedsmen, 6 stonemasons, 6 tailors, 1 tanner, 2 tin miners, 3 watch makers, 3 wheelwrights, 3 wine and spirit merchants, 4 woolstaplers. What a bustling and self sufficient little town! Very few of these appear as such on the tombstones which mostly record only names and dates and possibly epitaphs. Nor are the workers (as against tradespeople) put into the picture. I have looked in vain for a tombstone to George Sparks mentioned by Crossing in his "Dartmoor Worker" as "known as a driver far and wide who died in 1884 and is buried in St. Andrews, Ashburton, in which town he passed the whole of his days. At the funeral his favourite grey horse was led immediately behind the corpse".

But Miriam Adams was one of the workers who had a stone put up by public subscription in 1858. She was Letter Carrier to the Post Office and "discharged her responsible duties with uniform cheerfulness and strict fidelity", evidently a much loved figure on her pony with dog at heel. And in 1903 Mary Jane Salter, district nurse for 11 years, had a stone "subscribed for by over 300 inhabitants of Ashburton to perpetuate the memory of one so much respected and esteemed for the good she did to all classes".

It is the more prosperous of the tradesmen and business men whose families take a certain pride in naming their trade like W.E. Stentiford printer, died 1835, and John Foot, builder, 1846. A link with mining comes in Captain Peter Coade, mine agent, died 1845, who "for the space of 40 years worked in the fear and love of God, and after a long affliction endured with patient resignation exchanged the suffering of mortality for the deathless felicity of Eternal Life". And poor Willy Nicholls killed at Owlacombe mine in 1841.

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The importance of the wool industry is apparent in the tombs of wool merchants and subsidiary tradesmen. Mr. John Winsor, sergemaker died in 1772 and has a finely cut slate memorial in the east wall of the vestry. Joseph Hurst, the currier died 1814, William Mann the tanner in 1632 and Richard Elliot, tallow chandler, besides Peter Fabyen sergemaker who died 1843, these all prospered on products of the sheep.

From the family vaults we can trace the progress of the most prosperous families like the Caunters. John, the serge maker died 1772, the next John 1793 "who for various virtues of neighbour friend and relative stood conspicuous in the circle of his acquaintance". He lived at the time of Ashburton's famous sons, John Dunning, William Gifford and Dean Ireland and must surely have known them. We find the next son John a JP, and living at Waye.

The Hern vault starts with William Hern, the tanner who died in 1791 and ends with John Hern (died 1914) of Chuleigh, the house that sadly was demolished for widening the A38 in 1972. In the churchyard extension, then are large marble memorials to the family including William Hern, OBE, MRCS, who died 1939, and George Hern, MRCS, LRCP, who died in 1935.

The Tucker family was prominent in the town for 6 generations. Starting from professional roots, Moses Tozer, surgeon, died 1791 is the first name on the family vault. Robert Tucker was succeeded by Robert Tucker. They founded the solicitors firm of that name and took leading parts in public life in Ashburton. One branch of the family, that of Major General Sir Charles Tucker is commemorated by 2 tall crosses, one north of the church to his first wife who died in Secunderabad, the other in the churchyard extension to himself and other members of his family.

Several Vicars of Ashburton have memorial stones, William Marsh was Vicar for 25 years and died in 1861, and during his time, Mary Cook "faithful servant of the Vicar" died in 1842. Charles Worthy, after 18 years died in 1879. William Birch was Vicar from 1879 to 1900 and died in 1912. Richard James Bond, DD, Vicar, 1900 to 1922, died 1922, and Gerald Jones, Vicar here 17 years and Prebendary of Exeter Cathedral, died in 1962.

Five parish Clerks are commemorated, first Zachary Pinsent, 1677, whose ledger stone lies at the vestry door, Joseph Mudge who died in 1828 after 32 years as clerk, Peter Foot, died 1878, and John Ball Lee, 1882. John Palk was clerk and sexton for 37 years and died in 1942.

Schoolmasters occur in a varied range. W.F.Honywill, for 33 years was master of the Free School, and died in 1850. Mr. Butchers 45 years "Schoolmaster of this Parish" died 1919 and has on his tombstone "I pray thee write me then as one who loved his fellow men". Mr. Husson, 35 years "Schoolmaster of this Parish" has a stone erected by his old boys. James Mortimer was Headmaster of the Grammar School 1875-1915, and died in 1929.

We learn also that in 1843 died Mr. Skinner of Magdalen College, Cambridge, who "for 20 years conducted a musical and mathematical school in this town".

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The Arts are further represented by William Mann, the blind poet who died in 1862 and Frederick Foot the artist, youngest son of Peter Foot (above), died in 1908.

The fashion for outdoor tombstones coincides to some degree with the Empire, and it is interesting to note the names of sons who died in far away places recorded on the family tombstones here. The Cockey tomb tells us that the Rev. Cockey was curate here for 23 years and had 9 children, of whom I died in Australia in 1877, one, a midshipman in the Royal Navy died at Cadiz on H.M.S. Achilles in 1810, and one was drowned when at Trincomalee with the Royal Navy.

In 1845 Henry Luscombe died at Calcutta aged 16. Did he go out under Jardine's sponsorship, one wonders. Others died young in Chungking, Canada, Africa, Trinidad, and later a retired officer of the Colonial Administrative Service, C.D. Cobham, who had been Commissioner at Larnaca, Cyprus. Besides such as these there are all the War deaths, War Office stones for those lost in the 1939-46 war, names on family tombstones of some who fell in 1914-18, Frank, son of John Honeywill was one of those killed in the Boer War, no names from the Crimean, and some whose life had been in the Indian Army, like T.E.Rogers, who had been Superintendent of the Bengal Marines, and died at Waye in 1896. Perhaps the most poignant of all the stones is that of the young French Officer, Francois Guidon, aged 22 who is said to have been captured at the battle of Waterloo, and died as a prisoner on parole in September that year when the war was just over. He is buried on Strangers Hill and the willow tree at the head of his grave is said to have grown from a cutting from one brought from St. Helena, (Napoleon Bonaparte's last home) by a French soldier in 1871 to Napoleon III in Chislehurst, Kent, where he was then living.

In early times the churchyard would have been used for fairs and games and would not have had memorial stones in it. The church-warden's accounts record charges for burials in the church. Probably the floor was largely made up of memorial ledger stones which would have been removed at one of the restorations in the last 200 years. There remains our oldest tombstone at the west door, to Harris the Tanner, 1637, with the message "Fear not to die, learn this of me, No ill in death, if good thou be". Close to the church on the south east are a few tombstones of the 18th century including the granite one in the wall of Church Walk of 1760, "Near this place lyeth the remains of Wm. Cooke, Maltster", Also Johanna, his wife', (and 4 more lines undeciphered as yet), all cut in the coarse granite, plain and simple. In 1570, the churchwardens paid "for mending the Tomb Stone" and we read of the new wardens in 1575 receiving the accounts at the Tomb Stone, which surely must be the same Counting Tomb where the accounts were presented in the 19th century. We can see it today.

Whereas the earliest tombstones are of granite, by the 18th century slate had come into use. So much easier to cut, with Portland stone, it lent itself to the elegant style of Georgian times. Many beautiful slates are used, ranging in colour from dark grey, through mauve to a delicate grey green. They are cut in a variety of shapes, and the lettering is elegant too, some plain, some in swirling copper plate, many kinds of letters, large and small, and sometimes beautiful scroll work at the top of the stone. The local engravers who have named their work were R.Pomeroy and T, J and E,

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Sampson, lettering but no carving possible in the local stone. The graves of this period are marked mostly by a headstone, no crosses, but there is a sprinkling of large chest tombs and family vaults. This style continues through the old part of the churchyard, where the trees grow, and makes it a pleasant place. There is one little figure with drapery, urn and wreath, rather beautiful, and one column topped by an urn. Where the headstones and footstones that line some paths came from originally, it is hard to guess. It was a fairly careful if indiscriminate tidying up.

Fashions in epitaphs change with the period. The Georgian interest in the style of the individual comes out in praise, "Peace be to the memory of so useful and excellent a man", Samuel Letheridge Mann; and Mary Sunter, "A bright example of every Christian Virtue". And

"Afflicted by our loss we lay thee here,
In silent sorrow e'en thy dust is dear,
For never child shall weep, nor widow bend,
O'er kinder parent, partner and true friend" .

is on the grave of John Foot, builder, died in 1846. However, there is some revolt against this fulsome praise in Joseph Sunter's

"Praises on tombs are trifles spent,
A man's good name is his firmest monument".

And often there were warnings,

"As I am now, so you must be,
Prepare for Death,
And follow me".

The Georgians and the Victorians were much concerned about death. It was ever present with every family, like the Rowlands, John and Mary, who died in 1813 and 1840, whose tombstone bears this message,

"Weep not for us six children dear,
We are not dead but sleeping here,
Our guess is when our grave you see,
Wait but awhile you'll follow we".

Numerous children died, no doubt of illnesses avoided or cured today. Of Laura Mary Knowling, beloved child, died 19 months, they said,

"Not in anger, not in wrath, the Reaper came that day,
T'was an angel visited this green earth, and took our flower away"

There are frequent records on family tombs ending, "And 5 infant children" or 6, or 4. Quite often it is "Another folded lamb". Many stones were put up to young people with extremely poignant and sentimental epitaphs,

"Our lovely bud so soft and fair, called hence by early doom, Only to show how fair a flower, in Paradise can bloom".

Consumption was a dreaded killer, "T'was pale consumption sure but slow that stopped her fleeting breath". And was it scarlet fever that killed Ann Marie Dennis, aged 4?

"Although my friends your tender care,
O'er me did watch being all in vain,
The flaming fire did me consume,
And Christ has called me to the tomb".

The stone to Ann Pomeroy aged 23 engraved possibly by her father, R. Pomeroy with loving care, tells a long sad tale,

"To perpetuate the memory of the much beloved and lamented Ann Pomeroy who only a short time previous to her appointed Nuptials, the Lord thought proper to take unto Himself, leaving her friends and ONE ever deeply to lament her".

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There was more suffering than we have any idea of in our age of drugs and pain killers, to such a degree that it seemed right to mention it on tombstones, like John Woolaway, 1873.

“Afflictions great long time I bore, Physicians were in vain,
Till God saw fit to take me home, and ease me of my pain”.

There is a certain robust acceptance in Joseph Hyde’s epitaph. He died aged 16 in 1817,

“In bloom of life I was cut down,
To meet old Death without a frown”.

The mystery conveyed by Ann Badcock’s (she died in 1838) could inspire a detective story.

“What’s in my mind let no man know,
And if my friend should prove my foe,
All my secrets the world will know”.

And was Jane Turner who died in 1783 an interesting case for psychologists? or did she suffer some humiliating affliction?

‘Within this silent shade I rest, hid from the world, the world from me,
There is no one knows how I am blest, in the Divine Obscurity”.

From the 17th century onwards, it is possible to detect a strong Puritan and Evangelistic tradition in Ashburton. There is the well preserved chest tomb of “Wm Pearse Minister of ye Gospell in this town” died 1690 aged 66”, whose rejoicing was the Testimony of a good Concience”. He was an early minister at the Great Meeting. Later there was Wm. Thoresby, 1806, “Who laboured with great success 20 years in connection with Rev. John Wesley, and many were turned to righteousness”

“With flaming zeal and flowing tears, he laboured for the lord,
‘While he addressed the people’s ears, his Master own’d the word”.

Many stones have evangelistic exhortations like that of Margaret Trekkle 1817, “Having found Redemption through the blood of the Lamb, (and then in large letters), **READER HAST THOU**”? There is the vault of Henry Gervis, surgeon and JP, and his family of the 19th century with an urn—topped column inscribed on its north face with an evangelistic sermon and Bible texts. Alongside this is the stone of the Wesleyan ministers sons saying,

“When you stand where the young sleepers await the Resurrection Morn,
Oh, lift the heart in praise of Him who gave the Victory”.

In 1873 died Thomas Rowland “who for 60 years blew the Gospel trumpet with a certain sound”.

At about the turn of the century burials took place in the extension to the churchyard which was consecrated in 1901. What a different scene it presents from the old part. With improved transport a wide range of stone for memorials was available, granite, pale grey, and deep pink from Cornwall and Scotland polished now to a high gloss with new tools, Forest of Dean brown, grey Portland stone, and dazzling white marble from Italy became fashionable. Also of recent years crosses came into vogue, often of rough granite on rough base and of Celtic or plain or elaborate style. Marble lends itself to carving, and soon there were angels and doves, urns and flowers, clasped hands and intricate borders and patterns on the tombstones, cut by skilled local craftsmen. All this heterogeneous collection of materials and ideas creates a confused and crowded appearance that is not congenial to the local scene, unlike the old part where the local stone is used and seems part of the landscape. The fashion for kerb-

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stones has meant a problem for cutting grass which, without tree cover becomes very rank. The only overall unity seems to be the lettering on the tombstones which is now uniform in shape with lead inlaid, sadly lacking the character and interest of the old craftsmen's cutting. Fashion in epitaphs has changed too. There are few child deaths and the accent is now on the comforts of religion, and hopes of meeting loved ones beyond the grave. Heaven is above all a place of rest and peace. Very few of the tombstones of the first half of this century are without the words "At rest", or "Peace, perfect peace", "He entered into rest" or "Her end was peace" and "R.I.P."

The names on the stones are interesting. Some of the oldest surnames are still about in Ashburton, Eales, Foot, Hext, Mann, Harris, Pearse, Pomeroy, Tucker and Yolland. A couple wanting a name for their child might well get some ideas from the churchyard, Aaron and Abraham, Caleb, Jabez, Nathan, Hannibal and Zachary have not been used much for boys recently. And for girls, there is a choice of many, like Alvena, Dinah, Mahala, Olympia, Rupertia, Selena, Sybella, Treyphena, or how about "English Game", (alias "Cissie")?

I attempted to find out some history of our churchyard, and I made use of the Churchwardens Accounts 1479-1530, edited by Alison Hanham, and so delightfully translated by her into words we can understand today. I found regular entries for payments for cleaning the cemetery, also making and repairing the church gate, and for roofing the gate in 1492. In 1529 there is a charge for making the paths and in 1530 they had to buy rope for tying a pig that came into the cemetery. Then there was carriage of stone for the cemetery wall. In 1535 they were paving, not only in the church, but between church and church gate, which required purchases of sand, stones and sieves "2 tamies and a zeve to syfte the son with". Shortly after that there was a visit from the Bishop, and payment "for ryngyng agen My lorde bysheppe", more repetitions of previous running costs, others "for making allear wall between church and church gate (allear being like alley). And after all these busy improvements, is it not appropriate to see a charge "for playing a Christmas game within the church"? In 1542 it is "for le gate at the church stile" and "setting the grate in the churchyard", meaning railings, and 5 years later for carrying cope stones and wall stones for making the cemetery wall. In 1569 "spannys (iron bolts) and nayles" were required for mending the church gate again, recurring expenses through the years as today. We begin to get a picture of the churchyard walled as it is today to west and east with paths through it. The wrought iron gate that we see now was made in 1700, but the area now known as Strangers Hill was not included. In the Tythe map of 1840 there are buildings along the entrance approach which with the land along West Street comprised the "house and garden of Benjamin Parham", In 1864., The Exeter Flying Post carried a news item that "the tender of Mr. Thomas Hext, Mason "was accepted for taking down the first portion of the old buildings adjoining the entrance to the churchyard". This gives us a date for that northern addition to the churchyard and the planting of the great trees, Coast Redwood, Wellingtonia, the Atlantic Cedar, and the Thuja, the first now higher than the church.

The next trees to be planted must have been the yews and conifers south of the church, and those pollarded chestnuts and limes and elms

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along church walk that look so grotesque when the leaves fall. We counted the annual growth rings of one dead elm that had to be felled. The score was 82. So that put the planting date at the turn of the century. "Plant a tree in '73" was a national campaign that spurred many Ashburton societies and Organisations and individuals to plant trees, hawthorns, Whitebeams, Silver Birch, a Hornbeam, a variety of Maples, 2 Yews, and 2 Cypresses along the path and borders of the new sections. In 1980 the Dartmoor National Park supplied trees, and the Primary school children helped to plant them in the gaps along the old railings and among the graves in the new section, Judas trees, Amelanchier, Rowan, Holm oak, Portugal Laurel, and Cornus mas.

The churchyard was extended in 1884, when the Vicar and the Trustees of Parish Lands gave the land. It was consecrated in 1901. The public footpath ran through the area, and in 1903 an application was made to the U.D.C. for a diversion so as to put the churchyard in a ring fence as it is now. It meant leaving out the little corner triangle in the South East (though this is officially cemetery land). There had to be a public enquiry because Mr. Firth held that the changes could not be affected on consecrated ground without an Act of Parliament however, the Chancellor of the Diocese, after the meeting in the town hall, approved the new path and a Faculty was granted in 1903. In due course the area was tilled, and in 1956 the latest extension was taken into use. A hedge of Lawson's Cypress was planted along the boundary with Orchard Road.

One of the attractive features of the churchyard is that it is full of living things. Because there are big trees, and because the vegetation and grass are not poisoned nor cut and tidied excessively it 'provides a home for birds and reptiles, small mammals and insects that make a chain of life. Birds nest, and find safe roosts in the trees, there is even the winter shelter that tree creepers like. Hedgehogs and slowworms find suitable homes and feed on the insects that live in the ivy and elsewhere. When clearing vegetation in the new part one would quite often find that the mounds were not graves but ant hills or 'emmett's eels" as we say in Devon. I am a little surprised that there are not more wild flowers, a few celandines in the spring, and on a still winter afternoon, a rich waft of scent from the winter heliotrope that is thriving among the emmett's eels.

In these days when poisons and drastic cutting drive wild life from much of the countryside, a safe place like our churchyard can become a sanctuary. Long may it be so. The lichens on many of the tombstones, so sure a proof of our unpolluted air, are varied and beautiful. They are so slow growing and some are rare, so they are of interest and worth preserving. And the old tombstones themselves are museum pieces. Such craftsmanship is unlikely to be seen again. Let us keep them in their beautiful setting.

Document Notes (2013):

- (i) This digital version of the document was created in June 2013, from the original typed copy found in the Ashburton Museum. The original document is in the Museum and can be inspected on request.*
- (ii) The original document does not have any identified date or author, but it is assumed to have been typed in circa 1981/82 after the completion of the Tombstone surveys.*
- (iii) The spelling, grammar, style and page layout of the original has been retained wherever possible.*