

TOMBSTONES IN THE LOWER CHURCHYARD WORFIELD

When you go to Worfield Church and you go up the Church path those of you who are interested in churchyards will, no doubt, be looking to left and right and peering to see what you can read on the stones. Those who are not interested in who lies here will stride up to the Church door without a glance to either side. Churchyards polarise us, you love them or hate them, so if you are in the latter group this may not be for you. We also see churchyards differently because of our association. Some have loved ones buried here, others have responsibility for its upkeep, and then there are those who are interested bystanders. I would like to lure you off the path and have a look at the tombstones. What fascinates me, will, inevitably be different from what fascinates you. Some of the stones are beautiful, some of them have information related to where you live, family historians love information on gravestones because they show family connections we might not have known of. And the great thing about gravestone inscriptions is that you can't argue with them. You don't read them with the attitude of "I don't think that is true."

What you notice when you go up the main path is that the Churchyard is well maintained and park-like in some areas and wilder in others. It looks quite overgrown in parts and those (such as Bob Adams) who remember what the churchyard was like in former times say that it is much less well kept now than it was then. I don't have any answers as to how the churchyard is maintained but leaving it entirely to the church doesn't seem right and works only up to a point. Between the eighties, when the WI did an amazing survey of the churchyard and the end of 2009 when I completed my survey, ten stones have disappeared. Some have gone in the name of health and safety and some because it was easier to cut the grass when they weren't there! Those of you who are not interested in churchyards will be saying "quite right too" and those of you who love them will be saying "absolute vandalism". It depends where you stand but clearly there needs to be some sort of regular gravestone maintenance.

As you wander through the churchyard you will see a wide variety of stones. Most of the stone used is sandstone which, of course causes enormous problems because it weathers so easily. In some cases the entire face of the stone has fallen off, and on many the writing is very hard to read. At the back of the Church near the small wrought iron gate is a lovely collection of upright sandstone gravestones with names of families still in the area today. They include the Smithyman stones. Edwin Smithyman who died in 1835 aged 58 years was born in 1777. Jane Smithyman his widow ran the farm at Roughton after her husband's death. In the 1851 Census she is listed as a farmer of 220 acres, employing four men.

The shape of the stones varies enormously. My particular favourites are the flatstones and the box tombstones. Ah, if only we had stuck with flatstones, health and safety wouldn't be a problem. At the East side of the Church and especially at the back of the church are some lovely old flatstones which need reading. Some are totally illegible and some are tantalisingly close to being legible. On one of the oldest you can just pick out "Worcester". Box or table tombs on the other hand are not so easily maintained. Because they stand above the ground they are subject to weathering and ivy entwining and splitting the stone. But from the reader's point of view they are a benefit because the writing is often around the side and the top protects it from the excesses of weather. Near the Smithyman stones there is box tomb to Catherine, wife of William Stokes of Shipley who died in 1831. This is another example of a family that is still in the area - The Rowley family, who are descendants of the Stokes, still farm at Shipley.

There are some fine monuments in the churchyard – impressive in their size and quite majestic but the most beautiful in my opinion is a tiny birdbath which is the memorial to Sybill Mary Corbett who died in 1954. Climb the steps to the War Memorial and it is half way along that path on the left. In seeing this memorial one is reminded of the cross brought back from the First World War in

memory of her brother Major Frank Harvey Corbett. The family seems to have come from London (though I may be wrong). The 1881 Census lists Sybill and Frank's father, Richard as a Deputy Governor in the convict prison service. By 1891 their mother is listed as head of the family so presumably the father must have died. What brought the family to Stableford where they lived in the Old House, I don't know, perhaps someone else does.

Occupations are often mentioned on the tombstones. Sir Oliver Leese has a vault and a potted history of his working life although it doesn't say that when he retired he put Worfield on the map with his cactus growing. Most illustrious service person after Sir Oliver Leese is James Brasier who died in 1864 aged 80 and who was a Vice Admiral. There are also a number of vicars such as George Nicholas. But most influential in recent years is Rev Preb "Tom" Thomson who was Vicar of Worfield between 1955 and 1972. Preb Tom's background was naval and he held together a parish which was even larger than it is now with great authority.

Inscriptions are fascinating (apart from the ones in Latin which make me wish I had paid more attention when I was at school.). As fashions changed and the inscription was less of a bible passage and more of an attempt to capture the essence of a person they become, to me, more interesting. The nicest one I have seen is that on Mary Evans memorial which simply says "she loved this place." I had the privilege of meeting Miss Evans in the late sixties and she was one of the most generous and kind people I have ever met. It was she who started the tradition of the Worfield Flower Festival using flowers from her garden, perhaps this contribution could be remembered one year.

I too, "love this place" and I don't feel that I have done the churchyard justice in this description but that's not a bad thing. There is no substitute for getting out there and finding treasures of your own.