An Introduction to Swithland Slate Headstones

Many people who have spent any time in Leicestershire have noticed the rugged and characterful Swithland slates on the roofs of older buildings in the county. Quarried from Roman times to the end of the 19th century, Swithland slate, or to be more accurate Charnwood slate (it was quarried in Groby as well as Swithland), has been used for many things over the years including sundials, clockfaces, milestones, datestones, paving slabs, cheese presses, fireplaces, salting troughs, sinks, dairy cupboards, milk cisterns and gateposts (Charnwood's Heritage, 1976).

These pages look at its use for headstones in churchyards in Leicestershire and the neighbouring counties. Swithland slate is ideal for fine carving and is very durable, so it is still possible to see some headstone carvings in almost their original condition. It is estimated that there are over 10,000 slate headstones in Leicestershire (Airey, 2009) and a good rule of thumb for identifying Swithland slate is that the reverse side is rough. The grey, blue and purple tinges of the slate add huge visual appeal to the region's churchyards, while the content of the carving – like headstones across the world – tell us something of the people and cultures that created them.

This web exhibition is inspired by Frederick Burgess' book 'English Churchyard Memorials', Lutterworth Press (1963), which is still in print and is referenced thus: (Burgess p.xxx). Other sources referenced in the text are listed at the bottom of the page along with other useful books and articles.

Churchyards

A brief history of churchyards, and the many delights of Leicestershire's churchyards, are explored by Alan McWhirr in the link at the bottom of this page. Early headstones are more likely to be found to the south of a church as there were superstitions about the north side, which was darker, colder and thought of as more suitable for the burial of 'strangers, paupers, unbaptised infants, those who had died a violent death and, in particular suicides' (Burgess p.25). However, many headstones have been moved, as in the examples below.

Colour, texture, design - St Mary de Castro, Leicester, has one of the most interesting collections of headstones in the country.

Headstones on the south side of St Luke's, Gaddesby.

At St Denys, Ibstock, some of the older headstones have been moved and lined up on the southern perimeter of the churchyard.

At St Mary's, Sileby, many of the headstones have been placed closely together under a tree. This makes photographing them individually very difficult!

Some of the headstones at All Saints with Holy Trinity, Loughborough, have been moved into groups in the churchyard.

Also at All Saints with Holy Trinity, Loughborough, many headstones have been placed around the church.

Headstones

It has often been said that the earliest slate example in Leicestershire dates from the 1640s, but there is some doubt about this (Greiff, 2009). The majority of early local headstones that survive are from the 1680s and the 1690s. These are fairly basic in design but more ornate lettering and the introduction of carved images soon appear in the early 18th century.

The calligraphy (the art of decorative lettering) on the headstones was basic at first but became more intricate very quickly as widely distributed pattern books, which contained examples of different styles of lettering, gave guidance to local craftsmen. Eventually the whirls and flourishes applied to 'Here' or 'Below' became very extravagant. Later, there was experimentation with different fonts and the influence of early 19th century tastemakers such as Adams can be seen in the increasingly stylish designs used by the more talented engravers.

Swithland, 1673. Plain lettering. Possibly the earliest slate headstone in Leicestershire.

Ab Kettleby, 1694. Unusual attempts at November and September.

Melton Mowbray, 1697/8. Compare with the later 18th century lettering on either side.

Skills improved and soon many headstones featured elaborate work such as this flowing 'Here' (as in 'Here lies...'). Humberstone, 1727.

Note the different styles used for Hannah Hand (left), and Robert Hand (right). Headstones were often prepared with space for yet-to-die spouses and these were carved 18 years apart. Redmile, 1758 & 1775.

This ornate example by Christopher Staveley of Melton Mowbray is a favourite of Burgess. The fine detail is in a 'rococo' style and is influenced by fashionable design of the time. Grantham, 1761.

As well as lettering, carved images began to appear on headstones. There was a commonly accepted vocabulary of images that, up until the 1830s, mostly represented mortality, resurrection, and the means of salvation (Burgess p.165). Further descriptions of the imagery and how this changed over time are given in the image captions.

Across the country headstone carvings are examples of the excellent artistic work of local carvers, and the fine detail of Swithland slate headstones is testament to the skill of both Leicestershire craftsmen and others from the neighbouring counties. The work of William Charles of Wymeswold is mentioned by Burgess and has been explored in greater detail by Richard Merriman (Merriman, 2000). JC Davies has written about a group of engravers centred on Husbands Bosworth (Davies, 1993). Ranging from early, simple, examples to the ornate, skillfull work of men like Charles, Swithland slate headstones present an open-air museum of local, vernacular, artistic endeavour.

Imagery

As Protestants rejected the idea of Purgatory, it was believed that the fate of a person is decided at the moment of death rather than in the afterlife. So, in the 18th century into the early 19th century images on headstones reminded the viewer that, as life was short and that death was ever-ready to plunge its dart into you, or snuff out the candle of life, you should be prepared. Images associated with death and mortality include skeletons, skulls, bones, hourglasses, tools of the sexton (officer of a church – tools might include a spade or shovel for digging graves, a scythe, a mattock/pickaxe), candles. Inscriptions also remind the reader that death might be upon them at any moment.

As the 18th century progressed greater emphasis was placed on the resurrection of the body, which was represented by angels' heads, often accompanied by symbols of death, time and eternity (as above). Urns, representing sorrow or mourning, started to appear as well.

Over time, death and time were gradually replaced by images representing the means of salvation - Faith, Hope & Charity (virtues promoted by St Paul). Scenes of the Last Judgement and the Resurrection start to appear.

Eventually most of these images disappear and mid to late 19th century headstones most commonly feature urns of various descriptions, sometimes positioned next to someone, usually a woman, looking glum.

Common images of death and mortality

Death – skeletons are common and may be in a variety of poses. Often standing to one side with a dart, occasionally holding a candle snuffer (to snuff out life), sometimes lurking in a scenario such as a bedroom preparing to throw the dart at an unsuspecting victim. Another common scene is a skeleton on one side of an urn and an angel on the other, sometimes including a globe marked 'vanity'. A fine example in St Margaret's, Leicester, has death offering the riches of the world – in the form of a globe – to a dying person (see below).

A crude skeleton from a 'Moonface' headstone at Whatton, 1723.

Here the skeleton has an Ouroboros (see below) in one hand, a spear in the other, and a shovel and pick waiting to be used for a burial. Kirby Muxloe, 1763.

Death with dart and candle snuffer, an angel with scythe, hourglass and biblical quote, a globe encircled by a snake. Plungar, 1785.

In this scary scene Death not only brandishes a dart but snuffs out the candle as well. Quorn, 1804.

Death taunts the dying man with the riches of the world (the globe). There is a rare appearance of a clock (behind Death). St Margaret's, Leicester, 1776**.**

This is a variant on a favourite scene by Wood of Bingham. Death, with dart, lurks behind a curtain (sometimes at the foot of a bed) preparing to strike. Whatton, 1813.

Time – most commonly represented by an hourglass either upright or on its side. The hourglass may have wings, illustrating our fleeting time on earth, and/or may have a snake wrapped around it, usually in a circle representing eternal life (and known as an Ouroboros). Less common are images of Father Time - whether as old man, angel or skeleton - with his scythe, sometimes holding an hourglass, candle snuffer, or flaming lamp.

A typical plain design for an hourglass, with an Ouroboros, at Ab Kettleby, 1758.

Hourglasses often have wings. Time is, literally, flying. Nailstone, 1752.

A very faded skeleton holding a dart and, possibly unique to Swithland slate headstones, a sundial. The illegible scroll reads, 'Put thy house in order, thou shalt die and not live' (Burgess, p.169). Quorn, 1800.

This image leaves the viewer in no doubt as to her/his fate. A snake in a tree, a skull, a dart, an hourglass, an angel/Father Time with a scythe and, in case this wasn't clear, 'Prepare to meet thy God' on the pedestal. Nether Broughton, 1795.

Father Time as a muscular old man. Probably the best example in the region. St Mary de Castro, Leicester, 1799, by Firmadge.

A less muscular Father Time lolling at the base of the headstone with a scythe, an hourglass, and an Ourobus on either side. Market Harborough, 1775.

Skulls and bones – skulls of many different shapes and sizes can be seen on memorials both inside and outside of churches. A skull might have 'Mortality' written on it or a snake sliding through it. Bones are mostly crossed, sometimes with a skull and sometimes without. The idea was that for a soul to pass to heaven the skull or thigh bone should survive.

An early example of a crude skull and crossbones. Kirby Muxloe, 1710s

A skull combined with a scythe, snake and 'mortality', to emphasise the point. Church Langton, 1784 (?)

A skull & crossbones atop a crumbling plinth within, or on, an urn. Kirby Muxloe, 1812.

A collection of skillfully carved skulls. Little Dalby, 1747.

Death sports the victor's laurels. St Margaret's, Leicester.

Angels – reminding us of the soul flying to heaven, these come in all shapes and sizes. On Swithland slate there are curly haired Elvis Presley lookalikes, the 'Moonface' angels associated with the Vale of Belvoir (north of Melton Mowbray), cherub's heads (representing the soul when alone) or full angels with, or without, trumpets (representing victory and resurrection).

Trumpet blowing angels like these appear on several headstones and are usually referred to as 'buxom'. All Saints, Leicester, 1774.

Looking a little like a big-haired Elvis Presley there are many variations on this style of angel's head. Blaby, 1739 & 1741.

Two examples of Vale of Belvoir 'Moonface' angels. There are many dozens of these in and around the Vale of Belvoir, all with slight variations on a common theme. They deserve a website of their own! Upper Broughton, 1723 & 1733.

An unusual multi-winged angel by Pollard. Woodhouse, 1797.

Urns – a symbol of sorrow or mourning, these come in a wide variety of designs often influenced by what was fashionable at the time. There is sometimes a biblical quote on the urn, the handles are sometimes snakes. Urns became increasingly popular, and less interesting in design, as the 19th century progressed and sometimes featured a mourner standing or sitting beside them.

A fairly simple urn with the cross & anchor of Faith and Hope, and the inscription 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. Ratby, 1813.

An elaborate urn with Ouroboros, cross & anchor, skull & bones, heavenly JHS (abbreviation for Jesus Christ), and three quotes. Also, unusual in a scene like this, a church. Anstey, 1782.

Urn with snakes as handles, probably influenced by pattern-books of the time. Also, cross & anchor, skull & bones, JHS. Burton Overy, 1784.

A very nicely carved, unusual design where the urn is secondary to the mourning figure and a verse from the epitaph of 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' by T Gray. Billesdon, 1791.

A fairly common design featuring a mourner, snake in tree, globe, skull & bones. The pointing finger indicates being in heaven with Jesus. Brixworth, 1787.

A fairly common scene with a Father Time figure on the left of the urn and an angel with anchor representing Hope on the right. Belgrave, 1824.

Snakes – serpents represent death and appear in several scenes: tails wagging from behind urns, lurking under people's feet, winding around a tree or an hourglass, or eating its own tail and creating a circle – this is known as an Ouroborus and represents eternal life/time.

There are several instances of snakes curled around trees and this is straight from the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man story. St Margarets, Leicester, 176?

Urns often have snakes wrapped around them. The text reads, 'What is Life, it is ever a Vapour'. It's hard to tell what is coming out of the snake's mouth but it might be an apple or the Poppy of Sleep. Gaddesby, 1828.

An elaborately curled snake and urn. Loughborough, 1805.

A serpent on either side of the design. Loughborough, 1821.

The headstone is framed with the Ouroborus. St Margarets, Leicester, 1789.

An ornate serpent as part of an intricate design. Market Harborough, 1781.

Tools of the Sexton and other images - the spades, picks/mattocks and other tools of the sexton are often combined with images of the Passion (Christ on the cross - drops of blood, a spear) and images of mortality.

A small detail shows a basic shovel and pick that would be used to bury the dead. Market Harborough, 1792.

A scythe, shovel, coffin, and cross. The use of the cross is slightly unusual outside of the standard images of Hope (see below). Kibworth Beauchamp, 1778.

Lots of images of mortality thrown together. The upward facing torch usually represents Life. Scraptoft, 1777.

Downward facing torches are meant to signify Death. 'Memento Mori' means 'Remember that you have to die'. St Margaret's, Leicester, 1775.

Images of mortality on the left with drops of blood falling into a chalice on the right. An example of a 'mystic relationship between the trees which occasioned the Fall and the Redemption' according to Burgess (p.188). See also St Margarets, Leicester, 1761, (below). Burton Overy, 1763.

Common images of hope of resurrection and the means of salvation

Faith – represented by the cross, which usually appears sticking out of one side of an urn with an anchor, representing Hope, on the other side. Crosses were thought too Papish until the Victorian period so are very rare outside of this context on Swithland slate headstones.

Hope – represented by the anchor, which often appears with the cross, arranged around an urn, or with a woman leaning on an anchor, sometimes by a pedestal with or without an urn.

Charity – represented by the heart or a nursing mother. This is less common that Faith and Hope on Swithland headstones. The few examples of hearts often have flames coming out of them, representing the fire of Divine love, while there are only two examples of nursing mothers that I know of.

The cross, representing Faith, usually appears with an Anchor (Hope). Here, the figure holds a skull. Anstey, 1782.

A literal scene in which Death, standing on an hourglass, attacks Faith & Hope with a dart. Granby, 1795 (?), by Wood.

Hope represented by an anchor. A fine example of a common image. Scraptoft, 1795.

This image represents Hope but also features a crown. Crowns appear in several different settings and are symbolic of honour or glory but, after St Paul, representing the immortal crown of the Christian Life. Ratby, 1785.

Charity represented by a mother nursing her children. St Mary de Castro, Leicester, 1787.

Resurrections, Last Judgements etc.

One of the best 'skeleton rising from the tomb' scenes. The Dead rising to be judged is part of many Last Judgement & Doomsday scenes. St Mary de Castro, Leicester, 1780.

The pyramid falling probably refers to superstition or pride and can be found in scenes of the Last Judgement. Here, 'resurgemus' means 'we shall rise'. St Mary de Castro, Leicester, 1768.

A falling pyramid, trumpets sounding and a winged skull emerging from a tomb. Melton Mowbray, 1762.

A figure rising from the grave, which has the inscription 'Thanks be to God who gave us the victory thro Our Lord Jesus Christ'. Also, an hourglass, urn, cross & anchor, JHS. Quorn, 1803.

'The figure of Christ holding a great trumpet and scroll... is supported by cherubs amid a mass of cloud subtending ligtenings, which have cloven the spire of Swithland church, toppling it down over the graves and their occupants' (Burgess p.191). This headstone is listed Grade II. Rothley, 1794.

'In the centre rests a cadaver in a tomb on which is placed a book inscribed 'Per Serpentem Mors; Per Christum Vita'. To its left lightning blasts a withered tree set in a graveyard with crumbling tombs, a skull and serpent at its foot, and spear, scythe and spade at its side. To the right a tree in full leaf extending rays of glory in which float cherubs, together with a cross and chalice into which drip three gouts of blood from the sky' (Burgess p.188). St Margarets, Leicester, 1761.

Epitaphs and Inscriptions

A typical warning to the reader. Other phrases include 'Behold your end', and variations on 'As I am now, so you shall be'. Anstey.

The precariousness of life is sometimes shown on headstones. Here, it is recorded that Edward Savage lost three wives and many children. Lutterworth, 1733.

Illness was ever present and lines like 'Afflictions for long time born, physicians were in vain, 'til Death gave ease as God did please, to heal me of my pain' were quite common. Newtown Linford, 1740.

The accidental deaths of Thos Dyer & William Simkins are recorded on this headstone at Burton Overy, 1721. The number of little drawings on the headstone is unusual. If you can't read it from the photo there is a transcription in McWhirr, 1998.

As at Billesdon (above) poetry sometimes makes its way onto headstones. The reverse side of John Handley's headstone reads: 'This world it is a city full of crooked streets, Death is a market place where all men meet. If life were Marchandice that men could buy Rich men would ever live and poor men die'. Redmile, 1694. More information is on the Redmile Archive website.

Murder sometimes appears too. 'Through a woman I received the wound which quickly brought my body to ye ground. It's sure in time that she will have her due.The murdering hand God's vengeance will pursue. The debt I ow'd that caused all the strife was very small to cost me my sweet life. She threatened to give me a mark and made her cause look very dark'. Old Dalby, 1743. The full story is told in McWhirr, 2004.

Miscellaneous favourites

Burgess's book was written more than 50 years ago and some of the headstones must have degraded considerably since then (see the skeleton with sundial above). Burgess describes this scene as a representation of the 'good fight', in which a nude figure, armed with sword and buckler, has put on 'the armour of God' and tramples Death down (Burgess p.171). Lutterworth, 1782.

A rare example of a Caduceus, a winged staff with two snakes wrapped around it, like the post office symbol, at All Saints, Leicester, 1754 by Hind.

Not a headstone but a detail from the tomb of Lord Rollo, St Margarets, Leicester, 1765. This and the Danvers tomb at Swithland feature some very fine work and are both listed Grade II.

Christ as Judge with a blazing sun overhead points to a book marked Omega, 1785, Stoney Stanton (Burgess p.193).

Birds are usually doves, sometimes as the Divine Spirit in a glory of light, or as Noah's dove possibly signifying Hope or Promise (Burgess p.178). A tree could mean life when verdant or death when lopped or blasted, as here at Melton Mowbray, 1781.

A crude sort of Resurrection scene, with a wide variety of tools. Wigston, 1766.

Another resurrection scene, this time with angry skies and what looks like a thurible (for burning incense). Blaby, 1741.

It is rare to find illustrations of biblical stories on Swithland slate. This is Adam & Eve with mortality symbols and angel with flaming sword, by William Platt (Burgess p.189). Church Langton, 1777.

There are several examples of cannons, guns, ships etc. on the headstones of ex-military men. This commemorates a Capt. Spencer who 'died at Worksop on his March home'. The Great Meeting, East Bond Street, 1783.

There are several examples of naive drawings of faces on Swithland headstones. This one is at Humberstone, 1711.

According to Burgess this is a relief of Psyche, the goddess of the soul and the wife of Cupid. Kibworth, 1789.

There are several examples of this image by Winfield, in which a heavenly hand holds a set of scales. The left scale, featuring an Ouroboros and marked 'eternity' outweighs the scale marked 'vanity'. Ratcliffe on Soar, 1814.

Further Reading

Charnwood's Heritage edited by IM Evans, Leics Museums, 1976.

Dr Elias Travers DD Rector of Thurcaston cum Cropston by Margaret Greiff in the Leicestershire Historian pp 36-39 No 45 2009 - https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/Historian/2009%20(45%20) Leicestershire%20Historian.pdf.

Exploring English Churchyard Memorials by Hilary Lees, The History Press, 2002.

Exploring Leicestershire's Churchyards Parts 1 & 2 by Alan McWhirr in the Leicestershire Historian 2003 & 2004. Both editions available at - https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/publications/LeicestershireHistorianVols30-40.html

Gravestones, Tombs & Memorials by Trevor Yorke, Countryside Books, 2010.

Local History in Tombstones by Alan McWhirr in the Leicestershire Historian p.6 No 34 1998 - https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/LeicestershireHistorian-No34-1998.pdf

Some common symbols found in 17th and 18th century burial grounds is an information sheet available from the Association for Gravestone Studies - https://www.gravestonestudies.org/knowledge-center/symbolism

Slate Quarrying at Groby and Swithland by David A Ramsey in the LIHS Bulletin 17, 2000-2002 - http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/cdm/ref/collection/p15407coll7/id/154. David Ramsey is an expert on Charnwood slate and has published several articles in the Leicester Industrial History Society (LIHS) bulletins.

Swithland Slate Headstones by Albert Herbert in the Transactions of the LAHS, Vol 22 for 1941/2, Part 3 - https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/SwithlandPagesfromsmvolumeXXIIpart2-3.pdf

Swithland Slate Headstones is a wonderful book by David Lea. This detailed study of Swithland Slate headstones has high quality photos and is FREE to download from the Heart of Albion website - https://www.hoap.co.uk/.

The Tulip Slates of South Leicestershire and North West Northamptonshire by JC Davies in the Leicestershire Historian Vol 4 No 1 1993 - https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/LeicestershireHistorian-Vol.4No.1-1993.pdf

The Roman Swithland Slate Industry by Alan McWhirr in the Transactions of the LAHS, Vol 62 for 1988 - https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/McWhirrvolumeLXIIsm.pdf

The use of Swithland Slate Gravestones and their Engravers by Richard Merriman, MA at the Dept of English Local History, University of Leicester, 2000.

Tradition and innovation in Midlands churchyards: sandstone and slate tombstones from the early eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth centuries by Skans Victoria Airey in Sculpture Journal, Vol 18, No 2, p. 166, 2009.

More Photos

Flickr contains many more examples of skulls, skeletons, anchors, etc. from around the world. Probably the best place to start for Swithland slate headstones is speccy_beardy's collection, which runs into the thousands - https://www.flickr.com/photos/pix_of_brianc/sets/72157624010683498/

More images can be found on Wikimedia Commons - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Swithland_slate_gravestones

Contents - University Home - Archive Home - Contact Us

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