

Speaker: Mark Hatton

Most of us expect to die, after all it is the last thing that we'll do, but Mark Hatton brought the subject to our attention in a fascinating talk, ranging far and wide on the subject of death and the memorials thereto which lie in our very accessible graveyards.

The style of these gravestones follows that of the Romans. Mark showed photographs of gravestones in Rochester, Corbridge and Hexham, memorials to Roman soldiers who died on what was to them, of course, a far northern frontier, and which would not be amiss in our churchyards except for the names and occupations of the deceased. He pointed out that gravestones look like doors and that this is deliberate as they are meant to lead to the afterlife.

They followed a tradition of stone carving in Northumberland from the Bronze Age.

In our area gravestones are found largely from the beginning of the 18th century, although a few date from the 17th. Mark argued, persuasively in my view, that the catalyst for change was the union of the crowns of Scotland and England in 1603, which meant that with the Scottish court having moved to London, the higher ranking families left in Edinburgh had fewer ways of showing their status than before but one way that they could do so was in death, especially as the reformation and the reduction in rich benefactors led to a surfeit of skilled stonemasons. Presbyterianism does not countenance burial inside a church, or kirk, but with the purchase of the gardens of Greyfriars Monastery a short distance behind St. Giles cathedral, and the gifting of the land to the Council, a cemetery was established. The style and size of the mausolea of the richer families burgeoned, while the bourgeoisie were buried with less grandiose memorials but still had gravestones. It was the styles of the latter which found their way to Northumberland by the 18th century.

In Mark's view, most people were buried in unmarked graves. He accepted that it was possible that they had had memorials made of wood or that their gravestones had been cleared but, on balance, he thought that this was unlikely. Of course, a stone memorial lasts longer than other media. Mark showed us the 'hogsback' gravestones which depict the tiled roof of a house as well as sarcophagi complete with drain holes. I had not appreciated that the drain holes were to allow bodily fluids to exit so that the bones of the corpse could then be moved to an ossuary and the sarcophagus used for another corpse. A lovely thought, so different to what we think today.

Attitudes to death were very different to ours in the 21st century. There were no antibiotics, women died in childbirth, and many children died in infancy. In other words, one's grip on life was fragile. One sees this in the paintings of artists such as Caravaggio which depict a candle or condiments in light on a table, but close to its edge ready to be cast into darkness. Death was accepted as part of life, as it were, far more than it is today when the subject is shunned. It was poignant to note how couples are depicted on gravestones being re-joined in the afterlife and even more so to note gravestones which showed the effigies of those of their children who had died young. Death could even be welcomed as a release.

Of course, such an attitude was as a result in the firm belief in an afterlife which could be looked forward to. Mark explained much of the symbolism on gravestones: a head with wings either side depicting the soul going to heaven; the green man signifying that life goes on (although the green man is a relatively rare phenomenon in Northumberland); the circle showing a serpent devouring its own tail indicating birth, life, and death in a continuum; cherubs blowing bubbles indicating that life is transient; and pregnant women hitching up their skirts nearly to their crotches showing that life will defeat death.

The skull and crossbones represent death and Christ on the cross; a scallop shell shows the deceased was a disciple of Christ (again something often seen on 17th Century paintings); and Father Time with his hour glass and scythe is an obvious metaphor.

Mark pointed out that stonemasonry was local and suggested that each stonemason seemed to have a signature way of carving skulls; the ultimate memento mori. These could be explicit such as in the words: *'All that you come my grave to see as I am now, so you must be'*.

In concluding his talk, Mark suggested that the symbols on gravestones show

- 1) death, to remind us of our mortality
- 2) the resurrection of the dead
- 3) the occupation of the deceased and/or their status in life with depictions of the tools of their trades. Mark's examples included a cordwainer, farmer, stonemason, and blacksmith. He drew out attention on one grave in St Mary's which depicts the square and compasses which show the deceased was a freemason. (As an aside, the 'Victory' stamps of George VI also indicate that he was a freemason.)
- 4) the virtues of the deceased, to demonstrate that he or she is worthy of admission to heaven.

Mark was fairly dismissive of the gravestones and mausolea which followed the 18th century in the Victorian era as they were 'factory' designed and often produced without reference to the life of the deceased

In summary, it was a wonderful talk which was both entertaining and enlightening.

Peter W. Davies