

Funeral monuments are a neglected part of our cultural heritage and recent historical research is reconsidering the significance of funerary ritual and commemoration to Early Modern and Modern Society. My research, for an MA dissertation in English Local History, focused on monuments within a ten-mile radius of Market Harborough in the Welland Valley.

Twenty-six churches were visited over a six month period to document memorials, record the iconography, epitaphs and symbolism and ascertain what they conveyed about society and attitudes to death and commemoration. The period covered was approximately 1580-1925.

Only by contextualising, can we understand why monuments were so important to those who erected them and how they were interpreted by those who viewed at them. Henry VIII's break with Rome and the subsequent Dissolution of the Monasteries saw the established landowning gentry expand its ranks to include those who took advantage of the opportunity to purchase monastery land and establish country seats. These 'nouveaux riches' keen to embrace the social values of their peers, were at the forefront of appropriating space in their local parish churches by installing family pews and monuments.

Furthermore, the introduction of Protestantism led to a change of liturgy and emphasis in religious belief and subsequently to a re appraisal of death rites and commemoration. Clare Gittings maintains that the Early Modern Period was a watershed in the history of attitudes towards death in England with a change from communitarian expression of grief to one where the individual family shouldered the burden of responsibility for grieving¹. Protestantism also denied the bereaved the consolation of priests saying masses for the soul of the deceased and the role of the priest was degraded. However, there was still a desire for worldly remembrance and gradually a change of emphasis occurred focusing less on intercession, purgatory and hell, and more on acknowledgement of personal honour and achievement. It became fashionable to have long funeral sermons, some of which were later published, and this once more enhanced the role and income of the priest, but those that could afford it opted for the erection of a permanent visual momento - the monument.

From our modern perspective when death is taboo and dealt with as quickly and quietly as possible, it is hard to appreciate how different things were four hundred years ago. In 1640 life expectancy at birth was thirty-two years and between one-quarter and one-third of all children died before the age of fifteen.

Since medicine was primitive, death was ever present and there was an established ritual to cope with it. Nigel Llewellyn describes the post-Reformation ritual in which the bereaved 'surrounded themselves with visual signs in their homes, in their costume and on their persons to sustain the memory and the very presence of the dead'². In a manner thought to be morbid today but considered therapeutic at the time, it was not uncommon for painters to be commissioned to paint the deceased who might appear twice in the picture, both on their deathbed and sitting amongst the family group alongside to show both their live and

WELLAND VALLEY SOCIETY REFLECTED IN MEMORIALS

Jane Snelling

Reformatted in 2002 from original of 1998



JANE THURSBY (1631) NEVILL
HOLT. NOTE ANGELS DRAWING
BACK CURTAINS TO REVEAL
SUBJECT AT PRAYER.

1 C Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (1984).

2 N Llewellyn, *The Art of Death* (1991) p134.

dead status - see the painting by John Souch 'Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his wife'³ and for death masks and casts of hands and feet to be taken. Some of these were later used in preparing the monument which created the permanent memorial of effigy or bust. This preoccupation with death included being fully involved in the commissioning of monuments during life and even posing for them. However, by Victorian times attitudes had changed completely, the cultural complexity of death was denied and its abnormality and difficulty stressed.

Over the period under review there were many changes of monument style and emphasis, the most significant being a gradual move away from the freestanding floor monuments with recumbent effigies to large freestanding monuments against the wall and then to much smaller wall busts and plaques.



SIR GEOFFREY PALMER (1673)
AND WIFE, EAST CARLTON,
'RESURRECTION MONUMENT'.
LONG LATIN INSCRIPTION ON THE
OPEN DOORS.

Availability of space, cost and continental influences were contributory factors, though the individuality of the sculptor and wishes of the commissioning relative ensured variety.

The earlier monuments in the 16th and 17th century were of recumbent effigies, often alabaster, and examples of these can be seen at Stonton Wyville, Noseley, East Carlton, Theddingworth and Nevill Holt. The simplest at Stonton Wyville (Edmund Brudenell 1590) is of a single figure on a tomb-chest whilst the husband and wife Hesilrige monuments at Noseley to Sir Thomas Hesilrige (1629) and Sir Arthur Hesilrige (1660) are sophisticated and embellished with additional family figures, one monument being highly decorated whilst the other is of plain alabaster but exquisitely carved.

East Carlton possesses a magnificent, highly symbolic 'resurrection monument' erected to Sir Geoffrey Palmer (1673) and his wife. This is of two shrouded figures standing on urn rims and portrayed walking out of an archway towards eternal life. Three 17th century half-busts adorn the chancel at Clipston where John, George and Sir George Buswell are commemorated whilst examples of kneeling figures are at Nevill Holt, Marston Trussel, Brampton Ash and Kelmarsh. A Baroque example, oval with significant military paraphernalia, is that to Major-General Thomas Brudenell (1707) at Stonton Wyville whilst Husbands Bosworth contains a wealth of 18th and 19th century wall monuments which show that by Victorian times, these memorials were essentially plain, Gothic or incorporated simple classical symbolism.

Epitaphs tell us who people were, what they were, their family connections and achievements. They are also sources of information about personal characteristics, religious beliefs, how emotions such as grief and loss were expressed and the use of words. The whole message is reinforced by architecture, sculpture, iconography and materials. Epitaphs were idealised and on the basis of 'de mortuis nil nisi bonum' (say nothing but good of the dead) they tended to accentuate positive characteristics. Whilst some were positively verbose giving a full life history (eg Major-General Thomas Brudenell at Stonton Wyville) others were more concise and even subtle (eg at Brampton Ash the monuments to Elizabeth Page (1824), Charles Bosworth (1822) and Elizabeth Bosworth (1853) indicate that Elizabeth Page may have been more than the 'highly esteemed friend of Mr Charles Bosworth', by whose side she was buried.

Events happening in the community or further afield have all been faithfully recorded such as the Civil War in the 17th century, various naval campaigns in the 19th century and the First World War cf. the 20th century. At Husbands Bosworth there is an unusual wooden monument of note to both John Shenton (1699) and Austin Shenton (1918) honouring service in the Civil War and the Great War.

³ N Llewellyn, *The Art of Death* (1991) p48.

An example of early Stuart poetry is seen at Shangton (Margaret Saunders 1612). The diminishing use of Latin during the seventeenth century may indicate increasing literacy among the population, since the use of English would have enabled more people to read and understand the epitaphs.



ENGRAVING, EDMUND BRUDENELL FROM J NICHOLS, LEICS. 130, P808.

Secularisation could have aided monument erection by creating redundant space in churches Post-Reformation, but ideas about the use of church space have changed greatly over the last four hundred years. The erection of monuments has nearly always been highly contentious, especially when they were large, but when the Lord of the Manor was also the Rector, there was little that church users could do.

Today, some families continue to live in the parish and keep the monuments in good order, but the maintenance of monuments is a problem for churches where the family have moved away, for instance at Welham where the original giant obelisk was in the church yard but has since been incorporated into a poorly built extension on the northern side. Today there is a rigid process to follow before anything permanent can be erected in a church.

There have been periods of iconoclasm when monuments were deliberately vandalised pre Civil War and even earlier when Elizabeth I issued a decree imploring cessation of monument defacement, which was interpreted as an affront to the authority of the establishment and by default an attack on the monarchy. However, no obvious defacement was found in this area and it is more likely that damage suffered has been as a result of the ravages of time or neglect.

Relationships and ideals of manhood and womanhood changed over the period and the 'culture of sensibility' associated with the aesthetic movement, in which a person's ethical sensibility was judged by their treatment of and feeling for others, manifested itself in more explicit but tasteful expressions of male grief on monuments in the 18th and 19th centuries. Prime examples of this can be seen at Dingley where an 'afflicted husband' erected a memorial to Honoria Hungerford (1859) and at Arthingworth where Catherine Jekyll (1775) 'died unfeignedly regretted and lamented by her disconsolate husband'. The Greek revival of the 18th century is reflected in monuments with figures in classical dress and tastefully draped urns or other funereal objects. The large white marble plaque at the West End of Theddingworth church shows the Rev Slaughter Clark (1772) in dominant pose whilst his wife, who erected the monument in his honour, is portrayed as subservient and pensive reclining on an urn - such deference being unimaginable in our politically correct society. However, our distant perspective today makes it difficult to judge precisely the validity of the relationships or sentiments expressed.

Symbolism has always been an integral part of monumental architecture. Medieval monumental art frequently emphasised the inevitability of bodily decay and the gruesome aspects of death, whilst religious imagery was rare after 1530 except for figures of saints and angels. Pre Restoration recumbent effigies were commonly dressed in armour, with 'faithful dog' at their feet and 'virtuous wife' at their side. The Coat of Arms was proudly displayed whenever the family had heraldic right. Children were portrayed above on a backplate or below on the frieze, swaddled babies being those that had died in childhood and the heir carrying a sword. Angels drawing back curtains to reveal the deceased at

prayer was a popular theme in the 17th century - see Jane Thursby (1631) at Nevill Holt. By the 19th century wall monuments portrayed cherubs, urns and angels (all symbols of death) and some allegorical or shrouded figures. Wall plaques showed roses for innocence and youth, weeping willows for sorrow, obelisks for eternity, broken anchors for those lost at sea or connected with it and military symbols for those killed in action on land. Symbolism is a vast subject and space precludes further description here. However, monuments need to be 'read' like paintings together with knowledge of the period to uncover the full meaning of what is depicted.

In conclusion, monuments in parish churches give insight into society and culture in the Early Modern and Modern periods, and its attitude to death. Large or small, grand or poor, monuments are a permanent reminder of a person, a place and a time, or in the case of the modern war memorials, of groups of people.

To quote:

'tombs are the clothes of the dead; a grave is but a plain suit, and a rich Monument is one embroyder'd'⁴.

NB: Most churches are permanently locked and to avoid disappointment, it is essential to contact a keyholder before visiting.



SIR ARTHUR HESILRIGE (1660) AND WIVES DAME FRANCES AND DAME DORETHEA NOSELEY. KNEELING CHILDREN HAVE INDIVIDUAL POSES.

CHILDREN OF SIR HESILRIGE



⁴ D Fuller, 'Holy State' (1648) in Esdaile, English Church Monuments 1510-1840 (1946) p44.