

St Helen's Churchyard.

What is a churchyard?

St Helen's, like many churches, is surrounded by an area of land which we call The Churchyard. It is likely that most people do not take too much notice of it, other than to walk through it to and from the town. What is a churchyard? In St Helen's case it's no longer a place of burial, other than for the interment of ashes; St Helen's churchyard was closed to most burials in 1855, around the time that the town cemetery was opened.

Essentially, a churchyard (note I'm not calling it a graveyard) is the land surrounding the church, but it has an interesting history, and was much more important to our ancestors. Many churchyards have standing stones and crosses which may pre-date the church and had meaning for pre-Christian peoples. The churchyard was sacred, providing an outer ring of holiness beyond the church, and people could claim sanctuary beyond the entrance gateway. Many ceremonies took place here: marriages in the church entrance (the porch, where there was one), preaching, processions on high days and holy-days, even markets, dances, games, and weapons training! The Rector had grazing rights in the churchyard and sheep, not mowers, kept the grass short.

There was an attempt in the late 13th century to stop the use of churchyards for markets and fairs, but they continued: complaints were being made about the noise and stench of the animals at the market in a churchyard in York disrupting services in the nearby Minster. Butchers would hang their meats inside the church porch, while cloth, fruit and vegetables, animals, tools and trinkets were sold in the churchyard. Church Fairs were big events, taking place in both the church building and the churchyard. Eventually, markets moved away from the church to a designated market site – in Ashby's case, Market Street, of course - and, although we still have occasional fairs and events today, they are not usually while a service is taking place!



When the current St Helen's church was built in 1474, the churchyard was already hundreds of years old. Thousands of burials had taken place there; we have records from 1538, when church registers began to be kept, but evidence of the number of unknown burials can be found by looking beyond St Helen's vestry at the height of the ground beyond the east end: the land is 2 metres higher than the base of the church. It has been estimated that the average English parish churchyard could contain as many as 10,000 burials. Few people wanted to be buried on the north side of the church – the Devil's side – but at St Helen's there is very little space on the south side; we are unusual in having most of our space on the east end. The area to the west, beyond the tower, was added in 1812, when the churchyard was so full that there were concerns about sanitation and the uncovering of previously buried remains when a new grave was dug.

The shape of our churchyard has not changed in hundreds of years. The earliest map we have is 1735, and the shape is not dissimilar to the highly accurate topographical map produced by Mercian Archaeological Services in a community archaeology project carried out in 2016. It is roughly rectangular, although there is a hint that the earliest Anglo-Saxon churchyard was more rounded; follow the curved pathway by the west door towards Lower Church Street and you may be walking on a very early boundary. Today, the boundaries are walls: an assortment of stones, many of them reused, on the south side and a

19th century redbrick wall to the north, which is grade 2 listed. Also listed is the 18th century stone gateway onto Lower Church Street, with skull and crossbones on the top of the piers, denoting a burial site.

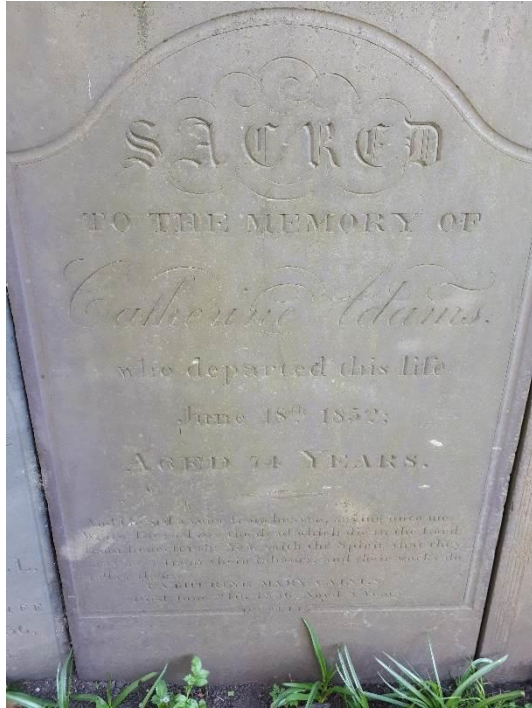


A place of Burial.

It is worth spending a few minutes looking at the churchyard as it is today. Time, gardeners and the ravages of mowing machines have caused the loss of many of the 18th and 19th century gravestones. We are fortunate that a record remains from the early 21st century, a survey carried out by Liz Jones at Ashby Museum, but this serves to underline what has already been lost.

The monuments in St Helen's churchyard – headstones, footstones, plaques, ledger stones, chest tombs, coping stones, crosses and pedestals – belong to quite a narrow period, the earliest being 1716 and the oldest 1939. Almost all the headstones are made of slate, brought from Swithland a few miles away. Other materials – sandstone and limestone – are all local, with the exception of one early 20th century grave cover of marble, now weathered.

In the early 1970s the headstones to the west of the church – around 130 of them - were removed from their graves and arranged in alphabetical order around the south and west walls of the churchyard; a few form the floor in the tower. These are all made of slate and are of two forms - flat-topped and shouldered - and all date after 1812, when the western section of the churchyard was added. The styles of writing are all similar, a mixture of flowery cursive and plain printing, for example:



Sacred to the memory of Catherine Adams, who departed this life

June 18th 1852; Aged 74 years.

And I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the spirit, that they may rest from their labours: and their works do follow them.

Added later at the bottom of the stone is

Catherine Mary Caines

Died June 24th 1856, Aged 8 years.

Catherine Caines was Catherine Adams' granddaughter.

The stone mason's name is present on many of the stones, in this case Cooper. A 19th century photograph of the stone masons exists, which confirms that a group of them worked in the same yard, which was less than a quarter of a mile from the churchyard.



A glance over St Helen's churchyard from the east end shows that there are very few standing monuments. Many of the headstones were laid flat and some were lost in 1878-1880 when the church was enlarged. The flattened stones are also mainly made of slate, but are in general of an older date, and in less good condition.

There are a number of slate footstones in the churchyard, not all of which are near their headstones. These bear just initials and sometimes a date. In at least one case there is no accompanying headstone: could

it be that a footstone was placed by the grave in the hopes that the family could afford a headstone one day?

Near the eastern wall are a number of children's graves. Child burials were often placed near a boundary in the medieval period, though there seems no reason for this in the 18th and 19th centuries, except perhaps tradition.



There are few three-dimensional objects in the churchyard. Only one chest tomb now remains, and that is in poor condition. It is made of sandstone and has four oval slate plaques, inscribed to members of the Dunn family, though one of these has now dropped off and is leaning against the tomb.

There are a surprising number of pieces of monument on the ground at the east end, suggesting that there were a number of other chest tombs which have been removed. Historic England's advice on dealing with damaged and dangerous monuments is to lay the top and/or inscriptions flat on the ground and this is what appears to have happened.

The Dunn family chest tomb

On the north east side of the church by the path is a pedestal monument, unusually for this churchyard made of limestone. It is in the form of a square column set on a stone plinth with a low iron railing around it. It has inscriptions on both faces with lead lettering, and the stone mason was called Elliott. It mentions members of the Cape Family, and shows Ashby's links with other parts of Britain and the world:

*... son of the Rev Joseph CAPE Rector of Uldale, Cumberland
Died at Ilfracombe 20th August 1858 Aged 60.*

Jonathan younger son of Thomas & Sarah Slater CAPE Lieut. 30th Bengal Infantry Killed at Lucknow on the 20th March 1858 at the early age of 19.

Joseph Thomas elder son of Thomas & Sarah Slater CAPE Died at Totnes 7th April 1888 Aged 50. He was buried at Harbertonford, Devon.



The Cape family monument

A number of 19th / 20th century memorials to the family of Canon John Denton lie on the north side of the church. Denton was the much loved, and erudite, rector who was responsible for the 19th century extension and refurbishment of the church. He lies buried under a marble coping stone with an inscribed cross on the top. The stone mason was Elliott.



*In loving memory of John DENTON, Vicar of Ashby
Hon. Canon of Peterborough, & Rural Dean, who
entered into rest June 12th 1903, Aged 73.
Loved and regretted by all amongst whom he had
laboured nearly 50 years.*

Other members of the Denton family were buried in the plot, which is surrounded by a sandstone kerb, all unusually after the churchyard was closed. The other family memorials are in the style of crosses, including one Celtic style. There are no other crosses in the churchyard.

The Denton memorial

The most recent monument in the churchyard dates to 1939 and is an unassuming limestone ledger stone tucked into the north side corner where the chancel meets the Hastings Chapel. It marks the grave of the 14th Earl of Huntingdon, Warner Francis John Plantagenet, the last descendent of the Hastings family to be buried at St Helen's.



Grave of the 14th Earl of Huntingdon

There are lots of stories connected to the gravestones which are yet to be told. If you have a few minutes, why not look at a few and see what they can tell you?

What is the future of the churchyard?

It is hard to imagine a church without its churchyard, and this is true of St Helen's. The view of the church from Upper Church Street is one many people see regularly; the churchyard gives the building

space. People walk along the pathways daily as a way of getting to the town. It is hard to imagine it hemmed in with buildings, as St Paul's Cathedral and many city churches are.

We have seen how, in the pre-Reformation period, the churchyard had many roles, some of which are surprising to us in the 21st century. Others remain the same: worshippers walk through the churchyard to enter the church; parents bring their children for baptism; brides walk from the gates to the north door before their marriage. The medieval churchyard was a place for preaching and processions: we occasionally do that today, though not so often. It was important for community socialising, with fairs and markets; today's church fetes sometimes spill out of the door. We no longer have a brewhouse, as would every medieval churchyard, or indulge in Church Ales as a method of fundraising – though some might think that an idea worth resurrecting!

We have seen that the churchyard is no longer a place of burial, but could that change? In September 2013, the BBC reported that it had conducted a survey which suggested that almost half of England's cemeteries could run out of space within the next 20 years. This has led to renewed calls for legislation to allow graves to be reused. At present there is space in Ashby town cemetery, but that won't be true for ever. England is unusual in having embraced cremation – around 75% of people choose to be cremated, much higher than any other country – but the production of carbon dioxide is an issue for climate change, so that, too, could change. In fact, the idea that a grave is the 'final' resting place dates back only to the Victorian era. The Church of England has always allowed reuse of graves, one consequence of the lack of markings or a plan of earlier burials. Ronald Blythe reports the words of William Russ, the gravedigger, in his 1960s classic 'Akenfield', based on a Suffolk village:

"Village folk have been buried over and over again in the same little bits of Churchyard. You have to throw somebody out to get somebody in – three or four sometimes. I always put all the bones back so that they lie tidy-like just under the new person. They're soon all one. The parson said to me, 'How is it that you get so many in one grave?' and I always tell him that I must have disturbed a plague pit. Parson will believe anything."

If the choice was to bury your loved one in a graveyard with space but miles from your home, or to reopen old graves in your churchyard, which would you choose? Does it help to know that there have been thousands of unknown burials in the churchyard at St Helen's since the earliest church?

While you walk through the churchyard considering this question, notice also the wildlife found there. St Helen's churchyard isn't rich in wildlife, unlike some rural churchyards, because it is regularly mown. But it is a green space; there are birds; the celandines and violets grow in profusion in the spring; and the little corners where the grass has grown longer are worth a closer look. Churchyards are important for wildlife, even in a city, and have been called 'God's Acre' since the 17th century.

Let's leave the last word to Thomas Gray, in a verse from his 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard':

*Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.*

Anne Heaton, with research help by Julie Starkey.