

Introduction

DURING THE PRESENT CENTURY the work of various scholars has firmly established the artistic importance of our English heritage of stone carving. Such research has brushed away certain myths woven by former prejudice and ill-formed opinion. Romanesque sculpture has lost its stigma of being thought uncouth and barbarous; medieval building and carving have been established as the work, not of monks, but of professional craftsmen who have shed much of their former anonymity; while post-Reformation tomb-makers and architects have been rescued from Victorian obloquy and shown to form a part of this same tradition. Within the last ten years this mass of information has been summarized in three individual indices, compiled by John Harvey, Rupert Gunnis and Howard Colvin, which are standard works of reference forming a roll of honour of English craftsmanship.

One branch of stone-carving, however, has received scant attention: our native monuments set out in the open air in burial grounds, churchyards and cemeteries, commemorating not so much the rich and the great, but the rank and file of humanity—the common man. The present book attempts to supply this lack and give not only a general account of such memorials from prehistoric until recent times but more particularly introduce the results of new research on those of the post-Reformation period which have suffered most from neglect.

Although tombstones previous to this historical turning-point have been individually described in learned papers or collectively under separate art-styles by authorities who have made such periods their special study, comparatively little has been done in the way of their overall assessment. In some respects, due to archaeological fervour, our knowledge of prehistoric has outstripped that of historic monuments; the bulk of Anglo-Saxon carving, although certain of its aspects have received minute attention, still awaits the completion of a survey initiated by Sir Thomas Kendrick; and information on medieval memorials is mainly imbedded in the reports of county antiquarian societies. For any reader, other than the specialist, the available data is therefore

widely dispersed, and difficult of access; for this reason, its essentials are here presented in a form which, it is hoped, is lucid and reasonably impartial, although the reader should bear in mind that the greater proportion of space is devoted to the post-Reformation period as this material is presented here for the first time. This point has largely determined the choice of illustrations.

Several reasons may account for the general apathy towards these latter monuments. Most important may be a subconscious unwillingness to acknowledge anything that reminds us of our own irrevocable destiny and, springing from this, there may be a certain satisfaction that lichen, weeds and ivy should be their shrouds; perhaps there is too a certain snobbery or class-consciousness which inhibits appreciation, or it may be the physical fact of their position out-of-doors, which permits their detail to be clearly seen only for an hour or two about mid-day. For these stones are indeed vulnerable, subject to the quixotic changes of English weather, to air pollution since the days of industrial progress, and to man's charity, as fickle as a vane. However well-chosen the stone (and much of it has lasted for centuries in spite of all these hazards) it cannot last for ever, and a monument no longer performs its function when it becomes unintelligible. Every churchyard contains a few monuments which time has defaced in this way.

Advantage has been taken of this fact by a specious logic and without discrimination, and many wholesale clearances of churchyard memorials have already been made (often in the teeth of safeguards initiated by church and diocesan authorities). Such vandalism, which masquerades as tidiness, has increased since World War II, and there is a very real danger of its becoming a regular practice. This insidious change from neglect to destruction makes the work of record an urgent and immediate duty.

It would seem that such a task (which involves a knowledge of local conditions and the minutiae of parish documents) could best be done by county archaeological societies, making systematic surveys in their own areas. Their main interest, however, has been confined to the genealogical data of inscriptions, which are such useful supplements to parish registers. Unfortunately, with the exceptions of Surrey, Sussex and Herefordshire, nothing has yet been done to initiate county photographic records and, apart from a few instances performed through the

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auspices of the Georgian Group and the Central Council for the Care of Churches, little to restore or preserve monuments of distinction. In most legitimate cases of clearance headstones at least are usually preserved by lining them up against the churchyard wall; but there can surely be little objection to retaining a few of the finest under cover in the church porch or interior? Rubbings and plaster casts of noteworthy details could also be made at little expense and housed in the county museum along with photographs for display and reference, while additional prints of the latter could be sent to the National Buildings Record to enlarge the material already contained in its files.

As well as the monuments themselves it is one of the aims of this book to rescue their carvers from an ill-deserved oblivion. These craftsmen can be identified either by personal memorials, or by their habit of signing work, usually at the base of the design. Through individual examination of monuments in this way, some adequate idea of a mason's output and range of influence can be obtained and, when such first-hand evidence is followed up by research into parish documents, wills, directories, etc., the jigsaw of his life can be assembled. Such signatures, however, were rarely cut before the middle of the eighteenth century, the oldest being visible on the hard-wearing slates of the West Country and Midlands; but the majority, being of softer freestone have seldom remained legible before the early years of the nineteenth century. Actual proof of identity is thus limited in scope and period, although comparative analysis can distinguish not only regional, but individual styles with some degree of probability. On the other hand, many masons are known from documentary evidence to have produced gravestones, although in the absence of signatures they will forever remain mere names.

While the present index of craftsmen at the end of this book, owing to pressure of space, has been condensed to a list of names and dates, it presents a foundation at least on which others may be inspired to build. For it must be emphasized that the present work is mainly the result of personal research, yet, owing to the increasing tempo of iconoclasm, future investigation needs to be both co-operative and co-ordinated. Presumably the immediate solution would be the election by county learned societies of working committees to investigate the available material in their own localities. The writer will feel

his own patience to have been rewarded if this book leads to such practical steps being taken. In the meanwhile he would be very grateful to receive and acknowledge any data or photographs relating to churchyard monuments and their makers, or notice of any errors or omissions that are unavoidable in a work of this kind which refers to many persons, places and sepulchres. Indeed it is more than likely that, in spite of careful checking, some of the items described in the following pages have since ceased to exist. The task is urgent, yet there are many thrills and pleasures involved in its field-work. Like Mr Landor's precept for happiness, it offers an object of unending pursuit. In his own course the writer has re-experienced the excitement of those early topographers who discovered our landscape and antiquities with fresh vision, it has led down roads unfolding to Pisgah-sights of unknown churches, and to long, quiet hours of content.

And in a larger sense what else is this inquiry—whereby these glyphs of the paradoxical English temperament become articulate—but a tribute from the living to the dead, an act of faith in man's posterity?

Most of my field-work during the past twenty-five years has been achieved on solitary visits during summer vacations. Pleasant exceptions have been excursions spent with my friend Birkin Haward of Ipswich (who has photographed many monuments throughout East Anglia), and later with my wife, whose eagle eye let no signature escape her. I owe much to the help and advice of my late step-father, John Newnham of Billingshurst, and the inspiration given by my former school-master, Edward Kirby of Kettering. I am grateful for help given by the late Mrs Katherine Esdaile and Mr Walter Godfrey (former Director of the National Buildings Record), and to Mr H. M. Colvin and Mr Rupert Gunnis for generously sharing information when they were producing their own records; for the loan of photographs by Miss Innes Hart, Miss M. Wight, Mr M. W. Barley, Mr E. Brown, Mr Lindsay Fleming, Mr G. L. Remnant, and Mr Philip Rogers (who single-handed has made an important photographic record of churchyard monuments throughout the county of Kent), and also to Mr Alan Ludwig, of Rhode Island (who recently visited this country in the attempt to find sources for the sepulchral art of New England). To the Central Council for the Care of Churches, the Society of Genealogists, to Mr F. W. Steer, and Mr M. P. Statham (respective archivists of

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