

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Peter Driver, *It's a Grave Business*

Peter Driver delivered a fascinating talk about gravestones and memorials entitled *It's a Grave Business* to the April meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. Despite its potentially morbid theme, he used humour to highlight the value of funerary art to local historians and people researching their family origins.

There are tombs in Suffolk dating from the Bronze Age but these tend to contain cremated ashes stored in pots but there are no inscriptions. The Romans provide the first informative tombstones. There have been no finds in Suffolk but Colchester has some fine examples. They provide a wealth of evidence including, the name and place of birth of the dead person, along with their military dress and rank.

The oldest preserved memorials are the tombs of the nobility found inside churches. They are made from soap stone which is easily carved but are also liable to be damaged for the same reason. These tombs were originally painted.

The graves of some people have almost as colourful a history as the person they contain. Mary, the sister of Henry VIII, is buried at St Mary's Church, Bury St Edmunds. She was a very beautiful woman and was useful in consolidating political alliances. Henry VIII arranged her marriage to King Louis XII of France in 1514 when she was 18 but her husband died 93 days later. Henry sent Charles Brandon, 1st Duke of Suffolk to France to escort Mary back to England. However, they married secretly in France. This treasonable act undermined Henry's plans for using his sister in other marriage alliances. Brandon was fortunate to escape execution but he was fined heavily. When Mary died in 1533 she was initially buried at the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds. However, during the Reformation the Abbey became derelict after the lead from its roof was removed. Mary was reinterred nearby at St Mary's Church Bury St Edmunds but then later was moved to a different location in the same church. The tablet describing Mary's life is interesting for the detail offered but also showed the influence of stone masons. Her first husband's name is misspelt as 'Lewes.'

Memorials often need to be interpreted as they contain hidden information. The Coke Family is commemorated in a 17th Century monument in St Matthew's Church in Ipswich. It shows a family where there were 12 children, eight boys and four girls. However, two of the girl figures carry a skull which is code for them predeceasing their parents. A symbol for child mortality is a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Headstones in churchyards in Suffolk rarely date before about 1580. Stone had to be imported and so was expensive. Memorials from the 17th and 18th centuries tend to be small and oval in shape. Few are legible unless they were protected from water and frost damage by being placed under a tree or near a wall. These headstones often have skeletons on them reflecting the new concept that the soul was more important than the body. Skull and cross bone carvings symbolise mortality, not involvement in piracy! The influence of the grand tour by the gentry is shown by the introduction of cherubs representing heaven as the afterlife.

Late 18th and early 19th century graves may include images of the profession of the dead person. There is a waggon and six horses on the grave of a driver in Palgrave and medical instruments on the tombstone of a surgeon. Pre-Victorian inscriptions often commented on the work and life of the deceased rather than having the later religious sentiments offering researchers a wealth information.

Peter Driver concluded with examples of inscriptions which were serious at the time they were written but can be amusing now. A grave near Sudbury states that the man 'died from sleeping in a damp bed eight years before.'

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 28 May at Rickinghall Village Hall when Gary Egerton presents a talk about *Bishops and Brothels*. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy