

The Sacred Space –

Some Thoughts on Churchyards

When we think of a churchyard what comes into mind? If we see only a landscape with tombstones, an abode of the dead, then we are missing by far the greater part of what these very special places can tell us.

For the naturalist a churchyard may well contain living remnants of ancient meadowland. An archaeologist might discover evidence of occupation, even perhaps of religious use, which predates the Christian era. Among the tombstones and inscriptions the Local Historian will find valuable clues concerning the locality and its social history. The casual visitor can experience a welcome aura of calm and peace in a place set aside from the world, often long centuries ago.

Yet if we could somehow see an action replay of that same churchyard down the years we would almost certainly be very surprised. Far from being set aside as a place of quiet we would discover it to be a hive of activity, a place where the sacred and the secular met, and a veritable hub of the local community.

There are records of Saxon Moots or parliaments being held in some churchyards. Others played host to markets, and all were places where people regularly gathered for recreational purposes as well as for official reasons.

Look around ancient churches and you'll often find deep grooves scratched in the stonework. These are where the men folk of the community sharpened their arrow points during compulsory archery practice at the butts set up in the churchyard.

Then there were the recreational activities such as quoits, ninepins, and wrestling. Church walls were the ideal place against which to play Fives, and even cockfighting was not unknown in the shadow of the ancient building.

Some of the clergy were not too keen on those sports and especially those that encouraged gambling, but King James the First had decreed in the year 1619 that 'traditional churchyard games' were to be encouraged, providing they were held, "in due and convenient time, and without implement or let of Divine Service", and so they could not do much about it.

On the subject of boisterous activities, we mustn't forget the Church Ales which were feasts of eating, drinking and merrymaking organised by Churchwardens to raise funds for the church and held in the churchyard.

Interestingly, all of these activities took place on the north side of the church when we might expect the sunnier southern aspect to be the more favoured for outdoor activities. The reason lies in the fact that when the church was built it would have been situated to the north of any existing High Cross, the idea being that the new structure would not cast a shadow upon the older symbol of Christianity which had preceded it. Hence the north side of the churchyard, behind the church, became the place where gatherings took place and sports were played, leaving the southern part as the place of burial. If there were any burials on the north side they would be of people deemed to be less worthy, such as criminals, suicides, witches, and so forth.

There are many old customs and superstitions concerning churchyards, and particularly after darkness has fallen. The young maiden for instance strewing grain along the churchyard path at midnight. Who did she hope to see when she turned around? Why did people creep into the church porch on All Hallows' Eve? What voice were they listening for beyond the tightly shut door?

Many churchyards have their own particular tales, entertaining now, but once treated very seriously, and all these are just another part of the treasures contained in our ancient churchyards.