

## **The John Martin chest-tomb in the parish churchyard of St. Andrew of Hampton** *A lichen assessment and recommendations for conservation.*

### **The condition of the tomb.**

The overall condition of the chest tomb is excellent considering that it is nearly 300 years old. Spalling due to frost action has caused some fragmentation on the south and the west faces and this should be stabilized using suitable lime mortar sympathetic with the surrounding stone in colour and texture. These supporting slabs appear to be of soft sandstone and their structural integrity after such a long period is, in part, due to the protective overhang of the limestone lid. They appear to have been recently re-pointed using lime mortar and, whereas the quality of this renovation is acceptable, the addition of a stain to the mortar to blend it into the colour of the original stone would have enhanced its appearance. A limestone block has been replaced in the footings of the western face which appears to be of similar geology to the adjacent stones and is beginning to pleasingly blend in due to colonization by lichens.

The western face is discoloured with carbon deposits from coal burning when this was the main fuel used by the village community. This might be removed with clean water applied carefully with soft brushes but will almost certainly expose the stone to increased erosion. It could be argued that this small area of blackened stone, which detracts little from the striking appearance of this tomb, be retained as an educational reminder of what the village environment was like in the past.

Regilding the inscriptions on the cartouche and slate panel may be carried out, if considered necessary, without damaging the surrounding lichen flora which is so noticeable but it will hardly increase the considerable character of the tomb.

### **The Lichen Flora supported by the tomb:**

This is remarkable and probably represents a climax community which has developed over the 3 centuries of the tomb's existence. Thirty three lichen species were recorded from the tomb—others are present but their identification was not determined as samples would have had to be taken for analysis. Many of the lichens are also found on other memorials in the churchyard and on the church itself but they still represent an astonishing diversity on such a small structure. The tapestry of colours produced by this lichen community gives the tomb a wonderful charm and timeless dignity and, in addition, two of the species

found on the lid, *Caloplaca variabilis* and *Leptogium plicatile*, are scarce in the county and should not be disturbed.

The ecological importance of lichens is difficult for the general public to appreciate as they rarely feature in popular natural history programmes but, to put this tomb into context, if it were a three hundred year old wild flower meadow it would be designated as a SSSI [Site of Special Scientific Interest]; if it were an unexploited oak wood of similar age it would be of county and national importance. These comparisons should put the importance of this tomb for its lichens into perspective. It is therefore strongly advised that the limestone blocks at the base of the tomb and the limestone capping lid should not be cleaned or the lichens compromised in any way. This is now the advice given by conservation bodies such as English Heritage, Natural England, the National Trust and, of course, by The British Lichen Society. This advice partly stems from a need to protect all aspects of the natural world but also from the realization that a “patina” of hardened, more resistant surface layer of stone is built up over many years by exposure to the atmosphere and that removal of lichens will disrupt this layer and leave the monument more susceptible to erosion by weathering. There is also good scientific evidence that a covering of lichens protects stone surfaces from frost action.

### **Summary**

The ecology of the tomb, particularly its lichen cover, is important not only to the wildlife of the churchyard but also to the natural history of the county—there are few memorials in Worcestershire which support this richness and diversity of species. Aesthetically the tomb enhances the entrance to the churchyard and endows it with a quiet charm and stature, and the lichens covering the stone do much to contribute to this effect. Any interference with its present integrity needs to be thought about very carefully if it is not to create something harsh and discordant at the entrance to this lovely area of tranquility and peace.

It is easy to destroy three centuries of ecological continuity, impossible to recreate it again, and I am certain that John Martin, a farmer close to the natural beauty of the Worcestershire countryside, would be in agreement if he could speak today.

Ivan Pedley

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