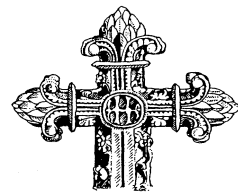


the FRIENDS OF holywell cemetery



The Cross on A.R. Mowbray's Grave

A Short Guide to Holywell Cemetery

A brief history

The historian A.L.Rowse wrote an evocative account of a walk he had just taken one July morning in the direction of Holywell. "Quiet, a blessed stillness, only Sunday sounds – it might be the Victorian age – as I turn in under the shadow of St Cross and glimpse, embowered in its shrubberies, the little sexton's house and church school, in the Gothic of the 1860s, something straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*: latticed windows, overhanging eaves, porch buried under a rambler rose. But one would never have believed what treasures there are within – the whole of Victorian Oxford leaps to the eye from headstone to headstone."

It is true: Holywell cemetery is one of Oxford's best kept secrets – a haven of tranquillity and recollection in a city where space and stillness are increasingly at a premium. Its stones contain a wealth of hidden stories. In the mid-19th century Oxford's existing churchyards were no longer adequate for the needs of a growing population. Outbreaks of cholera in the 1840s exacerbated the crisis, and raised concern for public health. New cemeteries (as opposed to churchyards), were created on the edge of town at Holywell, Osney and Jericho to meet the needs of the city parishes east, west and north of Carfax. The site at Holywell, gifted by Merton College in 1847, was administered by the incumbents of the parishes of St Martin's, Carfax (since demolished, except for its tower); All Saints (now Lincoln College library); St Mary the Virgin (the University church); St John the Baptist (Merton College chapel) and St Peter in the East (now the library of St Edmund Hall).

In 1850 a lodge was built beside the gate for the keeper and his family. (The wrought- iron gate, to the left, leads to the separate – and much older – parish churchyard of St Cross).The keeper, paid from combined parish funds, evidently did more than bury the dead and tend their graves: he created a much-admired garden. An English traveller in Spain, the Reverend Hugh James Rose, writing in 1873,

2

could not help contrasting the neglect he saw there with "the beautiful array of tombstones, sculptures, flowers and shrubs in a small cemetery in England – I mean that of Holywell, in Oxford – probably the most tasteful in England." Peter Miller, brought up in the keeper's lodge between the two World Wars, looking back at his childhood, remembered 'a lovely garden full of trees and flowers'.

The retirement of the last keeper in 1931, the disappearance of all but two of the contributing parishes, and subsequent lack of income, meant that what was a garden gradually became a wilderness. Burials were fewer, and there were no funds to support a caretaker. The recovery was largely due to the efforts of Peter Bostock (1911-1999), Canon Emeritus of the diocese of Mombasa, who in his retirement in the early 1980s, almost single handed, supervised a general process of clearance. Working from a survey carried out in 1970/71 he also compiled an invaluable annotated list of the burials, over 1200 in number. His three volumes, with an alphabetical index, are now available to researchers in the Oxfordshire Record Office. In 1987 a Society of Friends of Holywell Cemetery was created which raises money to pay for a part-time gardener and publishes an annual newsletter. It owed a great deal initially to the advice of Camilla Lambrick of the Ashmolean Natural History Society, to the initiative of the Oxford Urban Wildlife Group and especially to the dedication of Lars Thielker, periodically assisted by volunteers, who managed to rescue neglected tombstones from the undergrowth, while respecting and conserving the naturalness and resident wildlife which is one of Holywell's attractions.

When the cemetery was opened in 1847 burials were restricted to baptised members of the Church of England, but that bar was removed long ago. University dons predominate, as you might expect (at the last count there were 160 of them, including 32 Heads of Houses), but there is no barrier here between town and gown. Shopkeepers and tradespeople abound, with names which will be recognised by many Oxonians: Boffin the baker, Salter the boatbuilder, Badcock the draper, Gillman the bootmaker, Mallam the auctioneer, Knowles the builder, Castell the tailor and robemaker, Goundrey the ironmonger, Payne the jeweller, Goodall the chemist, Venables the gunsmith, Broadhurst the printer and stationer, Mowbray the ecclesiastical outfitter, Thornton the bookseller. Here too is Benjamin Blackwell (1814-1855), the first

city librarian whose little bookshop in St Clement's was the forerunner of his son's more famous premises in Broad Street.

3

George Claridge Druce, the proprietor of a chemist's shop in the High Street, was a businessman and an eminent botanist, whose dedication to science was rewarded by three honorary degrees and Fellowship of the Royal Society.

A walk round the cemetery

A back cover map shows paths and positions of the graves

What follows is a suggested route which will guide the visitor round some at least of the more notable graves (though in the democracy of the afterlife, all are notable!). A few graves along the path from the entrance, on the right hand side, is the vault (1) of **Kenneth Grahame** (d.1932), the author of *The Wind in the Willows*, and his son Alastair, an undergraduate of Christ Church who died twelve years earlier in tragic circumstances, at the age of 20.

Across the path is a flat stone marking the grave of **Lord Redcliffe-Maud** (1906-1982), Master of University College, a distinguished public servant and diplomat, together with his wife Jean (2).

Before turning to the left, notice the grave (3) of the **Miller Family** of Holywell. William Margetts Miller was the keeper of the cemetery for twenty years, until his death in 1916, when he was succeeded by his widow. She remained in the lodge as keeper till her retirement in 1931. Two of their sons and their wives were buried here with their parents. James joined the Great Western Railway at the age of 14 and ended a long career as stationmaster at Oxford.

Along the path to the left and under a yew tree on the right, at the end of the path, is the grave (4) of **Sir Hugh Cairns** (1896-1952), an Australian Rhodes Scholar who became the most brilliant brain surgeon of his day and was the first Nuffield Professor of Surgery from 1937 until his untimely death in 1952. Around the corner on the left, is a plot containing the graves of some of the Anglican sisters of Clewer who, in 1857, established a 'Female Penitentiary and House of Refuge' at Holywell Manor, adjoining the cemetery. Beyond them is a plaque on the wall commemorating JWB: **John William Burgon** (1813-1888), Fellow of Oriel, Vicar of St Mary's and finally Dean of Chichester - at Oxford an indefatigable defender of lost causes, famous for his tract 'To Educate Young Women like Young Men: A Thing Inexpedient and Immodest'. His tomb (5) is below.

4

Continuing along the wall, on reaching the Flemming plaque, turn right, where you will find the grave (6) of **Charles Williams** (1886-1945), poet, Arthurian scholar and Inkling –friend of J.R.R.Tolkien and C.S.Lewis.

As you turn left at the next corner you cannot miss the most beautiful funerary monument in the cemetery: the canopied tomb (7) of **Henry Beaumont Bird**, a Magdalen College chorister who died of typhoid fever in 1856, at the age of 12. It was probably his uncle, J.R.Bloxam, a Fellow of Magdalen and friend of Pugin, who commissioned the finest sculptor of the day, Thomas Earp of Lambeth, to carve the effigy and sepulchre in the medieval style. Henry is represented in the surplice of a chorister, his hands joined in prayer. At his feet is an eponymous bird, while the base below is decorated with lilies – the emblem of Magdalen College School.

Continue down this path and facing you at the end of this section is the tall sculpted cross marking the grave (8) of **Hastings Rashdall**, historian and theologian, Fellow of New College and later Dean of Carlisle. This is another jewel in Holywell's crown, a cross in the Celtic style, sculpted from Westmorland slate to mark Rashdall's association with that county. The design is inspired by ancient Celtic crosses which survive in the north-west of England. Don't miss the nose-diving angel on the far side.

Moving straight ahead you cannot miss the massive cross on the left marking the grave (9) of one of the giants of Victorian Oxford, **Sir Henry Acland** (1815-1900), a Devonian, Regius Professor of Medicine, Oxford G.P., lifelong friend of John Ruskin, creator of the University Museum and the moving spirit in the creation of a school of Natural Science at Oxford. Buried in the same grave is his wife Sarah (d.1878), two of his daughters, and the eldest of their six sons, an Admiral.

Facing it is the grave (10) of the Russian émigré **Sir Paul Vinogradoff (1854-1925)**, sometime Professor of History in the University of Moscow, 'the most cosmopolitan scholar to come to Oxford since the Renaissance'. As Professor of Jurisprudence here he brought a wider European perspective to English historical studies.

5

Continuing on the path, on the boundary wall, there are several memorials (11) to the Poulton family: **Sir Edward Poulton** (1866-1943), Professor of Zoology, and his wife Emily, the daughter of George Palmer, M.P. for Reading and co-founder of the firm of Huntley and Palmer, the biscuit manufacturers. Alongside is the simple wooden cross which originally marked the grave in Flanders of their second son **Ronald Palmer**, killed in battle in 1915. Ronald was one of the earliest Oxford graduates in engineering and the outstanding rugby player of his time, a celebrated sporting hero who established boys' clubs in Oxford and Reading.

Follow the wall until the next turning to the right, where near the corner you will find the unusual terracotta memorial (12) of **Sir John Rhys** (1840-1915), Professor of Celtic, and his wife.

Continue about 12m along the path by the wall to the memorial (13) to **George Claridge Druce** (1850-1932), proprietor of a chemist's shop in the High Street, Mayor of Oxford, botanist, and author of the *Flora of Oxfordshire*.

Return to the central path and behind the Rhys memorial is the massive granite Celtic cross which marks the grave (14) of **Sir Frederick Max Muller** (1823-1900), German-born Sanskrit scholar, world authority in the field of ancient Indian literature, pioneer of the science of comparative philology and religion, friend of kings and emperors. Nearby is another Celtic cross of granite, the finest among many in the cemetery, marking the grave of **Bartholomew Price**, mathematician and Master of Pembroke College.

Continuing along the main path, take the first turning to the right where you will find the grave (15, fourth on the left) of **Walter Pater** (d.1894), the author of *Marius the Epicurean*, and inspirer of the aesthetic movement. Taking the next turning to the right to find (on the left) the grave of the great Hegelian philosopher **F.H. Bradley** and his equally brilliant brother, the Shakespearian scholar **A.C. Bradley**. Another brother, drowned in the Isis when still an undergraduate, is commemorated with them (16).

6

On returning to the main path, at the second turning to the left, you may glimpse the tall Celtic cross above the grave (17) of **Sir John Stainer** (1840-1901), Professor of Music at the University of Oxford and composer of the *Crucifixion*, that most famous of Victorian oratorios, as well as of 40 anthems and some 150 hymn tunes. There is a window to his memory in St Cross church.

Return to the main path and as you reach the T-junction before the area beneath the branches of an American pin oak, take a few steps down the avenue to the right and you will find (on the left) a tablet (18) commemorating **William Frederick Donkin** (1845-1888), mountaineer, Alpine photographer, and scientist. Behind it is the grave of his wife and infant daughter, who died in 1877. He is not buried here, but in the Caucasus, where he and three companions were swept away by an avalanche while attempting the ascent of Mount Dychtau, the second highest mountain in the Caucasus. His last moments in biting wind and driving snow are vividly evoked in the verses on his memorial tablet.

Return to the T-junction and continue ahead where immediately on the left is a plaque (19) on the ground commemorating **James Blish**, American Science Fiction author. Continuing on this path which turns to the right is another little jewel of funerary art: the grave (20) of **Lewis Theodore Pilcher**, aged 4 years and two months, only child of Theodore and Sophie Pilcher, and his devoted nurse Elizabeth Sibley, both drowned at Medley Weir in May 1893. The marble casket tomb is adorned with exquisite copperwork. In 1993 vandals removed the panels at either end, each representing a peacock.

The area beneath the pin oak contains more recent burials and cremation burials. Among those commemorated here are the archaeologist **Christopher Hawkes** (21); the poet **Anne Ridler** and her husband **Vivian**, typographer and printer to the university (22); **Marjorie Reeves**, historian and churchwoman (23); **John Barber**, dramatic critic (24); **Hugo Dyson**, tutor in English literature and associate of the Inklings (25); **T.J. Binyon**, biographer of Pushkin (26); **Kenneth Tynan**, *enfant terrible* (27), and later one of the founders of the National Theatre; **Austin Farrer**, theologian (28), and **Maurice Bowra**, Warden of Wadham College, perhaps the most formidable and influential Oxford personality in the period between the two wars (29).

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We rely upon voluntary subscriptions from **Friends** in order to take care of this historic, peaceful place which contains so much of Oxford's history. The money we raise is used to fund a part-time gardener, to pay the expenses of volunteers who carry out heavy clearance work and wall repairs, and to cover insurance. Increased funds would allow us to improve maintenance by employing the gardener for longer hours, to repair monuments in need of conservation and to make the cemetery more accessible to visitors.

For £10 a year subscription, Friends receive an annual newsletter with articles of interest concerning cemetery history and wildlife.

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Sarah Ockwell, the University Church Administrator

Tel: 01865 279111

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HOLYWELL CEMETERY OXFORD GUIDE TO SELECTED GRAVES

