St Thomas of Canterbury

Northlew Parish Church

The old churchyard

God's Acre

Next time you walk past the village cross, through the lychgate and into the churchyard, spare a thought for the thousands who have passed that way before.

The old churchyard at St Thomas of Canterbury is very special. It's a tranquil place, lovingly cared for by generations of parishioners. It's a place of sorrow, of remembrance, of reflection and sentiment, of celebration, of respect and, above all, love.

Join us for a walk through the gates and into the old churchyard. Meet some of its inhabitants and share its memories, its stories and its wildlife.

We hope you'll see why it's such a special place, and why we need to look after it for the sake of past, present and future generations.

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep
Thomas Gray - Elegy in a country churchyard

The seventeenth century lychgate

Overleaf: St Thomas of Canterbury, Northlew © Google Earth June 2022 showing the approximate extent of the old churchyard

God's Acre

Long ago, the size of churchyards varied, although it was customary to position them around the church itself to remind the congregation of their own mortality as they went in to worship. It became common practice to enclose an area of roughly an acre of consecrated ground with the church at its centre - hence the term "God's Acre".

A back of the envelope calculation shows the area round Northlew Church is no exception, although the churchyard is now much larger having been extended twice in the last century. The first (northern) extension was consecrated in 1909 though it's hard to follow the boundary between the gravestones. It's long gone but maybe the large Lawson's Cypress in the middle is all that remains. The land for the second finger-shaped extension currently in use was donated in the 1950s by a parishioner, Fanny Smale.

Sadly, the church and churchyard fell into decay for about three hundred years before a major restoration in the 1800s. According to an historical account by Henry Geipel, the Northlew and Ashbury incumbent in the 1960s, the neglect coincided with the clergy being non-resident in the parish, the decline of the Church of England and the rise of Methodism.

Northlew church before the restoration was overgrown, with the roof covered in ivy; the churchyard was grazed and trampled by sheep and oxen and soil from graves was piled up against the walls

The earliest graves are from the early 1700s, though a memorial plaque in the Holway Chapel to the owner of Rutleigh Manor goes back to 1607.
"Here lyeth the body of Richard Phillips Gentleman, Preacher of God's word, Master of Arts, sometime Fellow of Balliol College Oxford"

Headstones

Most headstones in the old churchyard are made from local stone which was readily available before improved transport links made it easier to import different types such as marble that are more evident in the modern extensions.

The designs are simple and discreet, perhaps reflecting the nature of a rural community at that time. There are no large table tombs, no mausoleums, no obelisks or marble statues although many of the stones from the Victorian era have rather flowery and often melancholic epitaphs.

The oldest stones in the old churchyard are made of slate which is long lasting and can be carved and sculpted very crisply. The rest are generally sandstone which is softer and more porous, so less resilient to attack from wind and weather.

Some areas of the churchyard seem more sparsely populated than others so there must be more graves than are evident from the number of headstones; perhaps some were never marked or have been reused - or the headstones have been removed over time.

We have three Grade II listed stones near the tower and porch, all made of slate.

Phillip Dennis, a local Yeoman who died in 1784 aged 75 is remembered as *Distinguished for his industry, probity and blameless life*. He is buried next to his sons.

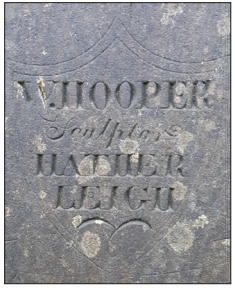
John died *June ye 22: 1765 in ye 21 Year of his AGE* and his brother Thomas soon after in 1768, aged 25.

Phillip Dennis' splendid slate headstone is carved with his face looking straight ahead and wearing a fashionable periwig, no doubt befitting his status - or could it be a winged angel?

The third listed stone, near the porch, commemorates Elizabeth Wood who was buried in 1751 aged 21. It features an hour glass, skull and crossed bones, angel face and wings, stars and flowers - still sharp and clear after all these years.

Headstone for Elizabeth Wood who died in 1751 aged 21. Reader Prepared be, death may call for thee

Not every stone carries the name of the stonemason or sculptor, but the most notable is William Hooper (1795-1847) from Hatherleigh who worked in the family architect office and was a master of his art.



Graves traditionally lie east to west with the writing on the headstone facing east so the occupant can greet the rising sun - or perhaps the second coming of Christ. Interestingly some of the headstones in the oldest part of the churchyard face the opposite way.

Nineteenth century pen and ink drawing of the east end of the church. Some of the headstones look familiar

Present day view of the east end of the church - spot the difference

Symbolism

The motifs carved on graves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were rich in symbolism and matched the sometimes effusive tributes to the departed. All these examples are to be found in the old churchyard.

Two clasped hands on the same level with matching cuffs typically represent a last farewell to earthly life and a greeting or welcome to eternal life.

A hand with the ***index finger pointing upward*** symbolises the departed has taken the pathway to Heaven. It also encourages grieving loved ones to look up.

If the forefinger points down it means the deceased is calling the earth to witness - not that he or she has missed out on going to Heaven.

The ***oak*** is a symbol of strength, honour and endurance, while acorns represent life, fertility and immortality.

A ***book*** symbolises knowledge, wisdom, and faith and is typically found on the headstones of scholars, writers, and faithful individuals. An open book represents the person's openness to knowledge or the Word of God.

The image can also represent the Book of Life or the Bible. It can record the good deeds of the departed or signify the early death of someone whose life story was not yet fully written.

This open book reads His end was peace

***Scrolls* can also** symbolise a person's life - the past is rolled up, the present (the moment of death) is on display and the future in the afterlife is yet to be revealed.

Scrolls can signify honour and a memorial - and can represent the Bible and other sacred texts.

This scroll shaped stone remembers a young wife

Evergreen ***ivy*** represents eternal love and friendship, fidelity and immortality. The leaves denote rebirth or regeneration - witness trying to get rid of it from your garden, it just pops up again!

A ***Celtic Cross*** can be a religious or a secular symbol. Its arms are of equal length surrounded by a circle. On a grave it sometimes indicates Irish or British heritage.

Irish legend says that St Patrick designed the cross to link Pagan and Christian symbols. Pagans worshipped the sun, represented by the circle, which is overlaid with a cross to symbolise Christ's sacrifice. Others claim that the circle represented a moon goddess and the cross signified the greater power of Christianity over the Pagan goddess.

Lilies mean innocence, purity and chastity. As they emerge each spring they may also symbolise resurrection and renewal.

Roses symbolise love on earth and in heaven. They are the quintessential emblem of beauty, hope and endless love and are often on graves of young women.

The ***sheaf and sickle*** can have several meanings. The wheat may represent the Body of Christ or a long life at the final harvest. The sickle can symbolise the cutting off of life and the harvesting of souls by the Grim Reaper.

IHS is a Christian symbol (a christogram) that appears in two forms in our churchyard, as separate letters or as an intertwined monogram.

Despite different interpretations, it's essentially an abbreviation of the name of Jesus Christ.

The most common translation is that it stands for the first three letters of Jesus Christ's name in Greek, IHSOS. IHS can also stand for the Latin phrase Iesus Hominum Salvator, meaning Jesus Saviour of Mankind (there was no letter J in old Latin...).

And some think it stands for In His Service or In His Steps, or even I Have Suffered. These last three are probably 'backronyms' - phrases conveniently made up to fit an existing acronym!

Urns were popular motifs in the 19th century. They represent immortality, containing the earthly remains of a body when the soul has ascended to the afterlife.

These headstones can be draped with shrouds or festooned with garlands, inspired by ancient Grecian and Egyptian designs very popular at the time.

Doves indicate purity, devotion, hope and peace. A dove descending symbolises the Holy Spirit.

Back stories

Three Rectors

Thomas England became Rector of Northlew in 1847 and served the Parish for over thirty years until his death in 1881. He lived in the Rectory next to the church with his wife and family.

England was a prolific writer and recorded the history of Northlew Church in meticulous detail. He wrote about, and sketched, the poor condition of the building and its furnishings and was clearly struggling to make improvements. His letters and entries in the Rural Dean's logbook over the decades show his increasing frustration with the slow progress of restoration and the lack of support from his parishioners and the powers that be.

A damning report by the Archdeacon in 1874 stated, "*It is with profound grief I report upon this church... a disgrace to the parish.*" It must have been the last straw. Sadly repeated requests for a Curate to help share his workload fell on deaf ears.

But he persevered and achieved much of the groundwork for restoration that his successors were able to build on so effectively.

Thomas England is buried in the old churchyard and his gravestone reads "*With Christ, which is far better*"

A fitting and no doubt heartfelt epitaph.

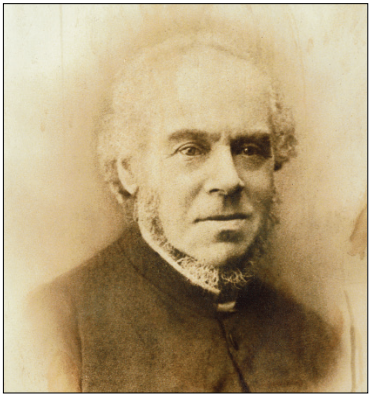
Sketch by Thomas England of the remains of the rood screen before restoration (drawn on the back of an old envelope)

Samuel Asher Herbert became Rector of Northlew on the death of Thomas England.

Although Jewish by birth he was baptised at eighteen and at Trinity College Dublin proved himself to be one of the best Hebrew scholars of the age. He was offered a curacy in Sunderland followed by a number of posts in Gateshead and London. In 1881 Mr Gladstone offered him the Parish of Northlew and Ashbury. He was only in post for three or four years, but wrote countless letters, appealed for funding and donations for the church restoration and sorted out plans for the work with the eminent architect, R Medley Fulford. He certainly wasted no time.

When he died in 1885 the work was not complete, but it was hurried along so his was the first burial service in the restored church. His obituary reads, "*for some weeks past the Rev. gentleman had been failing in health, and although medical skill tried its utmost, yet he sank into the arms of death on Sunday.*" He left a widow and eleven children.

Herbert is buried near Thomas England and his perseverance with the restoration is recognised on a brass plaque near the font.



This church, dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, begun in the time of the Normans, then by the piety of many generations, renewed, added to, adorned, after being miserably neglected for 300 years, & almost fallen into ruins, an age more zealous for several things, with much love for God, restored as far as possible, to its former state, in the year of Our Lord 1885.

S A Herbert, Rector W H Bickle, W Glass, Wardens

Revd Herbert's successor ***John Worthington*** was educated at Oxford and became Rector of Northlew in 1885 and Rural Dean from 1893 to 1906.

He conducted the special service to mark the reopening of the church in 1885. The Western Morning News reported that the restoration of the parish church would be the cause of joy and thankfulness to the people of Northlew. *"No longer could the reproach be made against the parish that whilst the dwellings around had been improved God's house was uncared for, for the church had been restored and fresh beauty added to it."*

The total cost of the restoration was £1,200 but during the first five years of Worthington's tenure parishioners and friends of the church were "*chiefly employed in wiping out the heavy debt (amounting to nearly £800)*" which had been left behind.

Worthington was a man of the people and clearly very popular. He was involved with the Northlew Band, the Victory Hall, the Men's Social Club, the first Parish Council and the school. He oversaw the installation of the church clock and the Henry Willis organ and organised the restoration of the village cross. The new vestry was dedicated to him in 1909 and one of the bells is hung in his memory.

Crowds celebrating the restoration of the village cross in 1900

The Latin inscription on his kerbed grave in the south east of the churchyard is rather modest:
Here lyeth John Worthington (the bodily remains) the unworthy pastor of this parish for 33 years. Born 27 Dec 1831, Died 14 Feb 1919 who in his final days beseeched the Lord Jesus to "have mercy upon me"

Here also lyeth his most delightful wife, Millicent Fox Worthington Born 28 Dec 1841, Died 11 Nov 1928

The Hicks family

From the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries the Hicks family farmed in Northlew and Inwardleigh.

Their first appearance in the parish records is the marriage between John Hicks and Margaret Weekes in 1779. John Hicks died in 1823 at Eastcott and his wife in 1813. They had one son, William, and eight grandchildren who survived to adulthood.

Successive generations of the Hicks family lived in the Northlew area until the mid 1800s when many Devon families began to emigrate in search of a better life. Annual tenancy agreements were replacing the old leases which had provided security for up to three generations, and putting great stress on tenant farmers.

The Hicks family had intermarried with the Palmers from Ashbury, so starting a whole new Hicks Palmer dynasty in Iowa and Chicago.

In April, the eighteenth day
We had fair wind and sailed away.
From a poem by Betsy Hicks Palmer

The Brayleys

The Brayleys (aka Breyley or Brailey) lived in the parish for many years and were no doubt an influential family.

James Brayley, a yeoman farmer, died in November 1845. The 1841 census shows he was 70 and lived at Luckroft. On his death his eldest son James was appointed Executor of his Will.

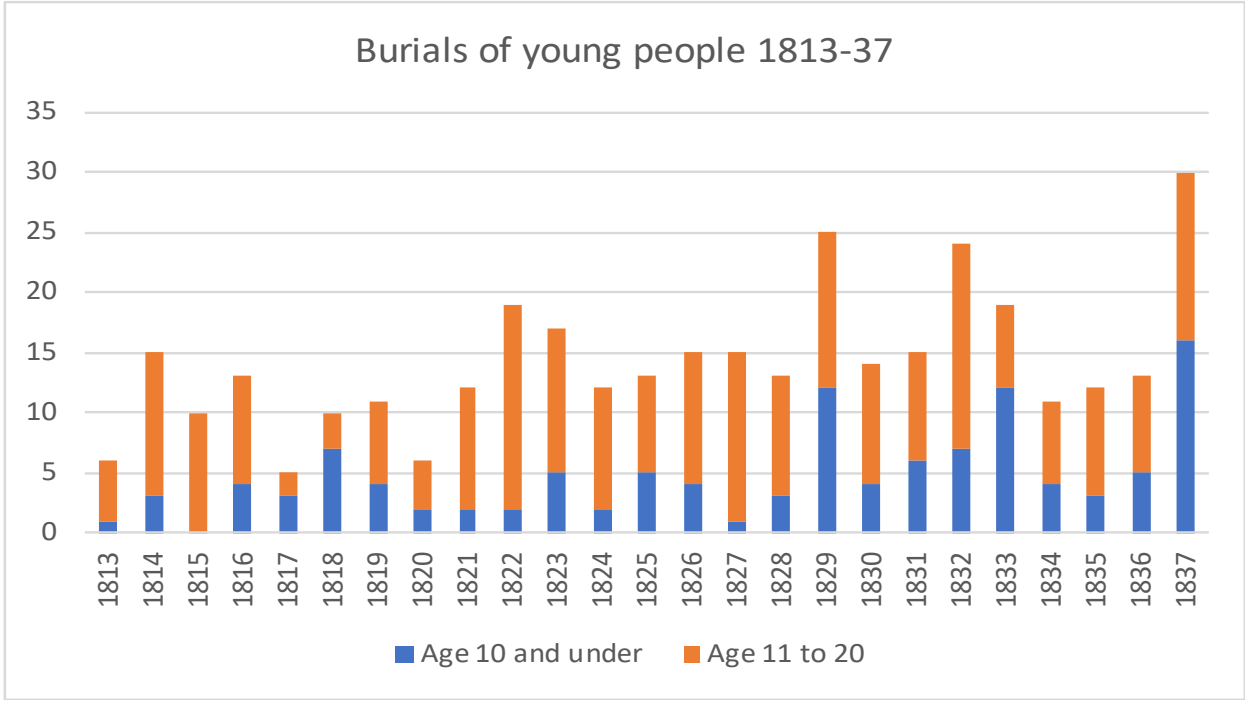
The bequest to his wife Judith recognised that she was twenty years his junior:
"*I give and bequeath unto my wife Judith Brayley an annuity or yearly sum of seven pounds to be paid and payable to her and her assigns out of my said estate of Luckroft by regular half yearly payments during the term of her natural life or widowhood but in case she shall marry again I will and declare that the said annuity shall immediately cease. I also give unto my said wife the bed performed in which we now sleep.*"

And to his daughters, "*I give and bequeath unto my daughters Jane Brayley and Grace Brayley the sum of one hundred pounds a piece to be paid to them out of my said estate of Luckroft within six calendar months next after my death.*"

Child deaths

Child deaths were commonplace in the early 1800s, usually from disease, overcrowding and poor sanitation. Typhus was often the culprit, transmitted by biting body lice, fleas and mites.

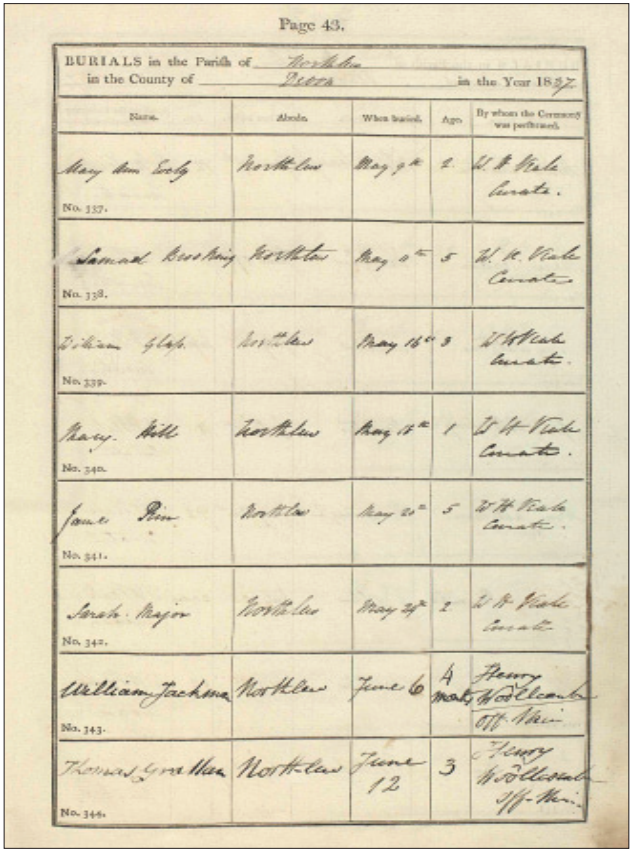
The disease was generally connected with poverty, poor nourishment and hygiene and was particularly virulent in the winter. The symptoms included headache, general pains, chills and fevers, lassitude and delirium.



Northlew was no exception. In the five months from December 1821 to April 1822 the parish lost fifteen young people to typhus, most in their teens and twenties. Five were members of the same family (the Braileys). Their mother, Jane, was first to pass away in the February, followed by four of her children before the end of March. They are all commemorated on Jane's headstone. Although child deaths were commonplace, the community must have been deeply shocked at such loss. And typhus did not stop there - another ten deaths from the disease were recorded over the two years from the end of 1825.

The legal requirement to register all births and deaths with the local registrar was not introduced until July 1837 and records before that can be unreliable. A single page from the parish burial register records eight consecutive child burials in just over a month, most conducted by the same Curate, W H Veale. Heartbreaking.

One of them, William Jackman, was only four months old when he died in June 1837. His mother Elizabeth from Leasefield had died in the March, three weeks after he was born and is also buried at Northlew.



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BURIALS in the Parish of Northlew
in the County of Devon in the Year 1837

Name.	Abode.	When buried.	Age.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
Mary Ann Ecky	Northlew	May 9th	2	W. H. Veale Curate.
No. 337.				
Samuel Brooking	Northlew	May 10th	5	W. H. Veale Curate
No. 338.				
William Gleb	Northlew	May 18th	3	W H Veale Curate.
No. 339.				
Mary Hill	Northlew	May 18th	1	W H Veale Curate.
No. 340.				
Jane Pim	Northlew	May 21st	5	W H Veale Curate.
No. 341.				
Sarah Major	Northlew	May 24th	2	W H Veale Curate
No. 342.				
William Jackman	Northlew	June 6	4 months	Henry Wollcombe Off. Min.
No. 343.				
Thomas Gratton	Northlew	June 12	3	Henry Wollcombe Off. Min.
No. 344.				

Extract from Northlew parish burial register 1837

Casualties of war

There are no Commonwealth war graves in the churchyard, but our war dead are commemorated on the War Memorial directly outside the church porch. It was installed in 1996 to record the names of the twenty-six villagers lost in the two World Wars. Three of the young men named are also remembered on their parents' headstones.

John Horn died of his wounds on 26 March 1918 aged 31. He fought with the 5th Dragoon Guards on the Somme and is buried in St Pierre Cemetery in Amiens, France.

He was the younger son of Alexander and Charlotte Horn who lived in Ford Cottage, Harpers Hill. His mother had died the previous year, aged 66 and his father, a Police pensioner, in 1919, the year after John was killed. A time of great loss for the family.

William Henry Karslake Burridge was killed in Flanders in 1915 aged 27. He belonged to the 1st Devons which in August 1914 had been deployed straight to the Western Front.

Private Burridge was a native of Northlew. The 1901 census records him aged 12 at South Yeo Cottage living with his grandmother Charity Burridge. In the 1911 census, aged 22, he was an unmarried farm labourer boarding at Milltown Lane.

On May 30th 1915 he had only been in the trenches for about three weeks when he was struck in the stomach by a piece of shrapnel. Although an operation was performed, he succumbed to the injuries the same night and is buried at Chester Farm Cemetery, West Vlaanderen in Belgium.

He left behind his new wife, Annie Burridge, who would no doubt have received a memorial scroll with the Royal Crest and a message from King George V. These were issued to the immediate next of kin of all who died serving the British and Empire forces in the war. He is named on his grandparents' headstone as well as on the War Memorial.

George Glass Pellow died on 23 October 1917 at Basra Hospital in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) aged 27 years. He served with the 1st/6th Batallion, the Devonshire Regiment and is remembered on his mother's headstone.

His father, a carpenter, died at 38 from acute pneumonia just three months before he was born in 1889. The 1891 census records George as living in Ford Town at the bottom of Harpers Hill with his mother Christiana and grandfather James Glass. Christiana died in January 1893 aged 31 from phthisis (tuberculosis), leaving George an orphan.

His relatives did not want him sent to the Poor House so applied for him to be taken into the Müller Orphanage in Bristol which cared for about 300 children. Run on strong Christian principles, there were just three entry requirements: the child must have been born in lawful wedlock, must have been bereaved of both parents and must have been in needy circumstances.

When asked about any assets the child might have his uncle declared that, "t*here is really nothing as the mother sold her furniture on the death of her husband and has up to the time of her death been living with her father, which has greatly impoverished him.*"

George was admitted to Orphan House No 4 in April 1893. It isn't clear when he left Müllers, but he was still there as an 'inmate' in the 1911 census.

Epitaphs

Inscriptions on the headstones and memorials in the churchyard include melancholic expressions of love and loss, grief for lives cut short, fulsome praise for the departed - and dire warnings about our mortality.

What is life? It is ever a vapour that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away
William Hicks, Eastcott Farm, died 1830 aged 51

Affliction sore long time I bore, physicians were in vain
Till God was pleased by death to ease my sorrow and my pain
Elizabeth Gay died 1886 aged 58

O gay and thoughtless ponder here,
And do not serious things defer:
Death from his mission will not stay,
But soon will hurry you away.
Charlotte Cole died 1836 aged 30

There's no protection that can save
Us mortals from the silent grave
But all mankind must yield their breath
Unto the fatal stroke of death
Joanna Williams died 1839 aged 68

Farewell vain world: I've seen enough of thee
And now I'm careless what thou say'st of me:
Thy smiles I court not nor thy frowns I fear.
My days are past, and I lie quiet here
What faults in me you saw, take care to shun
Judge first at home: enough there's to be done.
My dearest Friends grieve not for me: tis vain.
In heaven I trust we all shall meet again.
"Prepare to meet thy God"
John Lavis, Yeoman, Crowden, died 1835 aged 68

Leaving a Husband and ten Children to lament the loss of an endearing Partner, and very affectionate Mother, whose meek, amiable and sympathising spirit shone conspicuously through the whole family, and to a numerous connection, by whom she is sincerely deservedly regretted.
Miriam Weekes, Westlake Farm, Inwardleigh
died 1841 aged 56

My Parents dear dry up your tear,
Which from your eyes did run;
Remember I was born to die,
And Christ hath call'd me home.
Harriet Evely, Holloway, died 1854 aged 4 years

Here I must sleep until doth come
When all will have their final doom
Ah thousands then will wish their time
On earth had been as short as mine.
Reader behold and stop one moment here and think
I'm in eternity and thou art on the brink
Elizabeth Squires, died 1832 aged 3 years

Husband see how my days are past
My love to you so long did last
Weep not for me nor sorrow take
but love my children for my sake
Susanna Huneybourn Baker, died 1847 aged 49 years

I many years affliction did endure
Sought various means, yet could obtain no cure
Alas grim death hath shot the fatal dart
Which long seemed pointed at my languid heart.
The angels call, they call me from above
and bid me hasten to the realms of love.
My soul with transport hears the happy doom
I come ye gentle messengers, I come.
Be ye ready therefore also, for the Son of Man
cometh at an hour when ye think not.
Prepare to meet your God
Mary Smale, died 1823 aged 65 years

Boast not thyself of tomorrow for thou knowest not
what a day may bring forth
Proverbs 27.1
William Smale, died 1850 aged 63 years

Pass ye mourners cheerly on
through prayer unto the tomb
still as ye watch lifes falling leaf
gathering from every loss and grief
hope of new spring and endless home
William Lobb, died 1859 aged 65 years

Weep not for me my parents dear
because I am gone so soon
the fairest flower that ever grew
perhaps may fade at noon
all in the blooming of my days
to visit me the Lord did please
my morning sun went down at noon
happy for me it set so soon
no spot of guile did e'er betray
my youthful steps out of the way
God grant that I may in glory rise
to sing my dear Redeemer's praise
Mary Ann Tickle Friend, died 1852, aged 16 years

My wife and children dear
Pray don't you weep for me
It was the will of God to take me suddenly
But live a Godly life in unity and love
Then may we meet again and reign with Christ above
Who would not give a trifle to prevent
What he would give a thousand worlds to cure
Edward Glass, died 1817 aged 62 years

When death was sent from God above
So suddenly to part our love
No shield nor any human heart
Could then prevent his fatal dart
But to God's will I quickly yield
And flee to Christ my only shield
Ann Piper, died 1816 aged 33 years

Here rest in hope, freed from the cares of life
A tender mother and a virtuous wife
Midst all her pains her soul was quite resigned
And at her maker's will she ne'er repin'd
And calm content she bade the world adieu
And had thro' faith a better state in view
Susanna Kimber, died 1821 aged 74 years

The living churchyard

The lack of fertilisers and agrichemicals and minimal disturbance over the centuries has made churchyards a haven for wildlife. The many different habitats - stone walls, decaying wood, hedges, grassland, trees and shrubs - each provide food and shelter for a host of different species.

The gaps in between vertical stones in the Devon hedge near the gate to the public footpath allow space for animals to burrow and thicker stemmed plants such as wall pennywort to colonise. The plants that do well are adapted to the scattered light passing through the holly, ivy and hawthorn that grow on the wall.

The stone wall by the war memorial and the boundary wall with Church Farm are held together with lime mortar, and so favour alkaline-loving plants. The walls are thick with ivy, a suitable hiding place for invertebrates.

And the headstones themselves offer an excellent surface for mosses and lichens which in turn provide a safe environment for smaller creatures.

Holes in an old lintel in the south boundary wall are evidence of boring (!) insects

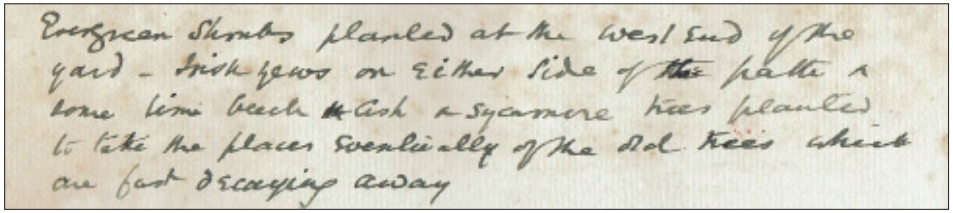
Trees

The larger trees in the old churchyard were planted after the restoration of the church to replace those that were decaying. Not surprisingly, they are all protected and need special care so they can continue to provide shelter and food for countless species. After well over a century these trees tower over the old churchyard, relentlessly marking the seasons.

A list of the trees and shrubs planted at that time was recorded in the Rural Dean's logbook by John Worthington in 1906. Sadly the ash is no longer there but the yew, beech, lime and sycamore trees continue to flourish.

Several of the trees were planted beside the path and are familiar friends. A large sycamore and limes greet you at the entrance and as you pass between the Irish yews on a windy day you may hear their long thin trunks clacking together, making a rather eerie sound in keeping with the surroundings.

This wintry view of the lychgate and tower from the early 1900s shows some trees which are no longer there



Evergreen Shrubs planted at the West End of the yard - Irish yews on either side of the path & some lime beech & ash & sycamore trees planted to take the places eventually of the old trees which are fast decaying away

Extract from the Rural Dean's logbook in 1906 listing the trees planted after the church restoration

Beech

A large beech tree *Fagus sylvatica* shades the bottom gate to the public footpath and a copper beech towers over the western boundary wall.

The beech is associated with femininity and generosity of spirit, the 'queen of trees', and goes through dramatic changes in its foliage as the seasons progress. The leaves are a bright lime green in spring, wonderfully soft, translucent and hairy. They're among the first to turn colour in autumn to a blazing auburn before the tree eventually sheds most of its seeds and dying leaves.

Not many green plants are able to grow underneath the dome-like crown and sprawling canopy as little light can penetrate but the smooth bark offers a home to a variety of fungi, mosses and lichens. Beech nuts (mast) provide a vital food source for small mammals and birds.

Mature beech trees can grow to over forty metres and live for hundreds of years although ours are still only middle aged.

The beech trees

I had a thought, that this too -
this time we were living in - would pass,
and I would pass, and you
(but me first, hopefully),
while the beech trees would remain.
And that thought
brought me a sense of peace
deeper than understanding,
as though I were seated on sacred ground.

Theodora Goss

Sycamore

The large sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* next to the lychgate dominates the entrance to the churchyard. It shelters a sea of blue crocus in spring, and cyclamen in the autumn. Sycamore trees are in the maple family and were brought into England from France in the Middle Ages. They represent strength, protection, reliability and clarity.

Under the shade of a sycamore tree
I sit here, nobody else
but the clock
constantly talking to me.

I sit here in silence.
Right underneath the
shade of the sycamore tree.

I sit here with my thoughts
watching them roam
from the flowers like a bee.

I sit here, not really alone
making secret little wishes
then setting them free.
Mickey1022

Sycamores can live for 400 years and reach thirty-five metres. As they grow the old rigid bark cracks and curls at the edges while a fresh new layer of bark forms underneath.

These bark flakes take a long time to fall off but while they are still attached they provide a sheltered habitat for small invertebrates such as earwigs and millepedes.

Lime

Limes or lindens *Tilia spp* have long been associated with fertility. The three trees beside the path are regularly pollarded to prevent them from outgrowing the space and blocking access to the church. After heavy pruning, the tree produces new shoots from the stumps.

The other two limes are not pollarded but show just how large they can grow.

This lime-tree bower my prison
Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine!
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Glastonbury thorn

To the south-east of the church, in the middle of the old churchyard, is a solitary hawthorn tree *Crataegus monogyna*. A plan drawn in 1972 identifies this as a Glastonbury Thorn, a tree with great mythical significance. The average life span is about 100 years but some have survived for several centuries.

Legend has it that when Joseph of Arimathea arrived in Britain in the 1st Century AD to introduce Christianity, he landed on the island of Avalon (Glastonbury) and climbed the hill. Exhausted, he thrust his staff into the ground but by morning it had miraculously take root and grown into a thorn tree that bloomed twice a year - in spring and again in winter.

The Glastonbury Thorn
O! let us still through love unite
To celebrate the holy rite;
That all the thorns of life may show
Nought but sweet flowers above the snow!
George Meredith

Yew

Yews are evergreen and have been considered as symbols of immortality, sometimes even seen as omens of doom. It used to be customary for yew branches to be carried on Palm Sunday and at funerals.

Most of the yews in the churchyard are ***Irish yew*** *Taxus baccata* '*Fastigiata*'. All Irish yews descended from cuttings of a single tree found in County Fermanagh in 1780 and are commonly seen in churchyards as they grow upright and don't encroach sideways. They can grow to seven metres.

They have small, curved needles with a pointed tip, and are a darker green than the English yew. The needles grow all around the twig in a kind of spiral, rather than in rows.

There are several Irish yews in the churchyard, some each side of the path. In contrast, the ***English yew*** *Taxus baccata* has straight needles, dark green above and green-grey below growing in two rows either side of each twig. The trees can spread widely, and can engulf gravestones in the process.

The clipped yew just outside the church porch is the only English yew in the churchyard and was planted in the year 2000 to celebrate the arrival of the third Christian Millenium. Cuttings taken from English yews known to be over two thousand years old were distributed all across the country by the Church of England and the Conservation Foundation UK.

Take a look at the commemorative plaque at its base - if you can bend down that far!

In Memoriam

Old Yew, which graspeth at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.
The seasons bring the flower again,
And bring the firstling to the flock;
And in the dusk of thee, the clock
Beats out the little lives of men.
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Alfred Freeman Peskett, a local doctor, died in 1917 aged 57

Yew trees provide valuable food and shelter as the foliage is very dense.

Most parts of the tree are poisonous to humans and livestock but birds only digest the fleshy part of the berries. The seeds just pass on through. The poison comes from alkaloids (taxines) and yew clippings used to be collected to make Taxoll, an effective chemotherapy drug. This is now made synthetically.

Oak

There was no mention of oaks *Quercus robur* in Worthington's 1906 list but we do have one - though not technically in the old churchyard. It grows close to the north boundary hedge within the first extension, perhaps planted to mark a special event. Oaks are classed as ancient trees once they reach 400 years so ours still has some way to go.

Oak trees signify royalty, patriotism, strength and ancient wisdom. They provide food and shelter for wildlife and as they age they develop cracks, crevices and dead wood to make a perfect wildlife habitat. Different species of animals and plants use different parts of the tree and each has its value, from the top of the canopy to the tip of the roots

The acorn does not know that it will become a sapling. The sapling does not remember when it was an acorn, and only dimly senses that it will become a mighty oak.
J Earp

Flowers

The path through the churchyard is a great place to trace the succession of flowers through the seasons. The snowdrops near the porch are the first to herald spring, then the crocuses and daffodils, and later on the celandines, cow parsley and pimpernels.

Some are cultivated varieties, planted by parishioners over the years. Others are native flowers that pop up each year, encouraged in the grassy meadow like areas that are left uncut in the spring and early summer.

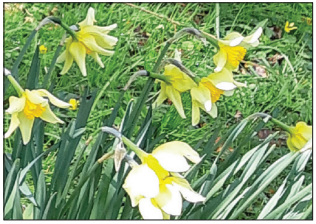
The fragrant crimson Thomas a Becket rose near the porch reminds us of our Patron Saint and there are flowers to be found in the hedges and on the walls too - ivy, hawthorn, hazel catkins, yew and holly.

Flowers only last for a short time, but they return again next year, to remind us of the inescapable cycle of life.

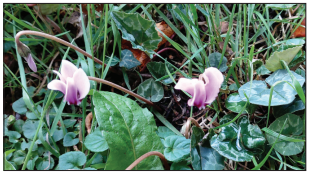
The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the
field; the wind blows over it and it
is gone, and its place remembers it
no more.
Psalm 103












Lichens

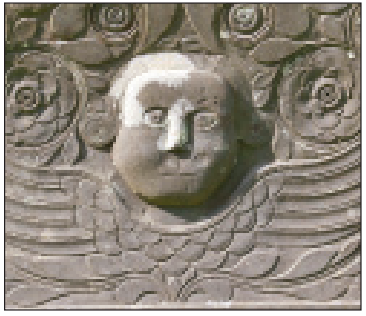
Burial grounds provide an ideal habitat for lichens. They are largely undisturbed and offer clean air and a range of different substrates to colonise. Lichens are found on the church walls and throughout the churchyard, often obscuring the writing on headstones.

Lichens form through co-operation between two different groups, an alga and a fungus, and both benefit from the close association. The fungus cannot make its own food but provides the algae with shelter from extremes of weather. In exchange the algae photosynthesise and produce carbohydrates to share.

There are two main types - crustose, which forms a thin layer on the surface, and the more leafy foliose variety. They colonise different types of stone although acid stone, like smooth slate or granite frequently supports both. Alkaline stone (the more porous limestone and marble) favours crustose species which can get a better hold on the rough surface and can make the most of its ability to hold water. Lichens can survive prolonged periods of drought.

Crustose lichens grow as mats that stick firmly to the stone; they can be brightly coloured – oranges, yellows and reds.

Bright colours act as a natural chemical sunscreen protecting the lichen from UV light



They can grow deep in the crevices of carvings which give them better purchase.

This example of a crustose lichen on slate (an acidic rock) picks out the detail of the face.

Foliose lichens are leafy and flattened, not as well attached to the stone as the crustose colonies so they are more easily damaged

Lichen colonies grow very slowly, sometimes just a millimetre a year. The older the stone, the larger the number and diameter of the colonies. The date of death recorded on a headstone gives a good indication of when the stone was newly erected while colony size gives a fairly good idea of growth rates.

The writing on some of the oldest stones in the churchyard is totally obscured by lichen growth.

The Victorian pen and ink drawing on page 8 shows three memorial plaques on the eastern wall which commemorated John and Margaret Hicks and her brother George Weekes. They died in the early 19th century so presumably that was when the memorials were put up.

The plaques were moved about twenty years ago and only the ledges on which they stood remain, but you can still make out where the lichen hadn't colonised the wall for the best part of two hundred years.

Margaret Hicks' plaque had a central ellipse, straight sides and a pointed top. Compare the lichen growth in the two photos

Mosses

Unlike most other plants, mosses don't have roots. Instead they have rhizoids, small hairlike structures that anchor the plant to rock, bark or soil.

They use them to draw in moisture and minerals from the water around them and that way provide a damp environment for other organisms. Mosses capture vast amounts of carbon compared with other plants so they certainly do their bit towards net zero.

They reproduce by spores released from tiny capsules held at the top of a thin stalk.

Fungi

We normally associate fungi with autumn and shorter days, when large toadstools pop up under the beech tree and in the grass.

But many microscopic fungi are in the soil all the time. They send out very fine tubes which infiltrate the soil and the cells in the plant roots - so individual plants are joined to one another by an extensive underground network that has been dubbed the Wood Wide Web. The fungi take sugars from the trees which in turn obtain soil nutrients from the fungi which have enzymes that the trees can't make for themselves.

Fungi are in a separate Kingdom of their own - neither plants nor animals. And remember, they are in lichens too - they get around a bit.

Creatures great and small

The old churchyard has all the larger animal species you might expect. Some make it their home and many others just visit - birds, bats, hedgehogs, foxes, dogs on leads. They are all somewhere near the top of the food chain and get our attention because they are larger.

But masses of small invertebrates live there too, in the soil, in the trees, in cracks in the walls, under logs, all a crucial part of the ecosystem. However you may feel about creepy crawlies, these smaller creatures make the world go around.

Here are just a few you might (even unknowingly) encounter in the churchyard.

Snails provide food for all sorts animals, they are part of the natural balance. They love the stone walls and the lime mortar - just the thing for making a calcareous shell.

Did you know?

- One snail can produce over 400 offspring a year
- Two types can be found locally, the common garden snail and the more colourful banded snail
- Their top speed is about one metre per hour
- They can lift up to ten times their body weight.

Brownish red ***Centipedes*** are flat enough to hide under logs and stones. They are carnivores and feed on smaller invertebrates, using their pincers to inject venom. The long antennae at the front and the last pair of long legs at the back can make it quite difficult to tell which end is which, especially as they can move backwards as well as forwards.

Despite their name they don't have a hundred legs - actually just fifteen pairs. They can move quickly but don't trip over their own feet because each leg is slightly longer than the one in front. Cunning.

Tardigrades (aka moss piglets or water bears) are cryptobiotic and can survive extreme conditions including outer space, volcanoes and freezing polar regions. All their metabolic processes stop - sometimes for years - until conditions become more favourable.

You'll not find such extremes here in rural Devon, at least not yet, but tardigrades are sure to be hidden somewhere in damp moss and lichen. Fear not, they're only a fraction of a millimetre long and although their sharp claws seem rather fierce, they don't bite. In fact they look rather cuddly.

Spare a thought for tardigrades next time you clear the moss out of your gutters and throw it on the compost heap.

Woodlice are generally beneficial. They usually shelter under stones, in walls or in leaf litter to avoid drying out, important as they have gills rather than lungs. They feed off dead plants and animals, recycling vital nutrients back into the soil and helping decomposition.

Apparently woodlice taste rather like shrimps, and live ones used to be carried in a pouch around the neck to swallow as a cure for stomach ache. Maybe there's a connection.

And of course ***earthworms*** also recycle nutrients, and keep the soil fertile. They can live for four or five years if they're lucky and can eat their own weight in soil in one day. There must be thousands toiling away in God's Acre.

Crane flies or daddy long legs swarm over the grass in late summer and autumn as they look for a mate. But their excitement is short lived as they only fly for a couple of weeks before dying. And their lives are fraught with danger as bats skim the surface of grass, feasting on them as they emerge on warm autumn evenings.

Most lay their eggs in the soil and their larvae (leather jackets) feed on grass roots, spending up to a year in the soil before the adults emerge.

Leather jackets are eaten by starlings, probing the grass to extract them one by one. Crane flies are completely harmless despite all those legs, so be kind to them, they've had a hard life.

And finally...

Thank you for joining us on our tour of the old churchyard at Northlew Parish Church. We hope you agree it's a very special place.

You can visit the churchyard at any time. And don't forget, the church is open daily for personal prayer and reflection and to enjoy its history and architecture.

Church services are held every Sunday at 09:30 and you are very welcome to join us.

The Friends of St Thomas' Church, Northlew

The living come with grassy tread
To read the gravestones on the hill;
The graveyard draws the living still,
But never any more the dead.
Robert Frost - In a disused graveyard

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The proceeds from the sale of this booklet will help the Friends of St Thomas' maintain our beautiful church for future generations to enjoy.

A special thank you to those who look after the churchyard and make it such a peaceful and welcoming place in the village.

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