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ROMANTICISM AND REMEMBERING¹

A few miles north of the royal residence of Windsor Castle is the village of Stoke Poges, in the County of Buckinghamshire. Its churchyard is a place of literary pilgrimage on two accounts: it contains the grave of a noted Eighteenth-century English poet, Thomas Gray (1716–1771), and it was the setting of his renowned poem, the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, first published in 1751 but written earlier. So renowned was this poem that a large memorial was raised in 1799 to commemorate Gray, which had verses from it carved on the sides of the pedestal, making it a uniquely literary kind of parkland monument (Fig. 1).² Less visited today than a century ago, perhaps, Stoke Poges still reflects the cult of the graveyard and the idea of poetic sensibility as expressed in the landscape. Gray's themes in his *Elegy* were wide-ranging, including the idea of rural humility, modes of remembrance for the labouring classes, and the dignity due to them. What does *Gray's Elegy* tell us about churchyards and the history of tombs? And how can we learn about churchyards?

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1 This paper is based on a talk I gave at the conference organised by Kadri Asmer at the University of Tartu in October 2022, honouring the career of Professor Juhan Maiste. I was given free range as to the subject. I decided to discuss the place I would take Prof Maiste, were he to visit England. It needed to be a place which combined landscape and cultural appeal, where architecture *parlante* (ideally from the age of the Enlightenment) could be admired, and which had a touch of melancholy about it. It did not take me long to identify just such a place.

2 John Martin Robinson, *James Wyatt* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 83.



FIG. 1. JAMES WYATT, MONUMENT TO THOMAS GRAY, STOKE PARK (1799). PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2021.

In England, as in most countries (the Baltic included), the history of the parish churchyard has yet to be written.³ The reasons for this are understandable: their sheer number (England is reckoned to have around 15,000), their temporal depth going back sometimes to the 10th century and sometimes beyond, the numbers of surviving tombs (and their often decayed condition), the hidden archaeological dimension, the limitations of documentation, regional variation, our ignorance of what is buried or lost: this list could go on. It would be a bold scholar to take on this huge subject.⁴ Studies of graveyards are much more advanced in the United States, where markers (as tombstones are often called there) represent some of the oldest artefacts to have survived.⁵ Internal church monuments survive in much better condition, predictably, and are among the glories of the English church.⁶ These tombs, always a sign of privileged status, remember the upper and middle classes. Burial inside a church was a clear sign of status right up to its cessation in the early 1850s, and many persons buried in this way were remembered with wall monuments, with inscribed ledger stones or even with free-standing architectural tombs that took over the interior space of the church. Sacred imagery was largely destroyed during the Reformation, creating a void which was steadily filled with more secular memorials. These monuments bestow a sort of immortality on their subjects: their names endure and sometimes their portraits; epitaphs tell of their lives and characters, often in very inflated rhetorical terms; and the beauty and richness of their tombs helps to keep the honoured dead in mind, many centuries later.

3 The best book on this subject is Frederick Burgess, *English Church Monuments* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1963). See also Hilary Lees, *English Churchyard Memorials* (Stroud: Tempus, 2000) and the present author's *Churchyards* (Stroud: Amberley, 2019).

4 Archaeologists such as Harold Mytum and Sarah Tarlow lead the way in investigating the churchyard from a methodological perspective. See their websites at <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/archaeology-classics-and-egyptology/staff/harold-mytum/publications/> and <https://le.ac.uk/people/sarah-tarlow> [accessed 10/08/2023].

5 The website for the Association of Gravestone Studies is a good place to start: <https://www.gravestonestudies.org/> [accessed 10/08/2023]. Dr Jonathan Kewley has recently (2017) completed a PhD on British tombstones which brings the rigour of American approaches to bear on British examples: available at <http://theses.dur.ac.uk/12411/> [accessed 10/08/2023].

6 C.B. Cameron, *English County Monuments* (London: Particular Books, 2023) is an outstanding introduction to this very large field. John Goodall, *Parish Church Treasures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) discusses funerary monuments in the wider context of church fittings.

Now consider the churchyard, where the great majority of the dead lie. A very different situation ensues: it is a story of anonymity, oblivion and decay. Let us at least start with the positives. Churchyards are walled enclosures, and their boundaries are tightly drawn and knowable: we have no difficulty in defining where they are, which is helpful. Second, the documentation through parish records is, in terms relative to other European countries, impressive: from the time of the Reformation, in 1537, parishes were obliged to keep a record of births, marriages and burials. But the names of the dead from earlier times have not come down to us, so five, six or seven centuries of burials will pre-date the documented ones. The documentation of English churchyard burials may be remarkable in some ways, but it is nevertheless an incomplete record which leaves many generations completely lost to historical memory. A third positive resides in the temporal depth and survival rates of memorials. Few pre-date the 18th century, but there are older ones to be found: slowly but surely, the medieval parish churchyard is returning to sight as the true extent of the survival of medieval grave-markers begins to emerge, following pioneering studies.⁷ The degree of survival will vary hugely, depending on the materials used for tombs, their location, past management regimes, and so on: but the churchyard scholar should be grateful for what has come down to the present day. These, then, are the positives: definition of area, existence of burial records since 1537, and the temporal depth and survival of memorials.

Against these must be placed an array of challenges which inhibit a full understanding of the development of outdoor modes of commemoration. First, the scope of the subject: the numbers of parishes, their widespread distribution and the sheer age of their foundation, a question that is very rarely possible to answer. Second, their imperfect condition: we do not know what has been lost, but we know that what has come down to us is only a partial survival. Old views of churches in south and east England, for instance, often show the presence of wooden grave-markers: these have almost always rotted away and been cleared. Third, there is the issue of legibility: not all epitaphs on a stone tombstone will be readable, and so their messages to posterity are lost. Next, the documentation is erratic: literacy was by no means universal even at the end of the 19th

⁷ Sally Badham, *Medieval Church and Churchyard Monuments* (Oxford: Shire, 2011), 20–25 provides an excellent introduction.

century, instructions for memorials were seldom included in wills, and parish records did not discuss the minutiae of tomb-raising. Permission for memorials was in the hands of the vicar: evidence of such discussions has yet to come to light, and the arrangements between masons and clients is similarly mysterious, no doubt being left to verbal agreement without written evidence; today's legalistic insistence on documentation for many activities – and the expectation that our forebears left a similarly complete trail of written evidence behind them – is in stark contrast to the reality of so many of the daily dealings in early modern society, which have left no evidence behind. Our chief evidence comprises the tombstones themselves.

Recent archaeological investigation is usually confined to small areas of graveyards, carried out when a church extension is being built, and disturbance is kept to a minimum. The numbers of rural churchyards which have been scientifically examined is miniscule: most famous is the deserved village of Wharram Percy in North Yorkshire, which has been comprehensively studied for decades.⁸ More common is the clearing of urban burial grounds facing comprehensive redevelopment: archaeological recording and analysis are conditions of planning consent, and the quality of the ensuing publications is extremely high, providing much information particularly about skeletal remains.⁹ What lies below the surface of the usual country graveyard is largely a mystery. The layers of dead parishioners are organically mingled in a way we can only imagine, and the fate of their grave-markers – if, indeed, they had one – is likewise lost in time. When we look at the surviving tombs in a churchyard, we are seeing just the tip of the historical iceberg.

Not that there isn't much to see above ground, however. Britain is fortunate because so many early churchyard memorials still survive. Some areas are renowned for their regional sepulchral heritage: the Cotswolds, Leicestershire, and the Scottish Lowlands are pre-eminent regions renowned for their tombstones. Each area is blessed with local deposits of stone, suitable for working, which of course

⁸ Simon Mays, Charlotte Harding, et al., *Wharram: A Study of Settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds*, vol. XI: The Churchyard (York: University of York Archaeological Publications 13, 2007).

⁹ One recent example is Robert Hartle, *The New Churchyard: From Moorfields Marsh to Bethlem Burial Ground, Brokers Row and Liverpool Street* (London: Museum of London Archaeology, 2017).



FIG. 2. PAINSWICK CHURCHYARD, GLOUCESTERSHIRE. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2012.

greatly encourages the craft.¹⁰ The premier stone is Portland stone, a limestone quarried on the Dorset coast of southern England and shipped in huge quantities to London and elsewhere. The same geological belt continues northwards into the Cotswolds, and Gloucestershire developed a rich tradition of stone-working which included outdoor monuments of some grandeur.¹¹ England's most celebrated graveyard is in the Gloucestershire town of Painswick, where exceptional tombs co-exist with a dramatic display of ninety-nine yew trees, cut into unforgettable forms (Fig. 2). Leicestershire, right in the heart of England, has an unusual geology with outcrops of granite and slate. This latter stone can be worked into smooth slender sheets, and readily takes an inscription or decorative carving; it also survives superbly, making these the best-preserved 18th century outdoor monuments anywhere.¹² The red sandstone of the Scottish

10 Alec Clifton-Taylor, *The Pattern of English Building* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962, 4th ed. 1987) is the best general introduction to English stone.

11 Hilary Lees, *Hallowed Ground. Churchyards of Gloucestershire and the Cotswolds* (Cheltenham: Thornhill, 1993).

12 Burgess (work cited in note 3) provides much information on this type.

Borders, by contrast, was less refined but capable of being carved into strong panels which received high relief sculpture of great interest.¹³ Scotland had an extra advantage in that, for religious reasons, there was much less appetite to erect internal church monuments: high-status tombs were often outdoor ones, unlike in England. All over the three nations of Britain, in Wales as well as England and Scotland, outdoor memorials survive in huge numbers. There may be many unanswered questions about how they developed, who made them and what they signified for early modern parishioners, but at least we have the stones themselves. Many were buried without a marker: a raised mound of earth would indicate the site of the grave. The miniature painter Thomas Flatman (1637–1688) was also a poet: his *A Dooms-Day Thought*, written in 1659, dwelt on the inevitable fate of man and described the graveyard anxiously:

...Go to the dull Church-yard, and see
 Those Hillocks of Mortalitie,
 Where proudest Man is one'ly found
 By a small swelling in the Ground;
 What crouds of Carcasses are made
 Slave to the pickax and the spade!...¹⁴

That was all most people received: a "Hillock of Mortalitie". From around 1700, churchyards were becoming fuller with ambitious tombs joining the more humble grave-markers which had traditionally filled these spaces. From the 1720s it is possible in the London area to discern a rise in the number of tombstones being erected. London and its environs, stretching westwards along the Thames Valley (an area which includes Stoke Poges), were expanding rapidly at this time. As a period of prosperity and urban growth, it was also an age of high mortality: indeed, the 1720s and 1730s are reckoned to have been the decades with the highest death rates of all.¹⁵ This was a period in which death rates, tomb production and literary responses to dying were all rising to a new peak.

13 Betty Willsher, Doreen Hunter, *Stones: A Guide to Some Remarkable Eighteenth Century Gravestones* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978) is a good introduction to Scottish kirkyard memorials.

14 *Poems and Songs by Thomas Flatman* (London: S. and B.G. for Benjamin Took, 1674), 104.

15 Edward A. Wrigley, Robert S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871. A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; 2nd ed. 1989), 167.

The Graveyard School is a recognised phenomenon in British 18th century literature:¹⁶ many of its early writers were Scottish, so it should not be described as English. The term refers to a genre of sacred verse which dwells on the theme of mortality and human decay in order to bring into clearer focus the glorious prospect of the life eternal. Its background can be traced back to the 17th century vogue for melancholy,¹⁷ and its elegiac tone requires the elements of solitude, reverie, and the exploration of places of death and decay. Its 18th century reception in the Baltic has recently been the subject of an article by Kairit Kaur, an indication of its European reach.¹⁸ The Irish cleric Thomas Parnell (1679–1718) is regarded as one of the pioneers of the genre: his *A Night-Piece on Death* was written in c. 1714 and first published in 1722, and comprised a moonlit walk to a lakeside graveyard which culminates in the voice of Death himself addressing the solitary walker. Robert Blair (1699–1746) was a minister of the Scottish church, and his verse *The Grave* (published in 1743, but written ten years before) gained great popularity for its evocative depiction of a melancholy graveyard:

...Oft, in the lone church-yard at night I've seen
By glimpse of moon-shine, chequering thro' the trees,
The school-boy with his satchel in his hand,
Whistling aloud to bear his courage up,
And lightly tripping o'er the long flat stones...¹⁹

Edward Young (1683–1765) was an English clergyman, whose *Night Thoughts* (or, more properly, *The Complaint, and the Consolation; or, Night Thoughts On Life, Death And Immortality: In Nine Nights*) was published in 1742–1746. *Night the First*, written in a period of great personal tragedy, is the best-known, and its subsequent popularity shows just how great the appetite was for sepulchral melancholy.

16 Eric Parisot, *Graveyard Poetry. Religion, Aesthetics and the Mid-Eighteenth Century poetic Condition* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2013) is the fullest recent discussion; Jack G. Voller, *The Graveyard School. An Anthology* (Richmond, Virginia: Valancourt, 2015) is an excellent compendium.

17 This was first discussed in Amy Louise Reed, *The Background to Gray's Elegy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924) which remains a useful source.

18 Kairit Kaur, "Totentanz and the Graveyard Poetry: About the Baltic German Reception of English Graveyard Poetry", *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica*, 21/22 (2018), 26–49.

19 Parisot, *Graveyard Poetry. Religion, Aesthetics and the Mid-Eighteenth Century poetic Condition*, 47.

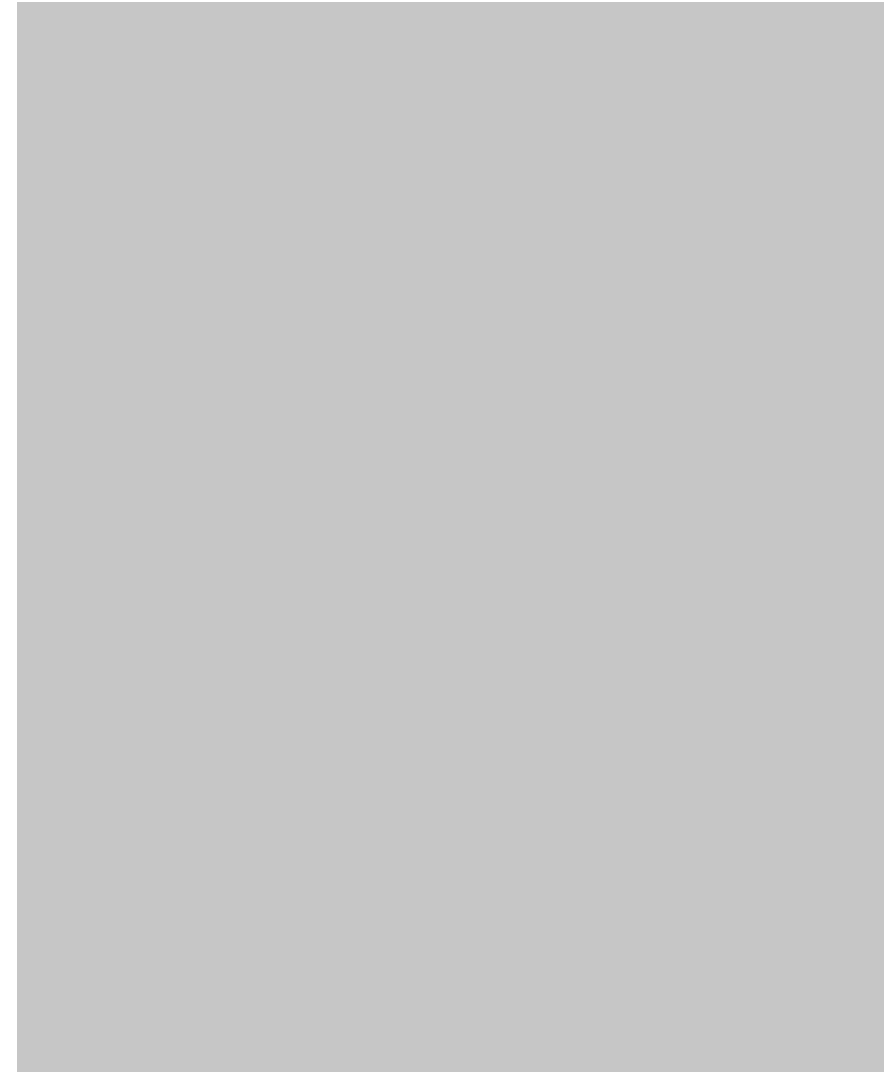


FIG. 3. CHARLES GRIGNON AFTER RICHARD BENTLEY, ENGRAVING ILLUSTRATION TO "ELEGY IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD" FROM *SIX POEMS BY MR T. GRAY* (LONDON: ROBERT DODSLEY, 1753). CREATIVE COMMONS.

Gray's Elegy was commenced in 1742, after the death of his schoolfriend, Richard West, but not completed until 1750. London-born Gray divided his time between Cambridge, where he held academic positions, and Stoke Poges, where his mother had moved in order to live with her sister. Gray had been educated at Eton



FIG. 4. 1971 FIRST DAY COVER, MARKING THE BICENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF THOMAS GRAY.

College, close by. First published anonymously in 1751, it was included in a lavishly illustrated edition of Gray's poems, published by Robert Dodsley in 1753 with a celebrated engraving after Richard Bentley, which has become one of the best-known images of English antiquarianism and the Rococo manner (Fig. 3).²⁰ The *Elegy* immediately became celebrated: Thomas Hardy's great Victorian novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) took its title from a line in the poem, and expressions like "paths of glory" and "kindred spirit" come from it. Numerous editions of Gray's poems were published, and *de luxe* illustrated editions of the *Elegy* appeared frequently, as did engravings of the subject.²¹ The bicentenary of Gray's death in 1971 was marked by the issuing of a stamp: the First Day Cover featured an engraving of the *Elegy*, an honour accorded to few other

20 *Six Poems by Mr T. Gray* (London: Robert Dodsley, 1753). This volume was actively encouraged by Horace Walpole, who contributed an "Explanation of the Prints" at the end. That for the *Elegy* reads: "A Gothic gateway in ruins with emblems of nobility on one side; and on the other, the implements and employments of the Poor. Thro' the arch appears a church-yard and village-church built out of the remains of an abbey. A countryman showing an epitaph to a passenger." There is no ruined abbey at Stoke Poges.

21 The on-line catalogue of the exhibition held at Peterhouse, Cambridge in 2021 provides an excellent introduction: <https://www.thomasgrayexhibition.com/> [accessed 10/08/2023].

verses (Fig. 4). As Voller has written in his anthology of Graveyard poetry, it is one of the landmarks of the genre but "marks a notable departure from Graveyard tradition in its rejection of the horrific and the supernatural... Its low key, reflective of Gray's own personality, is the key of pastoral elegy rather than proto-Gothic graveyard verse."²² Unlike other examples of this poetic genre, it does not linger on the horror of tombs and decay: instead, it uses the theme of a country churchyard and his knowledge of a rural village life to describe life and death, memory and oblivion.

Gray's poem is 120 lines long, divided into thirty quatrains. The direct references to burial are few. The fourth verse is key to setting the mood:

*Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf, in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.*

The six-foot graves which are the right of each parishioner are described as long mounds: earth was banked up over their length, and grassed over. The wooded setting, particularly the references to yew trees, synonymous with graveyards, reinforces the specific location of a centuries-old burial ground. The "rude Forefathers" stresses their lowly rank, and there is no mention of any tombstone. Line twenty reinforces this by calling their graves a "lowly bed". Gray is interested in humanity, not status, and the eighth verse is one of the best-known:

*Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.*

Gray then discusses the vanity of worldly riches in verse nine:

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r
And all that beauty, all that wealth ever gave,
Awaits alike th'inevitable hour,
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

22 Voller, *The Graveyard School. An Anthology*, 144.

“The boast of heraldry” (as seen so vividly in Tallinn Cathedral’s array of armorial epitaphs) is a system of social coding which has all but disappeared from modern consciousness, but its depictions through visual symbols of family connections made it an important element of the early modern tomb, which immediately signified social connections and lineage. Gray lived in retreat at Stoke Poges, removed from his smart cosmopolitan connections like the collector and writer Horace Walpole (1717–1797), son of the Prime Minister, with whom he had travelled on the continent during Walpole’s Grand Tour in 1739–1741: this socially unequal relationship had been a fraught one at times, and Gray’s sensitivity to issues of status probably informed his poetry. The next verses in the *Elegy* called to account the notion that grandeur of monument reflected grandeur of achievement:

*Nor you, ye Proud, impute to These the fault,
If Memory o’er their Tomb no Trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The peeling anthem swells the note of praise.*

Here Gray alludes to the most prestigious burial places of all, the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages,²³ and urges that the student of the dead looks beyond their sepulchral honours to determine the merits of those buried below. What use were tombs to bring back the dead?

*Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt’ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?*

Gray’s mention of “urn” and “bust” alluded to classical tomb design: a further distinction between the rural grave-mounds and the sumptuous marble monuments being erected in ever-larger numbers inside English churches. Neither the sculptor’s nor the writer’s talents can ward off death, however: the futility of trying to do so gives the *Elegy* its edge, and the need to accept mortality is one of the underlying lessons to be drawn. Gray then indulges in reverie as he ponders what the rustic dead might have achieved, had circumstance not denied them the opportunity to realise their

23 Westminster Abbey was (and remains) the nation’s premier burial place, with eminent figures beginning to join the royal and courtly tombs from the 16th century onwards. Thomas Gray would himself receive a memorial here after his death.

potential. After this comes the twentieth verse, one of the climaxes of the *Elegy* as the reader is brought back to the churchyard:

*Yet ev’n these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck’d,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.*

Gray here hints at the presence of tombstones in a manner which is as tantalisingly free of specifics as it is suggestive of the purpose of these memorials. They are protective, to ward off “insult” such as being trampled, and they are bearers of meaning, using word and image (albeit “uncouth” and “shapeless”) to head off oblivion by appealing, after the manner of the Ancients, to the traveller to pay heed to the presence of a wayside tomb: here is the *siste viator* idea of ancient Roman wayside tombs, transposed to a rural churchyard.

*Their name, their years, spelt by th’unletter’d muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist how to die.*

Names and dates and sacred inscriptions: those are the messages of the rural tomb, and the purpose of such epitaphs was broadened beyond the purely biographical to include improving texts of the *disce mori* type, which would instruct the parishioners, who passed these tombs every time they attended church, in the ways of dying well. Gray was “mindful of th’ unhonour’d Dead” (line 93) and closed his *Elegy* with an imagined tribute to the anonymous deceased local man, voiced by a “hoary-headed Swain” (line 97) or village elder which concludes (verse 29):

*The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow tho’ the church-way path we saw him borne
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
Grav’d on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.*

The repeated word “read” stresses the tombstone as communicator, comprehensible only to the lettered (from which, it is assumed, the “Swain” is excluded from understanding the message from beyond the grave), and the identifier stone makes clear that this was a permanent memorial. And then comes a three-verse epitaph, as formally elegant as anything inscribed on a grand monument inside a church, and far from the “uncouth rhymes” (line 79) Gray associates with the village tombstones, which discusses the earthly



FIG. 5. STOKE POGES CHURCHYARD, SEEN FROM THE EAST. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2019.

fortunes of the melancholy youth in question. Gray's *Elegy* is a fantasy, a blend of rustic scene-setting and private remembrance. So little is known about the erection and reception of churchyard tombstones: the *Elegy* acquires an air of extra value, beside its literary excellence, as an exploration of village sensibility.

Does the present state of Stoke Poges churchyard (Fig. 5) help us to understand the scene as it was in Gray's day? Which ones would Gray have known? It is disappointing to report that, of the twelve tombstones identified as being of the 18th century, almost all of them refer to deaths after 1742, when the *Elegy* was commenced. Just one, the tombstone of Thomas Sexton (d. 1741) (Fig. 6), might have been present when Gray began to roam in the churchyard, and another, to Mrs Martha Davis (d. 1754) (Fig. 7), would have been erected soon after the poem's publication. Each is a representative example of tombstones of this time and location: both are carved in Portland stone (the standard material for London and the Thames Valley, shipped up the River Thames and probably worked by a local mason) and both feature skulls, which on Sexton's tomb wears a

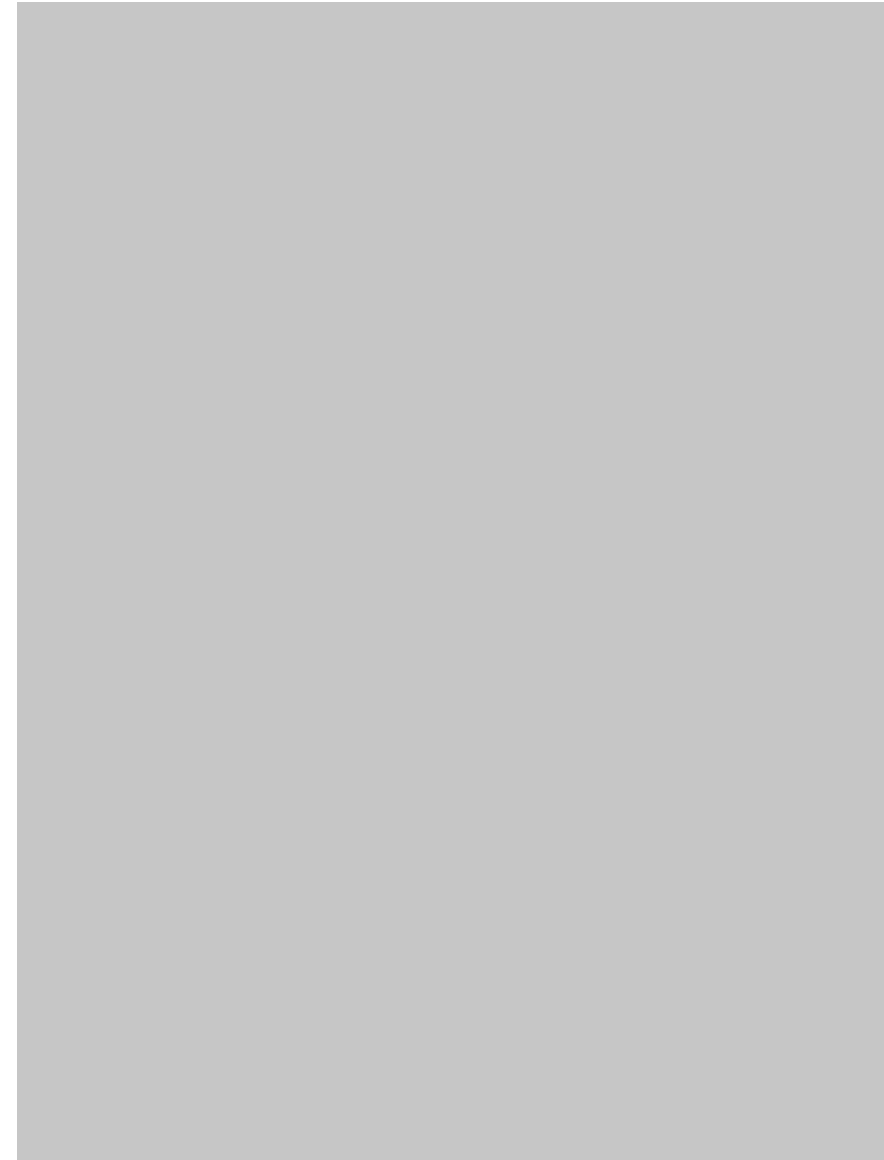


FIG. 6. HEADSTONE OF THOMAS SEXTON (D. 1741), STOKE POGES CHURCHYARD. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2022.

wreath of laurel, indicating death's triumph, while Davis' stone has a crudely carved skull set against crossed trumpets: this is a more optimistic panel in that the trumpets refer to the sounding of the last trump which heralds the resurrection of the dead, a message



FIG. 7. HEADSTONE OF MRS MARTHA DAVIS (D. 1754), STOKE POGES CHURCHYARD. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2022.



FIG. 8. HEADSTONE OF MRS MARTHA FRY (D. 1765), STOKE POGES CHURCHYARD. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2022.

reinforced by the branches which also refer to the life to come. Both have hourglass and bone symbols, alluding to the inevitability of death and decay. The next dated stone is to Mrs Martha Fry (d. 1765) (Fig. 8), and continues the skull theme, but this time enhanced with a worm crawling out of an eye socket. On the left is a candlestick and on the right, an hourglass: each emblems of the finite nature of time. Next in date is a pair of similar stones. That to Hannah Hustcraft (d. 1766) (Fig. 9) shows a skull seen in profile, with a scythe and smoking torch crossed below; a bone and a sickle fill up the space. It might be coincidence, but the smoking torch, an unusual tombstone symbol, distinctly resembles the same emblem which appears in the engraved end-piece by Richard Bentley of the *Elegy* in the illustrated 1763 edition of Gray's poems.²⁴ That for Thomas Sexton (date illegible) (Fig. 10) also depicts a sideways skull over a wheatsheaf and crossed rake and pitchfork: once again, it might be coincidence, but these very tools appear prominently in the Bentley

²⁴ There is a complete digitised set of images of this work, courtesy of Auckland Central City Library, New Zealand, available at <https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/rarebooks/id/11879> [accessed 10/08/2023].



FIG. 9. HEADSTONE OF HANNAH HUSTCRAFT (D. 1766), STOKE POGES CHURCHYARD. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2022.

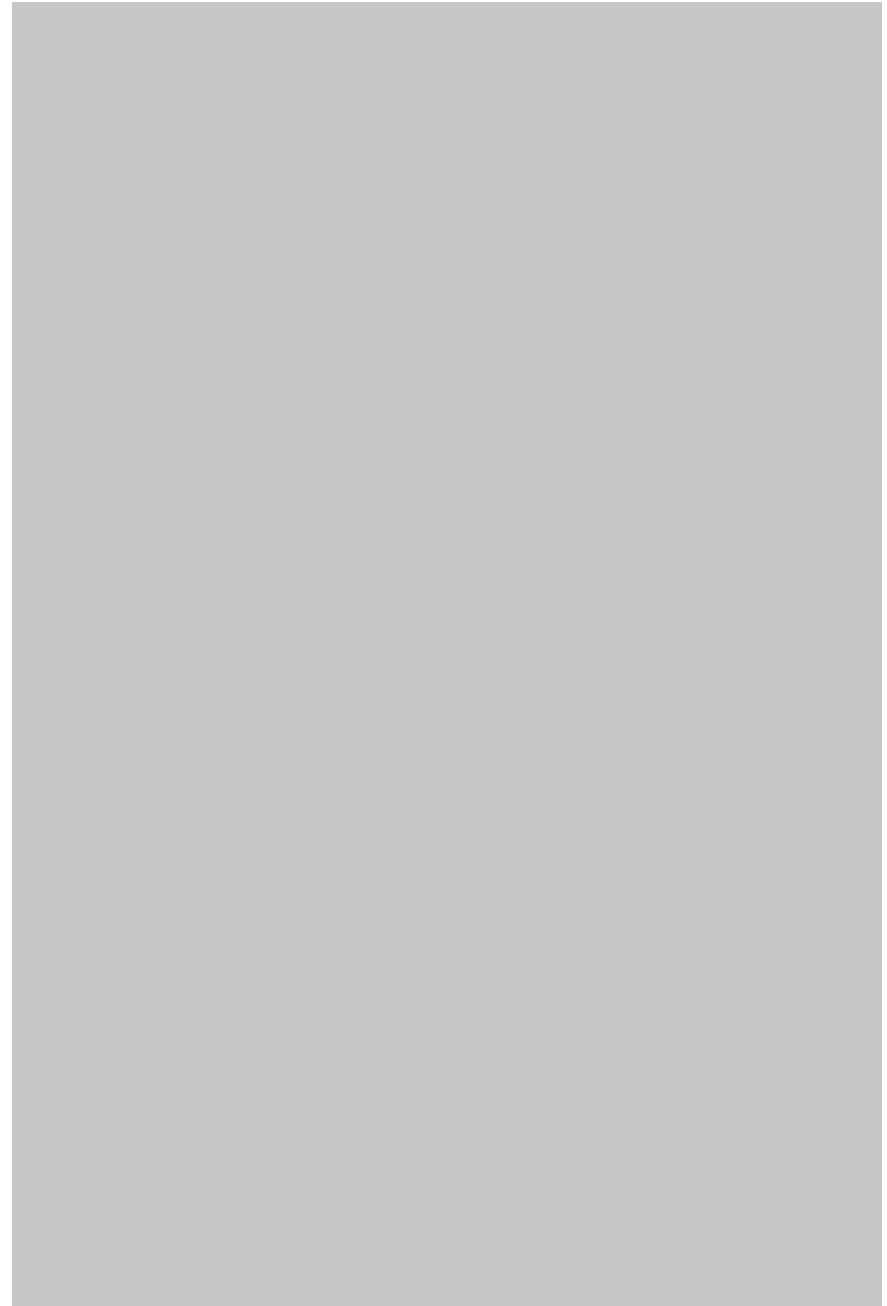


FIG. 10. HEADSTONE OF THOMAS SEXTON (DATE ILLEGIBLE), STOKE POGES CHURCHYARD. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2022.



FIG. 11. TOMB OF MARY ANTROBUS (D. 1749), STOKE POGES CHURCHYARD; GRAY IS BURIED IN A VAULT BELOW. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2021.

illustration to the *Elegy*. Just how the *de luxe* engravings of Dodsley's edition of Gray's poems might have found their way into the hands of a Buckinghamshire mason is perplexing, and perhaps just too unlikely to be worth pursuing. Both of these headstones combine rural farming implements with emblems of death and each is of a similar architectural format: as such, they are of interest for bringing a specifically rustic note to the Stoke Poges graveyard, almost in the spirit of the poem. Each of these tombstones has a charm as well as a solemn purpose, and it is interesting to speculate just how the parishioners of Stoke Poges would have reacted to them. Of less relevance to the theme of the *Elegy* are the higher-status chest tombs which survive in the churchyard: Gray makes no reference to them, but it should be observed that there are several that pre-date the time of the poem, such as the Salter tomb (d. 1693) at the east end of the church, close to where Gray himself is buried in a tomb chest of brick, erected to mark the grave of his aunt Mary Antrobus (d.

1749) (Fig. 11).²⁵ These did not represent the rural population which Gray was most interested in. What can we conclude from this brief consideration of the early tombs in Stoke Poges? It is possible that earlier ones have been removed or have perished; we just don't have the evidence. The tombs which do remain date from around the time of the poem or slightly later, and show how the rural population was just beginning to commission permanent markers for their graves at the very time that Gray was making their churchyard one of immortal renown.

Thomas Gray, in his turn, also came to be buried at Stoke Poges. His aunt, Mary Antrobus, had died in 1749 and was buried beneath a brick chest tomb with inscribed ledger slab featuring a heraldic lozenge (men received shields for their arms, women a rhombus-shaped lozenge): this marks out the family tomb as one of higher status than the headstones. Gray's mother Dorothy followed in 1753. In due course, Gray died on 30 July 1771, aged 54. His body was brought from Cambridge, where he held the position of Regius Professor of Modern History, and joined his mother and aunt in their grave. A stone tablet referring to him was later inserted into the brickwork of the tomb, and a sculpted memorial was placed in Westminster Abbey in 1778,²⁶ a sign of national esteem.

A generation after Gray's death, steps were taken to give him greater sepulchral acknowledgement. Stoke Park, the large historic estate beside the church, had been bought by the Penn family (of Pennsylvania fame, and hugely wealthy) in 1751, but they spent little time at the old house. This changed when the young heir to the estate, John Penn (1760–1834), after moving back from the United States, resolved to build a new house (Fig. 12) on a new site at Stoke Park, and make the renowned church and graveyard one of the key features for his new seat to look out onto: the other landmark, slightly more distant, was Windsor Castle. The renowned landscape designer Humphry Repton (1752–1818) was enlisted to assist Penn with the lay-out of the park landscape: a plan of 1797 survives, showing the

²⁵ The church and its monuments are fully described in George Lipscomb, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Buckinghamshire* (London: J. & W. Robins, 4 vols., 1847), vol. 4, 544 ff.

²⁶ This was erected by the Rev. William Mason, another poet, and carved by John Bacon the elder: see <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/thomas-gray> [accessed 10/08/2023] for an image.



FIG. 12. STOKE PARK SEEN FROM THE EAST, CLOSE TO THE CHURCHYARD. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2022.

proposed scheme.²⁷ The tale of how there came to be a monument in the parkland to Thomas Gray can be followed in the voluminous diaries of Joseph Farington (1747–1821),²⁸ a landscape painter who was a friend of John Penn and also of James Wyatt (1746–1813), Penn’s favoured architect at Stoke Park and one of the great figures in English Neo-classical and romantic architecture.

The east face of Stoke Park, which was remodelled by Wyatt from the mid-1790s onwards, looked towards Stoke Poges church: a picturesque bridge straddled the long lake which had been converted from the medieval fish-ponds during an earlier phase of landscape works. The church became a feature to be viewed from the mansion, but this did not satisfy John Penn, a poet himself and of a literary bent, he was eager to honour Thomas Gray. Having toyed with the idea of building a large new tomb beside the church for the poet, he then resolved to raise a monument to Gray beyond the churchyard, in

27 British Library, Add. MS. 32450/E.

28 These have been published in sixteen volumes by Yale University Press, edited by Angus Macintyre, Evelyn Newby and others (1978–1998). A precis of their contents is provided in Robinson, *James Wyatt*, 183 ff.



FIG. 13. GRAY MONUMENT, STOKE PARK. PHOTO: ROGER BOWDLER, 2022.

an outlying area of parkland which would be visible from the Stoke Park and serve as an eye-catcher. James Wyatt was its designer, and the result was a handsome sarcophagus raised on a tall pedestal, its sides embellished with marble panels inscribed with selected verses from the *Elegy* (Fig. 13). One side bore the following inscription:

THIS MONUMENT, / IN HONOUR OF THOMAS GRAY, / WAS
ERECTED A.D. 1799, AMONG / THE SCENES CELEBRATED BY
THAT / GREAT LYRIC AND ELEGIAC POET. / HE DIED JULY
30th 1771, AND / LIES UNNOTICED IN THE CHURCH YARD /
ADJOINING, UNDER THE TOMBSTONE ON / WHICH HE PIOUSLY
AND PATHETICALLY / RECORDED THE INTERMENT OF HIS /
AUNT AND LAMENTED MOTHER.

The inclusion of the word “unnoticed” clearly explains the motivation of the memorial. The sarcophagus was designed according to the height of fashion, its strigillated sides and tapering *arca*-like form presenting a strongly Roman character of a kind found elsewhere in Wyatt’s earlier sepulchral commissions, such as the large mausolea at Brocklesby (Lincolnshire) and Cobham Park (Kent) of the 1780s. Wyatt also designed another parkland monument for John



FIG. 14. "...THE CHURCH-YARD WHERE GRAY IS BURIED, AND HIS MONUMENT AT A DISTANCE, FROM A GARDEN SEAT AT STOKE", ETC. ENGRAVING BY W. BYRNE AFTER A. TENDI (1801) FROM JOHN PENN, *AN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF STOKE PARK IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE* (LONDON: W. BULMER, 1813). COLLECTION: FELIX MOORE.

Penn: a tall Doric column topped with a statue of a famous earlier resident of the estate: the former Lord Chief Justice Sir Edward Coke (1552–1634), who famously championed individual rights against the authority of the monarchy. The Gray monument and Stoke Poges church were illustrated in the book John Penn wrote about his seat,²⁹ appropriately enough for so renowned a work of melancholy, they are shown in moonlight, nocturne-like (Fig. 14).

The Gray Monument is now in the care of the National Trust; Stoke Park became a country club and its grounds are now a famous golf course. The monument underwent extensive repairs in 1977–1978 and now stands secure as a testament to the literary tastes of a Regency landowner and to the renown of a poem. Meanwhile, the tombs in the churchyard steadily decay. It is an important and unusual

²⁹ John Penn, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of Stoke Park in Buckinghamshire* (London: W. Bulmer, 1813).

parkland monument dedicated to a poet that helped to crystallise the connection between Stoke Poges and one of the most highly-regarded verses in the English language. Gray was never specific about where his poem was set, but it is now hard to uncouple the elegy and the place. There is a tender irony in the fact that a verse all about humility and modest remembrance should be thus celebrated with a costly monument, raised to embellish a very wealthy man's country estate. This essay has, for the first time, connected the verse with the churchyard memorials which stand in its place of inspiration. It is hard to establish any connection between what was written and what remains in the churchyard, but it is of no little interest that most of the headstones date from the period soon after the poem's publication. Gray wrote his *Elegy* at the very time when attitudes to rural commemoration were starting to change.

ROGER BOWDLER: ROMANTICISM AND REMEMBERING

KEYWORDS: CHURCHYARDS; TOMBSTONES; GRAVEYARD SCHOOL; ELEGY; MONUMENT

SUMMARY

This article looks at the celebrated poem *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* (1751) by Thomas Gray, and links it to the place of its inspiration, Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire. The development of English churchyard memorials is considered, followed by a brief discussion of the Graveyard School of poetry, which considered themes of mortality and melancholy set in the context of burial grounds. This formed a strand of proto-romanticism and was influential across Europe. The poem is then analysed in terms of its discussion of rural approaches to death and remembrance. A survey of mid-18th century churchyard memorials at Stoke Poges is then provided, and their imagery discussed: most of these post-date the publication of the poem. Thomas Gray died in 1771 and was buried in the tomb of his mother and aunt. He subsequently received a memorial in Westminster Abbey. A later owner of Stoke Park, the manor house of the estate, John Penn, was eager to commemorate the poet. He commissioned the celebrated architect James Wyatt to design a memorial which would be visible from the main house. This was erected in 1799, and consisted of a sarcophagus raised on

a tall base, the sides of which were inscribed with extracts from the *Elegy*. This was a highly unusual form of parkland memorial celebrating a poet and his best-known work, which has subsequently become one of the best-known verses in the English language. There is irony in that the poem is a discussion of rural humility and yet was celebrated through an imposing monument, raised by an extremely wealthy owner as a feature in his private park.

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