

Somerset Epitaphs: Quaint, Curious, and Pathetic.

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IT is one of the regrets of my life that I did not years ago commence to form a collection of epitaphs. But perhaps it is necessary that we should advance into middle-age before we can fully appreciate the quaint humour and the pathetic eloquence which are often to be found on some mouldering tablet of Elizabethan days. It is sad to observe how ruthlessly our sepulchral monuments and inscriptions have been treated,—especially during the last fifty years,—while the rage for encaustic tilings has caused many an interesting slab to be concealed; and the taste for Gothic architecture, though most commendable in itself, has often led architects and church restorers to treat with scant courtesy the elaborate tablets of the renaissance and classical styles.

There are, of course, a vast number of epitaphs composed in Latin, full of ponderous learning and elegant composition, but which would be apt to weary an audience if read at full length, and therefore it will be best for me to select for your consideration a few of the most racy and striking of the epitaphs in our county which are written in English. And in these one often finds examples of that wondrous power and art of writing English, which was the special characteristic of that era which began with Shakespeare and ended with Jeremy Taylor. From the time of Elizabeth, then, to that of Charles the Second, is the great period for oddity, pride, and pathos mixed together; for after that reign comes an era of intense and uninteresting pomposity; and after that time the Georgian period is often not only dull, but vulgar and diffuse, and only

now and then relieved with examples of a humorous simplicity.

Our ancestors must have spent a long time over the composition of these epitaphs, and often they could not resist the temptation of making a pun!

Thus at Cannington church we have an epitaph on Amy, the beloved wife of Henry St. Barbe, Esq., who died in 1621, which runs thus:—

She to gain love did Amyable live,
 And Sarah like to her Lord honour give :
 Bare him ten children, chastely bred them free
 From superstition and impietie,
 Answer'd her worthy parents worth, and dyed
 A pattern to her sexe to shun vain pride !

But another temptation to which they yielded was a love of over-fine conceits. Take, for example, the inscription from the chancel wall of Charlynch, a lonely church on one of the spurs of the Quantocks:—

To the Memory of

MR. BENJAMIN VAUGHAN,
 Pastor of this Church, who laboured in this vineyard
 for the space of twenty-one yeares,
 And dyed in the 80th yeare of his age, 1639.

Here reverend Vaughan lies, and canst thou see
 His sacred urne without an eulogie,
 Or pass him dry-eyed, who would impetrate
 A sigh from envy, wring a tear from hate,
 He merits rivers of them; though the tide
 Were pearls disolv'd, or cristal liquifide.

Less stilted and more pleasing is the following from St. Katharine's, near Batheaston, on

CAPTAIN WILLIAM BLANCHARD,
 Who deceased the 7th dies of Sp., 1631.

Blanchard, thou art not heere compriz'd,
 Nor is thy worth characteriz'd :
 Thy justice, charitie, virtue, grace,
 Do now possess a higher place—
 For unto Heaven (as we read)
 Good workes accompanie the dead.

St. Mary Magdalene's church, Taunton, supplies us with a quaint inscription :—

Consecrated to the blessed Memory of
ROBERT GRAYE, Esq.,
And founder.

Taunton Bore Him ; London Bred Him ;
Piety Train'd Him ; Virtue Led Him ;
Earth Enriched him ; Heaven Carest Him :
Taunton Blest Him ; London Blest Him :
This Thankful Town ; That Mindful City ;
Share His Piety and His Pity.
What He Gave, And How He Gave It,
Ask The Poor And You Shall Have It.
Gentle Reader, Heaven May Strike
Thy Tender Heart To Do The Like.
Now Thine Eyes Have Read The Story,
Give Him The Praise And GOD the Glory.

Ætatis svæ 65, Anno Dom. 1635,
At St. Mary Magdalene, Taunton.

Sometimes an epitaph has had a strange history—buried underground, and lost for a time. Thus, an inscription was long neglected, and half lost, but is now carefully preserved at Old Cleeve church, near Williton, and placed in the floor of the vestry. The following inscription was cut round the margin of the stone :—

Here Lyeth the Body of ROBERT BOTELER, Esquire, of the House of Lord Boteler, who died the 4 daye of June in the yeare of our LORD GOD, 1635. His age 46 yeeres.

And beneath the family arms are the following lines :—

<p>If a goode Life Leads To an Happy End, If both, men from the Grave to GOD commend, Then all will say In my Behalfe, now Dead, Thy Body only could Be buried.</p>	<p>Dust to the grave, to earth Earth thou Didst give: Thy Soule in Heaven : Thy Fame on Earth Doth Live Thrice Happy man ! Envy Cannot Denye Thou Died yet to live, who Living, Learned'st to dye.</p>
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In the course of some improvements in the churchyard of Burrington some time ago, a small tombstone of bluish stone

was found completely hidden in the soil, and bearing the following strange inscription, there being no name or date attached:—

In sacred writt on(e)
 Faithful Sara's found,
 But here lies two as
 Pious in this ground.
 Pious as primetive
 In the first times—
 Chaste, beautiful;
 Both died in their primes.

What a curious record of some charming rustic maidens of the olden time, and of some quaint old Puritan who devised the conceit and wrote this epitaph, which no doubt he felt was quite a master-piece of brevity and pious learning.

A couple of tombstone fragments have recently been found in front of the old Court of Barrow Gurney. Both are mere fragments, but, strange to say, both are of considerable interest and their history has been skilfully elucidated by the researches of the Vicar (Rev. A. Wadmore) in the old registers. One of these tombstones only retains the words,

In Memory of
 FRAN
 Twentieth day of July, Ano. Dom. 1629.

This has been identified with Mr. Francis James, son of Chancellor James, LL.D., the builder of the Court House. The other stone has only

Here lyeth two departed from this life :
 First the husband, then the wife : above 100.
 Father and mother dear—that they was.

The rest is gone, but by a very careful investigation of the old burial registers, it would seem that this memorial stone was erected in memory of one John Horte, for we read under the date of "1615, Feb. 8th, John Horte above 100." That such fragments should have been thus identified is very curious. The stones are being preserved.

It is interesting to reflect that some whose lot it was

in life to take part in some of the famous battle-fields of history have found their resting places in our quiet villages; where, whilst they yet lived, we can picture them to ourselves gathering round them a listening group, whilst they "shoulder'd their crutch, and showed how fields were lost and won." Thus we find on the walls of Chew Magna church a marble slab, with ornamented sculptured border, in letters which require "touching up"—

To the Memory of
MAJOR SAMUEL COLLINS,

Whose merit gradually recommended him to seven successive commissions in one regiment of horse; wherein he acquitted himself with honour and courage, in Scotland, Ireland, the Low Countries, Portugal, and Spain. To omit lesser actions, he had his share in the battle of Killiecrankie, the Boyne, and Agrim; in the sieges of Athlone, Galway, Limerick, Namur, Badajos; and at Barcarotta first proclaimed Charles III in Spain. By his first wife, Elizabeth, he left issue Samuel, Eliza, and Mary; and after 24 years fatigue in war, died here in the year of peace March 20th, 1712-13, aged 65.

Quis generosa putet nisi fortia?

This monument was erected by his two sons, Samuel and Emanuel.

But some more specimens ought to be given you of the poetry and sentiment of the early part of the 17th century. I picture to myself the learned old rector, rubbing up his long rusted Oxford Latinity, and sitting in his book-lined study, in gown and bands, carefully and with much toil preparing such an epitaph as this, which is carved on a flat ledger stone at Samford Brett:—

To the Memory of
MRS. LETTICE WEBBER,
Who departed this life June 2nd, 1669.
Now interred by her Husband, Mr. William Webber,
Sometime Rector of this Parish.

— — —
The mourning turtle here hath found
His loving mate lodged under ground,
Resting in Hope. Loe here's the place
Where dusty bodies doe imbrace.
Death once more cruel—now more kind,
The broken knott doth faster bind.
Tryth was her wealth, Humiity her crowne,
Her workes of charity her chief renowne:

Something she left behind, lay'd up in store,
 As tokens of her love to church and poore.
 Let poore lament her losse, Let rich here see
 A worthy patterne for their charitye.

Mors piis lucrum.

Often one grieves to think of the treasures in the epitaph way which are now lost, concealed behind organs, covered over with flooring or carelessly destroyed.

At Charlynch an old rector, about a century ago, had all the upright tombstones laid flat and covered over!

Often I am haunted by the recollection of an inscription, full of simple beauty, which is now buried beneath a "bran new" red and blue tile pavement, beyond recovery. But, instead of making my antiquarian readers sigh over their losses, let me lay before them some of my stores. Here is something quaint (from Hinton St. George), though perhaps one's sympathy is a little lessened at noticing the age at which she expired:—

Elizabeth Powlet lies
 Interred here
 A spotless corpses, a corps
 From scandal cleare.
 Deny her not the tribute
 Of your eye.

Shee a saint in heaven free
 From misery
 Beloved shee lived, shee dyd,
 A maiden pure
 A shame to Death her praise
 Shall last endure.

ELIZABETH POWLETT

Died in the fortieth year of her age,
 28th day of February, 1691.

But, indeed, when we examine the particulars recorded on monuments we may easily get puzzled. For instance, here seems a paradox. On a stone in Burrington churchyard we read:—

Here lyeth
 JOHN JONES, son
 Of John Jones, Esqre.,
 Of this Parish,
 Also

EDWARD JONES, second son
 Of ye said John Jones,
 Born Novr. ye 15th, 1708,
 Dyed March ye 14th, 1708,

which gives the extraordinary impression that this child died several months previous to the date assigned for his birth. The solution of this problem is found when we recollect that under "the old style" reckoning which prevailed in England till the middle of the last century the year began on the 25th of March, therefore the year 1708 had not ended on the 14th of March.

A little knowledge of Latin is a valuable help to the "epitaph hunter," for the clergy in the 17th century were very fond of showing their classical attainments, and at the same time "airing" their Latinity and soothing their feelings by a learned-looking inscription. Thus at Broomfield church we find a clergyman lamenting over his three wives,—“ Ursula,” “ Dorothea,” and “ Diana,”—and adding,

Tres duxi, tribus orbis eram, tria funera flevi,
Uxorum, has Lachrymas siste Triune DEUS.

which may be Anglicised, “ Thrice I married—thrice was a widower ; over the funerals of three wives have I wept : stay, O Triune Deity, these tears ! ” This poor man seems to have been less cheerful than the celebrated Mayor of Salisbury, who had inscribed on the wedding ring of his fourth spouse, “ If I survive, I’ll make it five ! ”

Sometimes we find both Latin and English on our monuments. Thus, at Curry Rivel, on a memorial to a father and son, called Jennings, who died in 1625 and 1630, after six lines of Latin come the following six lines in English :—

If age or youth could quitt us from the grave,
Or all th’ endowments that belong to both,
Wee would implead th’ unequal fates, and save
The father for his age, the son for’s youth ;
But since in-tomb’d together thus they lie,
What shall I say but this—that all must dy !

One wearies, after a time, of these stilted conceits, and it is refreshing to select from many specimens of tombstone verse some simple words of affectionate regret :—

Anno Dom. Jan. 27, 1760, aged 13 years.

Undeck'd by sculpture's trophies gay
 This stone no flattering tale can tell
 Of her, who claims this simple lay,
 Of her, who fills this narrow cell ;
 Save that in beauty's early bloom
 The path of innocence she trod ;
 Save that her childhood found a tomb ;
 Save that her spirit rests with GOD.

There is something very touching in the following epitaph ; one of genuine pathos, which shall come next. It is in Nettlecombe church, to the memory of John Musgrave, gentleman, who died in 1684 :—

Much of my welfare and content below
 I to my mother's love and vertues owe,
 Wherefore this humble grass so neere her bones
 I more esteem than elsewhere marble stones.

But this tribute to a mother's care may be well contrasted with one which speaks of good children, as you will see in this inscription from Chard church :—

Here lieth interred (expecting their Saviour) the bodyes of William Brewer, of Chard, phisitian, and Deanes his wife, who living forty years in happy wedlock, in full age departed this life ; shee dying 8th of Nov., 1614, and hee 24th of July, 1618, having issue only six sons and five daughters, all men and women grown, and all comforts to them !

At Publow, against the wall, is a small tablet, with these striking lines :—

HENRY, son of Richard and Marth Jefferies,
 Deceased Oct. ye 23, 1684,
 Aged one year & five months.
 REBEKAH departed June ye 8th, 1696,
 Aged one year & two months.
 REBEKAH dyed March ye 5th, 1764,
 Aged 2 years & 10 months.

—
 Death's steps are swift
 And yet no noise it makes ;
 Its hand unseen,
 But yet most strictly takes.

For conceit and pride, we get a good example of “monumental cheek” from Dundry :—

In memory of WILLIAM and MARTHA JONES, of Bishport. He

died May 16, 1753, aged 81. He was a man of well-known integrity, and whose natural abilities were so great that by them only he clearly comprehended the powers of the human mind, and, unaided by academical education, was able to refute with uncommon sagacity the slavish systems of usurped authority over the rights, the consciences, or the reason of mankind!!

But in those happy days, when there was "no hurry about anything," there was plenty of time to write and also to read epitaphs; and as the rustics stood in the churchyard they perused with deep interest the lines which were engraved on the head-stones of their forefathers' and neighbours' graves.

Clocks and watches were expensive things, and that trying torment of the present day, "the punctuality-mad" parson, was unknown, and good folks loitered about the churchyard in pleasant groups, and learnt wisdom from the tombstones. There too they studied the records of old benefactions, and watched that they were not lost to the parish. And what funny ways good people took of doing good. Who now thinks of showing their affection by providing a sermon to be preached at their friends, as did Mr. Wright, of whom we read—

Near this place (in the south aisle of Charlton Horethorne church) lyeth the body of JOHN WRIGHT, Esq., who departed this life on March 27th, 1726. As a lasting testimony of affection to this parish, he gave to the vicar for the time being and for ever the yearly sum of 40s. for a sermon to be preached in this church on the 27th of March annually. To the clerk 20 shillings, for tolling the great bell; and to such poor people as have no relief, five pounds, to be equally distributed among them!

No doubt good folks often wished to give good advice on their tombstones; and dear old rectors, who had been preaching all their lives, liked to think that even when gone they could still "poke an admonition" at their parishioners from their tablets. Still I think the old gentleman who penned the following must have been a very useful preacher. It is found on the east wall of Stawell church:—

Here lyeth the body of THOMAS MOGG, rector, who died Nov. 27th, 1706. Believe aright, and live as you believe; and you cannot but die in safety.

But here I must give some samples from rustic tombstones in our village churchyards—regretting that modern scruplosity prevented this charming specimen being left to us:—

Neglected by his doctor,
Illtreated by his nurse,
The brother robbed the widow,
Which made the matter worse.

Thus at Porlock:—

PRUDENCE (1831) and JOHN LUCKEY (1834).

Long time in pain we did remain,
While old world's place we trod;
But now we're free. Death eased wee,
And Glory be to God.

In Memory of THOMAS RAWLE,
Who died 15th of March,
1786, aged 51 years.
Also PRUDENCE, wife of
The above named Thomas Rawle,
Who died 16th of March, 1786,
Aged 50 years.

He first departed. She for one
Day try'd to live without
Him. Lik'd it not and dy'd.

At South Brent:—

Here lyeth the body of
WILLIAM COUNSEL of this Parish,
Who departed this life
The 7th day of March, 1687.

Christ is our Redeemer
In whom we trust;
Our souls is with the Lord,
And our bodyes in the dust.

At Abbots' Leigh churchyard:—

This stone can say what few stones can,
Here lies the body of an honest man.

But you will perhaps ask if there are any very interesting epitaphs round Weston-super-Mare. There is a curious epitaph from Wyck St. Lawrence church. The poor man whom it commemorates seems to have been lost in the neighbourhood

of the sea, and overwhelmed by the tide before he could extricate himself:—

To the memory of JAMES MORSS, of this parish, yeoman, who dy'd November ye 25th, 1730, aged 38 years.

Save me O God, the mighty waters role
 With near Approaches, even to my soul :
 Far from dry ground, mistaken in my course,
 I stick in mire, brought hither by my horse.
 Thus vain I cry'd to God, who only saves :
 In deaths cold pit I lay ore whelm'd with waves.

At Hutton, one to the memory of the son of Bishop Still. The bishop's son appears to have settled at Hutton Court, and the following quaint epitaph remains on a tomb adorned with effigies of himself, wife, and some of his children:—

In Memory of
 NATHANIEL STILL,
 Of this Parish, Esq.,
 Who dyed the 2nd day of Feb., A.D. 1626.

Not that he needeth monument of stone
 For his well-gotton fame to rest apon,
 But this was reared to testifie that hee
 Lives in their loves yt [*that*] yet surviving bee,
 For unto vertue, who first raised his name,
 Hee left the preservation of the same,
 And to posterity remaine it shall
 When brass and marble monuments shall fall.

Dr. John Langhorne erected a monument to his first wife, in Blagdon church (of which parish he was rector), and composed the following inscription for it:—

In Memory
 of ANN, the wife of John Langhorne, D.D.
 rector of this parish, and daughter of
 Robert Cracroft, Esq., of Hackthorne, in
 Lincolnshire: one of the most amiable
 and most accomplished women of her time,
 who fifteen months after her marriage,

died

in childbed: May 4th, 1768, Æ. 32,
 leaving behind her an only Son, named John
 Theodosius, and a Husband the most unhap-
 py, as her unequalled affection had made
 Him the happiest of men.

With Sappho's taste,
With Arria's tender heart,
Lucretia's Honour,
And Celia's art,
That such a woman died,
Surprise can't give,
Tis only strange
That such a one should live.

This monument was erected by her most affectionate Husband whose remains will shortly be added to her's and interred beneath this marble in the same Grave.

Dearest and best of Women we shall meet again !

If they did meet again, we suppose it was in the company of the two other wives with whom he consoled himself after composing this affecting epitaph.

At Nailsea we have a specimen of that taste for punning of which I have spoken.

One Richard Coles, who died in 1626—and no doubt had something to do with the coal mines there :—

The Candid Coles which kindly burned
The warmth of mercy by their heat,
To ashes black by death are turned,
But shine their soules in heavenly seat.

At Yatton, on a Gypsy Queen :—

Here lies MERRILY JOULES,
a beauty bright,
Who left Isac Joules, her
heart's delight.

At Congresbury :—

In Memory of
CHARLES CAPELL HARDWICKE
of this Parish.
died
July 2nd 1849
aged
50 years.
And was buried at Hutton
His Friends,
Erected this Monument
To record
their admiration of his
Character
and

their regret at his
Loss.
A.D. 1871.

He was of such courage that being attacked by a highway man on the heath in this parish, Oct. 21st 1830. and fearfully wounded by him, he pursued his assailant and having overtaken him in the centre of this village, he delivered him up to Justice.

At Wedmore is a match for the Collins epitaph at Chew:—

Sacred to the memorie of Captain THOMAS HODGES, of the county of Somerset, Esq; who at the seige of Antwerpe, aboute 1583, with unconquered courage, wonne two ensignes from the enemy, where receiving his last wound, he gave three legacies: his soul to His Lord Jesus, his body to be lodged in Flemish earth, his heart to be sent to his dear wife in England.

In conclusion, at Wolverton is the following doggrel:—

The Lord was pleased His power to show
In giving me a mortal blow,
Which was from off a waggon's head
Crushed by one wheel, as it was said.
Let this my death a warning be,
The young or old, you plainly see
Must go, when death doth for you call,
Appointed time there is for all.

In connection with this subject, I feel it right to recommend to your support that most excellent Society for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead, which is carrying on a good work under the patronage of many leading men, and of which the Secretary is Mr. Vincent of Norwich. You will be also interested to learn that a gentleman of this county, Mr. William Adlam, is, at his own expense, having a complete list made of every epitaph and tombstone inscription in this country. Already about two hundred churchyards have been worked through, and a copy of this exhaustive undertaking will be placed in the British Museum.
