

A Gravestone call to Arms. Eric Robinson

It is a matter of fact that, when I was trying to get the GA to reach a wider public for our subject, I took them into cemeteries and churchyards. Already they had been on the streets, stroking buildings but gravestones were even more eccentric and hence, that bit appealing to non-geologists. For the doubting professionals, gravestones offered a time scale for weathering in that each bore the date of committal. All except granites showed their response to weathering. Later we found we could appeal to lichenologists as lichens are stone-specific to limestones or sandstones.

Well our success stemmed from organised excursions added to our fieldtrips. On site discussions opened up other lines as we meet famous people commemorated in stone. Writing up visits crept into the Proceedings or the Circular but as such, left the next visit dependent upon the visitor. We never got to DVDs or films that might be the approach of modern media studies and IT. Well progress has been made in a new generation of accounts. Nina Morgan and Philip Powell of Oxford background have produced 'The Geology of Oxford Gravestones' Geologica Press, involving approaches which are appropriate to 2015. There are three improvements in presentation to welcome

First: there is the mistaken introduction of our jargon of geology which can deter the casual beginner. Often we start accounts outlining the diversity of geology; the categories igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic. Even if this is well-done we risk killing off the delicate shoots of interest in the would-be geologist. Nina and Philip chose to introduce rock types and their names as they crop up in a visit to a churchyard. So, for Holywell cemetery (a splendid wealth of subjects here)

we start with Portland Stone in the stone to Kenneth Graham (yes, he of Wind in the Willows). So, in one entry we have the familiar limestone with notes on texture, fossil content and lichen hosting, coupled with a famous name. There are people who will be as interested in the person as in the stone so this is good practice to follow.

Second: could be just that record. Oxford sites are rich in famous name either academic such as Jowell, Master of Balliol 1838-1893, through to Kenneth Tynan and Maurice Bowen. Their fame is explained in good clear terms, following the precepts of the GA of 1859 "avoid hard words". Again this is a text which should not terrify the non-geologist.

There has to be a third recommendation for this Oxford guide and it is some quite brilliant colour photography by Mike Tomlinson. If descriptions in the text hadn't done their work, a bright colour plate speaks volumes.

Altogether, reviewing this guide, I do feel like John the Baptist (John Chapter 1) "What I do, another can do better.....". The message for everyone thinking of accounts of gravestone geology, must be to follow the plan created by Nina and Philip. For Dorset I can foresee the approach adopted for St George Reforne, described by Pevsner as "the most impressive C18 church in Dorset". The churchyard is crowded with carved Portland and Purbeck slabs telling of loss at sea or death in childbirth for those who's reading was a struggle. Wildflowers and Nature are there in abundance to invite that complete account of the natural history of the setting. If I had the legs I'd do it but happily pass the relay baton to your DIGS activists.

The Guide is available at £14.99 plus £2.00 post from Nina Morgan, Rose Cottage, East End, Chadlington, Oxford OX7 3LX. Details on www.gravestonegeology.uk

Eric's mention of lichens reminded me of the C18th bridge in Frampton. Built of Broadmayne brick and clad in Portland Stone, it is an excellent example of using lichens as a dating medium. I had previously obtained various correspondence from the 1960s and 1980s on the declining state of the bridge, one of which included the following information

An architect's report in 1965 described it as "twenty nine balusters missing, water was coming in at many joints, and attention had been drawn to it just in time". The difficulty about saving the bridge lay in the nature of its ownership. It was vested in the Public Trustee and he explained that he could neither dispose of it, nor had he the funds out of which to repair it. What might replace the balustrades if there was a total collapse was nobody's business. Thirteen more balusters went into the river before further losses were prevented by encasing them in wirenetting.

The photo on the front page illustrates the difference in lichen growth very effectively and I had no difficulty finding which balusters had been replaced in 1965 and 1981. I have a photographic record of each baluster safely stored away as well as long stretches of them. There was a great deal of correspondence on the matter of saving the bridge all down to one man determined to save it. Quite fascinating reading on its own merit.

I was also pleased to eventually find where the bricks from the local brickyard had been used. Magnificent 3 metre high walls round the original estate gardens were revealed when a modern house in the Park was sold and I had the opportunity to explore previously private territory. An ancient climbing plant had an 1830 lead tag which confirmed my find. DS

Trees at the bottom of the Channel

(from SAGA magazine, translated by Alison Neil)

10000 years ago, it was possible to walk to England without getting one's feet wet!

The map (front page) shows the coastline in the mesolithic period: the sea-water level then was 100 to 150 metres lower, due to glaciation. Jersey and Guernsey were just plateaus emerging from a plain. And the Thames flowed in an immense lush green valley which, much later, became the Channel. Lush green? Well yes! It was even a paradise according to scientists. A river, streams, trees, birds, animals... Shelter and food...

Traces of this forest can still be seen sometimes along the coast of Normandy. And, in England, Dawn Watson, a diver who was carrying out scientific research, came across whole petrified tree trunks and branches covered in algae and concretions. "At first I thought they were pieces of shipwrecks", she explained to the BBC. But in fact they lay in part of the vast region which geologists call Dogger-land, which was then above sea level, and which covered what was later to become the North Sea and the Channel.

This region and its forest were gradually submerged by the melt-water at the end of the ice age, about 6000 years ago, at the same time as the bay of the Mont St Michel was submerged, isolating the channel islands and the nearby Chausey islets.

But why have these traces only been discovered now? Doubtlessly thanks to a storm which hit the Norfolk coast in 2013.

(Reference: Ouest-France. 5.02.2015. After an article by Hervé Hillard)