

Graveyard Survey, St Mary's, Birkenhead.

In March and April, 1977, the Society carried out a full survey of the graveyard of St Mary's Church, Priory Road, Birkenhead.

St Mary's, built between 1819 and 1821, was designed by Thomas Rickman. It was declared redundant in 1974 owing to the impossibility of maintaining the fabric of the building because of the declining congregation and the position in the middle of a new industrial estate. The Church is currently being demolished and was recorded photographically by Merseyside County Museums in 1975.

St Mary's lies partly on the site of a Benedictine priory founded there in the twelfth century, parts of which still stand and are open to the public. As part of a scheme to develop the medieval site, it was proposed to remove or bury all the grave stones in the graveyard to the north of the church. This area only represents a fraction of the former graveyard which lies also to the south of the church, where the monastic burial ground was sited. This part of the site is now occupied by Cammell Laird Shipyards and no record was made of its destruction.

A survey was therefore proposed to record all the surviving grave monuments in the area to the north of the church and in the cloisters to the west, also to assess the extent of disturbance of the monastic site. The C.B.A. recording system was adopted for the grave monuments in a slightly adapted format on an A4 sheet for easier use in the field. The information elicited about each monument included dimensions (with a sketch plan), inscription, decoration, orientation, type of stone and general condition. Each monument received a serial number, was marked on a master plan and photographed. A total of nearly 300 grave monuments was recorded, varying in complexity from a simple tile edged surround to the Laird family monument of elaborate polished granite construction. The earliest memorials are flat sandstone slabs of the early eighteenth century; however, the majority fall into the period 1830-90 with a few later examples. The most common form is the flat 6 x 3 feet grave slab of red sandstone, sometimes with the names of a whole family of eight or nine individuals commemorated on it. Upright memorials are less common and nearly always in a worse condition as they have lacked the protection of a cover of turf and suffered from severe wind erosion. The most elaborate monuments lie in the cloister area and are not threatened by the development project.

The type of information recorded on the stone varies in content. Name, age and date of death are almost invariable, but some contain useful data regarding the origins of the family, occupations, official positions, addresses and causes of death (often abroad). At present no attempt has been made to process this data in any way as it represents an incomplete record of the burials made by that community (owing to the loss of a large proportion of the site) and the results may be very misleading. The registers of the church have still to be checked in detail against the recorded information but in the 1850's they show that some five hundred were taking place every year. In this light the 1500 or so burials recorded by the survey represents a very inadequate proportion of the community for statistical analysis.

Taking into account the areas thoroughly disturbed by grave digging, the building of the church and the reparation of the priory building it is apparent that the only area of the monastic site relatively undisturbed lies beneath the pathway leading from Priory Road to the south of the church. This area is indicated on the map. It is suggested that should any of the development proposals affect this area it should if possible be excavated and certainly closely observed and recorded.

I am very grateful to all the members of the Society who spent many Sundays in very poor weather recording the site. In particular I should like to thank Mr. W. C. Billington, the Warden of the Chapel, for all his help and co-operation; Mr. S. E. Gray of the Church Commissioners and Mr. B. Barnes of the Wirral Leisure Services Department for their permission to carry out the survey and providing plans and information about the site and Mr. P. Phillips of the Geology Department, Merseyside County Museums for identifying the stones.

The recording sheets and photographs have been deposited in the Merseyside County Museums. A list of the inscriptions will be abstracted and deposited with the Wirral Leisure Services Department and the Society of Genealogists in London.

Gill Chitty

