

Swithland slate headstones

Despite the terrible weather on 11th March, more than 20 members and visitors decided to brave the elements and listen to Roger Willson talk about Swithland slate headstones.

He explained his love of visiting churches, especially in Leicestershire and the Vale of Belvoir. His particular interests are alabaster sculptures and monuments and from this developed a passion for seeking out church headstones, especially those made from Swithland slate.

The slate itself came from Swithland's quarries and was of top quality. As it also splits so easily much of it was used for roofing, with the various sizes of slate tile giving many local houses their unique appearance.

It was soon realized that the slate made excellent headstones, being very hard and long-wearing and unaffected by the ravages of the weather compared to other stone like sandstone.

The peak period for Swithland slate headstones was between 1750 and 1810 when there were about 150 craftsmen at 50 locations in the area. These men produced top quality headstones, and it was a trade that was handed down from father to son.

The stones were smoothed and polished on one side only, the rear being left in its natural state. Every slate was individual and different, with more than 10,000 Swithland headstones in Leicestershire alone. The oldest known one (at All Saints Church, Thurcaston) dates back to 1641. It's now safely preserved inside the church.

Early slates had basic block lettering and sometimes if the craftsman ran out of space he just fitted items in where he could, giving some stones an unusual style.

As time went on, lettering improved and biblical texts and designs began to appear. One in particular, known as the Belvoir Angel, became very popular from the 1690s to the 1750s. As the name suggests, most of these were in the Vale of Belvoir.

From around the 1840s, railways began to appear and this meant that much cheaper Welsh slate became readily available, replacing the expensive Swithland slate. The last quarry in Swithland closed in 1887.

Using our overhead projector system, Roger showed us photos of many of the headstones he has recorded, the styles, the lettering, the quotes, the dates and, of course, the Belvoir Angels. It was fascinating to see that some of the earliest dates indicated that the grave's occupant was alive in Leicestershire in the early 1600s.

This was a fascinating talk and no doubt when our weather improves there will be more interested researchers visiting our local churches to see what they can find.

Brian Axon