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<th>Rachel Napper</th>
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St Nicholas Church, Henstridge.

A graveyard survey and evaluative essay

An evaluative essay and graveyard survey of St Nicholas Church, Henstridge, Somerset, generated in response to an assignment working towards a foundation degree in History, Heritage and Archaeology for submission.

By Rachel Napper

History, Heritage and Archaeology Foundation Degree

27th May 2010
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Précis

This project consists of a graveyard survey at St Nicholas church in Henstridge, Somerset. The project was started in late November of 2009 where the author collected information on the most efficient way in which to carry out a survey of a churchyard and the best way in which to store the information. It was completed in May 2010.

Upon starting the research, it was soon discovered that the local family history group had wanted to carry out a survey of the churchyard and so were very keen to be involved in this project and offered greatly received advice to the author. The history group already had in its possession lists of gravestones removed and a partial plan of the burial plots.

It was decided by the author that this information should be made accessible to the village and further afield and so it was decided that all of the research and finished survey would be made available via the village website, Henstridge Online.

In the April of 2010 the survey was carried out over two days in which all of the gravestones in the area to the north, east and west of the path was surveyed and sectioned out into areas from A to H.

In order to draw up a plan to scale the church was measured with the aid of a helper and the sections were also measured so that the stones could be plotted onto this plan.

Once all of the information had been gathered, all details were put into a spreadsheet and the photographs saved into files corresponding to the area in which they were surveyed.
What follows is a brief history of St Nicholas church and the history of graveyard furniture and some statistical analysis based upon the individuals who were buried in the churchyard.
The Church of St Nicholas

The parish of Henstridge lies 5km north-east of Milborne Port and is on the Dorset border and it includes the substantial village of Henstridge and the smaller hamlets of Henstridge Ash, Whitechurch and Yenston.

The church of St Nicholas is located on Church Street, just off of the High Street and dates back to a possible date of 1170\(^1\) and it was originally dedicated to St Michael by 1294 until the 18\(^{th}\) Century when it was dedicated to St Nicholas.\(^2\)

The church has a chancel with a north chapel and a south vestry with an organ chamber, a nave with north and south aisles along with a south porch and a west tower.

The medieval church consisted of just a chancel with a north chapel which was known as the Lady or Toomer aisle.\(^3\)

The north-west corner of the tower has a 13\(^{th}\) Century buttress and the nave has a thick south wall which suggests it could have an origin of the 12\(^{th}\) Century or even possibly earlier. The church was added to over time with the north aisle being built in the 15\(^{th}\) century and this was when the upper part of the tower and windows were renewed.

It was during the 18\(^{th}\) century that during restoration, the vestry was demolished and the chancel was extended along with other modifications. See (figure 1) for a plan drawn up by the architect J.M Allen for these modifications, and also (figure 2).

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\(^2\) ibid

\(^3\) ibid
It was during the restoration that a fresco of St Christopher was found on the north wall with the arms of the family Clarent and Toomer and some miniature paintings of a windmill and a monk holding a lantern.4

Roger Whiting’s book on churches states that churchyard crosses stood in every churchyard before the Reformation to act as a sign that the church was consecrated and that many were destroyed in the 17th century by Cromwell’s soldiers.5 There are the remains of a preaching cross within the churchyard of St Nicholas, in front of the porch of the church.

The History of Churchyards

The location of the burials within a churchyard can also show what type of people would have been buried there as the graves were on church ground in order for the congregation to remember and pray for the souls of those buried.

The south side of the church was also the most desired location to be buried as it got most of the sun and it was thought that evil spirits lurked in the shadows of the north side and so this was where strangers, babies, criminals and suicide victims were superstitiously buried.6 This is possibly true of St Nicholas which has only a few burials marked on the north side of the church and the majority being on the south side although it does not make it clear from the markers if the individuals buried here were strangers, criminals or strangers to the village. Archaeologist, Mike Parker Pearson explores the folklore that surrounds the idea that the dark side of the church

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6 ibid
is associated with the Devil and evil and states that it was often the poorer members of the community who would be buried there. This traditional avoidance of the north side was still happening as late at the 19th Century.7

St Nicholas also has a Lynch gate to the entrance of the churchyard which is a roofed entrance way. The name comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *Lich* which means corpse and it was stated in the 1549 prayer book that the priest would have to meet the deceased before the ceremony was carried out and so a roof was placed over the gate in order to provide shelter for the mourners.8

In 1872 the churchyard at St Nicholas was very quickly becoming overcrowded and so a portion of parsonage field was given for free but the situation of overcrowding happened again in 1932 and so there was an extension of the Glebe field and this was consecrated on 2nd October 1932.9

**The Survey**

It was decided that a survey of the gravestones within the churchyard of St Nicholas would be carried out in order for a degree of statistical analysis to be carried out to find out more about the people who once lived in Henstridge, their ages at death, family links and the years in which the majority of people were buried there.

Before the actual surveying was carried out, research was conducted to find out if a survey already existed for Henstridge and if a plan of the stones had already been drawn up. It was established that though liaising with the Reverend Hallett and the

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village history group that no formal plan of the grave markers existed and if it did, it was lost or possibly lay with the undertakers in the neighbouring village. Even so, it was clear that this would not be easily accessible to members of the public to use if they wished to find the marker of an ancestor.

Through research, it was found that within Yeovil library there were collections of papers which contain written inscriptions of the stones and this was deemed extremely useful as it is clear that a lot of the grave stones have now been removed due to them becoming dangerous over the years through weathering and through the stone disintegrating.

Henstridge has a website which was set up only a few years ago by a couple who moved to the village and decided to research its history and make it accessible to people all around the world. It was soon discovered that many people used it to research their family history and there were postings from people all around the world asking if the graveyard could be searched for a relative to establish their date of death.

Therefore, if the information could be gathered from the survey and made accessible through the internet and this website in particular, it would be greatly received by the researchers, saving everyone a great deal of time. The survey entailed the recording of all inscriptions and then this information would be put into an Excel spreadsheet so that information could be searched for and alongside every inscription there would be photographs of every grave stone and also its location would be plotted on a plan. A list of all of the removed stones was also obtained through the Henstridge family history group which will eventually be placed into a spreadsheet and made available on the Henstridge website.
Before any surveying was carried out, research was undertaken in the most efficient way to do it as time was limited. Many websites were consulted and advice was gained through contacting an academic, Dr Peter Wardle, who had already carried out a graveyard survey and had published the report online and holds a PhD in Archaeological Sciences. It was established through conversations with Dr Wardle that as long as high quality photographs were taken with a scale next to the grave stone then this would suffice in recording.\(^{10}\) It was soon discovered though that by just taking the photographs it was difficult to see the full inscriptions on the gravestone and so it was decided early on that the inscriptions would be written in full at the time.

The church was measured with large tape measures in order to draw up a plan to scale. Once the plan had been drawn up, then the area of graveyard being surveyed was sectioned off into areas from A to H and each gravestone was numbered within this section. This was then plotted on to the plan and each gravestone had a photograph. Each of the grave markers was photographed with numbers and the letter corresponding to the area they were in so that they can be found quickly on the plan.

Due to timescale only a section of the church was chosen to survey which contained just over 100 markers and each of these had to be photographed and measured which took 2 days in all with one helper. (See figure 3)

Once all of the information had been gathered then it was all input onto an Excel spreadsheet under the headings, first name, second name, family name, date of birth, date of death and from this the age at death could be worked out. Also

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\(^{10}\) Pers Comm, Dr Peter Wardle, 11/03/2010.
included on the spreadsheet were the inscription and the relationship, if any, to the individual who was buried in the same plot. (Please refer to CD for spreadsheet.)

It soon became apparent that the graves and the church played an important role in the village as whilst taking details of various memorials, members of the community would come over whilst travelling through and pass on the story of that particular person’s life and what they remember of them when they were alive.

The History of Gravestones

The use of headstones in its literal form has been around for thousands of years with the practice of placing stones over bodies buried in the ground to stop wild animals from getting at them.¹¹ Later it became a superstition to place stones over graves in order to stop the spirits from rising from the ground. It became popular after the Reformation as a way of marking the graves of loved ones and it wasn’t until the end of the 16th Century that more people were able to afford plots of land and to have stone memorials made. This would have been made from local stone as it was the cheapest source of such material.¹² Soft stone was often used and this weathers easier which is why the older stones are so hard to read now. Later on, polished marble was used and cast iron and there is one marker made from metal evident in St Nicholas in the form of a cross within a circle which no inscription present at all. It was common before the 19th Century for old grave markers to be cleared away for new ones to put in their place but the Victorians put an end to this as they wanted their graves to be permanent and so they introduced the fashion of iron railings and

big elaborate graves. There is an example of this with the large grave of Thomas and Theodora Merther Guest. (See figure 4)

Strong religious feelings in the 19th Century also meant that every person should have a plot and a memorial although there was evidence in the graveyard at St Nicholas of graves cutting through other graves where stones have been removed or they have been broken.

It was evident from first walking into the graveyard the vast range in styles of gravestone architecture from the simple small square marker flat on the ground to the elaborate Victorian grave markers which stood well over a metre tall. (See figure 5.) There was very little control within St Nicholas over the design, size and materials used for headstones up until 1873 when the current vicar, Alexander Ainslie requested that the tombstones should be less dominating in size and “no longer must we have urns or inverted torches or other pagan symbols.”

The Typology of Gravestones

The date ranges in the sections surveyed contained a wide range of dates, the earliest being 1837 and the latest is 2007. According to Harold Mytum, the style of grave stones changed over the centuries and this was often linked to social status and is also very dependent on the religion and rules of the church.

The 19th Century graves in Henstridge are mainly of the gothic style being very tall at just over a metre in height and have pointed tops. (See figure 6) This style was a

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revival of the gothic architectural style as at this time, people were commissioning their memorials and this style was seen as the ‘typical’ graveyard monument.\textsuperscript{15}

As the stones head into the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, then the height of the stones decrease and they are no longer used to local materials instead being made from polished marble. Up until the 1960s, headstones often mirrored the architecture of the time. \textit{(See figure 7)}

Many Churches in England tried to influence people to choose flat memorials as this took up less space and aided with grass cutting but this idea never took up in England and it didn’t in St Nicholas either. In the area surveyed there are only four flat memorials in comparison to 64 being of either headstones or kerb stones and tombs.

According to Mytum, the earliest shapes of headstones can be explained by the ways and by whom they were being produced by in the late 17\textsuperscript{th} century and early 18\textsuperscript{th} as they consisted of either flat tops or ‘bedstead’ styles which mirrors contemporary chair backs and bedsteads. This was because the local craftsmen such as joiners and carpenters acted as the undertakers and funeral directors until the profession developed.\textsuperscript{16}

Headstones increased in size heading into the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century which could represent the changing values of social status being reflected in monuments to the dead as well being displayed during the lives of these people. This style of monument coincides with the Victorian idea of ‘permanent’ memorials. It is also suggested by Mytum that there was possibly another reason for these tall

monuments. Graveyard management was very different during the 18th and 19th century and grass was allowed to grow up high in order to be cut later on for hay, so the monuments needed to be tall in order for them to be visible all the year around. As already mentioned, the upright styles of monument are the most popular at St Nicholas and out of those the most frequent style is the rounded top, flat top then the gothic style and the other style that was frequently used were a 3 and 2 stepped base cross. There are only 3 examples of kerbs with posts and only one elaborate kerb with railings. There was only one example of a small chest tomb in the section surveyed though it was evident that there were many on the south side of the church. These tombs were at their most popular in the 18th and first half of the 19th century and have medieval echoes of burial practice and even Roman, as their dead were often encased in stone or lead tombs before burial.

The Gravestone Inscriptions

The inscriptions on headstones give an insight into the family who buried their dead and also to the individual buried. The inscriptions were also noted on the markers at St Nicholas in addition to the names and dates to see how the wording has changed over the years. Some of the wording is personal to the family and is significant to them such as the grave of Beatrix Everitt who died in 1943, it is written, “A gentle

courageous kindly heart never forgotten by any who knew her.”  

The most common inscriptions are religious quotes from the bible or the words, “Thy will be done”.

A very poignant inscription is that on the marker of 2nd Lieutenant Reginald Stern who was killed in action in 1941. It is written “All he had hoped for, all he had he gave to save mankind, himself he scorned to save.”

The use of motifs and engravings on gravestones has changed over the centuries as peoples attitude to death and the dead have evolved and developed. Mike Parker Pearson explains that 16th Century memorials in England mostly depicted heraldic motifs and moving into the 17th Century, the engravings took a more sinister turn and skull and crossbones, snuffed candle, hour glasses and felled trees were being depicted more which heavily symbolised death. The body was not ‘asleep’ as was the view in the previous century but that the corpse was just dry bones and it was only a matter of time before we all met the same fate.

As we move into the 19th century, the inscriptions become more family orientated and speak of emotion and loss which is evident in the gravestones surveyed at Henstridge. As Parker Pearson explains, “Death was no longer a duality between the body’s transformation into food for worms and the soul’s eternal spiritual life, but a sunset, a voyage over the sea, or a harvest followed by the meeting of loved ones in the hereafter.”

This idea of the dead being reunited in Heaven or in the afterlife is suggested through a few burials as Henstridge as one in particular is the burial of 8 year old Ada Blackmore who is buried with her Grandparents. The impression that is gained

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18 Gravestone 4F
19 Gravestone 14G
21 ibid
is that this little girl was lost by her parents and she was buried with her Grandparents so she could be kept safe and looked after in Heaven.

One particular grave stone at Henstridge has a bunch of 3 flowers engraved on it which represents mortality and the fragility of life. (See figure 8)

Weathering of Gravestones

The importance of recording the gravestones as early as possible is immense as this author discovered whilst carrying out the survey and this was due to the amount of decay some the older stones were suffering from.

There is evidence of weathering on the gravestones that stand in St Nicholas and this has made it very difficult to read some of the inscriptions. The vegetation in the churchyard has also damaged the stones. (See figure 9) Even if this greenery is removed, it pulls away the fragments of stone and with it the words of the inscription. A selection of gravestones were totally unreadable as the stones had broken clean in half through severe deterioration and many were leaning at a dangerous angle and due to this, many had been removed all together and were left leaning against the wall of the church.

A Case Study

The data collected from the survey of St Nicholas allowed the author to start research from one gravestone in particular in order to demonstrate how historians and genealogists can use graveyards as a starting point for their own research. One particular grave stone seemed very interesting as it listed a husband and wife and their 4 children. What was tragic was that one of the children, Richard Green
died on 4/4/1862 aged just 15 weeks, followed two days later by his four year old brother, Henry. Just a year after that, the husband, William Green dies aged 52 years. Further research was then carried out in order to find out who this family was, where they lived and most importantly of all, how did the two year old die and his father?

The 1861 census was consulted and the family were located as living on Hookthorn Farm in Wincanton. The census showed that William Green, the father, was a farmer and had a 55 acre farm and employed two men and one boy. His family consisted of his wife, Elizabeth and his 9 children not including little Richard who wasn’t born at that time. The children were listed as either assisting their mother and father on the farm or they were scholars. (See figure 10)

The next stage was to see how the father died and the two year old boy as if the cause of death could be identified for him then it was possibly going to be something similar for the 15 week old boy as they died within days of each other.

The death certificates were obtained and the cause of death was listed for William Green as ‘disease of the chest’ which was most likely TB and next to it was the simple cross as the mark of his wife, Elizabeth who was present for the death. (See figure 11)

Two year old Harry Green’s death certificate showed his cause of death as ‘infantile fever’ and again, Elizabeth’s mark was next to it showing she was at his death also. (See figure 12)

Children’s mortality rates during the end of the 19th century were incredibly high and many children died very young. Generally, the children living in towns and cities were the most vulnerable to diseases such as scarlet fever, measles and polio but children
in rural village were also susceptible to such illnesses due to open sewers, poor drinking water and lack of toilets. Within a large family, the disease would have spread really quickly and that is most likely why Richard and Harry died within a few days of each other.

This tragic loss of children through illness is mentioned in the diary of William Holland, entitled Paupers and Pig Killers. He was writing in the early 1800s and within it he mentions the death of a number of his children in the space of a few weeks through similar disease that could have taken the Green children.

Therefore, from one gravestone inscription further research can be carried out and the life and death of one family can be researched. Grave stones could either be the start of research for a family historian or it could be the end, when all has been found out and the gravestone is located as an end and a closure to the journey that historian or genealogist has taken.

**Statistical Analysis**

The gravestones surveyed as a group at St Nicholas were recorded onto a spreadsheet and so it was then made available to be used to create graphs and tables to show the statistics of the individuals buried there and therefore, trends could be identified with regards to the most common age of death and in what century most deaths were.

The first graph plotted was to show the most common age at death for individuals buried within the section surveyed. *(See figure 13)*

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The chart shows us that the majority of deaths were from people aged between 81 to 90 years and some even living up to and past their 90’s. The chart also shows that there are more deaths in children aged between 0 and 10 years than aged 11 to 19 years which is possible due to childhood illnesses such as scarlet fever where vulnerable babies were falling ill and without medication were unable to survive. The majority of deaths are between the ages of 61 and 90 years which is showing that despite the common idea that people in the 18th and 19th centuries didn’t live for as long as on the 20th century, people were still living up to a good age before death.

The second graph is displaying the year in which there were the most deaths. (See figure 14).

This graph is showing the highest number of deaths and burials were between the years 1901 and 1940 which is what was expected as during these years there is WW1 and WW2 and also at this time, in 1918 there was the Spanish Flu pandemic which ran from March 1918 to June 1920 and attacked mainly the vulnerable such as weak infants or the elderly. There is evidence of war dead within Henstridge with burials from both WW1 and 2 and so this could be the reason for the high number of deaths during these years.

The third graph shows the population of Henstridge taken from the census reports. (See figure 15)

The graph shows that the population of Henstridge increased in the years 1881 and 1930 but then took a dip in the years 1931 and 1980. This again could be explained by WW2 and many people leaving the village to fight. The increase in population

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between the years 1881 and 1930 could be attributed to the opening of the railway line from Templecombe to Blandford by the Somerset and Dorset railway company which ran east of the village and opened in 1863 and meant that the village was opened up to its surrounding towns and villages making it much easier for people to travel.24

A graph was then plotted which showed the number of deaths that were surveyed against the population to see if there are any comparisons to be made between the two. (See figure 16)

The main trend that is noticeable is that when the population dips the amount of graves and deaths increases. This could either be due to an illness that has taken a large number of the village as victims or it could be again explained by the WW2 and the large amount of people leaving the village to fight, their bodies being brought back to be buried.

These graphs are useful in displaying the data visually from what has been collected through the survey and makes it easier for trends to be seen and compared with other data and for a picture of village life long gone to be created.

**Conclusion**

The survey has been a wonderfully enlightening and fascinating subject for the author and much has been learnt about the history of the village of Henstridge and the church of St Nicholas. The subject of graveyards is often met with suspicion and questioning as the author discovered when carrying out the survey, as many villagers would just stand and watch as grave details were being taken and the

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braver ones would come and ask what was happening. Once they understood the process, they too became fascinated with the survey.

Much has been learnt by the author on the varying styles of gravestones and how the shapes and styles have altered over the centuries which match that of the architecture. The motifs engraved on the stones have also changed as they depict people’s developing attitudes towards death that is echoed in the popular religions of the time.

The most fascinating discovery was the journey taken to trace a single family from the inscriptions on one grave marker. Despite having no connection to the family at all, it was striking the amount of emotion that was felt in reading the carved words which bluntly portrayed a woman who had lived through three of her sons’ deaths followed by her husband’s before dying some 20 years later aged 73 years. (See figure 17)

The graveyard survey was very dependent on the weather and the author was lucky enough to have a weekend of dry weather so that it could be completed in the space of those two days.

A much more detailed picture could have been created if the entire churchyard was surveyed but due to time scale this was impossible. It is something that the author would like to carry out and add to this survey.

With regards to heritage management, it became clear to the author whilst carrying out this survey, that unless the grave stones are recorded in this way and made accessible to the public for personal research, then through weathering and removal, they could be lost forever and that is something which should be avoided at all costs.
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• Pers Comm Jane Jeanes, Church Warden for St Nicholas, 2010
• Pers Comm Cherry Shephard, 2010
• Pers Comm Dr Peter Wardle, 2010
Appendices

Figure 1

25 http://www.churchplansonline.org/ HENSTRIDGE, St. Nicholas (1872)
HENSTRIDGE
groundplan created by ALLEN, James Mountford: b. 1809 - d. 1883 of Crewkerne and London
HENSTRIDGE, St. Nicholas (1871-1874)

HENSTRIDGE groundplan created by ?ALLEN, James Mountford: b. 1809 - d. 1883 of Crewkerne and London; A.J. Ainslie

http://www.churchplansomline.org/HENSTRIDGE, St. Nicholas (1871-1874)
Figure 4
### 1861 CENSUS FOR HENSTRIDGE - Household Detail

Piece: RG 9/, Folio: 44, Page: 1, Schedule: 5

**Enumeration District:** 4 (1861)
**Registration District:** Wincanton
**Address:** Hookthorn Farm

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**Note:**
- The figure represents a death certificate from the Register Office, with details filled in correctly.
- The certificate is certified as a true copy and bears the stamp of the registrar.
- The date of the certificate is April 2010.

**WARNING:**
- A false certificate is not evidence of identity.
**CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH**

**REGISTRATION DISTRICT**

1862  DEATH in the Sub-district of Milborne Port
in the County of Somerset

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</table>

**Jethro Grieve**

Henry Grieve  28th  
Son of William Grieve, a Farmer
Infantile Fever
1. The death of Elizabeth Hobbs, a servant at the death of Jethro Grieve, 1862
T. Lowe  Registrar

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE under the Seal of the said Office, the 28th day of April 2016

DYC 720361

CAUTION: THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE - CROWN COPYRIGHT
WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.
Figure 13

Age at death

Figure 14

Deaths per Year
Figure 15

Population of Henstridge

![Population of Henstridge graph]

Figure 16

Population Compared With Number of Graves.

![Population and Number of Graves graph]