

“A Churchyard back in Time”

St Michael’s Parish Church Alnwick

Recording St Michaels’s graveyard for Posterity



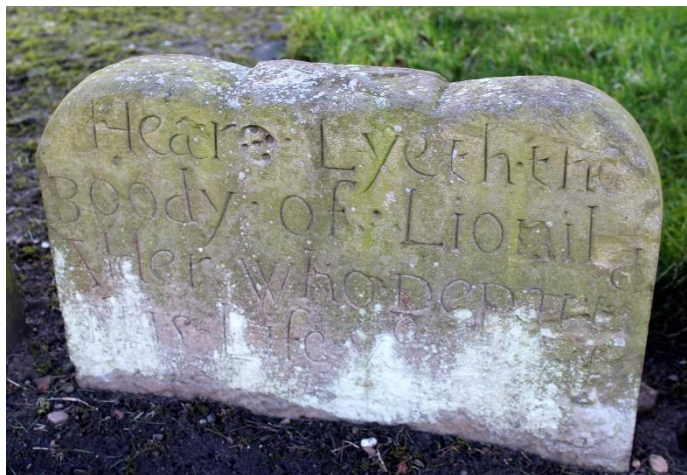
St Michael's Church, Alnwick c1860

Family Historians will be pleased to learn that a two year project to record all the burials in the church yard has now been completed. From earliest times this was the only burial ground for the people of Alnwick with the exception of a small Quaker plot and ones at St James’s and St Thomas Chapel.

A surprising number of 20,000 named individuals buried in the one and a half acre church yard have been brought together on a searchable data base. All the original church records available from 1646 form this data store with any added information available about the deceased. It has been proved challenging deciphering early handwritten records and grave stone inscriptions in order to bring all the records together. The church no longer holds any of its original records as they are deposited at Woodhorn Museum Archive. This means that family historians will not need to make the journey out to Woodhorn and spend many hours searching through the parish burial book. Besides being of interest to family historians, the records are of historical importance to the people of the town.

The church yard closed in 1856 when it was becoming full although there were a small number of burials after this time. A map exists to help find a burial plot for many burials and it is also possible in some cases to find an individual grave and head stone. Some of the stones name those who died in the Cholera epidemic of 1849 and recently a new stone has been erected in the churchyard in memory of who have no known grave.

The second part of the project was to record all the existing tomb stones as it is evident that they are deteriorating and will in time be lost. A number of stones have fallen or were originally flat have become overgrown or completely hidden over the years. These have now been cleared of grass to reveal any inscriptions that positively identify them. In 1885 there were 717 stones in existence now a recent count has found this number has been reduced to 522. The project has photographed and transcribed where possible and any further research on their occupation, age and place of abode added.



Lionil Alder who died in the 1700's

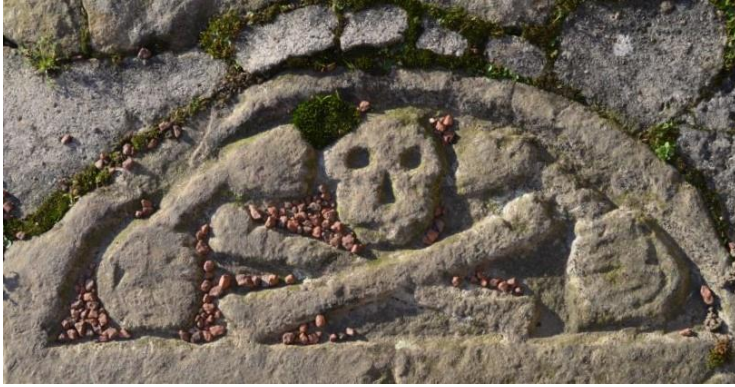


Edward Berens Blackburn table tombstone

Many of the older tomb stones and larger table top tombs have either disappeared or now stand against a wall or lay flat. Closer to the church south wall as many as thirty stones have been used as pavement slabs, some have been moved inside the church and used as window sills. It is noticeable given the high number of burials that the ground has risen around the church.


One of the oldest stones in the churchyard that is still visible is that of Edward Alnwicke who died in 1597. His epitaph is no longer visible but was recorded in 1822 by William Davison "Here lyeth under Buried the body of Edward Alnwicke who departed 12th February 1597". The date on the stone can just be made out.





Another early stone termed a “memento mori” is from the 17th century and is to remind passers by of the deceased and their own mortality.

A visitor could be forgiven for rushing through the church yard, its grave stones are modest and hide the lives of the those buried here. One historian commented that “The monuments in Alnwick churchyard are not famous for the length or undue panegyrics over the dead”. However, Alnwick was certainly not short of characters in the past and folk who made an interesting contribution to the town. Buried here are the trades people, soldiers, artists, scientists, doctors, academics, musicians, painters and many more. Some families who had been here for centuries whilst others came and went.

WILKIN William	B2052 2E6
	<p>Sacred to the memory of William Wilkin who by innate Vigour of his own GENIUS, improved by Application, acquired a most extensive Knowledge in MATHEMATICS.</p> <p>His Heart was endowed with every social and manly VIRTUE and adorned with those Qualities which constitute anamiable character. But alas! ere his Genius had reached its Meridian and just as his talents became known and necessary to Mankind the SMALLPOX as if envious of hus growing lustre extinguished his lamp of science on the 15th January 1777 and 24th year of his age.</p> <p>In token of their esteem, a few friends have erected this to mark the place of his dust.</p>
<p>This tombstone is a memorial which was erected by a few friends and admirers of Mr William Wilkin.</p>	

There are many examples of stones from past centuries which have more elaborate inscriptions telling the story of the person, their family and achievements.

Interest in family history has meant that the church and graveyard are often visited by local residents and visitors seeking information about their ancestors who may have been buried here. As a result of this, researcher Trish Jones with permission from the church embarked on the project to record an up to date data base. The scale of this soon became apparent and Colin Watson has been instrumental in undertaking the arduous task of meticulously producing the data base, photographing and transcribing the stones. It was this interest in Alnwick’s past as lived by its inhabitants which has brought about the project. The next stage will be to explore the life and times of those buried here and write their stories.

If you would like more information about an ancestor who is buried in St Michael’s Church yard please contact us via the church or their web site and we will be pleased to help.

We would also like to hear from anyone who remembers the collapse of the church wall in the 1980’s which exposed early burials and then was rebuilt, or the vault for Sir David William Smith which is no longer accessible.

Contact : pfj100@btinternet.com