

How to close a Churchyard

Part One

Holy Cross Churchyard has been an oasis of peace and calm for hundreds of years. Headstones from four centuries appear, higgledy-piggledy around the church and present those who walk through or past with a salutary reminder of how brief life is and how much we ought to cherish the life we have, while we have it!

The appearance of Holy Cross churchyard has been a matter of pride for many years and during my time as Incumbent, started way back in 1982, I have known six individuals who have taken a lead role in keeping the grass cut and making the graveyard a place of beauty for all to enjoy.

But one of the headstones in the church tells the tale of William King who before he died in 1863 and who was “upwards of 60 years the gardener of this parish.” He was born in 1779 and started work as gardener around about the age of 21. Now that is service! You can see that he was also a keen bee-keeper from the hive on his headstone!

None of the modern equivalents can match that record, of course, but they have all brought their own particular style to the job. Running a churchyard is something that is difficult to organise with a team of volunteers. People have always promised to look after this area or cut back that hedge or trim those roses, but in reality, things get forgotten and overlooked and what is needed is a single mind, an individual who work with the volunteers but be willing to pick up the pieces and make sure it all happens. My first such person was Mr

Butterfield. Albert was an old gentleman who toiled in the churchyard for many years. He proudly showed me the beech tree he planted some years earlier when his wife died. Another now stands within sight of the first, representing the lives of two stalwart Holy Crossers! Mr Butterfield died soon after my arrival and John Gabriel took up the work, but within a short space of time he moved to Yorkshire. So, next came Chris Cullum. Chris was an energetic man with more than a little of the buccaneer about him. Indeed, after leaving Greenford, he became a fisherman for a while. I remember one Easter Day meeting some women in the garden. They were up in arms. Chris had been pollarding the Lime trees and had decided to burn the cuttings but he chose, without realising it, the centre of the Garden of Remembrance where we bury cremated human remains. He



never heard the end of that one! Chris moved to Folkestone to start a career as a fisherman, so, next came Ken Wylde. Now Ken was a former professional soldier and a very effective and efficient person. In fact, he had been awarded the Military Medal for his part in one of the conflicts of the later 20th century. He treated the garden in a military fashion and the grass was never allowed to grow many millimetres before being mown down in anger. In fact, one Guide to local churches at the time carried a comment about how the grass didn't need to be cut so harshly and rigidly. In fact, to keep this level of mowing consistently high is a very difficult job. Headstones appear as hazards for the mowing machine

everywhere you look and the job is hard work and fiddly at the same time. Only a high level of commitments makes it happen throughout the summer growing season. Greenford is the sort of place people leave a lot, so

after Ken moved to another part of the country, in stepped Roy Clarridge. Roy was a very committed worker and made a huge effort to create the unique atmosphere which is our churchyard. Again, lots of people made promises to help and some kept their promises, but the bulk of the work fell on Roy and he eventually felt the strain, going on as gardener long after his retirement from real work.



That brings me down to the present day and Malcolm Ede, who is also the church honorary treasurer. Malcolm cuts a strange figure, dressed in his white coat and toiling away on the many jobs involved. For several years he has single-handedly pollarded the Lime trees, but now, approaching 65, he told me that he didn't think he could climb the ladders and reach the crowns of the trees any longer.

During 2009, Malcolm proposed that we reduce the number of limes to halve the work involved. This proposal created a huge back-lash of church opinion. There are in fact 39 lime trees, planted in 1939, the same year in which the foundation stone of the Holy Cross New Church was laid. The proposal triggered off a chain-reaction which led to the Local Authority placing a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) on all the trees in the churchyard.



What happened next was a much-needed assessment of our resources and priorities as a church community. In terms of both staffing and financial resources, the care of the churchyard looked impossible to maintain. Then I remembered that almost 25 years ago, we had discussed the possibility of closing the churchyard for burials because there hadn't been a burial of a body in a generation, certainly for over 40 years. The reason for not applying for closure then was that we had the volunteers and expertise and so we should try for as long as possible to keep going the unique beauty of the churchyard ourselves. In 2009, we seemed to have come to the end of a line. So, the Parochial Church Council passed a resolution that we should seek an Order in Council for the closure of the Holy Cross Churchyard on the grounds that it was now full and no longer possible for future burials. In February, 2010, I contacted the appropriate Government Department, which is the Ministry of Justice, (Coroners and Burials Division) for a form of application for a Closure Order for Discontinuance of Burials in Church of England Churchyards, under Section 1 of the Burial Act, 1853, a

date when old William King still had 10 years to go busying himself in the churchyard! I had hoped to be able to report on progress and how we eventually came to a satisfactory conclusion, but the wheels of the Ministry of Justice grind slowly, indeed. I recently received a letter dated 9 April, 2010, informing me that the Ministry had written to the Local Authority to ask them for any reactions to our proposal. Following this stage, there is a public consultation provided through an advertisement in the local newspaper, and then, who knows?



Progress will be reported in Part Two.