

### Churchyards - history carved in stone

A wander through your local churchyard at this time of year can be a wonderful experience as they are an oasis of wildlife.

But of course what I like is the history that they contain. Beddingham church has a commonwealth war grave to a woman who died in the Great War. Selmeston Church has the grave to Fred Mockford who originated the MAYDAY emergency signal and Folkington Church has the grave of Elizabeth David the food writer.

These graves are relatively recent and are in good condition but many gravestones are succumbing to the effects of time. How many people today live in the same parish as their ancestors?

Once gravestones would have been cared for by local families but today we seldom live where our ancestors did and gravestones become worn and damaged. The problem here is that our past is slowly but surely being eroded.

Seaford's St Leonard's churchyard is a good example. Reading through some of the old records for the town there were obviously some interesting gravestones there. One, for the Stevens family read "Near this place lie two mothers, three grandmothers, four aunts, four sisters, four daughters, three cousins but six persons" another memorial marked the mass grave of sailors who drowned in 1809 when seven ships sank in Seaford bay in just one fateful night. Both memorials are now lost.

In Seaford however we are lucky that a small group of volunteers have been ensuring that the inscriptions on local memorials are recorded for future generations.

Members of the Seaford Monumental Inscription Group first met at Seaford Museum and have meticulously recorded every grave and memorial both inside and outside the church.

I joined them on several occasions and they used a variety of ingenious methods to decipher the worn inscriptions.

Vegetation was carefully cut-back, ancient text was sprayed with a mist of water and a bright light was shone across the face of the stone to reveal words that have probably not been seen for decades. The oldest gravestone found was to Ann Swaine of Denton who was buried at St Leonard's in 1702 more than 300 years ago.

The oldest memorial inside the church is to Stephen Elphick who was born in 1567. Sadly the Victorians recycled the gravestone as a heating duct and it is no longer visible to the public.

Luckily the group have published their findings in a book "Testimony of Regard" which contains details of hundreds of burials.

This book not only lists the names and details of every stone and memorial but also gives valuable advice on how to read worn and ancient text on gravestones near you. The book is the second in the series (the first "As I am now, so you must be" related to St Peter's Church at East Blatchington) and makes fascinating reading.

It is full of familiar Seaford surnames such as Banks, Elphick, Simmons, Chambers, Lower, Allwork and Harison and would be a vital source of information to local people researching their family tree.

The Seaford Monumental Inscription Group worked closely with the church. The vicar The Rev Paul Owen said that if the projects had been left for just another 10 years, the fading inscriptions would have gone beyond recovery.

The book is richly illustrated and also has well drawn plans of the churchyard to help to identify the exact location of each grave. "Testimony of Regard" is available from Seaford Museum.

The Monumental Inscription Group have a website [www.seamig.org.uk](http://www.seamig.org.uk) which also gives details of how the books can be obtained.

The group's next project is Seaford cemetery so I suspect that there will be several years of work before the next book is published.

If you have a few spare hours a month and don't mind working in a graveyard why not contact the group and offer your help.

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*[Amended Aug 2018]*