A survey of Swithland slate gravestone literature

Bob Trubshaw

Much of my interest in gravestones engraved on slate from the Charnwood Forest arose from visiting churchyards and looking at the dates, decorative designs, and thinking about the changes in fashion these memorials revealed as well as providing good indications of pre-railways trade routes.

Only when I began to take more interest in the names of the engravers did I begin to realise that considerable prior research had been published. However becoming aware of that research was not as simple as might be expected, especially considering that all-but-one of the key sources has been digitised and made available online.

So, to assist others in getting up to speed with these so-called 'Swithland slates' and the makers, I have compiled this annotated bibliography. It starts out in chronological order of publication then 'diversifies' into books and articles which look more broadly at the history of churchyards.

Note that geologists refer to the type of slate used for these memorials and for roofing as 'Swithland slate'. However this is misleading as only part of two quarries were in Swithland parish while the larger quarries were in adjacent parishes and at Groby. I refer to them as 'Charnwood slates' to avoid the misleading impression given by the geological nomenclature.

Leicestershire

Alfred Herbert, 1938/9, ‘Swithland Slate Headstones’ in *Transactions of Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* Vol.22 Part 2–3; online at www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/SwithlandPagesfromsmvolumeXXIIpart2-3.pdf

Nottinghamshire

Maurice Barley, 1948, 'Slate headstones in Nottinghamshire' in *Transactions of the Thoroton Society,* Vol 52, p. 69–86; doi.org/10.5284/1115919.

Barley acknowledges considerable assistance from F.W. Burgess whose own research into churchyard memorials had yet to be published. Considering the research was done about eighty years ago it is a remarkably good pioneering study.

Kesteven

David Neave and Vanessa Heron, 1969, 'Kesteven slate headstones and their engravers' in The Local Historian Vol. 8, No. 6; online at slha.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/import/Downloads/LHA4-Neave-Heron.pdf

The geographical scope is substantial as Kesteven is a big Part of Lincolnshire. However most of the slate memorials are to be found around Grantham and down to Colsterworth. If you think Swithland Slate is mostly used for gravestones in Leicestershire and the Vale of Belvoir then put yourself right by reading this paper (e.g. in Grantham parish churchyard alone there's 380 surviving slate gravestones from Charnwood quarries; another 114 can be found at Great Gonerby).

Although generally sound, their suggestion of road routes – while plausible – omit the most obvious (because almost dead straight) option of using the Salters Way from Barrow-upon-Soar to Grantham. The use of the Grantham Canal to transport slates from 1797 – which they provide evidence for – required the River Soar to be made navigable as far as Loughborough. This happened in 1778, but is not mentioned.

Northamptonshire

Bob Trubshaw, 2011, 'Charnwood slate gravestones in Northamptonshire', *Hindsight* No.17; reproduced as Appendix 1 of *Conversations in Churchyards:: A field guide to the social history of memorials* (Heart of Albion 2025); online at www.hoap.co.uk/conversations_in_churchyards.pdf

My first publication relating to slate gravestones. I note that every churchyard in the northern half of Northamptonshire has at least one headstone made from Charnwood slate. Slate – Charnwood or Welsh – is usually absent from churchyards in the southern half of Northamptonshire where limestone is used until granite and marble became fashionable in the later nineteenth century.

Masons

The first person to attempt to identify the signatures on slate gravestones was Maurice Barley in his 1948 study of Nottinghamshire memorials.

Maurice Barley, 1948, 'Slate headstones in Nottinghamshire' in *Transactions of the Thoroton Society,* Vol 52, p. 69–86; doi.org/10.5284/1115919.

Barley was friends with Frederick Burgess who visited churchyards over a much wider area, noting the inscriptions and signatures. Between 1954 and 1957 Burgess published a series of twenty-four articles in *The Monument Journal*, all titled 'English Sepulchral Monuments: Swithland slate carvers'. In total this a comprehensive list of most of the known masons (see below). Where

possible Burgess provides dates of birth and death for nearly all the people who signed slates from the 1720s onwards. He also provides fairly detailed genealogies and discusses their designs from the perspective of mid-twentieth century art history.

The following lists Burgess's articles in chronological order and indexes the surnames of carvers of Swithland slates.

November 1954 p686–90. Introduction to 'Swithland' slate. (Note that Burgess's remarks regarding waterborne transport do not fit the facts. Waterborne transport seems to have had little influence on Charnwood slate distribution because the nearest river to Charnwood Forest, the Soar, was not navigable until 1778 (and not until 1794 for the section between Loughborough and Leicester) and did not have connections with the national canal system until 1814. As I set out in Chapter Six of my *Belvoir Angels* PDF there is good evidence for slate being transported by road in the early eighteenth century.)

December 1954 p747–51. Introduction to slate carvers and 'Belvoir angels'. Abbott, Adams, Agar, Ainsworth, Alcott, Alldred, Allen, Almond, Allsop, Allt, Archer, Askew, Atkins, Badcock, Badham, Bagnall, Bainbridge, Baker, Ballard, Baraclough.

January 1955 p35–8. Barfield, Barlow, Barnatt, Barnes, Barnwell, Barrand, Barratt, Barrows, Barton, Baseley, Bass, Batchelor, Bateman, Bates, Baum, Beardsley, Beer, Bell, Bennison, Berrisford/Beresford, Bettony, Billyeld, Birch, Birchnall.

February 1955 p101–5. Birkenhead, Birks, Birtchnell, Bland, Booth and Johnson, Bonser/Bonsor, Braddow, Bramley, Brewin, Brewster, Broadbent, Broadgate, Broughton, Brown, Brunt, Buckerfield, Bull.

April 1955 p239–42. Carver, Cassnell, Castledine, Cave, Challands/Challans, Chamberlain, Chanler, Chapman, Charles, Clarke.

N.B. There presumably was a further article covering masons between Clarke and Cragg.

September 1955 p578–81. Cragg, Crooke, Cuthbert, Daft, Dams, Darbyshire, Dare, Davis, Dawkins, Dexter, Dickinson, Dolman, Dones, Dunicliff, Dutton, Eglinton, Eldridge, Elliott.

October 1955 p633, 656–8. Elliott, Errington, Essex, Evans, Evarard, Evatt, Ferriman, Field, Firmage, Firn, Fisher, Flintoff, Foden, Fox, Fraby, Freer, Foggott, Fryer, Fullalove, Gilbert.

November 1955 p722–5. Gilbert, Glenn, Goodman, Granger, Green, Greseley, Grundy, Guess, Guy, Hack, Hadock, Hadden/Haddon, Hall, Harden, Hardy, Hardwick, Hargrave, Harrold, Harston, Hart, Harvey, Hassell, Hawley.

December 1955 p782–5. Haycock, Hayes, Hayward/Haywood, Heathcote, Henderson, Henson, Henworth, Herbert/Harbert, Hibbitt, Hill, Hind [an important biography of the family], Hipwell.

January 1956 p45–8. Holland, Hollins, Holmes, Holworthy, Horn, Houghton, Hubbard, Hull, Ianson, Ireson, Jackson, Jee/Gee, Jelley, Jephcott, Johnson.

February 1956 p102–5. Johnson, Jones, Kempin, Kerry, Kiddy, Kilpack, Kimberlin, King and Ridley, Kinnes, Kirk, Kitchen, Kiteley, Knight, Lagoe, Lamb, Langley, Lee.

March 1956 p173–6. Langton, Lewin, Lewis, Lewitt, Lindley, Litchfield, Lomas, Lord, Ludlam, Mabbott, Mainwaring, Malin, Margetts, Marples, Marriott, Marshall.

April 1956 p239–42. Marshall, Martin, Mason, Maskrey, Matthews, Maxey, McCracken, Miles, Miller, Mitchel, Moffat, Mooney, Moore, Morley, Morris, Neale, Newton, Oakes, Orme, Orton.

May 1956 p302–5. Osborne, Page, Parkin, Parrott, Peacock, Pearson, Peck, Petts, Phipps, Platt, Pollard, Poyser, Pratt, Priestnall, Proudman, Pulford, Pullen, Pulton.

June 1956 p367–70. Radcliff, Rawlstone, Rawson, Redfern, Richdale, Riley, Roberts, Robinson, Rose, Rowe, Rowland, Rowley, Roworth, Rudkin/Rutkin.

July 1956 p433–6. Rudkin, Scarborough, Scott, Seager, Seagrave, Seal and Gill, Searcy and Drake, Sentance, Shaw, Shenton, Sheppard, Shepherdson, Sherwood, Shillitoe, Shreeve, Sills, Simpkin, Sims, Singleton, Slater, Smart.

October 1956 p619–22. Smart, Smith, Snaith, Somerby, Sparrow ('One of the finest and most prolific of the gravestone engravers of the Midlands.'), Spencer, Spittle, Spratton, Sprawson, Squires, Stafford, Stanford, Stanyon, Stavelley.

March 1957 p164–7. Stevens, Sretton, Sturley, Summers, Surplice, Sutton, Swan, Swain, Swinnerton, Tanner, Tarry, Tavener, Taylor, Tebbutt, Thompson.

April 1957 p223–6. Thompson, Thornton, Thorpe, Tinkler, Tinley, Tomlin, Trussell, Tunnicliffe, Turner, Valentine/Volentine, Varleys, Varnon, Vice, Vincent, Vinrace, Virden, Wade, Waddington, Walker, Walkerdine.

May 1957 p291–4. Walker, Wallis, Walpole, Ward, Walker, Warren, Wartnaby, Watson, Weaver, Webster.

June 1957 p357–60. Wesley, Weston, Whadcock, Whitacker, White, Wileman, Wilmot, Wills, Wilcox, Wilson, Winfield, Wood.

August 1957 p478–81. Wood, Winn, Wood, Woodcock, Woolerton, Wolstenholme, Wooton/Wootton.

September 1957 p544–5. Wormleighton, Worrall, Wothers, Wright, Yates plus 'summing up'.

Burgess also published 'Gravestones of the Seventeenth Century' in *The Monument Journal,* September 1956 p557–62. It is an illustrated discussion of late seventeenth century gravestones in various English counties.

Apart from the presumed absent issue in 1955, all these issues of *The Monument Journal* are in the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland. Staff kindly supplied scans (but not for free!).

From those scans in 2026 I prepared a *Gazetteer of East Midlands slate gravestone masons and engravers*, available as a free PDF at: www.hoap.co.uk/gazetteer_of_burgess's_engravers.pdf This takes Burgess's list of information (organised by mason's surname) and reconfigures it as a village by village gazetteer. Which requires clarifying several ambiguities as to which village Burgess was referring to.

> I have also cross-referenced Burgess's 1950s articles with my own churchyard surveys. Burgess visited about half the churchyards in the geographical area he identified as having the most slate memorials. In contrast my fieldwork does not extend so far, nor so evenly. In contrast I have looked at a smaller area more completely e.g. I have visited nearly all the churchyards in south Nottinghamshire and South Kesteven, along with the majority in north Leicestershire. A fairly quick comparison reveals that Burgess missed a surprising number of the 'lesser' masons and engravers and, more significantly, missed up to half the gravestones by the more prolific masons.

This is not a criticism. I am merely flagging up a warning to the unwary. The apparent 'completeness' of Burgess's 1950s articles is illusory. Burgess did remarkably well spending his summer holidays from a career as a secondary school art teacher in Reigate to research gravestones in the East Midlands. He clearly states that he only visited about half the churchyards and acknowledged that there was more to be found.

I have no plans to publish a detailed critique of Burgess's 1950s articles. However I am willing to share my notes about under-represented memorials and masons with anyone venturing into this 'territory'. Please email me via bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk

In 2012 Roderick Cave emailed me with a draft of his *An index of monumental masons and slate engravers in the East Midlands*. After I was made aware of his death, in 2025 I made this available as a free PDF.

Roderick Cave, 2012 (2025), An index of monumental masons and slate engravers in the East Midlands, www.hoap.co.uk/an_index_of_monumental_masons.pdf

Apart from extensive personal fieldwork Cave lists as his sources:

anon, no date, *Tombstones in the Graveyard of Loughborough Parish Church of All Saints*, by the Loughborough Archaeological and Historical Society.

anon, no date, 'Monuments in the churchyard of St Wistan, Wistow', downloaded from www.leicestershirevillages.com/wistow/monumentalinscriptions1.html [sadly this domain is now defunct]

anon, no date, 'stones signed by masons based at Bingham'; online database at www.binghamheritage.org.uk/churchyard/search_the_churchyard/search.php

John Christopher Davies, 1987, 'Harborough Slate Engravers', *Transactions of the Leicester Archaeological and Historical Society*, vol. 61, p. 24–33; online at https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-4493-1/dissemination/1987_61/1987_61_24-33_davies.pdf

An excellent paper which should be emulated for other parts of the East Midlands.

When describing a 1763 headstone at Church Langton, Davies wrote: 'The most striking feature is the child's head with stylised wings. It represents an angel, a most potent symbol of the flight of the soul to Heaven. In earlier times the head and wings were much more crudely drawn, as in the famous Vale of Belvoir slates: in some New England stones the head is even represented by a skull.'

Note he does not use the Heathcotes' phrase 'Belvoir Angel' but follows Burgess's precedent in referring to the Vale of Belvoir. So far as I am currently aware Davies is the first person to recognise that the so-called 'angels' are also on headstones in the New World.

R. Merriman, 2000, *The use of slate gravestones and their engravers*, MA in English Local History, Leicester University.

Alfred Henry Paget, 1912, *The epitaphs in the graveyard and chapel of the Great Meeting, Leicester … and printed several years after his death … By Thomas Fielding Johnson*, Leicester: Clarke & Satchell.

I have yet to read the Loughborough publication, Merriman's dissertation or Paget's pamphlet.

Symbolism on slates

David Lea, 2023, *Swithland Slate Headstones: An illustrated survey;* online at www.hoap.co.uk/swithland_slate_headstones.pdf

David Lea brings a sophisticated 'art history' approach to the symbolism on eighteenth century gravestones, revealing much that had been missed by earlier writers such as Burgess. He is also an excellent photographer.

Belvoir angels

Frederick W. Burgess, 1963, *English Churchyard Memorials*, Lutterworth Press.

Overall the best introduction to what it says in the title. However in a section on angels Burgess briefly mentions several 'angels of the Vale [of Belvoir]' which he deems to be ‘folk art’ and so ‘perhaps most removed from our present taste.' Art historians slowly became less snooty over subsequent decades.

William Francis Silvester, unpublished MS *circa* 1979, *18th Century Headstones in the Vale of Belvoir.* Copy in Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR).

William Francis Silvester, unpublished MS *circa* 1979, *A Survey of Angel-Faced Gravestones in the Vale of Belvoir*. Copy in Loughborough Library Local Studies Collection.

Ann Schmidt discovered the copy in ROLLR. No one else seems to have been aware of Silverster's pioneering survey until February 2026 when Bob Timms discovered an unpublished ring-binder of photographs and typed notes in Loughborough Library Local Studies Collection. He was made aware of its existence by Joan Shaw and Della Graham who are volunteers at the Collection. Lynne Dyer of the Belvoir Angel Society established that Silvester was born in 1908 and died in 1999. Ann Schmidt thinks that, despite the different titles, the contents are similar. I have yet to see either copy.

Clearly Silvester was the first person to put together a survey, even though the limitations of 1970s technology meant that making multiple copies was expensive. He deserves to be credited with being a key pioneer of the study of slates with soul effigies, even if – understandably – the Heathcotes (see next entry) have hitherto been given prominence.

Pauline and Bernard Heathcote, 2008, *Vale of Belvoir Angels*, published by author (revised edition 2009).

This is the pioneering *published* study of what the Heathcotes dubbed 'Belvoir Angels', a misnomer which we seem to be stuck with. The Heathcotes' research has been continued by Ann Schmidt and friends who formed a Belvoir Angel Society in 2024.

Bob Trubshaw, 2024, 'Goodbye Belvoir Angels. Hello Soul Effigies', *Leicestershire Historian*, No.60 p26–30; reproduced as Appendix 3 of *Conversations in Churchyards*: *A field guide to the social history of memorials* (Heart of Albion 2025); online at www.hoap.co.uk/conversations_in_churchyards.pdf

My first attempt to explain that Belvoir Angels were not angels until the works of Burgess and the Heathcotes. When carved they were part of a national trend to depict the soul of the deceased. Because slate headstones have survived from the early eighteenth century the distribution of these 'soul effigies' is biased towards the distribution of slate from Charnwood Forest in the early eighteenth century (i.e. a much greater area than the Vale of Belvoir).

Bob Trubshaw, 2026, *Belvoir Angels: All the fables plus a few facts*, Heart of Albion; online at www.hoap.co.uk/belvoir_angels.pdf

This PDF brings together my previous writings about so-called 'Belvoir angels' on early eighteenth century slate gravestones. There's three problems. Firstly, the motif is found throughout England and not only the Vale of Belvoir. Secondly, when carved they were not thought to be angels. Instead they were 'soul effigies'. Thirdly, 'Belvoir angels' are supposedly only found on Charnwood ('Swithland') slate. In reality the same motif is also depicted on limestone memorials. Confused? In the course of reading this PDF a few facts will start to clarify the situation.

Nigel and Barbara Wood, 2011, *Belvoir Angels, A Field Guide* (Langar cum Barnstone Heritage Group) www.hicklingnottslocalhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/wood-field-guide-of-belvoir-angels11899.pdf

A useful study but in need of updating as more so-called 'Belvoir Angels' have been recognised since 2011, mostly outside the study area used by the Woods (e.g. a few examples in north Northamptonshire).

See also my remarks above about John Christopher Davies, 1987, 'Harborough Slate Engravers', *Transactions of the Leicester Archaeological and Historical Society,* vol. 61, p. 24–33; online at https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-4493-1/dissemination/1987_61/1987_61_24-33_davies.pdf

Farber Gravestone Collection www.davidrumsey.com/farber/

This collection of photographs of late seventeenth and early eighteen century grave markers in the east coast of America reveals that the pioneering settlers took both winged skulls (rarely surviving in England) and 'soul effigies' to the New World. The curators of these 'Puritan' churchyards specifically refer to the winged head as a 'soul effigy'.

Cornish angels

Alison Englefield, 2025, *Cornish Angels: Faces from the stones*, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies.

Motifs very similar to 'Belvoir angels' abound in Cornish churchyards, carved on Delabole slate. The main difference is they date to the second half of the eighteenth century, so after such 'soul effigies' were being carved in north Leicestershire, south Nottinghamshire and occasionally elsewhere in the East Midlands. Englefield's book provides a detailed survey of these carvings with relevant historical background. Grateful thanks to Alex Hando for bringing this book to my attention.

Available via https://kernowgoth.org/product/cornish-angels-faces-from-the-stones/
Photographs possibly online at https://uk.pinterest.com/alisonenglefield/cornish-angels/

slate quarries

David Ramsey, 2002, *Newtown Linford Notes and the Leicestershire Slate Industry,* Bradgate Books.

David Ramsey, 2002, 'Slate quarrying at Groby and Swithland', *Leicestershire Industrial Heritage Society Bulletin* No.17; online at specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p15407coll7/id/131

David Ramsey, 2007, 'Early slate quarries North West Leicestershire', *Leicestershire Industrial History Bulletin* no.18; text seemingly online at Leicestershire Victoria County History Trust Charnwood Roots Databank archive.charnwoodroots.org/media/6238/70a2746-3a0a172a31ee4f50e0c3533598b53cbf5b890670.docx

David researched the slate quarries over many years, along with other aspects of the history of Bradgate and Groby. My grateful thanks to Aubrey Stevenson for much-needed assistance attempting to create a bibliography of David's publications. So far as I am aware these are the only three works by him which look at the Swithland slate industry.

Alex Hando, 2022, 'Cleft from the Hills', Heart of Albion; online at www.hoap.co.uk/cleft_from_the_hills.pdf

Alex Hando drew upon numerous prior publications to write an an overview of the differences between Charnwood and Welsh slate extraction, explaining why the Welsh product dominated the market after the railway network was established in the 1840s. He provides a full list of sources for those wishing to explore this aspect of history further.

Since publication Alex has done more research on the last years of the 'Swithland' quarries but this has yet to be published.

Eighteenth century trade routes

Bob Trubshaw, 2022, 'Charnwood slate gravestones and eighteenth century trade routes', *Leicestershire Historian,* No.58 p37–2; reproduced as Appendix 2 of *Conversations in Churchyards:: A field guide to the social history of memorials* (Heart of Albion 2025); online at www.hoap.co.uk/conversations_in_churchyards.pdf

Slate gravestones make a unique historical resource for the eighteenth century – the 'when' and 'where' of location are rarely ambiguous. Thanks to assistance from David Ramsey and John Manterfield I was able to construct plausible trade routes from Charnwood Forest to Northampton and Grantham.

English churchyard monuments

W.T. Vincent, 1896, *In Search of Gravestones Old and Curious.*

Katharine Esdaile, 1946, *English Church Monuments 1510 to 1840*, Batsford.

Frederick Burgess, 1963, *English Churchyard Memorials*, Lutterworth Press.

Ronald Fletcher, 1978, *In a Country Churchyard,* Batsford.

Peter Gwillim and Christopher Whitmore, 1964, *Slate engraving, research and design*, Leicester College of Art, School of Printing.

Brian Kemp, 1980, *English Church Monuments,* Batsford.

Kenneth Lindley, 1965, *Of Graves and Epitaphs*, Hutchinson.

Peter Stanford, 2013, *How to Read a Graveyard: Journeys in the company of the dead,* Bloomsbury.

P. Booth and E. Tingle (eds), 2023, *A Companion to Death, Burial, and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe c.1300–700*, Brill.

Bob Trubshaw, 2025, *Conversations in Churchyards*, Heart of Albion; online at www.hoap.co.uk/conversations_in_churchyards.pdf

For those who want to look more broadly at the history of English churchyards this is your reading list. If you prefer a lightweight introduction then try:

Roger Bowdler, 2019, *Churchyards*, Amberley Publishing, 2019

I have not yet encountered a copy of W.T. Vincent's pioneering study, nor Gwillim and Whitmore's intriguing-sounding publication.

Ronald Fletcher's approach is intriguing as he shows how burial grounds commemorate local communities – just as much as individuals – by helping to maintain, share and construct memories and collective identities.

My own contribution was inspired by unpublished research by Emeritus Professor Keith Snell, and I am grateful for his help and encouragement.

Scottish churchyard monuments

Betty Willsher and Doreen Hunter, 1978, *Stones: a guide to some remarkable eighteenth century gravestones,* Canongate; also reprints by at least one other publisher.

Betty Willsher, 1985, *Understanding Scottish Graveyards*; 4th edn revised by Susan Buckham, Archaeopress Archaeology 2026.

I have yet to read either of these studies but include them for completeness.

Leicestershire churchyard monuments

Max Wade Matthews, 1992, *Grave Matters: A walk through Welford Road Cemetery*, Heart of Albion.

Alan McWhirr, 1998, 'Local history in tombstones', *Leicestershire Historian* No.34 p6–7; online at archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/details.xhtml?recordId=325378 4

Alan McWhirr, 2003, 'Exploring Leicestershire' Churchyards – part 1', *Leicestershire Historian* No.39 p11–6; online at archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-6156-1/dissemination/LH39-2003/LH39-2003-11-16-McWhirr.pdf

Alan McWhirr, 2004, 'Exploring Leicestershire' Churchyards –part 2', *Leicestershire Historian* No.40 p16–1; online at archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-6156-1/dissemination/LH40-2004/LH40-2004-16-21-McWhirr.pdf

Strictly Max Matthews' booklet is not about a churchyard but a pioneering municipal cemetery. Back in 1992 it was fairly groundbreaking. It is not online but copies should be available at ROLLR and LAHS library.

Alan McWhirr provided a masterclass in concise overviews of the history of different aspects of churchyard history. His articles were most helpful when writing *Conversations in Churchyards.*

Revised November 2025; March 2026 (twice); April 2026; May 2026; June 2026; July 2026