

V.—DISUSED GRAVEYARDS IN NORTHUMBERLAND.

BY MABERLY PHILLIPS.

[Read on the 26th October, 1887.]

DURING a recent stay in the neighbourhood of Wooler, I visited the beautiful little church of Old Bewick, which, after lying in ruins for a number of years, was, by the liberality of the late Mr. John Charles Langlands,¹ restored to its original state in 1867. Around it stand several headstones that give the names and mark the resting-places of many a sturdy borderer during the 17th and 18th centuries. A stone over the inside of the vestry door informs us that the chapel had been previously restored by Ralph Williamson, Esq., in 1695, but as the said stone was, at the time of the present restoration, found in the burn near the church, it may give some idea of the condition of things at that time.

I was led to enquire whether there were any other chapels of ease with their graveyards that had fallen into such ruin, and the result was my finding accounts of several in the neighbourhood which are still to be traced in states of greater or less decay, and as there can be no doubt that wanton destruction and mischief has had far more to do with their defacement than the corroding hand of time, I venture to bring the result of my enquiries before the members of this Society, trusting that through them the attention of those responsible for the due and proper protection of such sacred grounds may be awakened ere all traces of these interesting relics of past time are ruthlessly swept away.

About four miles from Old Bewick, within the grounds of Mr. Edward John Collingwood of Lilburn Tower, are the remains of Lilburn chapel. Here, in spite of its ruinous condition, members of the Collingwood family have been baptized. The graveyard around is becomingly kept, and occasional interments take place. A few old headstones are still standing; one notes the resting-place of Henry Neilson, who died in 1684, and another of William Neilson, who was buried in 1693.

¹ See *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newcastle*, III., pp. 200 and 201.

At South Middleton, some four miles to the west of Lilburn, I found there had previously been an old church and burial ground, but that every stone had long since disappeared and the ground had been ploughed over for many years. It stood in the Woodhead Field, where some remains of an ancient village were recently traceable.

At Brandon is still a small burying ground, but no remains of the chapel. It is enclosed, but the neglected vegetation has grown into a tangled mass of dockens, nettles, and rank grass. Several head and slab stones are still there visible, and I believe others might be found were the mass of herbage removed. Between this plot of ground, now enclosed, and the high road, are some cottage gardens, which at first seems strange, but there always has been, and still is, through this part of the country a very strong objection, amounting to a superstition, against being buried on the north side, or as it is locally called, the back side of the church, and in no case is it resorted to until the want of space compels. It, therefore, seems likely that the ground at Brandon has been enclosed just where the graves were and up to the ruins of the church, the remainder of the churchyard on the north being turned into gardens. In my opinion the same idea applies to several other burial grounds that I saw.

Two miles north-west of Wooler is Humbledon, and there, a few hundred yards off the high road, near where the old village is said to have stood, were pointed out to me the remains of the old kirk and graveyard. Some twenty or thirty yards into a barley field was a neglected mound of earth and small stones, grass grown and wretched, but no trace of building or headstone. Upon enquiry it appeared that about thirty-five years ago the farmer commenced to plough the whole place up, but was stopped by the vicar of Doddington, not, however, until much of the outlying ground had been turned over and many bones exposed. In the memory of by no means the oldest inhabitant, some fifteen or twenty headstones were standing, but these had all been gradually broken up by the good housewives in the neighbourhood for sandstone to clean their hearths with, that article being scarce.

At Akeld, a mile further west, upon the road side, is a grass-grown patch of ground of about an acre, open to the road, but enclosed on the field side, and offering a most tempting site for muggers, and from the embers of late fires, presumably occupied by that fraternity. This was

the churchyard of Akeld, and the oldest inhabitant only knows that it has always been so, but believes that the vicar of Kirknewton does look after it, as the farmer commenced a manure heap there and had to remove it, and when the policeman *did* see the muggers he made them move on.

At Ewart, about two miles north-east, under the shadow of some large buildings erected by Sir Horace St. Paul, is the site of another old graveyard, but whether a church ever stood here, I could not find out. The ground is partially enclosed, surrounded by a row of trees of from 80 to 100 years' growth. No traces of buildings or headstones are now to be seen; probably they have long since yielded their quota to the sandstone market.

On the road side, between Mindrum and Mindrum Mill, is a graveyard of considerable dimensions, with many headstones standing. In the centre of the ground a wall has been built, enclosing a space about 10 yards by 12. The wall is about seven feet high, with a good stone coping upon the top, but now somewhat broken down. I was informed that it was erected some years ago by a family of the name of Potts, though the stones within speak of the Edmestons having used it in 1778. Outside of this enclosure one of the gravestones records the death of George Tait, on "ye 4th Oct. 1675." On the back of it are shears with "Memento Mori" in a half-circle, and several large initials, evidently of the family of Tait, and from it a brass has been extracted. There is also a large stone of a red colour, broken in half, with a figure carved upon it much larger than is generally found upon a headstone, which may be a remnant of the old chapel.

At Fenton is a most interesting ground situated on the farm of Mr. Laidlaw. In the centre of a large barley field is an enclosure of about half an acre of land. Amongst a mass of tangled grass is here to be found (so the historian Mackenzie tells us)² all that is left of the mother church of Wooler. The unevenness of the ground under foot indicated many stones still left, if time permitted to uncover them. One large tablet, with the aid of some farm-workers who were passing, we did succeed in divesting of its matted turf. The top line was remarkably clear, "Thomas Morton of Humbleton" being cut in large bold capitals. Many letters upon the outer sides of the stone were very distinct, but the centre was too weather-beaten to be deciphered.

² Vol. I., p. 392.

Mr. Laidlaw told me he had cleared the same slab fifteen or sixteen years before, when the date, 1600 and something, was to be made out. The Mortons were reputed to be ancestors of the Biddick family of the same name. Another large stone some 6 feet long by 20 inches at one end tapering to 12 at the other, and broken through the centre, we uncovered close by, but it had no inscription. A stone with illegible lettering, built into part of the farm stabling, may suggest where the remains of the church, and probably some of the headstones are to be found. Until very recently, the foundations of an old pele tower might be seen in the garden of the farm-house.

I was informed that there is an old burial ground lying between Wark and Carham, called "Julie's Nick," and another at West Learmouth, but these I did not visit.

At Hepple, near Rothbury (though rather out of the district that we have been speaking of), once stood a chapel with its burial ground.³ Mackenzie, in his *View of Northumberland*,⁴ tells us that in 1760 the remains of the church were removed and a farm-house built with the stones. The Kirk Hill Farm, now to be found at Hepple, seems to bear silent testimony to this fact. The same historian also tells us that the graveyard was used occasionally for burying strangers and unchristened children in, and that in 1760 "the font and pedestal were in good preservation, and many mutilated monuments were found both within and without the walls of the holy building." "In the chancel, the fragments of a tombstone with its supporters were discovered, and what is curious, was standing in a north and south direction. This monument was much defaced (apparently more owing to acts of wantonness than to the slow corroding teeth of time), and it was with extreme difficulty that parts of the inscription were deciphered." The site of the church and graveyard is now ploughed over, and no tidings could I learn of the interesting relics named by Mackenzie.

I have made no attempt at giving an historical account of these burial places; but fearing that the opening of the new railway through this locality might stimulate the demand for "sandstone," I have hastened to bring the matter forward, hoping that it may lead to some steps being taken to duly preserve the little that is yet left of these sacred relics of antiquity.

³ See *Proc.* III., p. 216. ⁴ Vol. II., p. 75.