

Harborough Slate Engravers

by *J. C. Davies*

The eighteenth century slate engravers of Leicestershire are a neglected school of craftsmen. They appeared in response to a demand from a population steadily growing in affluence. In the Middle Ages only the very rich or the very holy were buried inside the church, and commemorated by splendid tombs and tombstones: the rest of the population were buried outside in the churchyard, and if they were commemorated at all, it would have been in wood. Such memorials do not survive the centuries, although there are some indications that they existed. But after the Wars of the Roses, England steadily built up its strength, and new classes of people became affluent enough to afford more permanent memorials of their dead.

It was during the seventeenth century that stone memorials first appeared in the nation's churchyards. In Leicestershire we are lucky, as our local stone is slate, which is very hard: in other parts of the country the early gravestones are largely indecipherable, but Leicestershire slates retain their inscriptions almost as new.

The early slates are understandably crude, but there was a gradual refinement until about the middle of the eighteenth century, when there was a sudden advance which produced the flowering of this craft. The country masons received inspiration from the great world outside, firstly from the writing masters, such as Bickham, then from the furniture designers, like Chippendale, and finally from the Classical innovators, like the Adams brothers. These famous craftsmen produced pattern books that enjoyed a wide circulation, and the local craftsmen developed profuse variations on their themes. Then came opposition. In the nineteenth century the newly awakened consciousness of the clergy prompted them to attack the 'paganism' and 'extravagance' shown on the headstones. With more justification, they deplored the unseemliness of some of the epitaphs. The result was a withering away of the vitality of composition, and a reduction to bareness and mere recording.

The accompanying photographs are of rubbings made by Mr Harold Jones in the churchyards of the Harborough district. They attempt to illustrate the development and decline of this craft in one little corner of the extensive territory that was served with memorial stones of Swithland slate.

The slates will be identified by the first name and date on them. No.1 is Samuel Farmar 1701, standing in Glooston churchyard. They are not many of these early stones left: this one, although late in date, is perhaps a little cruder than most. The lettering, the spacing, and the spelling show that the engraver was illiterate and unaware of any standards in this work: the same is probably true of his patron. Nevertheless the main function of the work is achieved: Samuel Farmar is commemorated.

No.2 is William Reynolds 1717. It stands in Theddingworth churchyard, and shows an advance. The first letter is elaborately decorated, and two or three others have decorative twirls. The main lettering, although not homogeneous, is firm and pleasing, and there are additional decorations in the form of the supporting bracket and the flowers, a tulip and two sunflowers.

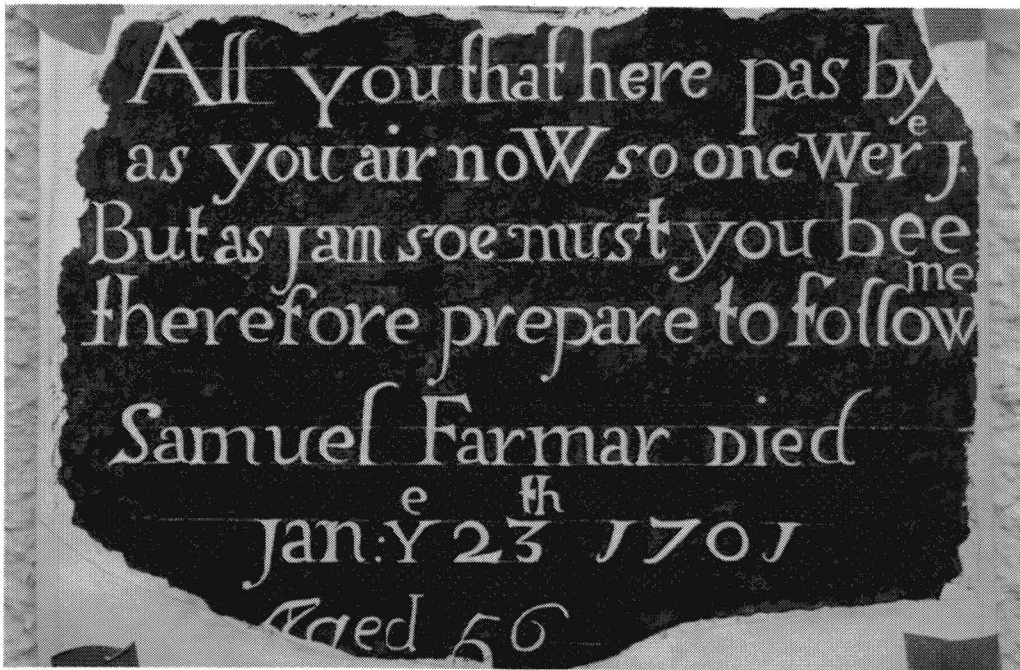


Plate 1. Samuel Farmar 1701 Height 14"

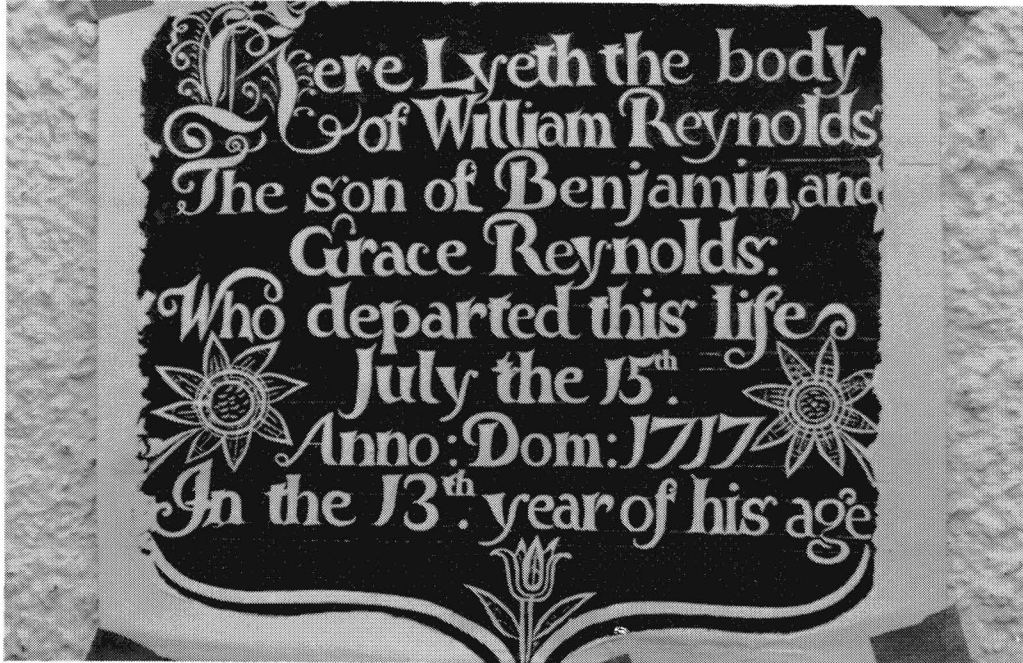


Plate 2. William Reynolds 1717 Height 15"



Plate 3. Miriam Spence 1748 Height 34"

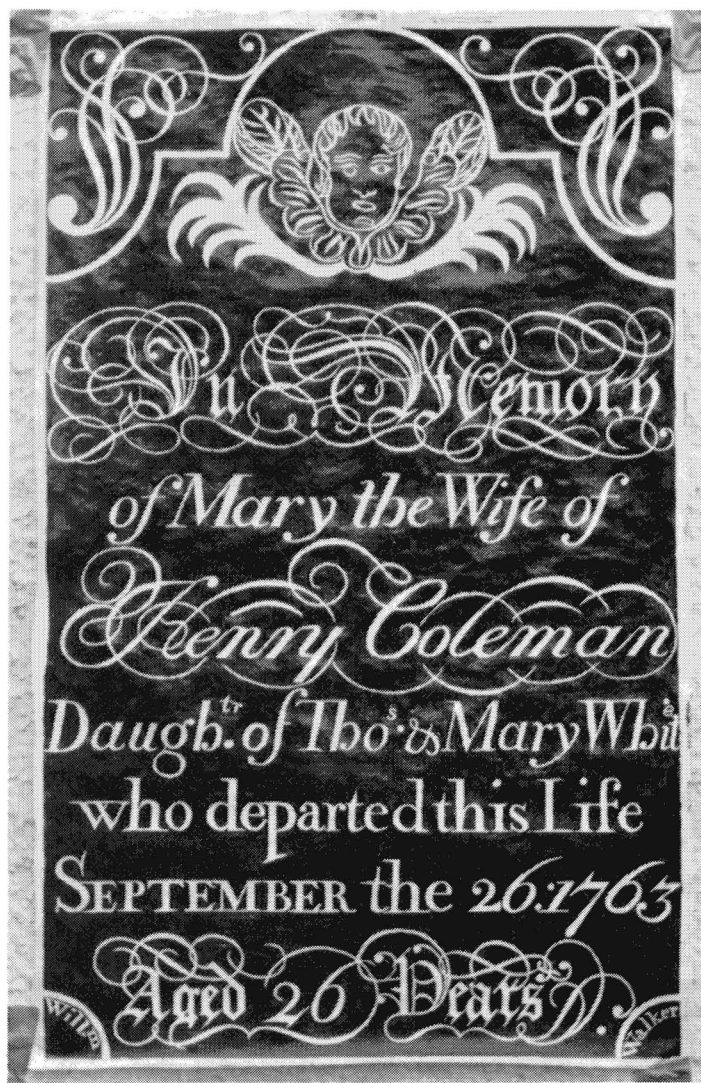


Plate 4. Mary Coleman 1763 Height 37"



Plate 5. John Casee 1764 Height 50"

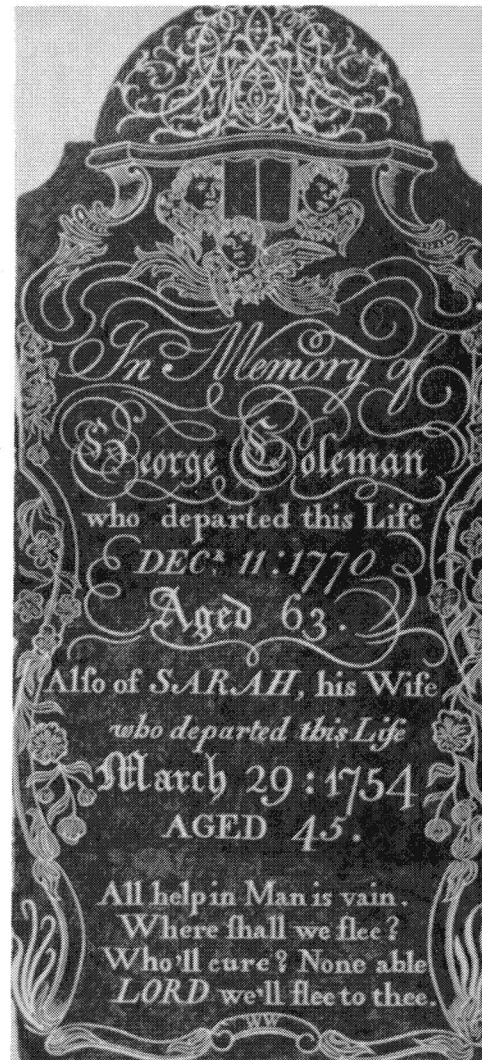


Plate 6. George Coleman 1770 Height 52"

No.3, Miriam Spence 1748, standing in the churchyard of St. Mary in Arden, Market Harborough, is in a different class altogether. The top of the stone is shaped into a double shouldered arch, with a double margin all round. Most spectacular is the calligraphic ornament, perhaps a little excessive in this case: the other lettering is worth noting, three different founts in four lines, although the spacing is not perfect.

The elaborate design at the base of the stone containing the engraver's name is of acanthus leaves. Acanthus is a Mediterranean plant much used in Classical decoration, so its presence here must indicate external influence. The engraver is Samuel Turner, who lived in Bowden Lane¹, Market Harborough.

He was not a mason, as most of the engravers were, but a surveyor. He was actually a shepherd living in the parish of Harrington, Northamptonshire, until he was thirty-four years old, and then he migrated to Market Harborough. He must have had wide talents as he made a living as a surveyor, engraver, and painter. He drew the oldest existing map of Harborough,² and engraved at least thirty memorial stones.³ He also painted pictures, although none of these have ever been identified. Finally, he engraved his own memorial stone, with an autobiographical inscription, which is given below.

No.4 Mary Coleman 1763 stands in Church Langton churchyard, and was engraved by William Walker, a Harborough mason. Although fifteen years later than Turner's stone, it is less sophisticated. It is square cut, and the shouldered arch is merely incised upon it, with scroll designs in the spandrels. 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. Walker enters the tradition at a late stage, but he does use this symbol at least a dozen times. The calligraphic decoration is less elaborate than in Turner. The spacing of the letters is not faultless, yet there are six different types in seven lines.

William Walker lived in a house at the bottom of High Street, Harborough, now replaced by the Co-operative Stores.⁴ Besides being a mason, he must have been a bricklayer, for in his will he mentioned his brickyard in the parish of Great Bowden.⁵ This was probably in St Mary's Road, where Symington's Recreation Ground is today, for this was once a brickyard, and once in Great Bowden parish. There is mention of some work he did in the church,⁶ and also of some on the main bridge in Harborough, for in his old age he was appointed Overseer of the Highways.⁷ We know nothing of the houses he must have built in Harborough and the surrounding villages, but the memorial stones he engraved stand witness to his talents. Mr Harold Jones has rubbed 63 of them:⁸ three of them follow.

No.5 is John Casee Senior 1764, standing in the churchyard of St Mary in Arden. This design must have been taken straight out of a cabinet maker's pattern book: a mirror frame in the full flow of rococo fantasy. The monogram in the medallion is the middle class equivalent of the gentleman's coat of arms. The inscription and its decoration is comparatively undistinguished, but there are four different types of lettering in four lines.

No.6 is George Coleman 1770 standing in Great Bowden churchyard. The stone is cut to a shouldered arch which contains an elaborate double monogram, as the wife Sarah is also commemorated. Underneath the entablature the book of life, a religious symbol, lies open, surrounded by three cherubs' heads that can no longer be regarded as symbolic, but rather as decorative features: the faces and wings are much more naturalistic.

In this slate Walker has shown his originality in the choice of his ornaments, a cartouche shaped to suit his double inscription and epitaph, stylised scrolls to enclose it, and native flowers to adorn it. The trite epitaph is a weakness common to most of the craftsmen of this period: their literary instincts were not as refined as their sculptural.

No.7 is Ann Hubbard 1779, standing *in situ* in the churchyard of St. Mary in Arden. It is a simple squared stone with the most elaborate decoration. The cartouche is another individual shape designed to take two inscriptions, the second perhaps completed later by another hand. The medallion contains a stylised urn decorated with acanthus, anthemion, and a swag of husks. These are classical features which had been creeping into the rococo tradition for some time. In the surrounding decoration there is acanthus, some husk, and even modified *paterae*, but the overwhelming impression is rococo, including a pair of fantastic cornices. The serpents hanging from the two upper *paterae* are decorative: originally, the circular serpent swallowing its tail had a religious significance, symbolising eternity.

This stone is perhaps the summit of Walker's achievement. It has an added distinction in that it is the focus of a service of commemoration every Easter Eve. William Hubbard, commemorated by the second inscription on the stone, left a charge of one guinea a year on one of his properties. This was to be paid to 'the Harborough singers' provided they held a service over his grave every Easter Eve. The charge has been compounded to a lump sum by the present owners of the property, but the choir of St Dionysius Church still hold the service around this gravestone every Easter Eve.

An interesting minor feature of these Walker slates is the different form of his signature to each:

Will^m Walker, W. Walker, W. W. Walker.

No.8 is Samuel Turner 1784, standing in the churchyard of St Mary in Arden. It is a curiosity rather than an illustration of the artistry of eighteenth century Harborough slate cutters. He cut the slate himself in 1782, and took the opportunity to fashion a short autobiography. The central decoration was an actual sundial, but the metal gnomon has disappeared. To the right is his shepherd's hut and two sheep: at the right hand corner is a portrait of himself seated at his easel. To the left of the sundial are surveyor's instruments, and in the left hand corner a map of Stoney Farm. On the left margin is a painter's palette, and on the right what looks like a leather bucket. The whole effect is intellectual rather than artistic.

There were several other slate engravers in Harborough besides Walker and Turner, and a couple are included in this essay to show that they belonged to the same school.

No.9 is Thomas Collins 1770, standing in Little Bowden churchyard. It is by John Clark, who signs himself as a plasterer. The cartouche, outlined by scrolls, is individual in shape, and sectionalised to commemorate two children. The medallion contains the symbolic crown of glory, and the open book has two Latin inscriptions that are translated 'The death of the faithful is life', and 'Our adversities are from God'. The decoration is mainly acanthus, with stylised *paterae* and serpents, and is noticeably more restrained than Walker's. The small symbols, chalice and cross on the left, and hour glass and scythe on the right, are unusual.

No.10 is Mathias Harrison 1783, once standing in the graveyard of the Congregational Chapel, Market Harborough, and now preserved behind the chapel. It was cut by J. Scott, whom we take to be the Joseph Scott of Harborough who has signed some other slates thus.

The two identical tablets form a solid base for the decoration of the upper part. This design is purely classical: the urn is more orthodox than Walker's, and the general effect is more austere.

No.11 is John Swingler 1811 standing in Lubenham churchyard, and cut by William Tompson of Harborough. It shows a deterioration in style from Walker, Clark and Scott. From the entablature emerge what must be truncated acanthus leaves that betray an ignorance of the essential shape of the plant. The pillars on either side are composite and

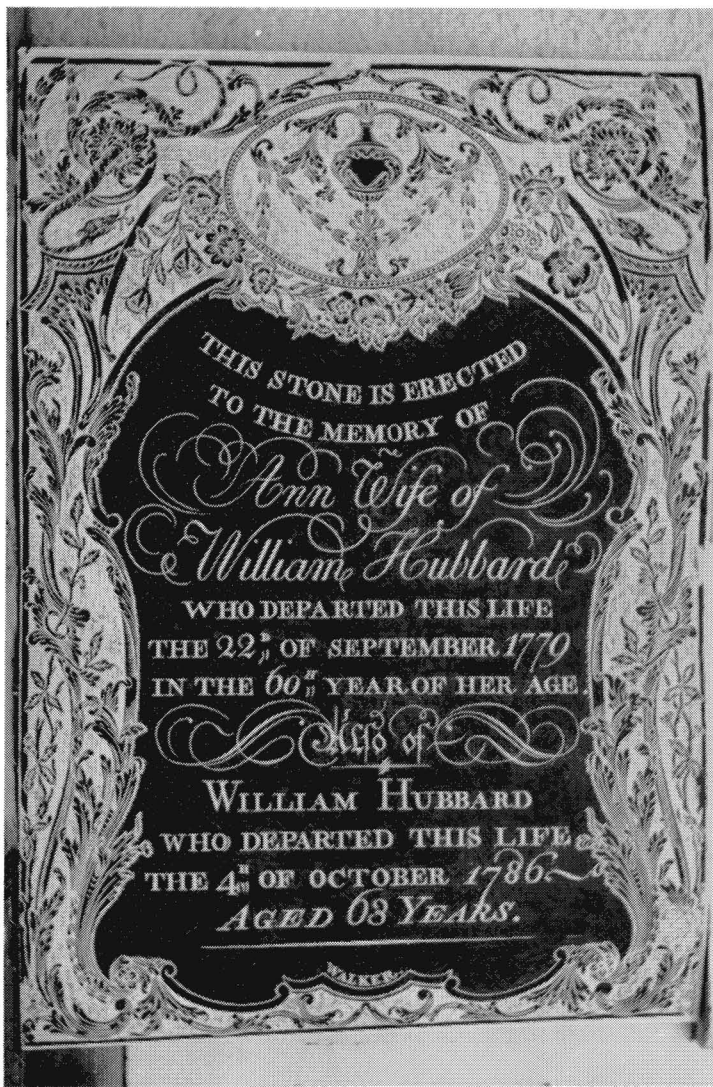


Plate 7. Ann Hubbard 1779 Height 51"

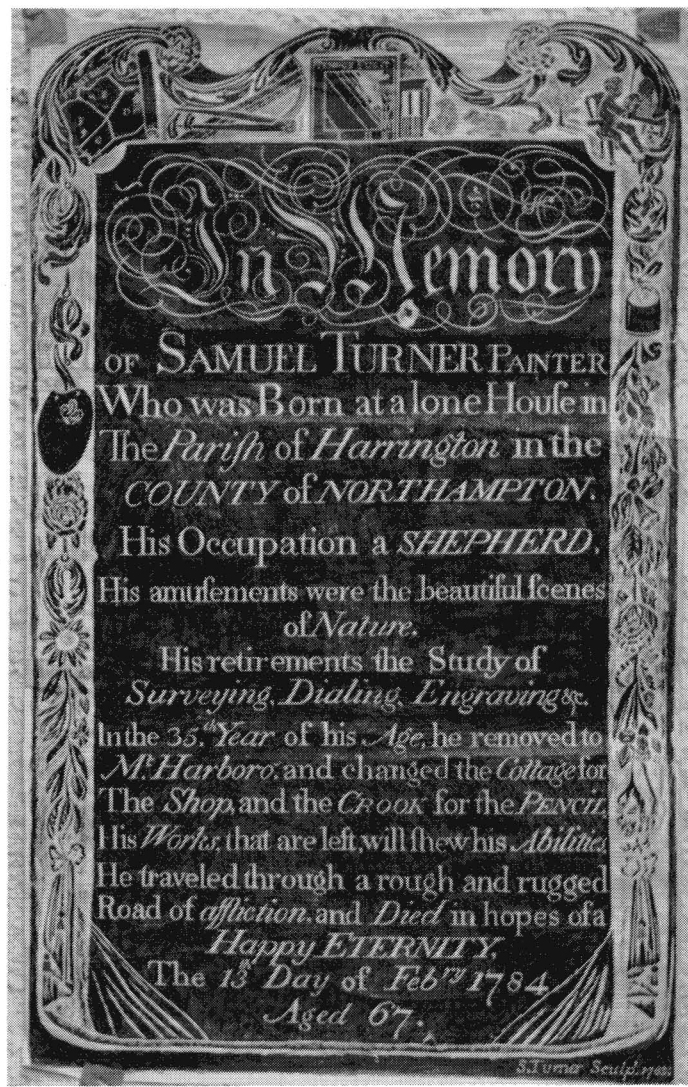


Plate 8. Samuel Turner 1784 Height 47"

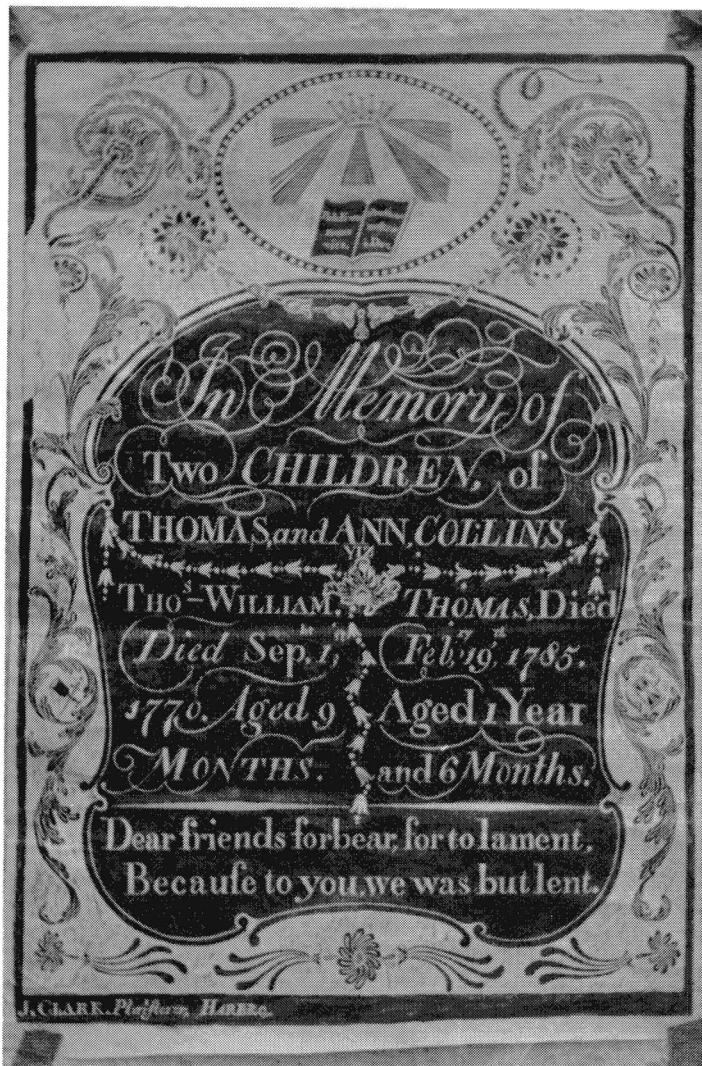


Plate 9. Thomas Collins 1770 Height 48"

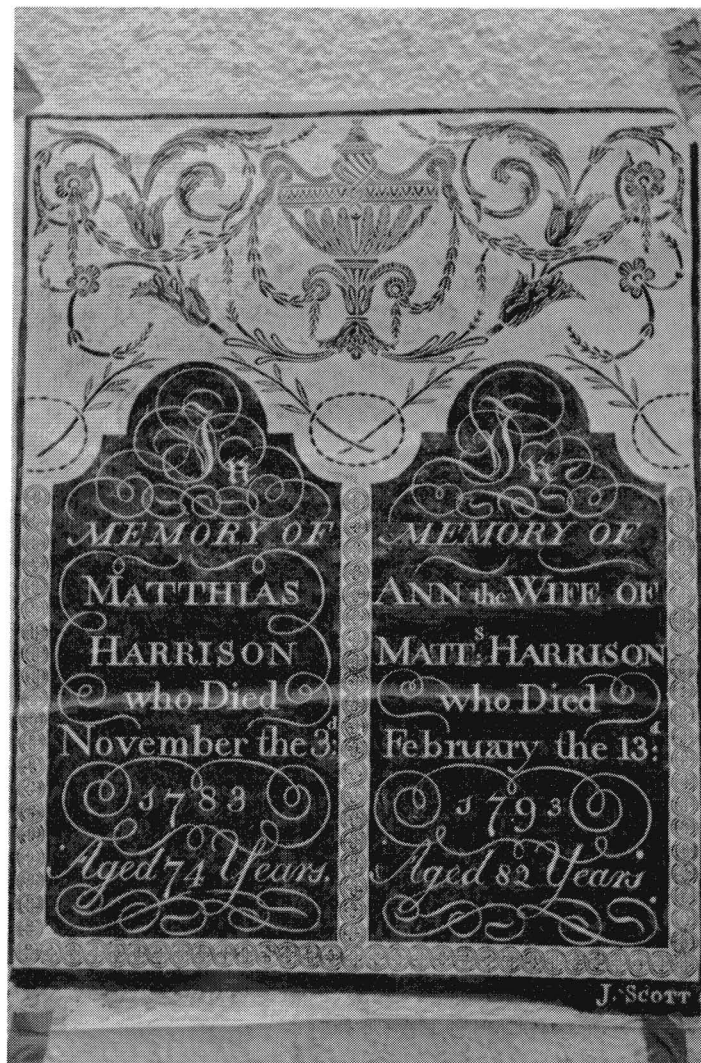


Plate 10. Mathias Harrison 1783 Height 42"

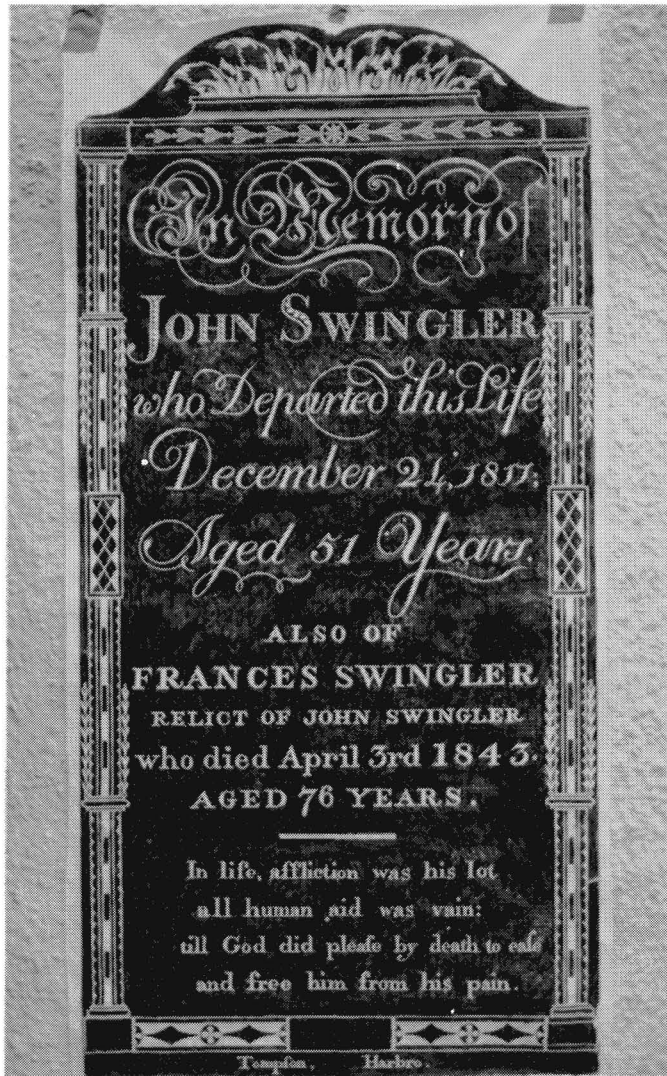


Plate 11. John Swingler 1811 Height 60"

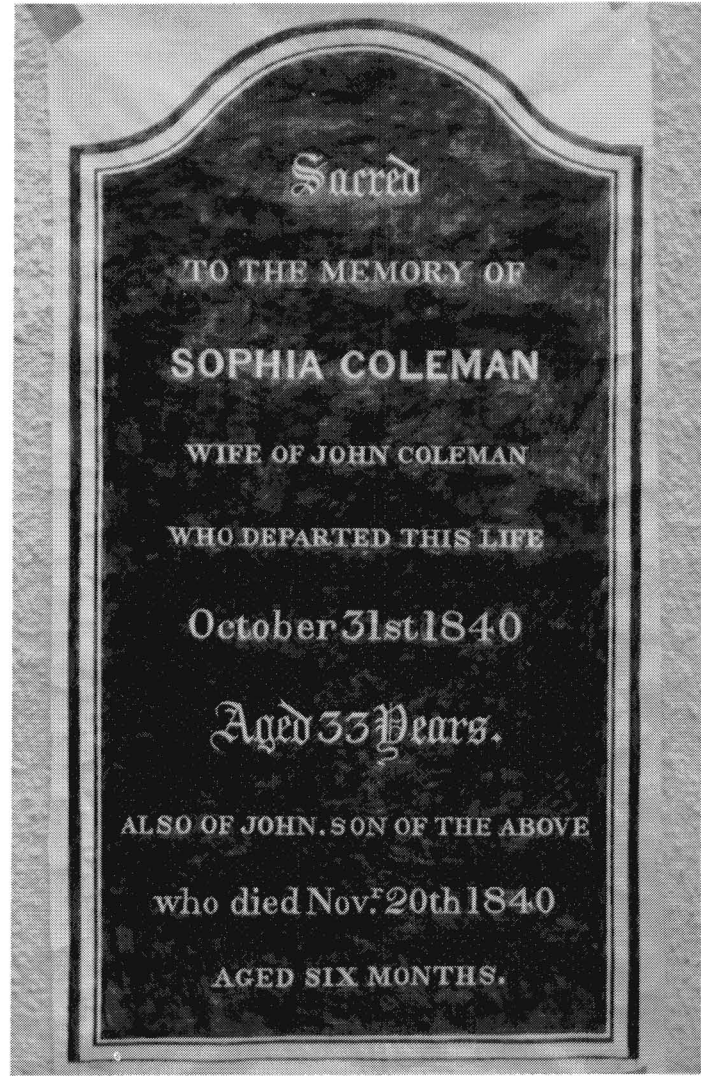


Plate 12. Sophia Coleman 1840 Height 50"

unreal, as are the husks that adorn them. The lettering is undistinguished, although the decoration of 'John Swingler' is an innovation. The inscription for Frances Swingler, cut 32 years later, shows the decline to bareness in the nineteenth century.

No.12 is Sophia Coleman 1840, also standing in Lubenham churchyard. It confirms the decline to bareness, and shows the ultimate state of slate memorials in the Harborough district. It was probably supplied ready shaped from a central yard, and the engraver asked merely to cut the inscription. He did not cut his name, either because he was not proud of his work, or perhaps because the parson had forbidden it. It must be conceded that the lettering is good, but the vitality of the eighteenth century is gone.

Such was the development and decline of slate memorials in the Harborough district. Furthermore, slate went of fashion as foreign stones were imported: our churchyards and cemeteries were dominated by Italian marble in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Notes

The background to this essay is *English Churchyard Memorials* by Frederick Burgess (Lutterworth Press, 1963): for New England references, *Gravestone Designs* by Emily Wasserman (Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1972).

1. Market Harborough Town Rate Book: LRO DE2132/4
2. Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*: Vol.III, ii, 1127
3. *Rubbings in Harborough Museum*
4. M.H. Town Rate Book: LRO DE2132/21
5. LRO PR/T/1793/175/1-2
6. Rowland Rouse m/s *History of Harborough* 1762 p.18
7. Account Book of William Walker, LRO DE435/3
8. *Rubbings in Harborough Museum*