The north side of the churchyard

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In Wales, Frances Lynch is our longest-standing diocesan archaeologist. She has sat on the advisory committee for Bangor diocese since its inception in 1994, revealing that her interests range widely beyond the sphere of Neolithic and Bronze Age studies on which she is such an authority. As a fellow diocesan archaeologist, for neighbouring St Asaph, I can assume that Frances too periodically encounters proposals by a parish to build an extension to its church or some other development that will involve the disturbance of a portion of the churchyard. More often than not the location of the new development will be on the north side of the church, and when the faculty application is returned to the diocesan office it is not uncommon to find the petitioners have claimed that there are no burials in the area proposed for the development. In such circumstances the well-used adage, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, immediately comes to mind, for what is implicit in the petitioners' statement is that there are no visible grave markers in the designated patch of ground. Thus it can come as a surprise to them when the almost inevitable evaluation reveals burials. This paper, offered out of respect for an archaeologist whose wise counsel has been much appreciated by the writer over the years, digs a little deeper into the past history of the north side of the churchyard.

MARKED GRAVES

Permanent stone grave markers started to become prevalent across England and Wales only in the second half of the seventeenth century. Before that date they were extremely uncommon, though it has been claimed that less durable wooden crosses were widely employed.[1] During the survey of historic churches in the borderland counties of Wales funded by Cadw in the early 1990s, the writer became aware, albeit gradually, that the earliest marked graves consistently appeared on the south or occasionally the east side of the church. More intuitive observation than objective assessment, this view was based solely on rapid and rather brief examinations of numerous churchyards. Had I been more familiar with the writings of accomplished nineteenth-century church historians such as Archdeacon Thomas of St Asaph, the phenomenon might have seemed less remarkable.

A cursory examination of any group of historic churchyards will probably also reveal that graves on the north side of the church are often sparser than their counterparts on the south, as for example at Methyr Cynog in Brecknock (Fig 1). In the diocese of St Asaph, the writer's own parish of Meifod reflects the dichotomy perfectly. At 1.9 hectares, the churchyard is the largest in Powys, a relic of the precinct that enclosed the mother church of the region in the pre-Conquest period.[2] The church of St Tysilio and St Mary lies eccentrically within the enclosure and, given the latter's size, the building appears overly close to its southern boundary. Grave markers are tightly packed into the small churchyard area to the south of the church, while nineteenth- and twentieth-century graves lie ranked to the north of the church; about 0.6 hectares or nearly a third of the churchyard remains as green sward without

Fig. 1. The empty northern side of the churchyard at Merthyr Cynog in Brecknock. *Photograph: author.*

obvious disturbances (Fig. 2).

The sparseness of graves is a feature occasionally remarked on by the wider community. In *A Shropshire Lad*, published in 1887, A. E. Housman poeticized the phenomenon, hinting in veiled fashion at one of the reasons behind it:

> To south the headstones cluster,
> The sunny mounds lie thick;
> The dead are more in muster
> At Hughley than the quick.
> North, for a soon-told number,
> Chill graves the sexton delves,
> And steeple-shadowed slumber
> The slayers of themselves.[3]

A gravestone of 1807 at Epworth (Lincs.) incorporates a comparable sentiment:

> That I might longer undisturbed abide,
> I choos'd to be laid on the northern side.[4]

Fig. 2. The northern side of the churchyard at Meifod, Montgomeryshire. *Photograph: author.*

The few systematic archaeological surveys of churchyard burial monuments in St Asaph diocese permit greater objectivity: Pennant Melangell (Monts.), Bangor-on-Dee (Flints.) and Llangar near Corwen (Mer.). That from Bangor-on-Dee tells us little. From the earlier part of the eighteenth century, two marked burials lie on the north side of the church, one on the south, while in the second half of the century there is a fairly even spread across both sides.[5] Llangar offers better evidence. Prior to 1750, the few graves that were marked lay to the south with one or two to the east. After that date the north side of the churchyard began to be utilised.[6] Pennant Melangell (Figs 3–4) is by far the most instructive, with a scatter of seventeenth-century memorials around the south-eastern corner of the church, wider spreads on the south in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and an expansion into the western and north-western reaches of the graveyard only in the twentieth century. Even today there are no graves immediately north of the church.[7]

Measured surveys apart, there is another more ubiquitous source to draw on. County genealogical societies have been assiduously recording and publishing the memorial inscriptions in their churches and churchyards for many years. The Montgomeryshire series started in 1995 and most of the county's historic churches have now been examined. Each calendar of churchyard inscriptions is accompanied by a map, not metrically accurate but specific enough for the purpose of determining the position of individual grave markers. The Montgomeryshire data are thus reasonably full, and the picture that emerges is unlikely to be exceptional within the country as a whole.

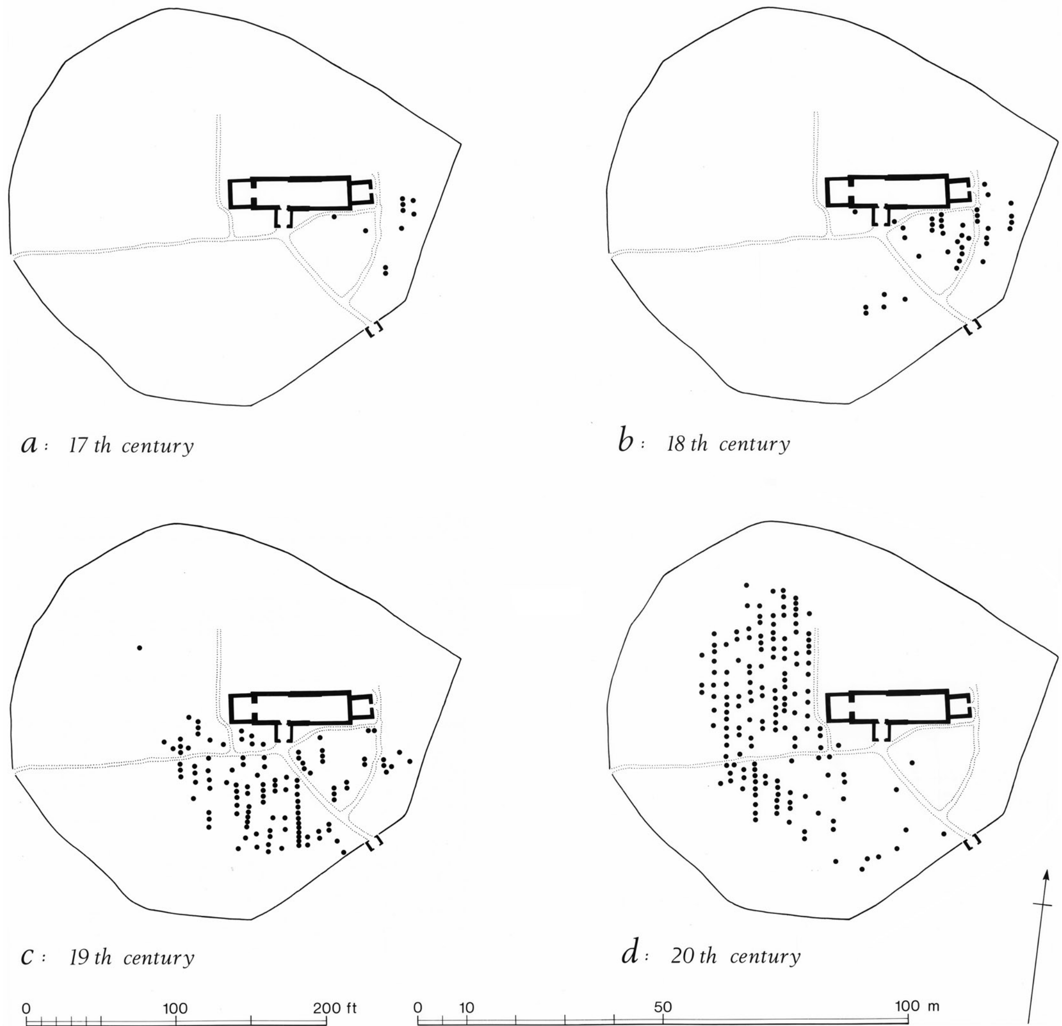

Fig. 3. The development of burial patterns in the rural churchyard at Pennant Melangell, Montgomeryshire (after Britnell 1994).

Comparison of the earliest dated grave markers to the north and south of a church may perhaps be a rather blunt tool for discerning pattern, and there are several variables that could distort the picture in any particular graveyard. Some have witnessed drastic clearance of memorials in recent times, though few rival the official vandalism of the grave markers at Worthenbury (Flints.), now fragmented in a grass-covered bund along the churchyard edge. Earlier clearance, less easy to demonstrate, is patently the reason why the sequence in St Peter's churchyard in Machynlleth, a thriving small town in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, commences no earlier than 1731.

The elements, too, take a toll of older sandstone and slate memorials, through erosion and spalling respectively; both types of stones were used widely for earlier graveyard memorials. And where multiple interments are recorded on a single stone, the earliest inscription may not reflect the true date at which the stone was erected: that could have been years, even decades later. Individually, the resulting patterns from some churchyards might be challengeable for one of a number of reasons; collectively, however, the empirical evidence from the county is convincing.

From the forty-two Montgomeryshire churchyards that provide useful data, only three churches have their earliest grave marker on the north side. Montgomery itself has a thirty-year separation between north (1746) and south (1776), the logical conclusion being that the Machynlleth situation mentioned above affected this small town also. The remote hill settlement at Llanmerewig near Newtown has the earliest memorial on the south side from 1775, yet two eighteenth-century ledgers lie on the north, from 1724 and 1783; these though are anomalies for all the remaining stones on this side are of twentieth-century origin. Only Churchstoke is convincingly exceptional; the north side of its graveyard is home to a range of eighteenth-century memorials, the earliest from 1749 which pre-dates the earliest on the south by nearly thirty years.

Over ninety per cent of Montgomeryshire churches have their earliest stones on the south side. Eight have seventeenth-century stones, with Llan in western Montgomeryshire (the original Llanbrynmair) the earliest with a pre-Carollian Restoration stone of 1654, and others in rural churchyards such as

Fig. 4. Pennant Melangell church and churchyard, Montgomeryshire, viewed from the north-east. *Photograph: Chris Musson, CPAT.*

Llanwnnog, Meifod and Aberhafesp. Invariably in this small group, the time-lapse between the use of the southern and northern sectors of the churchyard is well over a century for with the exception of Llan not one of these has any eighteenth-century memorials on the north side. In the case of Pennant Melangell the difference is extreme—more than three hundred years, in the absence of any marked burials on the north side of the church. Even some Montgomeryshire churches established in the middle of the nineteenth century—such as Sarn and Penybontfawr—display a distinct preference for burial on the southern side of the churchyard, with as yet no burials to the north. The implication is clear: casual observations about the dates and densities of memorials on the north side of churches are borne out by more detailed studies.

BURIAL IN THE CHURCHYARD

Explanations for an aversion to the north side of the churchyard appear in print, frequently unsupported by any solid evidence. It has been claimed for instance that the northern side of a churchyard might be ground that was left unconsecrated, reason enough for it to be free of burials. Pinpointing examples of unconsecrated churchyards is, however, a fruitless task; it is one of those unsubstantiated beliefs that has acquired fictitious authenticity in the telling, and the nineteenth-century cleric, Elias Owen, of whom more below, thought it no more than a popular fallacy.[8] There is, too, the simple view articulated by Roy Palmer, one of the more prolific of modern folklorists, in his *Folklore of Gloucestershire*, that 'graves once occupied only the south side of churchyards, and when the plot was full a start [in burying the dead] would be made again at the other end'.[9] Palmer offered no explanation for what he evidently felt was a common phenomenon. Finally, and somewhat tangentially, the author of a respected work on death in Scotland claimed that churches were so placed in their churchyards to leave plenty of space on the south for burial; possibly this might be true of Scotland, but certainly it does not hold for England and Wales, as far as I can establish.[10]

Rather, it is necessary to invoke a mix of post-Reformation burial practice coupled with both tradition and folklore for this dichotomy between the north and south sides of the churchyard. Firstly, we need to recognise the influence of the Book of Common Prayer. Initially distributed during the Edwardian Reformation in 1549 and in extensively revised form in 1552, it was reissued in 1661 following the demise of the Commonwealth. Within the Book of Common Prayer, 'The Order for the Burial of the Dead' was prefaced in 1661 by a new rubric incorporating the statement that 'the Office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have lain violent hands upon themselves'.[11] This is still used today in the Church of England version, but was superseded in Wales in 1984 by a prayer book specific to the Church in Wales which does not carry the same evocation.

According to convention, those who were specifically excluded by the regulations of the Church would be buried beyond the boundary of the churchyard in unconsecrated ground. This was the case with Isabel Keames, the parish register of Albrighton (Shrops.) for 1619 recording that she was buried in 'the hall orchard near unto the church wall upon the west side, thereof . . . being an excommunicated person'. At Aylsham (Norfolk) in the 1580s a labourer giving evidence recalled that a priest who had drowned himself in a well and two men who had hanged themselves at different times in the parish were all buried on heathland edging the parish.[12] In a different vein, a vagrant who died in Wymondham (Norfolk) towards the end of the eighteenth century was buried on the parish boundary, not because of any specified ecclesiastical prohibition but for the more mundane reason that the parish officers refused to cover the costs of burying him in the churchyard.[13] Some

Puritans appear even to have opposed the concept of burial in consecrated ground. One Scot wrote: 'where learned you to bury in hallowed churches and churchyards, as though you had no fields to bury in? . . . it is neither comely or wholesome'.[14] Burial in unhallowed ground inflicted further punishment on criminals according to Christian belief,[15] preventing them from rising on Judgement Day. The corollary, at least as far as the righteous were concerned, was that those who died in sin would not pollute hallowed soil.[16]

In theory, then, a 'good' burial was denied to some recently deceased members of society, the 'deviant' dead as they have been termed by Nicola Whyte in her study of post-Reformation Norfolk.[17] Theory and practice, however, did not always coincide, and the burial in unconsecrated ground of those who did not for one reason or another conform to the norms of society was not uniformly adhered to. Some would be buried in the northern sector of the churchyard with the tacit agreement of the incumbent, though without recourse to the 'Order for the Burial of the Dead'. On occasions this might be because the deceased had had time to admit their errors. Such was Mary Davies of Pentrobin (Flints.) who appears in the burial register as 'a single woman, though excommunicated, was on this day [23 October 1750] within [the] night, on account of some particular circumstances alleged by neighbours of credit in her favour (as to her resolving to come and reconcile herself and do penance if she recovered) indulged by being interred on the backside of the church, but no service or tolling allowed'.[18]

The burial registers of Myddle in Shropshire, famous for Richard Gough's history of the parish, include entries for unbaptized infants, and throughout the seventeenth century the only person known to have been refused burial in the churchyard there was Richard Woulf who poisoned himself; his body was buried at a crossroads but then almost immediately dug up and reinterred in his own rye field.[19] At Drypole (Yorks.) in 1597 'Anne Ruter, a single woman drowned herself and was buried the 4th day of July on the north side of the church', and in 1734 at Thorpe Achurch (Northants.) 'William Greenwood cut his throat at a public house in our parish, and after the coroner's inquest was buried behind the church'.[20] Vanessa Harding in her studies of burial in London has noted that of thirteen suicides recorded in burial registers and other documents in the period up to *c.* 1670, five were specifically excluded from consecrated ground, five more were buried in the New Churchyard established on the fringe of the city in 1569, seemingly a burial ground not favoured by those who had any choice in the matter, one was buried in a parish churchyard without a service, one had no burial place specified and the last suicide survived long enough to repent and receive the sacrament, thus permitting a 'proper' burial.[21]

What most commentators agree on, though it is normally couched only in the most general terms, is that the north side of the churchyard was reserved, even into the nineteenth century in some instances, for the burial of those cited in the 1661 rubric: unbaptised infants, suicides and those who had been excommunicated. Added to this intake, though not ubiquitously so, were other groups: those who had been executed or had died a violent death, strangers, vagrants and paupers.[22] Robert Forby, a vicar in central Norfolk, put it thus in the early nineteenth century: 'in many churchyards may be seen a row of graves on the extreme verge which are occupied by the bodies of strangers buried at the parish charge, of suicides or of others, who are considered unfit to associate underground with the good people of the parish'.[23] At St Nicholas' in Aberdeen, the process for burial was fixed in 1647 and the north side of the churchyard was appointed for the poor and their children, because they could not afford the prices.[24] Some of these burials may have been marked, the majority were not.

In north Wales we are fortunate in having the writings of the Reverend Elias Owen who in the course of his work as diocesan examiner in scriptural knowledge at church schools in St Asaph

Diocese towards the end of the nineteenth century collected information and traditions from ministers, churchwardens and others that he encountered. His small book, *Old Stone Crosses of the Vale of Clwyd*, is a repository of fascinating information, much broader than its title suggests. There was, for instance, a strong local belief that an altar tomb on the north side of Cyffylliog (Denbs.) housed the body of an excommunicated clergyman, William Lloyd, the rector of the neighbouring parish of Llanfwrog who died in 1743. Owen was unable to verify that the rector had been excommunicated, but in 1874 the vicar there claimed that with the exception of the occupant of that one tomb, he had officiated at the burial services of all who lay in the northern part of the churchyard.[25]

William Lloyd's altar tomb at Cyffylliog is rather a rarity, a material indicator of the requirement to separate those who were not allowed a conventional burial. Close to the north wall of Montgomery churchyard is a rose bush and a wooden sign simply inscribed 'robbers [sic] grave'. In September 1821 John Davies, a slaterer from Wrexham, was executed and then interred in an unused part of the churchyard, having been found guilty of highway robbery.[26] Possibly had he not proclaimed his innocence vociferously and foretold that no grass would grow on his grave for a generation, his burial place might have remained anonymous, rather than the local attraction it is today. In a slightly different vein a number of the Chartists who were killed during an attack on the Westgate Hotel in Newport (Mons.) in November 1839 were buried in an unmarked grave at dead of night on the north side of St Woolos' church, now Newport Cathedral.[27]

The treatment of deceased paupers is well-attested. West of the Victorian church at Forden (Monts.), but to the north of its medieval predecessor, is an open area of the churchyard where there are no marked burials. Records reveal that here 634 residents of the Forden workhouse, less than a mile away, were interred in unmarked graves between 1795 and 1818, the date that the workhouse acquired its own cemetery. It was not until the 1920s, more than a century later, that the ground immediately adjacent to the paupers' plot was used for new burials. A similar open space exists in the north-west sector of Corwen churchyard (formerly Mer., now Denbs.), and with the local workhouse only one hundred metres away, a similar explanation might be assumed, although this has yet to be verified. Rather different was the situation at Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain (Monts.) where the eastern part of the churchyard was known as the 'Rich ground' while the western end was the 'Poor's ground'.[28]

Archaeology yields evidence of burials on the north side, usually, it has to be said, without any explanation of their presence. The 1989 excavations at Pennant Melangell revealed about twenty-five graves on the north side of the church, some stratigraphically earlier than the church walls.[29] Evaluations, too, repeatedly turn up unmarked graves. Work in advance of a new drainage trench along the north side of Whitford church (Flints.) in 1993 uncovered at least eight burials; three were disturbed by the wall of the north aisle and were thus pre-sixteenth-century interments; five others lay a little further out from the wall, their grave fills containing eighteenth or nineteenth-century pottery and clay-pipe fragments.[30] Two graves and a skeleton were exposed also in 1993 in an evaluation beside the vestry on the north side of Crickhowell church (Breckn.), and in the same year late graves were encountered at Llanfair Caereinion (Monts.), at least two of them cut across the wall of a north aisle that had been demolished in 1867.[31] More recently human bone was found on the north side of Old Radnor church,[32] and other examples can regularly be encountered in the pages of *Archaeology in Wales*.

Infant burials, presumably unbaptized, are occasionally uncovered. The medieval church of Plemstall just outside Chester was evaluated in 2001 in advance an extension on the north side of the building. Two infants, one probably no more than a few days old, were found together in a box, and were thought to have been buried in the second half of the nineteenth century. Another infant buried during the same period was thought to be less than a year old.[33]

Change in the authorities' attitude to burial practice came slowly. Customarily, coroners and judges, influenced by the Church's thinking might well determine that suicides and executed criminals were to be buried by roads, at crossroads and on parish boundaries.[34] In the early nineteenth century attitudes eased, and in 1823 Parliament passed a statute—the Burial of Suicide Act—officially permitting the interment of a suicide in consecrated ground, but privately between the hours of nine and twelve at night, and with no religious ceremony. Yet even in 1882 with the passing of the Interments Act the burial of a suicide could still not be solemnised by a burial service, continuing acknowledgement of the Church's strictures.

The stigma attached to suicide was still played out at Clydach in south Wales as recently as the 1950s where a man having killed his family then committed suicide. The coffins of his wife and children following standard practice were brought through the lychgate into church for the service and then burial; his was manhandled over the churchyard wall for burial.[35]

SUPERSTITION AND THE NORTH SIDE

While the ecclesiastical and civil authorities promoted their ambivalent approaches to acceptable burial practice, those in the community who were superstitious or deeply imbued with strong religious beliefs perceived the north side of the churchyard as the Devil's side and, as recounted by one folklorist, the 'domain of demons'. These were views that carried the full weight of scripture. Isaiah (14:13) recorded that Satan set up his throne on a mountain in the north, while Jeremiah (1:14; 6:1) held that demonic attacks were to be expected from the northern quarter.[36] There was too an apocryphal tradition that hell lay in the north.[37] In one guise or another these beliefs surface across the British Isles, though perhaps inevitably such views were rarely committed to paper. Less common is the observation from the Gloucestershire folklorist Margaret Eyre who when collecting material in the Forest of Dean in 1905 was told by a villager at St Briavels: 'that's the Devil's bit, Miss, and don't you be buried there'.[38]

With the north side already accommodating those who had deviated in some way, it is of no surprise that normal folk were reluctant to be buried there. Frederick Burgess, the first to study graveyard memorials in detail, put it succinctly: 'widespread prejudice existed against burial in this area, rooted apparently in folk beliefs which regarded the cold north as a source of evil, the "wrong side" ', while Stephen Friar opined more lyrically that: 'although the entire churchyard is consecrated ground, there persisted into the [nineteenth] century the practice whereby the virtuous received burial on the salubrious south side of the church and felons and outcasts were consigned to perpetual shadow on the north'.[39]

Benjamin Malkin during his tours of south Wales in 1803 noted that it was the custom not to bury the dead on the north side of the churchyard in Radnorshire.[40] Thomas Pennant of Downing, the naturalist, antiquary and traveller, remarked of his home parish of Whitford (Flints.) at the end of the eighteenth century that 'in no distant time, the north side, like those of all other Welsh churches was, through some superstition, to be occupied only by persons executed, or by suicides. It is now nearly as much crowded as the other parts'.[41] Elias Owen recorded the widespread antipathy to the north side of the churchyard and confirmed that it was beginning to dissipate only as the eighteenth century progressed. He wrote of a farmer near Corwen earlier in the nineteenth century who had been instructed by his mother to choose a burial spot for his recently deceased father but not on the north side of the church. He went against his mother's wishes, and his father was the first to be interred on the north side of the churchyard at Gwyddelwern.[42] Owen remarked, too, on the determination

of the Reverend John Jones of Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain (Monts.) who in 1846 was the first to be buried to the north of his church, his example rapidly being followed by others.

Other eighteenth-century writers from further afield provide us with useful contemporary views. Unsuccessful was a Suffolk vicar, the Reverend Sir John Cullum of Hawstead, who in the second half of the eighteenth century failed to persuade his parishioners to bury their dead on the north side of the churchyard. Their preference for the south side he explained away, perhaps somewhat disingenuously, by the visibility of the memorials to those entering the church through the churchyard who were thus able to pray for the deceased. To make his point Cullum had his body buried beneath the threshold stone of the north doorway of his church, with a commemorative tablet set above the door.[43] Better known is Gilbert White of Selborne (Hants.) who in his diary in the 1780s complained that 'all wish to be buried on the south side, which is become such a mass of mortality that no person can be there interred without disturbing or displacing the bones of his ancestors. At the east end are a few graves, yet none, till very lately, on the north side: but as two or three families of the best repute have begun to bury in that quarter, prejudice may wear out by degrees, and their example be followed by the rest of the neighbourhood'.[44]

BURIAL IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Do these attitudes and the antipathy for the north side of the churchyard have their origins in the Middle Ages? This is impossible to establish in Wales where extensive excavations of churchyards known to have fallen out of use by the time of the Reformation are virtually unknown, while claims that shallow burials in poor condition are hallmarks of medieval interments carry little conviction.[45] The evidence from further afield is however more useful.

Medieval statute did not determine who could or could not be buried in consecrated space, nor necessarily did canon law. There was no legal prescription for the burial of criminals, and this was conducted on an *ad hoc* basis.[46] The Knights Hospitallers, for instance, would bury executed criminals in their churchyards and claimed papal privilege to bury any who had given alms to the brethren.[47] Suicide was rarely acknowledged in the Middle Ages because the repercussions for the surviving family could be severe, and the cause of death was generally specified as mental illness.

The absence of statutory guidance did not, however, prevent individuals pronouncing on who should be buried where. Normally cited are the writings of John Mirk, an Augustinian canon of Lilleshall Abbey in Shropshire at the end of the fourteenth century, which laid out who could not be buried in the sanctuary of a church, the church itself and even the churchyard. Thus in his view suicides and adulterers were barred from burial in the churchyard, while women dying in childbirth should be excluded from the church but not the churchyard.[48] Other writers of the time such as John of Burgo differed in the detail: pagans, heretics and the excommunicated were all cited as being unworthy of churchyard burial.[49] How influential these tracts were we have no way of knowing, but what is implicit from them is that in the medieval mind there was no distinction between different sectors of the churchyard. Rather more significant was the proximity of the grave to the church itself. As a penance a Suffolk magnate, Lord Clifford, ordered in his will in the early fifteenth century that 'his wretched careyn to be beryed in the furthest corner of the chirchezerd'.[50]

Canon law acknowledged that individuals could choose where to be buried.[51] In London a detailed study of wills of the middle orders from the late Middle Ages reveals preferences to be buried close to wives or children, or parallel with the altar but, assuming the absence of any comment to the contrary rarely if ever a testator requiring to be buried on the south side. Burial charges imposed

by London churches in the early sixteenth century made no distinction between burials in different sectors of the churchyard.[52] Medieval town cemeteries—Hereford, Worcester and York—display little obvious preference for the southern side in the spread of graves, and some commentaries on what have been classed as socially excluded groups focus on Jews and lepers, and not the classes that were stigmatized after the Reformation.[53] Hospitals, again usually within or on the peripheries of medieval towns, buried their dead where space was available: St Bartholomew's hospital in Newbury (Berks.) had its graveyard on the north side of its hospital and church buildings.[54]

It apparently mattered little to monastic communities nor to those laymen and women who were laid to rest in monastic graveyards that they were to be interred on the north side of the abbey or priory church, the standard location of graveyards when the cloister ranges normally occupied the ground to the south. And as recently demonstrated at Llandough (Glam.) with its monastic cemetery north of the parish church this seems to have been the case in the pre-Conquest era, too, though it must be admitted that the site of the monastery has not been pinpointed by excavation.[55]

Of course, what held true for cosmopolitan London and other urban centres in the Middle Ages might not be an accurate guide to traditions that were fostered in rural areas of Wales and England. Some writers have refused to rule out the possibility that the northern parts of the churchyard were avoided even in the Middle Ages. Tackley in Oxfordshire is the example that is usually cited, but the evidence is not compelling—the excavation report makes it clear that the work in the angle between the nave and the north transept at Tackley was of limited extent and even then one burial of unknown date was encountered.[56] One excavation in Wales that might be relevant is of the church and churchyard at St Nicholas in Barry, where the excavators claimed that burial had been largely confined to the south of the church at least up to the early thirteenth century. The scale of the excavations, as reported, looks to be a fairly flimsy basis for such a far-reaching conclusion however. Much more illuminating is Capel Maelog near Llandrindod Wells (Radns.), a chapel that probably went out of use in the early sixteenth century.[57] The plan of this is sufficiently clear to obviate the need for any commentary (Fig. 5).

Christopher Daniell, the leading archaeological specialist on death in the medieval era, has not ruled out the possibility that there may have been more favoured areas for burial in the medieval churchyard, but is reasonably convinced that the north side acquired its significance only towards the very end of the Middle Ages and particularly in the sixteenth century.[58] Certain groups, indeed, may have been excluded from burial in the spiritual centre of the community, the church and its graveyard.[59] Those who had suffered 'a bad death' as with criminals, or those who died in a catastrophe or war, could defile the sanctity of consecrated ground.[60] But there is no convincing evidence to suggest that any stigma was attached to the north side of the churchyard, prior to the Reformation, and while the physical evidence remains relatively slim, there is also virtually nothing in any of the written sources to contradict it.

THE NORTH SIDE OF THE CHURCH

Does this post-Reformation aversion for the north side of the churchyard find a counterpart in the attitudes of the clergy and their congregations to the church itself? Superficially, the material indicators so transparently displayed by virtually every historic churchyard are absent from the buildings themselves, and it is a very different constituency—women—who can lay claim to the north side of the church, still recognisable today at a wedding where the bride's party is to be found on the north side of the central aisle.[61] Yet very occasionally there appears a perceptible sense of

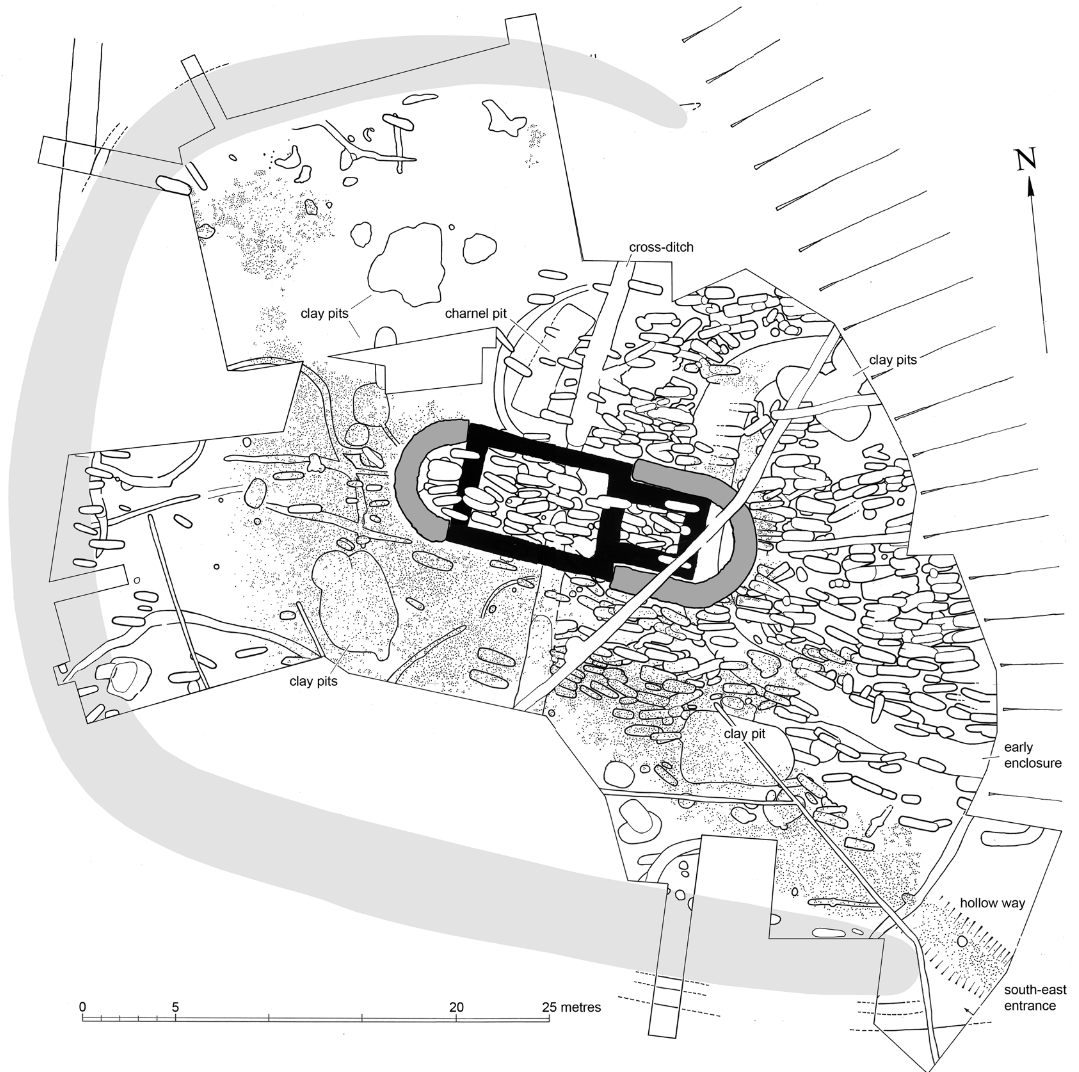

Fig. 5 Capel Maelog in Radnorshire. A pre-Reformation churchyard where north-side burials were commonplace (after Britnell 1990).

unease about the north side even in more recent times. The church at Llansantffraed Cwmdeuddwr (Radns.) was rebuilt on a new site within its early medieval churchyard in 1778. The new building had a north porch, approached directly through the churchyard from the small village which had grown up on the opposite bank of the Wye to Rhayader. The church lasted less than a century. In 1866 it was demolished and replaced by a structure in the same position. This, though, had its porch on the south, facing open countryside, invisible from the settlement on the river bank, and forcing

churchgoers to walk around the building to reach the entrance. There is no logical explanation for this—it might simply reflect the architect's reassertion of a more traditional layout, but could reveal an irrational preference for the southern side and lingering superstitions amongst those who commissioned the new building.

Facing the altar, north was to the left, in Latin the 'sinister' side. With the north side the devil's side, it is perhaps no surprise that the wonderful, early sixteenth-century windows in Fairford church (Glos.) have devils in the northern windows of the nave, saints in the southern; and in Morpeth (Northumb.) it has been argued that the gargoyles representing ugly demons on the north side of the church contrast with those of angels on the south, manifesting the views of medieval builders about the north side.[62] While both these examples will have served to remind observers of the cardinal directions of good and evil, in an overt demonstration of the power of iconography, they are unlikely to have been designed simply to reinforce the congregation's dread of the north and its resulting avoidance. And these are exceptional cases—the writer has not been able to identify comparable depictions in Wales.

More telling is an observation from Elias Owen that in the nineteenth century many of the older churches in Wales lacked windows in their north walls, other than a small light in the chancel, and that it was only during the numerous restorations of that era that north walls were pierced for windows. The latter can be readily endorsed, for though there are no statistics immediately to hand, it appears to be true that a preponderance of the windows in the northern walls of our churches are of Victorian or occasionally late Georgian date. Owen's contention about the absence of north windows in our older churches is now more difficult to corroborate than it was in his time. Nevertheless, from a summary trawl of the records, there are a number of churches, not necessarily rural, but generally small and with considerable medieval masonry surviving, where this is apparent. Partrishow (Breckn.), Aberdaeron and Llanfaelrhys (Caerns.), Llandrillo-yn-Rhos (Denbs.), Llanllugan and Tregynon (Monts.) are all without northern windows; Llan-y-wern (Breckn.), Pistyll (Caerns.), Efenechtyd, Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr, Llangynhafal, Llansaintffraid Glyn Ceiriog and Llysfaen (Denbs.), Llangar (Mer.; Fig. 6), Llan and Llansantffraid (Monts.), and Pilleth and Rhulen (Radns.) all have solitary northern windows. The list is far from comprehensive, and in each case with the exception of Rhulen there are more windows in the southern wall than in the northern. The simplest explanation is that those who commissioned these medieval churches wished to avoid their congregations looking out to the north. Perhaps, too, the imperative was to prevent demons and spirits from looking in at anything other than the altar and the cross.

It is not, however, the church windows that attract the most stories but the north door of the church, today widely labelled as the 'Devil's Door'.[63] It is almost a generic term for any north door within a church. Possibly, it reveals how in the modern age a traditional and attractive superstition can be taken up and multiplied through the medium of the internet. Enter in the keywords and a string of web sites for areas as far apart as Cornwall, Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Kent, Norfolk and Northumberland delivers a consistent narrative of how the door is linked to the devil and offered him an exit from the church.[64] In north Wales the 'Devil's Door' is known at Gwaenysgor, at Meliden and at other places. So widely upheld is the tradition that it now has its own dedicated website.[65] It is, however, more than a just a modern fixation.

The compliers of the Victoria County History in the mid-twentieth century noted for Birdham church, south-west of Chichester (Sussex), that 'the ancient north door, now blocked, [is] of the same design as the south door, but narrower, and so much lower that it can hardly have had any but a ritual use for the exit of the Devil'.[66] It proffers too a confirmatory reference to a manuscript source dating from 1602 which states that 'the north door is clene dammed vpp', though perhaps

Fig. 6. The north side of Llangar church, formerly Merioneth, now Denbighshire. *Photograph: author.*

the meaning of this early corroboration is more ambiguous than the V.C.H. implies. The Reverend Hawker of Morwenstow, familiar to many a Cornishman as a nineteenth-century eccentric, but also a poet and antiquary, wrote in *Notes and Queries* that 'the north was the devoted region of Satan and his hosts, the lair of Demons and their haunt. In some of our ancient churches, over against the font, and in the northern walls, there was a devil's door. It was thrown open at every baptism for the escape of the fiend, and at all other seasons carefully closed. Hence came the old dislike to sepulture on the north'.[67] At Kerry in Montgomeryshire, so Elias Owen was informed, it had been customary to open the north door as the clergyman entered through the south door, to allow the devil to exit.[68]

Inevitably other variant superstitions have been layered on to this simple method of escape. It has been claimed, for instance, that people would not enter or leave by the north door in case they were possessed by fleeing demons looking for a host, and that in later centuries it was common practice to block the north door in order to keep the Devil outside the church. Further afield, in Norfolk, a legend relates that when the congregation entered the church through the south door they dipped their fingers into the holy water stoup and that by crossing themselves the Devil was expelled; as the Devil could not get out over their shoulders, a north door was included for his retreat, and thus the north door was on occasions known as the 'Devil's Door'.[69] As a variation, at Gwaenysgor, there was a tradition that saw the north door used to carry an infant into the church for baptism and the door was then slammed shut to keep the Devil from following.[70]

All this may be linked in with the practices of the Middle Ages. Prior to the Reformation a strong

prayer was used by the priest to drive out the unclean spirit from an infant about to be baptized, and this was retained by Thomas Cranmer in the first Book of Common Prayer of 1549. In essence the baptismal liturgy was explicitly concerned with the expulsion of the Devil,[71] but what is not clear is whether the north door's use reflected these liturgical practices in any way. Before the Reformation, the north door of a church functioned as an exit for the processions that were a fundamental feature of holy days and feast days. These were eliminated with the appearance of the Edwardian Book of Common Prayer,[72] and with the changes in liturgical practice that resulted from the break with Rome, the north door became less important, except perhaps where the village lay on that side of the church. Such doorways were increasingly closed and blocked off, and it is plausible that some north doors were sealed by the incumbents in order to combat superstition amongst their congregation. With the north door past practice and superstitions mingle inextricably.

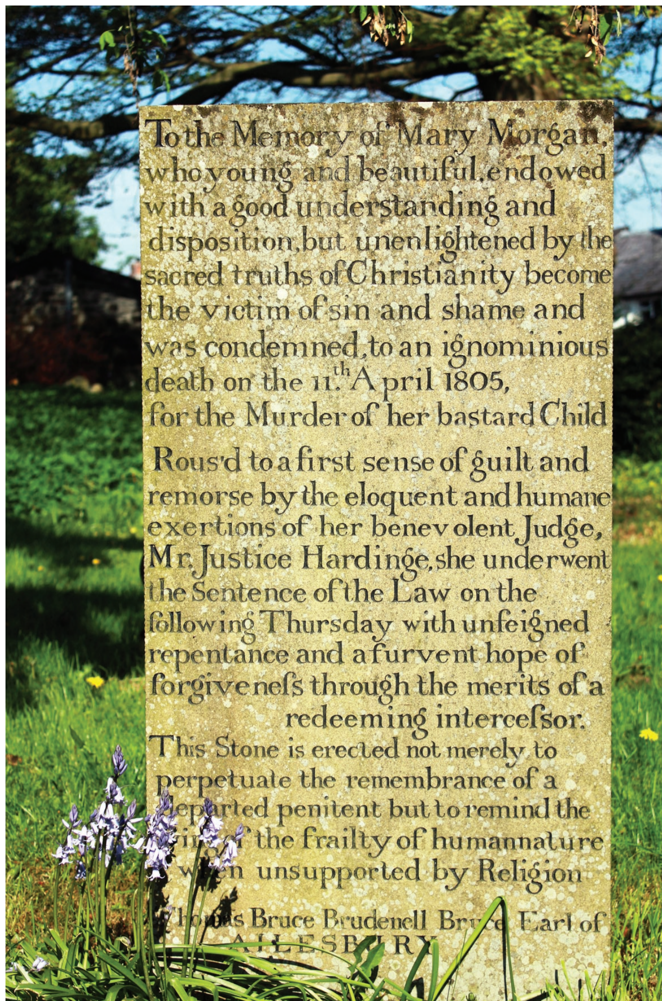

Fig. 7. The gravestone of Mary Morgan in Presteigne churchyard, Radnorshire. *Photograph: author.*

CONCLUSIONS

Superstitions were firmly rooted in the collective minds of rural communities in the centuries after the Reformation. This much is clear from the wide range of reported folk beliefs,[73] and the use or avoidance of the churchyard falls readily into this pattern. The north side of the churchyard was used for burial but unlike the majority of godly burials, the dead were not commemorated with permanent memorials, even if local memory, at least for a time, would have been able to identify where specific interments had been made. A gradual change in attitude is discernible through the second half of the eighteenth century, driven in some cases by clergy intent on dispelling local superstitions, and in some cases as a pragmatic solution to the inexorable infilling of the churchyard as the population grew.

What we see here is the mergence of two or even three somewhat disparate traditions. The requirements of the post-Reformation church required that the deviant dead should not benefit from the burial service; contemporary superstition imbued the northern side of the churchyard with unholy associations giving people a sense of unease, even dread; and only for specific crimes did the law of the land lay down where malefactors were to be interred. The use of the northern side was not a ubiquitous norm in itself. When Mary Morgan was publicly hanged at Presteigne (Radns.) in 1805 for killing her child she was buried not in the northern portion of the churchyard but on the west side of the church, a gravestone recounting her crime at a level of detail that demonstrates not only how exceptionally unusual was this particular remembrance, but also and more importantly because prior to her death she repented, which permitted her a better place in the churchyard (Fig. 7). The northern side of the churchyard became the place where those who had not conformed to the norms of society were buried, normally in graves which lacked any visible marker and where remembrance was deliberately eschewed. Over three centuries churchyards were so used, and even in remote rural churchyards such as Pennant Melangell, the absence of burials is likely to be a superficial illusion.

NOTES

1. Burgess 1963, 108; Dymond 1999, 467; Mytum 2000, 3; Mytum and Chapman 2003–5.
2. Silvester and Evans 2009.
3. Housman 1967, 62. My thanks to Jeremy Knight for reminding me of Housman's verse. Hughley lies between Telford and Church Stretton.
4. Dyer 1891, 158.
5. Hankinson 2007.
6. Shoesmith 1980, fig. 6.
7. Britnell 1994, fig. 4.6.
8. Owen 1886, 197.
9. Cunningham 1999, 53; Friar 1996, 122; Palmer 2001, 74.
10. Gordon 1984, 88.
11. Proctor and Frere 1902, 636.
12. Gittings 1984, 76; Whyte 2009, 160.
13. Whyte 2009, 162.
14. Cited but without a source attribution by Gittings 1984, 139.
15. This was reinforced in law by the so called 'Murder Act' of 1752 which stated that 'it had become necessary that some further terror and peculiar mark of infamy be added to the punishment of death', invoking either the gibbet, or in the London area, dissection by surgeons. These penalties were repealed in 1834 and 1832 respectively. See Gittings 1984, 74.

16. Whyte 2009, 25.
17. Whyte 2003.
18. *Notes and Queries* 1st ser., vol. 3 (1851), 125; Dyer 1891, 159.
19. Hey 1974, 46.
20. Cox 1910, 114–5; Gittings 1999, 150; Gittings 1984, 73.
21. Harding 1998, 60. Of the five buried in unconsecrated ground, three were buried in the street or highway, one 'in the field', and one at Mile End, presumably well away from the city.
22. Owen 1991, 80.
23. Forby 1830–58, vol. 2, 49.
24. Gordon 1984, 88.
25. Owen 1886, 198.
26. Lloyd 1959; Welton and Welton 2003, 32–3.
27. My thanks to Jeremy Knight for this example.
28. Jones 1871, 129.
29. Britnell 1994, 81–3.
30. Thomas 1993.
31. Jones 1993a: Jones 1993b.
32. Appleton-Fox 2002.
33. Thanks to Ian Grant for this information, who was also the author of 'St Peter's Church, Plemstall, Chester MTR/PLC 01, Chester', unpublished report, Gifford and Partners.
34. Westwood and Simpson 2005, 195; Whyte 2009, 157.
35. My thanks to Archdeacon Bernard Thomas who was told of the event many years ago.
36. Davies, 1911, 188; Simpson and Round 2000, 260.
37. Westwood and Simpson 2005, 195.
38. Reported in Palmer 2001, 75.
39. Burgess 1963, 25: Friar 2001, 80; Dymond 1999, 468.
40. Malkin 1804, 270.
41. Pennant 1796, 102.
42. Owen 1886, 197.
43. Gurdon 1893, 50.
44. White 1789, 322.
45. For instance in a brief note in the journal *Church Archaeology* (2004, 131) burials found during an evaluation at St Sannan's in Bedwellty, Monmouthshire were considered to be medieval in origin because of the shallowness of the graves and the shape of the churchyard. Ironically in the same journal (p.121) no date was attributed on up to twenty burials on the north side of the church at Whitchurch Canonicorum (Dorset), but their poor state of preservation was thought to favour a pre-Reformation date.
46. Daniell 2002, 246; Clay 1909, 101–2.
47. Daniell 1997, 99; Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 73.
48. Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 71.
49. Daniell 1997, 103.
50. Gurdon 1893, 49n.
51. Harding 1992, 120.
52. Harding 1992, 127, 131.
53. Barrow 1992, 94; figs 7.1, 7.4 and 7.5.
54. Clough 2006.
55. Holbrook and Thomas 2005.
56. Blair and McKay 1985, 43; Rosser 1996, 80.
57. Thomas 2000, 135; Britnell 1990.
58. Daniell 1997, 99; 2002, 244.

59. Whyte 2009, 159.
60. Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 71.
61. Aston 1990, 267, 274-80; Gray and Morgan-Guy 2005, 109.
62. Thomas 1904, 100.
63. Westwood and Simpson 2005, 515.
64. <http://www.shotwick.org.uk: http://www.cambornechurch.org.uk>; <http://www.shurdington.org>; <http://www.holytrinitymiltonregis.com>; <http://www.sevenchurches.org.uk>.
65. <http://thedevilsdoor.org>. The website however is primarily concerned with attitudes to baptism.
66. Salzman 1953, 201.
67. *Notes and Queries* 1st ser., vol. 2 (1850), 254.
68. Owen 1991, 199.
69. <www/Norfolkcoast.co.uk>.
70. Information from the Reverend Shirley Griffiths.
71. Duffy 1992, 280, 473.
72. Duffy 1992, 464.
73. Howell 2000, 154.

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