

# "BELVOIR ANGELS "

## October 2008 Meeting Report

### Speaker - Rod Gill

The October meeting of the Keyworth & District Local History Society was held in The Centenary Lounge, Keyworth on Friday, 3rd October. The guest speaker, Rod Gill, needed no introduction to the audience, as he is a prominent and stalwart member of the society. His subject for the evening was 'Belvoir Angels' and the presentation was in the form of a talk accompanied by a slide show. Rod began by explaining how he came to be interested in this particular type of gravestone. A friend of his had been on a guided walk, one summer evening, around the churchyard at Hickling. The guide that evening was Val Henstock, a name not unknown to Keyworth & District Local History Society since, in the past, she has given the Society several interesting talks. Hickling churchyard is one of the richest sources of the Belvoir Angel headstone and Val pointed out several of the more interesting stones. It was via this friend that Rod first became acquainted with the singular stones.

Rod then went on to explain what really constituted a 'Belvoir Angel'? Certain criteria had to be met. All of the angels were carved on Swithland slate. Swithland is a village in the Charnwood Forest, Leicestershire. There were three quarries in the region producing the slate in the 18th Century but it is the quarry at Swithland that is synonymous with the name of the slate. The stone itself is pre-Cambrian in origin, having been formed from sedimentary sea deposits laid down around 700 million years ago. The slate is very hard, very durable, and weathers very well. A fact attested to by the pristine condition that a great many of the stones are still in despite being around three hundred years old. All of the Belvoir Angels so far

identified fall into an age range between 1690 and 1758, though it is possible that other stones may be located in the future which are slightly outside this range. The angels themselves are of a very distinct style, having curls, down-turned wings, and what appears to be a ruff. There are around six or seven distinct style of angel. The stones are to be found, loosely, in the Vale of Belvoir. They range from Nottingham in the west to Grantham in the east, and Flawborough in the north to Twyford in the south. During Rod's investigation into the subject he had visited over 130 churches in the region. Belvoir Angels were located in over sixty of these churchyards. Altogether over 320 gravestones with Belvoir Angels have now been located. It is almost certain though that there are still further angels to be located so this number should, in time, increase, though probably not by a very significant margin. How many stones with angels on were carved originally is a question that is unlikely ever to be answered. One thing is for sure and that it was probably a good deal more than have so far been located. Several churchyards that Rod visited had been cleared of stones completely, whilst others had been cleared of older stone to make room for further, later additions to the graveyard.

It appears that depictions of angels on gravestones became popular in the second half of the 17th Century. Stones from this time that have angels carved on them can be found the length and breadth of the land, from Cornwall to Orkney. Indeed, examples have even been located in parts of New England in the United States. The quality of the carving on those stones located in The Vale of Belvoir is generally of a very high order, though the actual laying out of the wording is much more haphazard. Usually the stones are engraved though there are several examples where the stones are carved in relief. The amount of work that is required to produce the stones in relief is considerable. The stones themselves must have been commissioned by people who were relatively well off, probably those that we would call the middle class in today's parlance. This group of people began to gain prominence after the English

Civil War which had taken place earlier in the 17th Century. These people had a greater amount of disposable income. They were not of sufficient social standing to be given a space inside the church for their memorials but they could certainly leave their mark in the churchyard. The actual carving of the angel must have taken a considerable time to complete. A stonemason who had been consulted on the subject was of the opinion that it would have taken several days to execute. Since time, then as now, was money, only the relatively well-off could afford the luxury of such memorials.

The stones present something of an enigma however. Given that they can be found over quite a wide area within the Vale of Belvoir virtually nothing is known of their history. Who carved them and where they were carved is a total mystery. It seems highly probable that two persons were responsible for carving the vast majority of these stones between the years 1710 and 1750. The peak decade for carving was the 1720's, after which the incidence of the stones declines decade by decade. The actual quality of the carving declines also, whether this reflects the declining health of the mason or not is unknown. It is possible that the two masons were a father and son and that the son continued the work when the father ceased carving. It is equally plausible that the two masons were unrelated. The location of the mason's workshop is likewise a total mystery. It seems highly likely that it was located somewhere in or around Hickling, Nether Broughton or Upper Broughton as this is where the bulk of the stones are to be found. Indeed, these three churchyards account for over 90% of the stones. It seems incredible that nothing whatsoever is known regarding these masons given that their work is so widespread throughout the Vale of Belvoir. Perhaps, hopefully, information may be unearthed in the future, which will shed light on their identities.

The stones themselves, Rod went on to relate, give a wonderful insight into village life in the first half of the 18th century. Death was a constant visitor. One thing that particularly struck Rod was

the incidence of deaths that occurred to relatively young persons, in particular children and infants. Likewise, there are several stones relating to women dying in childbirth. These stones mention Benoni. The name is biblical in origin and relates to the death of Jacob's wife, Rachel. Rachel knew that she was dying after giving birth to her son whom she named Benoni, the name meaning, literally, the child of my sorrow. Jacob, however, changed the boy's name from Benoni to Benjamin. Many of the stones have interesting verses inscribed on them, which tell of the cause of death. Two even relate to murder victims. Both were young men who were killed by women. Another fairly common verse related to visitations by 'Pale Death', hence... 'Pale death will hardly find another, so good a wife, so kind a mother, in all her actions so discreet, as she who lies here at your feet. It is thought that the pale death in question was consumption or tuberculosis.

A considerable number of the stones had suffered some form of damage. This often involved defacement of the depiction of the angel effigy. It is believed that this damage usually occurred soon after the stone was erected and was the work of persons, probably of a Puritanical persuasion, who took exception to what they considered to be blasphemous effigies. Another feature that was quite apparent on the stones was the amount of grammatical errors. It would seem that the masons were probably illiterate, the number of basic spelling mistakes, letters engraved the wrong way around, and letters and words missed out that had to be added later supporting this hypothesis. The spacing of the words was also very erratic, it is common for the mason to run out of space on a line and the words squeezed in on the lines above or below. What was a common feature though was how beautifully carved the actual angel effigies were.

Rod finished by saying that there had been one, recent addition to the list of angels. This is at Hose churchyard, which has no original Belvoir Angels. However a stone was erected in 2005 which has a Belvoir Angel carved upon it. Perhaps this will be the

forerunner of a new generation of Belvoir Angels, it would be nice to see the fashion re-introduced. Well-done Rod for acquainting us more fully with what is undoubtedly a local treasure in a most interesting and informative way.

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