

St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

HLF report & evaluation.

March 2017

Setting the scene:

The churchyard, of about 2 acres, was first used for burials around 1670. An original chapel (Eastfield Chapel) dates from 1529 and a Georgian church was built towards the end of 18C. This was replaced a century later by the current St Matthew's Church which is 400m along the Wakefield Road. The original church remained in use for occasional services and as a funeral chapel but was not seen to be economically or socially viable. It became largely neglected and a decision to demolish was taken around 1970. Only the tower remains.

With the separation of church and churchyard, the latter became neglected and very much



overgrown with brambles and rose bay willow herb. The paths disappeared and very few headstones were visible. In 2012, Angela Monaghan called a public meeting and the Friends of St Mathew's Churchyard was formed. Progress was slow but steady in the first couple of years but an ambitious 5 year plan was adopted and used as the basis of our Heritage Lottery Fund bid. The bid was for £16700 including £14700 from HLF & the balance from FOSMC's own fund raising. Work on the project began in March 2015 and is now virtually finished.

Access for the community.

We have transformed the churchyard so that it is both welcoming and accessible to the community. The funding has allowed us to provide heavy duty grass cutting machinery which allows us to be



much more productive.

There are now broad footpaths throughout the churchyard which are walkable under all conditions.



There is a hard standing footpath between two gates which is accessible for disabled visitors and three substantial larch seats have been provided.



The churchyard is being visited much more by both locals and those visiting family graves. There have been very positive comments from our neighbours, Councillors and visitors. What was an unwelcoming area is now being seen as a place of interest and a place of quiet peace. The number of Friends has doubled to 60 in the past 2 years.

Interpretation:

Three interpretation boards are now in place focussing on the old church, wildlife & conservation and what to see in the churchyard. Alongside one of these are two small plaques commemorating Ann Walker and Rev Rich Sutcliffe both buried in the old church.



It was originally planned to have leaflet guides but this was considered to be impractical as there is nowhere to store them. With HLF permission we changed this to 6 QR coded posts linked to tour waypoints contained on our website. We feel this is more practicable, flexible and more likely to be



used by the younger generation.

War memorials & other memorials:

We have had a number of WW1 memorials restored and the family stories of these soldiers (and a munitions worker) have been researched and written up (People of Interest on our website). Extracts have been posted on the noticeboards e.g. brief histories of those who died at the Somme were published in 2016. Following publication there have been a number of contacts made between the families and our researcher.



Once these memorials were done a few more were restored including that of a former Mayor of Bradford.

The work was done by a Council team to the national standards and, as a supportive gesture, the team flipped over 20 headstones which had been pushed over for safety reasons but in such a way that the inscriptions could not be read. This has delighted at least three descendents who can now read grandparents' headstones.

There has been considerable interest locally in what is within the churchyard, the different types of graves and the focus on people of interest. People looking for family burials have been helped to find graves.



This photo shows a couple successfully finding a family grave.

Training.

- 5 members have had H&S training to use our grass cutting equipment provided by the Council.
- 2 members have learned how to manage the website and a further member will be trained next year.
- 2 members have improved their research skills into family history.

Wild life.

With the grass cut back to 10cm and brambles and rose bay willow herb under control, a range of plants are now thriving. Snowdrops, crocus, daffodils & primula which had previously been hidden are now spreading. Wild garlic and bluebells (both native & Spanish) take over small areas and other species are seen but have not yet been identified. A full survey is scheduled for next year and a comparison will be made with our initial survey.

We have had some success with wildflowers and will continue over the next year. We are part of the wildlife corridor across Calderdale. A yew cutting from an “ancient” tree has been given and has been planted, a second one from Caring for God’s Acre has been promised.

About half of the new bird boxes were used in Spring 2016. Typical local birds are in evidence and, again, a comparative survey is scheduled for next year. The annual bat watch evening provides evidence of a number of bats though the numbers are unlikely to have been increased by our work.

We have created a few natural habitat boxes and a bug hotel.

There are many comments about how much pleasanter the churchyard is since it has been cleared. Comments are made about the variety of flowers that are now to be seen. Many more local people visit or walk through.

Partnerships.

The Council & Councillors.

We have established good relationships with the local Council. The Council has responded to our work by taking increased pride in the “closed” part of the churchyard which is their responsibility. The Council cemeteries team has been extremely helpful in providing advice and expert help especially in the restoration of some of the memorials.

Local Councillors have been supportive throughout and helped to find sources of funding including Section 106 and Ward Forum monies.

Friends of Friendless Churches.

This national charity owns the tower which it adopted in its early years. There is now a working relationship between the two groups of Friends. As part of this, we have had access to the inside of the tower and been able to photograph memorials which were rescued from the old church. This has allowed us, amongst other things, to confirm that Ann Walker was buried under the pulpit in 1854. She was a friend of Anne Lister of Shibden Hall and there is an interest in her life locally and further afield. Until the plaque was found, we could only conjecture about her burial site. A major TV series is planned in the near future.

Caring for God's Acre:

We have been associated with this group since we formed and have benefited from their advice. We wrote a case study of our restoration work in the churchyard and attended a recent conference.

The Parochial Church Council:

We are an unusual group in that we are independent of the church – several of the committee have no links to the church – but work in its churchyard. A good understanding is in place and a semi-formal agreement now exists indicating the distinctive responsibilities of each. As a result the Friends have undertaken to maintain that part of the churchyard that is still in use which was not part of our original aims.

Regular reports go to the PCC, equipment is stored in its store room and the church is made available, free of charge, for our annual fund raising concert.

Bradford University Archaeological Department:

A team of post graduates practiced surveying techniques for a day. We received a report & analysis



indicating where some unseen ledger stones may be. We have yet to follow this up as the gravestones are likely to be at least 30cm under turf.

Website.

Our website is well established. In addition to providing the standard information, we have a search mechanism which trawls the 11,000 burial records based on surname, forename and year of death. Results indicate where the burial site is, whether there is memorial and, if so, what is written on it. Photos are now available of all memorials either from us or on the international Gravestone Photographic Resources website.

We are creating a short illustrated history of the church that was demolished in the 1970s. We have already written a number of histories of local families starting with WW1 soldiers.

These stories have brought a lot of positive feedback both locally and from further away. International interest includes links with New York State, Australia and Vancouver.

4 videos taken from a drone by a neighbour, Gary Edmondson, are available at the foot of our homepage.

The website is proving popular with those who are searching for aspects of family history. It proves an ideal spot to begin to search on their own or by contacting the Friends. Two local historians are using it on a regular basis. Additionally it is an ideal format for publicising our work.

Spreading the word:

We have been able to buy a noticeboard which is shared by the Friends and the parish. Our notices have included our plans, information about working parties and details commemorating those



soldiers who died in WW1.

Talks have been given to the local historical society and to a group in a deprived area of Halifax and further talks are planned. The churchyard is a central feature of a new Calderdale Heritage Walk which will be offered regularly.

A display was mounted at two local libraries showing progress in the restoration and the



information that we now have readily available.

The work of the Friends was shared at an HLF meeting in Sheffield and articles have been written in the Parish magazine and the area family history society's magazine, The Scrivener. There have been a few brief articles in the local press.

We run an annual concert at the church using professional musicians and a local choir. This is proving very popular in the community, raises enough money to cover our costs and provides an



opportunity to share progress with an audience of 240.

A Poet in Residence, local historian Bob Horne, will begin to publish occasional poems inspired by the churchyard and its residents.

The local golf club is adopting a traditional phone kiosk which will be used by groups including the historical society. One of the first displays will be the history of the old St Matthew's church and its churchyard featuring Historic England archive images.

An event is being planned for Saturday, 3rd June 2017 to celebrate the progress made by the Friends over the past 5 years and especially during the HLF project. All those who have contributed to the success will be invited. It will coincide with Cherishing Churchyards Week to gain as much publicity as possible.

Individual members of the committee have all received positive comments about the progress that is being made. There is a lot of evidence that a broad range of people are now aware of our churchyard and the work of The Friends.

Future plans.

A detailed sustainability report has been adopted by the Friends. We are confident that we will be able to maintain the improvements made during the project and continue to research family backgrounds and keep the website up to date. The annual costs, estimated at £1100, will be raised by the annual concert and, if necessary, from locally available grants. A 5 year plan has been agreed. The priorities include:

- Attracting a few more volunteers for working parties
- Making more contacts with younger groups & individuals
- Conducting wild life surveys to compare with original surveys

Summary Evaluation.

The funding of this project has been very successful both in terms of outcomes and motivation. The Friends had set themselves an ambitious 5 year management plan which would have required a significant of time being devoted to additional fund raising over and above that raised for our basic running costs. The project allowed us to make demonstrable progress very rapidly. It avoided the possibility of the group being demotivated and overwhelmed by slow progress.

We have been able to achieve all of the objectives and, in some instances, exceeded them. An example is the sophistication of the website whereas we had planned a fairly basic version.



The reaction from the local community and the parish congregation has been very positive. Equally

we have received grateful thanks (and some donations) from those who have been looking for family historical information.

We feel that our churchyard is “ a sanctuary for the living and the dead.”

Events.

We have organised open days coinciding with Cherishing Churchyards week with good turn outs.

Each year we have organised a bat watching evening and in 2014 a dawn bird watching event.

Working parties are held once a month on Sunday afternoons.

The annual concerts, featuring two talented professional singers, are very popular.

We will be celebrating the end of this HLF project (together with the restoration of 8 WW1 memorials) on Saturday 3rd June coinciding with the start of Cherishing Churchyards week.