

HIDDEN HERITAGE

If your shopping is not too heavy and you have a little time to spare, it's much more than just a short cut home after a visit to Sainsbury's. For years, unless you were willing to stray off the tarmac and trek the overgrown muddy bypaths that line the Great Yarmouth Cemeteries, old and new, you may not have realised the craftsmanship that lies there.

Now, thanks to the fantastic efforts by the Green Gym, Community Service and other eager volunteers, the skill of stonemason, blacksmith and poet are beginning to be revealed once again for all to appreciate.

Entangling ivy and sycamore are being cut back and cleared and the stonework organically smothered and weathered by the elements has been given a chance against the ongoing assault. Previously hidden, full or partial epitaphs give clues to occupations, victories, personalities. Some are short, economical: others long, delivering prose.

You don't have to understand the signs or symbols. You can view them apart from their placement and consider the art in its own right, varied and plenty. To some it may seem a little macabre but take a moment to reflect that every name expertly carved into sandstone, limestone, granite or marble carries its own personal history, and its contribution and connection to the town's background.

From the simplicity and sadness of the pauper's grave to the tall magnificence of the ironwork surrounding allegorical sculpture, each one has a story to tell. In every direction the skill and beauty is there for all who care to look.

If you do, however, wish to explore the many themes and meanings expressed in this form, there is a world of information available. In St. Nicholas Church itself, the library and on the internet, there are many ways to research every aspect of this rich, historic environment. It may just captivate you.

Some of the memorials are taped off like a crime scene but grave robbers have not returned to target the cemetery. You have to go back to 1827, when over the period of 20 days 10 bodies were stolen from Great Yarmouth, for reference to that! Those surrounded by tape are a few of the many selected by members of the Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust's Cemeteries Project for repair, in an attempt to return them to their deserved glory and to conserve this sometimes forgotten and overlooked but important area of our local heritage.



Runniff Chest Tomb selected for repair by David Harwood



David reconstructing Runniff Tomb



Peter and David completing Runniff Tomb

By 1901, the Cemeteries were full, frozen in time and watched over by the heavy iron gates. Apart from nature's decay and the occasional act of vandalism, the plots have lain mainly undisturbed: only the passing wind carrying away the tales of fame, glory, tragedy, mythology and plague that lie within. The list ends where your interest ends – where death lay, history comes alive.

David Harwood, February 2013

Note:

John Runniff, d. 1893, 81 yrs old. A fish merchant.

Also, Jane Runniff, E. Runniff, M.Hines, W.Nutman, L.Nutman and I.Casey

William Nutman d.1868, 45 yrs old. Assistant overseer of the poor, 'esteemed and respected for his patience and kindness.'

Reference: "*Some Notes on the Graves in Plot in the Old Cemetery, Great Yarmouth*", by Paul Davies, 2013.