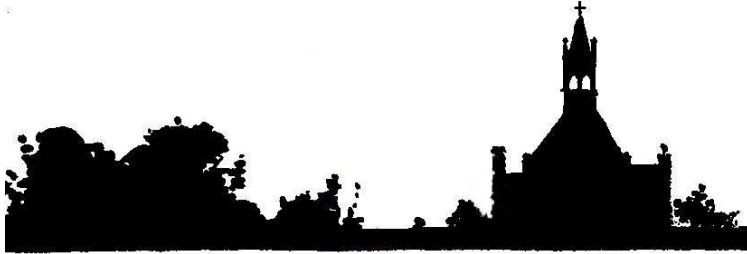


# Ellerton Church Preservation Trust



Newsletter number 3 August 2005

## Managing our churchyard - traditionally

One of the glories of Ellerton Priory church is its close relationship with the surrounding landscape of the Lower Derwent Valley - one of the most protected and environmentally sensitive landscapes in Britain. But immediately around the church is another, smaller landscape of importance in its own right: the churchyard. Ellerton churchyard is not only the setting for the church, but is also a Scheduled Ancient Monument - part of the site of the mediaeval Gilbertine priory - and has been used for burials since at least the thirteenth century.

A small part of the churchyard to the east of the church (the close-mown area to the right of the gate) is fairly modern and is still used regularly for burials. The remainder is the ancient burial ground, for many years abandoned along with the church building. By the late 1990s, most of the headstones had disappeared under a dense growth of brambles and ivy. A jungle of elders had caused parts of the 1848 churchyard wall to collapse along the north and west boundaries.

Hand-in-hand with the restoration and conservation of the building has gone a programme to reclaim the ancient churchyard, and to manage it in a way which respects its character and acknowledges the yearly cycle of nature. Enormous effort by volunteers has banished the brambles and elders, the brick walls have been re-built, repaired and largely re-pointed, and the fallen gravestones have been re-set. New gates are soon to be installed between the north side of the church and Abbey Garth - the huge field surrounding the site on three sides. Interesting grassland plant communities, unusual lichens, fungi and a modest range of animals and birds already flourish in this sheltered enclosure. The trustees hope to encourage more to colonise through appropriate traditional management.

One of the aims will be to reduce the dominance of certain hardy grasses by impoverishing the fertility of the soil through a combination of cutting at the right time of the year and sheep-grazing in the autumn. For the last five or six years, the hay has been cut in mid-July. In future this may be increased to two cuts, followed by the Hebridean sheep to take advantage of the 'aftermath' grazing when the vegetation has recovered - as well as providing entertainment for our visitors.

To diversify the character of the churchyard and enhance the setting of the church even more, two oak trees have been planted to replace huge trees visible in early photographs, but long-since felled, and a vigorous rambling rose - the lovely *rosa Mulliganii* - has been planted against a south-facing wall.

## Getting plastered - the inside story

For many years, Ellerton Priory church had large holes in the roof and no windows. The weather was much the same inside the building as it was outside - no joke on such an exposed site. Substantial parts of the structure were more-or-less permanently wet. Fortunately the building was completely re-roofed about six years ago, since when it has gradually dried out, but the action of salts migrating from the drying masonry has blown much of the plaster off the internal walls. All the perished plaster has now been hacked-off by volunteers, and the trustees have asked Peter Baker, an artist and traditional craftsman-plasterer living in York, to repair the internal surfaces - starting with the chancel and the end walls of the nave.

So far, Peter has spent about seven days at the church, gradually building-up the missing areas in at least three layers of plaster made from coarse sand and lime putty. Each layer is allowed to dry very gently before the next is added, and the process cannot be rushed. The final coat will match as closely as possible the finish of the 1840s surface where it has survived and the walls will then be given four coats of creamy limewash. This may sound very laborious in an age of DIY and instant 'make-overs', but ancient buildings demand respect and really good repair and conservation work takes care and time. Traditional lime plaster covered with limewash will allow the structure to breathe and move in a way that modern plasters and paints will not, and give a quality of light just right for our magnificent stained glass windows.

**An old-fashioned tribute**

Stephen Warburton, the first Secretary of the Ellerton Church Preservation Trust, was a lifelong and enthusiastic 'church-crawler'. Although he loved exploring churches and their contents for their own sake, his particular relish was for the seventeenth, eighteenth and early-nineteenth century memorials that so often pepper their walls. He was intrigued by their design and their often witty or surprising imagery. He valued them as records of social history and, most importantly, he loved their language. He would spend happy hours poring over (and smiling at) those long, high-flown epitaphs which describe very ordinary people in terms of the most lavish and unlikely perfection - especially when written in latin.

Before his death last year he asked that he might be remembered at Ellerton Priory, and many of you have contributed generously toward his memorial fund. A handsome monument has now been commissioned and will be installed before the end of the year. True to the spirit of Ellerton, it has been designed and is being made by a group of Stephen's friends working in collaboration: Peter Coates, Peter Maris, Harold Gosney and Phil Thomas. Carved from lovely green Westmorland slate and creamy Yorkshire limestone, it takes the form of a Classical wall-tablet and incorporates discreet symbols of the natural world (earth water and sky) and of the intellectual life Stephen valued so much. His practical relationship with the land is shown by carvings of his spade and fork, and the whole is crowned with an onion (he grew fine onions, shallots and leeks) - exactly the kind of affectionate, ridiculous detail which delighted him on old memorials.

The long epitaph has a distinctly eighteenth century flavour, and on the predella (the shallow panel at the base) are carved the closing words of Virgil's third *Eclogue*, which Stephen often used to illustrate lectures on the English landscape: *Claudite iam rivus pueri, sat prata biberunt*. He liked to translate this as *Now close the sluices lads, for the meadows have drunk their fill*, which could hardly be more appropriate beside the seasonally flooding Derwent and as a comment on the well-spent life of a committed Natural Historian and an unfailingly hospitable man.

## Final events at Ellerton Priory, 2005

We are coming to the end of the most productive and rewarding season we have had at Ellerton Priory church since the restoration project began ten years ago. There are only two public events left, and we would like both of them to be a great success, so please come along if you can, and encourage friends who do not know Ellerton to come along as well.

### Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> September and Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> September

A practical **Weekend Workshop in Creative Ceramics** led by professional potter Ian Howie, who will talk about his own work and lead a basic course in practical ceramic techniques, concentrating on hand-building. Ian's website address is: [www.ianhowie.co.uk](http://www.ianhowie.co.uk). Fee: £20 per person. **Places limited, early booking advised.** Booking: Phil Thomas, 13 South Parade, York YO23 1BF. Tel: 01904 630097. E-mail: [york@enterprise.net](mailto:york@enterprise.net)

### Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> September: National Heritage Open Day

**Church and churchyard open to visitors 10.30 am - 5.30 pm for National Heritage Open Days.** This is our biggest event of the year with **entertaining guided tours at 11.00 am, 1.00 pm and 4.00 pm** and **Derwent Valley guided nature walks at 12.30 pm and 2.30 pm** and we would love to welcome you for the day. There will be stalls selling local produce, plants, gift and Christmas cards, second-hand books and refreshments - including excellent home-made cakes. There is plentiful car parking available. We have comprehensive guide books to the church and its stained glass, which are also available in large-print versions. **New things to see this year** include a recently-installed jewel-like window by the celebrated stained glass artist Alf Fisher, and the design for another future window. This summer, the church interior has been partly re-plastered and decorated. Bring a pic-nic, and eat it while you make friends with the lovely **Hebridean sheep** who graze our churchyard? Please note that our splendid 'sister' church in the village of **Warter** near Pocklington will also be open on the previous day, Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> September, if you would like to make a weekend of it.

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**Directions:** **Ellerton** is 14 miles south-east of York, just off the B1228 York-Howden road. The church is the last building at the far end of the village. Access is via a grass path and two steps. Excellent traditional village pub nearby. **Warter** is on the B1246, 4 miles east of Pocklington. There is an ample village car park nearby. Access is via a sloping grass path and two very shallow steps.

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LHI is a partnership between the  
Heritage Lottery Fund, Nationwide Building  
Society and the Countryside Agency