

Appleby Archaeology Group began their season of winter evening lectures on Thursday in the town's Supper Room with an excellent illustrated talk by Peter Ryder, Historic Building Consultant and independent archaeologist with a particular knowledge of medieval architecture and sculpture. The subject of his talk was the Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers of Cumbria and all present were fascinated and impressed by what they learnt.

Mr Ryder's interest in medieval grave slabs began many years ago he first saw some which had been propped up in a church in Bridekirk and which were in a state of some disrepair – the detail and skill of the engraving on them prompted him to start recording, surveying and drawing these slabs. Also in the 1970s he came across a book by C Clement-Hodges – “The Sepulchral Slabs of the County of Durham” – and in this book were some of the author's own personal notes and observations about individual slabs. From that moment Peter was determined to do more to help record, preserve and save as many as possible.

In the 1990s he visited and surveyed 160 church and monastic sites in Cumbria and this resulted in him recording, in photographs and drawings, 452 slabs. Early records indicated at the time that there were another 74 slabs in the county but their whereabouts were unknown. Using old documents and archival records he found some of the missing ones but many still remain undiscovered and are still waiting to be located.

Dating between about the 12th to 15th Centuries grave slabs such as these are among the most common forms of memorial to survive from this era and they give us a tangible link to the past, to real people and aspects of their lives. Most of the slabs are no longer in their original location and over time they have been re-used and re-set into the fabric of church buildings, used as lintels, in the walls of porches, to create a piscina or set on the top of boundary walls – but they still reveal much to us today from the symbols and designs on them.

The emblem which occurs most frequently is the sword. This indicates a male burial and the sword is almost always on the right hand side of the slab. In Cumbria 123 grave slabs depict a sword and 97 of them have the sword on the right. The second most common symbol is a pair of shears – indicating a female. My Ryder explained how the carving of symbols was a sort of follow-on from “grave goods” – rather than an individual being interred with actual goods as in earlier centuries, the symbols on their grave slabs represent something that had been important to them in life or indicated their status. Many slabs show objects connected with trades or skills and we can offer an educated opinion as to what the interred individual might have done – for instance a bow and quiver to represent a hunter or a forester, a set square to represent a mason, an axe for a carpenter, horseshoe, pliers and hammer for a blacksmith. Personal names appear very infrequently so the burial slab with the engraving “ Domina Eoa de Nevt” which denotes a woman, Eoa, buried in the cloister walk of a Cumbrian abbey is a rare thing.

Mr Ryder went on to explain that symbols of chalice and book with a clasp almost always denote the burial of a priest – but there is a mystery on one of Cumbria's 15th Century slabs which has the female symbol of shears but also a chalice and a book, see the picture – the anomaly has yet to be explained!

Mr Ryder showed many fine examples of different styles of engraved crosses on the slabs ranging from very plain to elaborate ones wreathed with foliate designs of varying complexity. Where the sacred monogram IHC is included this usually means the slab was carved at the latter end of the medieval era.

He presented the group with another conundrum – the burial slab on the grave of Bishop Bell (1496) in Carlisle Cathedral has numerous carvings of birds and animals but also includes two very identifiable Brontosaurus dinosaurs. Had the mason seen fossils? Did the Bishop believe these creatures still existed? It certainly prompted a few theories from the audience. Finally he ended with a self-penned song about Bishop Bell's grave slab and the dinosaur images – it was an entertaining way to end what had been an enthralling talk (and it was a first for the group!) – all members of the audience left the evening smiling, and it's a likely bet that no-one present will ever forget Bishop Bell or his grave slab!

Appleby Archaeology Group meet in the Supper Room on the second Thursday of each month and talks begin at 7.30pm. Visitors most welcome.