

Renovation of the Lych-gates 2006

This is now a small item of historic information which will be of interest to any future renovation of the lych-gates situated in the far corner of the cemetery bordering Park Road, Hampton Hill.

This is the only record of the lych-gates, because it has not been possible to discover any other reference.

During the refurbishment of the gates at this time extensive research was made to learn of their origin.

In an endeavour to discover new and perhaps collate old facts, all the obvious locations thought to hold any reference were carefully eliminated. The Church archives, the local library at Hampton Hill, the main library at Hampton, and the records section of the Museum at Richmond were visited, all to no avail. It slowly became apparent that there was no information at all as to their origin, no plans of the siting, no reference as to the original dates of erection, the original cost (indeed any costing), or if they were donated. No reference whatsoever as to when they were repaired (and there was evidence of previous repair) was found.

Now, if the well-read who are reading this are by now thinking "I've seen an old photograph of the lych-gate somewhere in a book!", then you are correct, please see the photographs at the end.

A brief explanation: the copy of the print dated 1890s features the lych-gates, or more precisely the *lych*. Look closely at the original and compare this with the recent photograph and you will see. The main uprights of the lych do not match the uprights of recent photographs. So it can be said with some certainty that the lych was not moved but replaced, at some time after 1912. The original print does not show any detail of the actual gates, so perhaps it would be a mistake to assume that the actual gates of the 1890s were replaced at the same time.

The Revd Fitzroy John Fitzwygram, a radical figure at that time, may have had some dealings in the original lych-gate, but there is no record. In more recent times, were they replaced or damaged in the Second World War?

Because of the shameful neglect, in the last five or six decades, of these humble but once proud solid oak gates, it was decided that this refurbishment should not go unrecorded.

The train of events all started from a chance remark after a repair some weeks earlier of the iron gates, also situated in Park Road.

The lych-gates at this time were in a sorry state. One gate had for years been lying up against the wall where it had a worn and broken bottom hinge and closure, which obviously were not original and not in keeping. The other gate was permanently in the open position, the catch and closure now reduced to rusty remains of their former selves, and for the most part non-existent.

Shrinkage of the oak panels was obvious; extensive work would be needed to restore the gates to anything like their original renown.

The gates were duly removed, much to the surprise of the then vicar, the Rev Dr Brian Leathard, who, until brought up to date, thought they had been stolen!

With the gates now removed to a secure location, where power tools were to hand, the first job was to remove all the bolted ironwork.

Because there has been no guttering to the lych, a high-pressure water jet was used to restore the colour and remove the staining of years of rain water that had splashed up from the pavement. Next the gates were completely taken apart by removing the wooden dowels. Upon inspection of the eleven panels of each gate it was soon significant that these were original because they were double grooved and not tongued and grooved. Further inspection revealed that unfortunately the small tongues were not however original.

Perhaps I should explain. Because of the finding that the oak panels were double grooved and thought to be original, it was gleaned from the experts at Park Gate Timber, High Street, Hampton Hill, that in the 'good old days' double grooved panels were made, because machinery had not then been invented to make it possible to make the tongue. The panels, then not having a tongue, a separate tongue had to be expertly hand shaved to shape and thickness. These somewhat delicate thin joining pieces were always cut diagonal to the grain for strength and, because of the grain marking they looked similar to, were called *feathers*.

The one reason it was now obvious that an earlier repair had been made to the gates was because the feathers found were in fact made of hardboard, a modern manufactured composite material of the same profile.

Now, hardboard was first on the market shortly after the war, circa 1950ish. So, was that an indication that the gates were repaired about that time; could the repair have been necessary as a result of bomb damage?

It has not been possible to date the gates even with their distinctive forged iron bottom hinges. Distinctive because both are not an exact matched pair, they being handmade and hammered over an anvil. Whilst conventionally they swivel from the rear, for effect are actually bolted at the front. This causes them to look as if they are about to fall off when in the open position. It is also to be noted that the top hinges are not in character with the bottom hinges, either in age, design, quality, or value. Unlike the bottom hinges, they are modern cup hinges of a type freely available today. This difference is questionable because there is no evidence either on the gates or on the posts that previous hinges have been fitted. If replaced, could this change have been made at the same time as the use of hardboard?

Advice from the experts was now thought necessary to determine the gates' best interests in preserving their character. With the gates in pieces and under scrutiny, evidence was also found of the use of round dowels, another indication that the gates had had earlier attention because, on reliable authority, original dowels would most certainly have been square.

The original ironwork was cleaned, primed, rust proofed and painted. One bottom hinge was repaired and new bolts were used throughout. New like-for-like latch and closures were acquired from Roger at Hampton Hill Hardware. After the feathers were replaced with quality seasoned imported hard wood, and the round dowels with square ones, it was decided that no liquid preservative would be used on the finished gates, they being more than capable of seeing out the present congregation and their offspring.

This 'labour of love' was not undertaken for recognition. You will not find a name or signature to these findings. I have however taken the liberty to impart my initials on one of the gates, but it will take whosoever has the privilege of any future renovation to find them.

Over the years the lych-gates in Park Road, Hampton Hill, have a story to tell but it seems they prefer to remain prudent and discreet. They may well be allowed to last for another 100 years and, in all good time, those that now know will not be around to tell. So, although it raises more questions than it answers, hopefully then the reader of this missive, perhaps in the next century or so, will learn a little of their history.

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