

# The medieval grave slabs of Birkenhead Priory

## Background

The chapter house chapel at Birkenhead priory has been dated to the twelfth century, based on surviving Norman architectural features<sup>1</sup>, with the scriptorium above dating to the fourteenth century. First listed in 1950, it is a grade II\* listed building<sup>2</sup>.

Birkenhead was one of the first priories to be disbanded in 1536 under the *Act for the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries*<sup>3</sup> and following the Reformation it remained in private hands up until 1896 when it was acquired by the Birkenhead Borough Council<sup>4</sup>. The chapter house acted as a church from the Reformation up until 1821 when St Mary's church was consecrated<sup>5</sup>. It was dedicated as a chapel in 1919<sup>6</sup>.

On the floor of the sanctuary of the chapter house chapel, a number of grave slabs can be found. One of the original functions of a grave slab was to mark a burial, however they would also have commemorated the deceased and been used to solicit prayers. Whilst the majority of medieval grave slabs are now anonymous, it can be argued that similarly to church walls, sculpture and monuments, these slabs could originally have been painted and decorated<sup>7</sup> and so inscriptions and names could have originally been visible.

Grave slabs could be found covering both intramural and churchyard interments. In common with many found in parish churches today, the grave slabs at Birkenhead Priory are no longer in their original position but have been moved and repositioned. Their original positions are unknown. They could have been situated in the external burial ground, within the chapter house chapel (prior to the priory church being built in the thirteenth century<sup>8</sup>), or within the priory church, which no longer survives and originally stood to the south of the chapter house.

## The surviving grave slabs

The remains of possibly twelve grave slabs are currently positioned on the floor of the sanctuary. The majority of these are cross-grave slabs. This is with the exception of no.12, which is a rectangular plain slab with a Latin inscription around the edge of each side. They are in various condition, with some too fragmented or worn to determine their original form.

All the slabs are made from sandstone, and with the exception of no.7 all design and text are incised. They are as follows<sup>9</sup>:

To the left of the altar

No.1/2



Two separate fragments positioned together.

1) The top fragment is undecipherable.

*L 25cm  
W 28/29cm*

2) The bottom fragment has an incised stepped cross base.

*L 29cm  
W 32cm*

No.3



Incomplete slab. Mounded base and partial cross shaft. Top right-hand corner has been replaced with a separate fragment of stone.

*L 46cm  
W 32cm at shortest point  
W 34cm at widest point*

No.4









Stepped base with splayed arm cross. This type of cross was common in use from c1100 and throughout the twelfth century<sup>10</sup>.


Secondary emblem – shears. This symbol can either represent a clothier or a female.

Miniature monuments, including grave slabs such as this, have been interpreted as belonging to children due to their small size. This is not necessarily always the case and smaller monuments can be found to represent heart or entrail burials or be a design choice.

*L 72cm  
W 18 cm at shortest point  
W 27cm at widest point*

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| No.5   |    | <p>Incomplete slab missing the cross head. Mounded base and evidence of a secondary symbol.</p> <p><i>L 103cm</i><br/> <i>W 32cm at shortest point</i><br/> <i>W 39cm at widest point</i></p>   |
| No.6   |   | <p>Wheeled cross head with missing section which would have shown the cross base. Erosion on cross head but looks like it is a bracelet design. The bracelet design was popular from the late twelfth century<sup>11</sup>.</p> <p>Secondary emblem – sword. This symbol likely represents a man of elite class or a knightly status.</p> <p><i>L 103cm</i><br/> <i>W 34cm at shortest point</i><br/> <i>W 41cm at widest point</i></p> |
| No.7/8 |  | <p>Two separate fragments positioned together.</p> <p>7) The top stone shows what is likely to be the shaft of a cross and part of a sword in high relief.</p> <p><i>L 26cm</i><br/> <i>W 42/43cm</i></p> <p>8) Williams<sup>12</sup> suggests this may have originally been a shield. The stone still has two identifiable incised curved lines supporting this argument.</p> <p><i>L 22cm</i><br/> <i>W 42/43cm</i></p>               |

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| No.9                             |    | <p>Stepped base with bracelet cross (made up of four open circles similar to bracelets). The bracelet design was popular from the late twelfth century<sup>13</sup>.</p> <p>Consists of three separate pieces, which appear to have been cut down. The incised cross has been reinscribed, extending slightly into the surrounding floor stones to show its full design.</p> <p><i>L 145cm</i><br/> <i>W 39cm at shortest point</i><br/> <i>W 50cm at widest point</i></p>                                    |
| <b>To the right of the altar</b> |   |   |
| No.10                            |   | <p>Small fleur-de-lys style cross with a mounded base. Elaborated and floriated crosses became popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries<sup>14</sup>. It has been suggested that the move from the stepped base to this mounded base took place in the thirteenth century<sup>15</sup>.</p> <p>Secondary emblem – sword. This symbol likely represents a man of elite class or a knightly status.</p> <p><i>L 109cm</i><br/> <i>W 33cm at shortest point</i><br/> <i>W 38cm at widest point</i></p> |
| No.11                            |  | <p>Stepped base with foliated cross head. Elaborated and floriated crosses became popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries<sup>16</sup>.</p> <p>Secondary emblem – Chalice and book representing a member of the clergy.</p> <p><i>L 87cm</i><br/> <i>W 35cm at shortest point</i><br/> <i>W 36cm at widest point</i></p>   |

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| No.12 |  | <p>Large, damaged rectangular plain slab with inscription round the edge. The translation reads:</p> <p>"Here lieth Thomas Rayneford, formerly the good Prior of this House, who died the 8th day of May in the year of our Lord 1473. May God be Gracious to his Soul."<sup>17</sup></p> <p>L 204cm<br/>W 98cm</p> |
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### A brief life-history of the grave slabs

An object's function and meaning can change repeatedly throughout its lifespan. By considering the life-history of an object we can determine what they may mean to communities over time. After their initial function as a grave cover and to commemorate the deceased, there appears to be a period of silence when we do not know much about the history of the Priory's medieval grave slabs, that is until we get to the nineteenth century.

Restoration took place at the Priory between 1896-98, with additional restoration in the chapter house chapel between 1913-1919<sup>18</sup>. At this time, it is clear that the historical value of old stonework was important to those responsible for the restoration. A report undertaken at the time says that prior to clearing the refectory '*all the grave slabs and fragments now in garden and hall to be collected and safely stored where they may not be used up as old stone*'<sup>19</sup>. A photograph taken at the time, currently on display in the crypt, shows a collection of stonework fragments. Some of these can be identified as grave slabs now positioned in the floor of the chapter house chapel, on display as relics of the Priory's past.

This report states that a '*systematic examination of the fragments of original stonework, tombstones, and other objects of interest which have been met with was kindly undertaken by Mr. Henry Taylor of the Chester Archaeological Society, and by Mr. J. Paul Rylands, Mr. R. D. Radcliffe, and Mr. W. F. Irvine of this Society; and the larger pieces of stonework have been ranged round the Prior's Hall and in the Crypt, where they are convenient for inspection by archaeologists, whilst the smaller objects are stored in a show-case under cover in the Chapter House*'<sup>20</sup>. This demonstrates that those leading the restoration had a specific interest in preserving old material culture, including the gravestones.

Prior to Rayneford's grave slab being repositioned into the floor of the chapter house, Bushell suggests it was in the graveyard and when it was dug up in 1818, three skeletons were found buried underneath it<sup>21</sup>. In 1890 it is reported by Aldridge to be '*placed vertically in the west wall of the chapter house, on the left side of the doorway*'<sup>22</sup> This may be where Robinson means when she states in 1903 it had been '*removed from the outer wall, where it was put when discovered in 1818*'<sup>23</sup>. It is clear that since its discovery in 1818 this grave slab has been deliberately saved and repositioned on a number of occasions.

Whilst this information regarding the grave slabs concentrates on the restoration activities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fact the grave slabs survived hundreds of years to this point can indicate they were of some significance to previous generations. However, the report undertaken at the time of the nineteenth century restoration can also give an insight into how the grave slabs had been treated in the past. It mentions that amongst the stone found in the refectory there was a 'a gravestone of Norman work which had apparently been reused for the base of an open-work screen'<sup>24</sup>. So, whilst at the end of the nineteenth century the historical value of the stonework was being acknowledged, and effort made for their survival and presentation, at some point in their life-history they were considered as spolia and reused as building material.

## Conclusion

The careful collection, preservation and recording discussed above shows an interest in the existence of the grave slabs during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their deliberate grouping, reuse and display in a sacred area of the church as an assemblage shows they were considered of value and importance. From their original function as a grave cover and memorial, to an example of reuse as ad-hoc building materials, to their preservation and current display, the grave slabs at Birkenhead priory provide an example of how the function and value of material culture can change over time.

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<sup>1</sup> See Historic England listing: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1218733?section=official-list-entry>; Richards, R. (1973). *Old Cheshire Churches*. E.J. Morten; Pevsner, N., & Hubbard, E. (1990). *The Buildings of England: Cheshire*. Penguin Books; and Bushell, W.F. (1956). The Ancient Graveyard of Birkenhead Priory. *The Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire*, 108, p.141-146.

<sup>2</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1218733>

<sup>3</sup> Richards, R. (1973). *Old Cheshire Churches*. E.J. Morten. See p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> See The Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland: <https://archive.ph/20120729033225/http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-ch-birpr.html#selection-553.58-553.85>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1218733?section=official-list-entry>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://archive.ph/20120729033225/http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-ch-birpr.html#selection-859.74-859.126>

<sup>7</sup> Badham, S. (2004). 'A new feire peynted stone' Medieval English Incised Slabs? *Church Monuments*, XIX. p.20-52.

<sup>8</sup> Aldridge, C.A. (1890). The Priory of the Blessed Virgin and Saint James, Birkenhead. *The Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire*, 42. p.141-160. See p.215.

<sup>9</sup> Also see Williams, C. (1995). Cross-Bearing Grave Slabs in Merseyside. *Merseyside Archaeological Society Journal*, 9, p.79-95.

<sup>10</sup> McClain, A.N. (2007). Medieval cross slabs in North Yorkshire: chronology, distribution, and social implications. *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 79, p.155-193. See p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> McClain, A.N. (2010). Cross slab monuments in the late Middle Ages: patronage, production, and locality in northern England. In: Badham, S. and Oosterwijk, S., (eds.), *Monumental Industry: the Production of Tomb Monuments in England and Wales in the Long Fourteenth Century*. (p. 37-65). Shaun Tyas. See p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, C. (1995). Cross-Bearing Grave Slabs in Merseyside. See p.83.

<sup>13</sup> McClain, A.N. (2010). Cross slab monuments in the late Middle Ages. p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> McClain, A.N. (2010). Cross slab monuments in the late Middle Ages. p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, L.A.S. 1958. 'Some early northern grave covers--a reassessment,' *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 36, p.207-220. See p.215.

<sup>16</sup> McClain, A.N. (2007). Medieval Cross Slabs in North Yorkshire. p. 165.

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<sup>17</sup> Robinson, A. (1903). The Birkenhead Priory Reparation. *The Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire*, 55. p. 107- 113. See page 112.

<sup>18</sup> <https://historicensland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1218733?section=official-list-entry>.

<sup>19</sup> Robinson, A. (1903). The Birkenhead Priory Reparation. p.108.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, A. (1903). The Birkenhead Priory Reparation. p.113.

<sup>21</sup> Bushell, W.F. (1956). The Ancient Graveyard of Birkenhead Priory. See p.144.

<sup>22</sup> Aldridge, C.A. (1890). The Priory of the Blessed Virgin and Saint James, Birkenhead. See p.150.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, A. (1903). The Birkenhead Priory Reparation. p. 112.

<sup>24</sup> Robinson, A. (1903). The Birkenhead Priory Reparation. p.111.