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www.skillingtons.co.uk

Units 6 - 7 Hollis Road, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 7QH
T: 01476 565671 F: 01476 566524 E: Skillwork@aol.com



**St. Peter & St. Paul's church,
KNAPTON, Norfolk**



Report on eight medieval coffin lids with a proposed methodology for their relocation

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Skillington Workshop Limited

Director: Dr. David Carrington BSc(hons) MA DPhil ACR Company Secretary: Wendy Carrington
Reg. Office: Unit 6, Heritage Business Centre, Derby Road, Belper, Derbyshire DE56 1SW
Company No. 3865769 VAT Reg. No. 694 9354 76 CITB Reg. No. 3939218



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Abstract

This report concerns a group of 12th-13th century coffin lids in Knapton parish church. Their exceptional importance is established, as is the viability of re-locating them from the nave to the chancel. Each is described and its condition recorded, and a methodology presented for the work proposed.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The report

This survey has been commissioned on behalf of Knapton Parochial Church Council by their architect Ruth Blackman of Birdsall, Swash & Blackman Ltd. It results from consultation with the Church Buildings Council as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant-aided scheme for repairs to the church as well as the installation of new facilities at the west end of the nave.

The main contractor for this project is S&L Restoration, whose director Stephen Miles has been consulted during the preparation of this report. It is likely that S&L Restoration will be closely involved with the relocation of the coffin lids, working in conjunction with a specialist conservator.

This report has been prepared by Dr David Carrington ACR of Skillington Workshop Ltd, with a site survey being carried out on 24 March 2016.

1.2 St. Peter & St. Paul's church

St. Peter & St. Paul's church comprises a nave (with roof dated to 1504), chancel (also late medieval), south porch, and north-west tower of the early 14th century. It is notable for present purposes that none of building appears to pre-date the 14th century. The most notable restoration was by George Gilbert Scott Jnr in 1881-3¹.

Of the furnishings the font is interesting since it is of the 13th century, of a relatively standard Purbeck marble form², octagonal with a main central shaft and plain outer smaller shafts, and simple arcading around the bowl. Although raised on later steps and with a fine cover of 1704 this, together with the coffin lids, is a tangible reminder of an earlier church at Knapton.

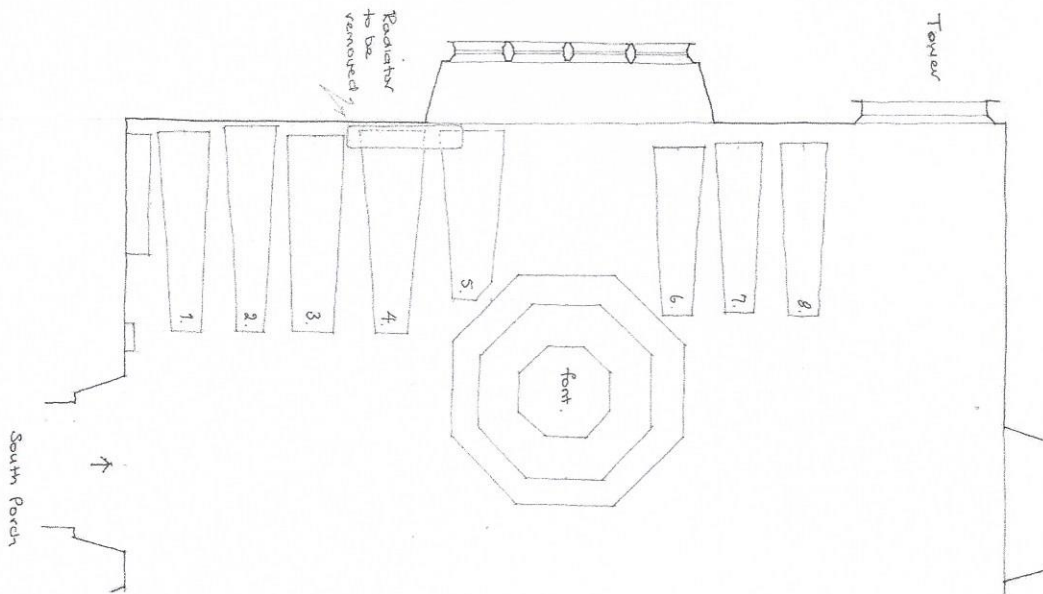
The church appears generally in good order and well maintained, with no particular concerns about drainage, damp, or leaks in the roof.

¹ Pevsner & Wilson 1997 pp.581-2, Mortlock & Roberts 2007 pp.167-8.

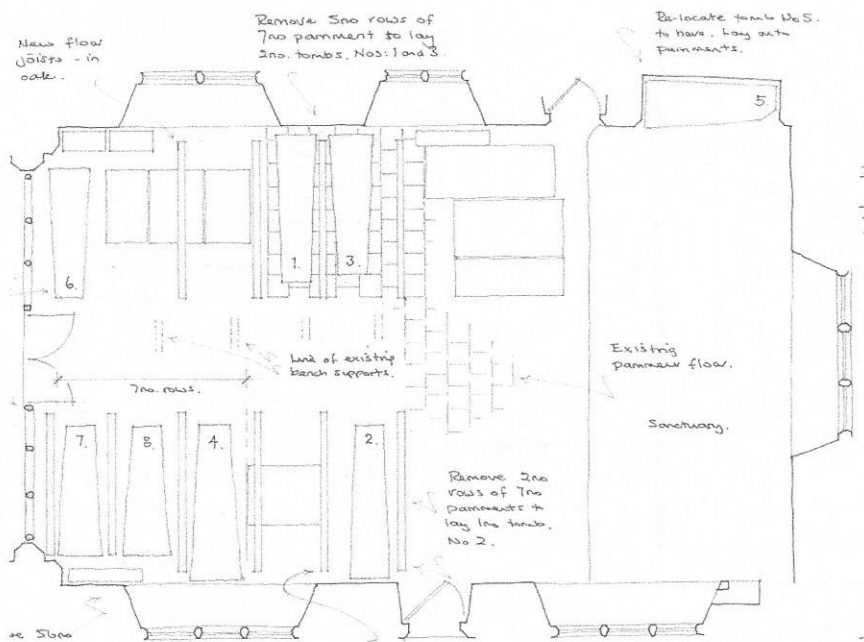
² There are 42 in Norfolk according to Pevsner & Wilson 1997 page 63.

1.3 The present and proposed location of the coffin lids

The coffin lids are currently at the west end of the nave, shown in general view in plates 1 & 2 on the front page of this report. They are numbered 1 to 8 working south to north, as shown in the detail of the architect's drawing ref. 01, below.

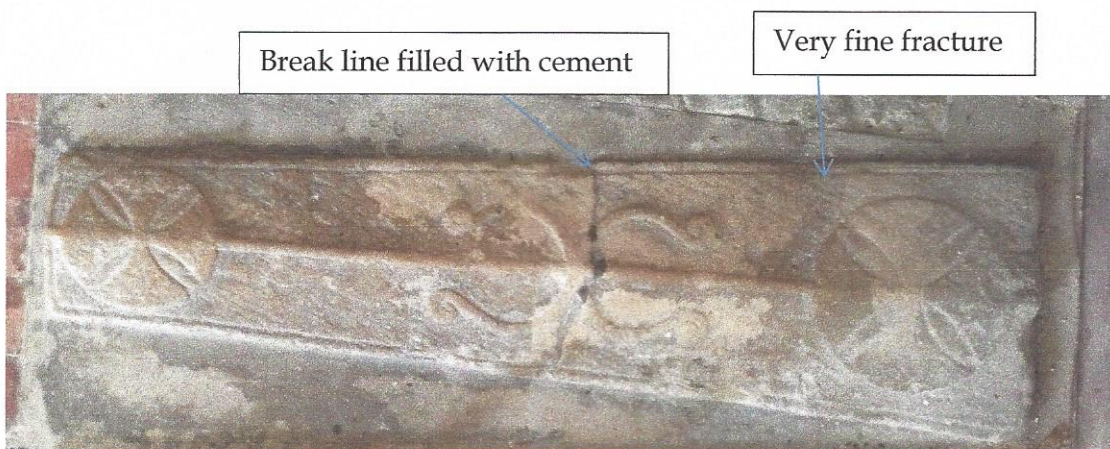


The proposed locations in the chancel are shown in the extract from drawing no. 2, below:



2 Description and condition report

2.1 Coffin lid no. 1



This Barnack³ limestone coffin lid is circa 1980mm long and tapers from 575mm wide at the west to 320mm at the east. It is coped, and has a maximum of about 50mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

The decoration comprises a simple moulding around the edge and a flat roll moulding running the entire length of the central ridge. At the head and foot is a simple cross paté and at mid-way along the ridge round-ended ribbon ornament.

It appears to have been in two pieces when set in its present position, the break filled with hard cement. There is also a hairline fracture running right the way through, just below the head cross, which looks like a clean break which will come apart when it is moved, but there is no sign of cement fill.

There is a small area of loss to the bottom right-hand corner in the photograph above.

The surface is worn in places, which seems to clearly correlate to the doors of the adjacent cupboard, and is thus almost certainly from foot traffic. Elsewhere the surface of this hard limestone is in remarkably good condition with tool marks still visible.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

³ Barnack, near Stamford (Lincolnshire) is the source of a very durable and well regarded shelly limestone, exploited from Roman times until the late Middle Ages when it began to be worked out.

2.2 Coffin lid no. 2



This Barnack limestone coffin lid is circa 2080mm long and tapers from 560mm wide at the west to 285mm at the east. It is only slightly coped, and has a maximum of about 30mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

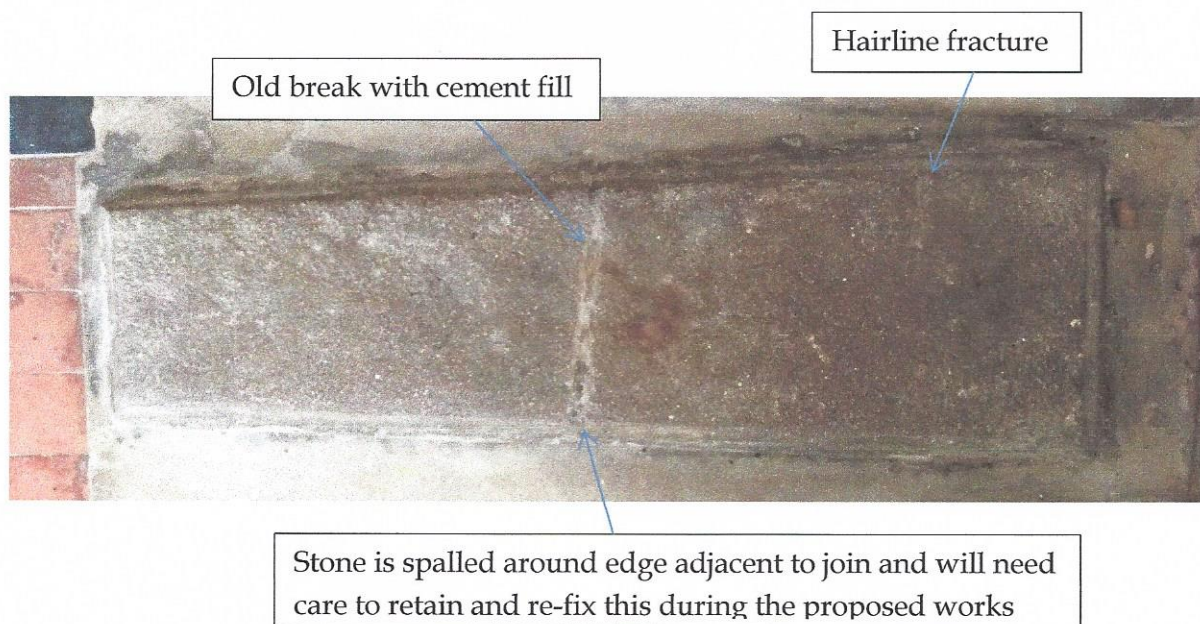
The decoration comprises a simple and very feint moulding around the edge and a flat roll moulding running along the length of the central ridge – although it is too worn to see if this extends all the way. At the head is a simple cross paté and at the foot a three stepped mount (or calvary). Towards the head, straddling the ridge, is a round-ended ribbon ornament. There is a hint of further ornament lower down.

It was in three pieces when set in its present position, the wide breaks crudely filled with hard cement.

The surface is very worn such that much of the original surface tooling and ornamentation is worn away, but this appears to be historic wear with only small areas of 'fresh' stone suggesting that there hasn't been much wear in recent times. The implication is that it was previously outside or in an area of high foot traffic.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

2.3 Coffin lid no. 3

This Purbeck marble⁴ coffin lid is circa 1885mm long and tapers from 595mm wide at the west to 435mm at the east. It is flat-topped, and has a maximum of about 75mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

The upper surface is weathered and it cannot be discounted that there was originally some form of surface decoration. There is a double hollow chamfer running around the edge, which is chipped and worn.

Various facets of the condition of the coffin lid are shown on the photograph above. Note the vulnerability of the moulded edge to further damage all the way around, but especially where the spall is indicated. There is also, as shown, a latent fissure. Care will need to be taken not to place pressure on this when the coffin lid is handled.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

⁴ Not a true marble in the geological sense of the word, which would indicate a metamorphic stone, but a shelly limestone of the Upper Jurassic which takes a polish. See references for further information.

2.4 Coffin lid no. 4



This Barnack limestone coffin lid is circa 2110mm long and tapers from 690mm wide at the west to 335mm at the east. It is only slightly coped, and has a maximum of about 30mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

There is a hint of a simple and very feint moulding around the edge and a flat roll moulding running along the length of the central ridge – although it is too worn to see if this extends all the way. At the head is a simple cross with rounded termini. Whatever was at the foot is completely worn away. At mid-length, straddling the ridge, is the remains of a round-ended ribbon ornament.

It was in three pieces when set in its present position, the wide breaks crudely filled with hard cement. The breaks are wider at the surface than lower down suggesting that it was very worn when in pieces prior to being placed in its present position.

The surface is very worn such that much of the original surface tooling and ornamentation is worn away, but this appears to be historic wear with only small areas of ‘fresh’ stone suggesting that there hasn’t been much wear in recent times. The implication is that it was previously outside or in an area of high foot traffic.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

2.5 Coffin lid no. 5



This Barnack limestone coffin lid is incomplete, with an old break at the foot end indicating that it has been truncated. It was further cut to accommodate the font base. What remains is circa 1780mm long and tapers from 615mm wide at the west to 380mm at the east. It is coped, and has a maximum of about 55mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

No carved decoration or tooling remains.

When set in its present position there were two large sections and a somewhat broken up middle section. It has been set together in a hard grey cement. Whereas for the other coffin lids which have been repaired it is possible – or likely – that the cement break fills are relatively superficial it must be assumed that the centre portion to this slab has cement to its full depth, holding the five or more smaller fragments together.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

2.6 Coffin lid no. 6



This Barnack limestone coffin lid is circa 1730mm long and tapers from 510mm wide at the west to 260mm at the east. It is coped, and has a maximum of about 85mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

The decoration comprises a simple moulding around the edge, but unlike the other slabs the roll is to the side rather than on the upper surface. There is a flat roll moulding running the entire length of the central ridge. At the head is a simple cross paté, at the foot a three stepped mount (or calvary) and at mid-way along the ridge round-ended ribbon ornament.

It was in three pieces when set in its present position, the breaks filled with hard cement.

The surface has recent wear in places, at the east end which is almost certainly from foot traffic, and chips at the west end probably from having furniture stored on top of it. Elsewhere the surface has more historic wear such that although the ornamentation is still visible no tool marks remain.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

2.7 Coffin lid no. 7

Smaller and neater repair to spalled stone. See text below.



This Purbeck marble coffin lid is circa 1810mm long and tapers from 605mm wide at the west to 345mm at the east. It is flat-topped, and has a maximum of about 80mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

There is a single hollow chamfer running around the edge, which is in remarkably good condition.

The decoration comprises a distinctive form of cross head (see 3.1.2 for further details); a shaft which is straight and plain other than a circle just below the cross; and a three-stepped mount or calvary.

It has a clean break which has been filled with a hard, grey cement. As shown on the photograph above there is a small and more subtle previous repair adjacent to the more obvious break repair.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

2.8 Coffin lid no. 8



Note soluble salt efflorescence to surrounding cement screed as well as to the edges in particular of the coffin lid.

This Purbeck marble coffin lid is circa 1850mm long and tapers from 605mm wide at the west to 310mm at the east. It is flat-topped, and has a maximum of about 70mm protruding above the surrounding cement screed.

There is a single hollow chamfer running around the edge.

The decoration comprises a distinctive form of cross head (see 3.1.2 for further details); a shaft which is straight and plain – but quite worn so it may have lost the circle visible on lid 7; and a three-stepped mount or calvary.

It is complete, with no historic breaks apparent, but unfortunately is in poor condition. There is much wear to the top and the edge moulding appears to be actively deteriorating with evidence of soluble salts being responsible at least in part for on-going deterioration.

A metal detector survey was negative – suggesting that metal fixings are not present.

There is no evidence of polychromy.

2.9 Coffin lid in south wall recess

Although not strictly covered by this report the Purbeck marble coffin lid in the tomb recess in the south wall is illustrated here to complete the picture.

It is not covered by the recommendations in sections 4 and 5.



The Purbeck marble coffin lid is circa 1830mm long and tapers from c.705mm wide at the west to 390mm at the east. It is flat-topped, and is about 150mm thick.

There is a double hollow chamfer running around the edge.

It is partly buried in the wall.

The decoration comprises a distinctive form of cross head (see 3.1.2 for further details), but the remainder of the surface is weathered – with active on-going deterioration – so the form of shaft and base is not known.

Given that the nave is believed to be some 100 years or so later than the coffin lid it is unlikely that it is in its original location.

3 Statement of significance

3.1 Parallels and dating

3.1.1 *The Barnack stone coffin lids*

An early medieval school of stone carving centred around the Barnack quarries near Stamford in Lincolnshire has long been recognised, products of which include many fine Anglo-Saxon sculptures in the region⁵. There is evidence that at least some of the quarries were owned by Peterborough Abbey at least as early as the 11th century⁶.

Lawrence Butler carried out a major survey of examples in the East Midlands⁷ and has established a chronology based on style of decoration, running from the Norman Conquest to circa 1300 when the school ceased to dominate the region and thus to have much less influence. There are numerous examples plotted throughout the East Midlands but with a concentration around major rivers and the coast. There has not been a thorough study of this type of monument in Norfolk but I have recorded examples, which are closely comparable to the better surviving lids at Knapton, at East Winch, at Emneth and at Hockering. This again reflects a distribution near to rivers and the coast. Butler dates the type of decoration seen on Knapton coffin lids 1, 2 and 6 to between 1120-60. After that date the cross forms become more elaborate, and it is not so easy to place coffin lid 4 in Butler's sequence. We can however with some degree of confidence say that it must be of the 12th century.

3.1.2 *The Purbeck marble coffin lids*

Purbeck marble was widely used for high-status coffin lids during the 12th and 13th centuries, either with plain tops or with crosses of various forms, falling out of fashion by the early 14th century.⁸ It seems likely that until the end of this period at least that they were carved near to the quarry sites on the Isle of Purbeck, and their pattern of distribution indicates the reliance on sea and river transport to their final destination⁹. A pretty complete catalogue of surviving examples has been published, including examples in Norfolk¹⁰. Looking at examples with chamfered sides there are about 103 surviving in

⁵ Butler 1964 page 118.

⁶ Hall 2008 page 12.

⁷ Butler 1964.

⁸ Badham 2007 page 4.

⁹ Blair, J. 'Purbeck marble', being chapter 3 in Blair & Ramsey 1991. The production of Purbeck marble tombs in London gained ascendancy from about 1280. (pp.45-6)

¹⁰ The catalogue compiled primarily by Badham, S., Gittos, M., Gittos, B. & Lankester, P. in the Church Monuments Society Newsletter between 1994 (volume 10 no. 1) to 2004 (volume 19 no.2). Norfolk is in volume 15 no. 1 (1999) pages 10-21 with additions and corrections in volume 19 no. 2 (2004) pages 17-18.

the county (maybe more but with their chamfers not visible), but the only other church with as many surviving examples is St. Lawrence, South Walsham but they are very fragmentary – and indeed two listed may even be part of the same slab. Although the catalogue defines the slabs by type of cross head, base and the type of chamfer no attempt is made to date the styles.

Of the three coffin lids with crosses on at Knapton (including that in the recess in the south wall of the south aisle, which can be seen to have a similar cross form to lids 7 and 8 but a double rather than a single hollow chamfer) the cross design is identical as far as we can tell, the head being a Badham, Gittos, Gittos & Lankester type E or what is described by Butler as a simple round leaf design with pointed buds and dated by him within the context of Barnack slabs as between 1180-1220¹¹. This date range cannot be automatically transposed to Purbeck coffin lids but it is clear that the cross design is a relatively early form – thus it should be safe to state that they are of the very late 12th or first half of the 13th century. Given that the three slabs are so similar one wonders if they were actually part of the same order from the quarry masons.

3.2 Significance

It is clear from section 3.1 that the coffin lids at Knapton represent a date range from as early as about 1120 to as late as the mid-13th century. It was really only after this time that monumental effigies became popular beyond the greater churches, so these imported coffin lids must represent a sequence of high-status memorials stretching over in excess of 100 years in the parish.

What is of further significance is that they all pre-date the present church – of which the only other major clue to there being a pre-14th century church is the font.

How unusual is it to have so many coffin lids surviving in one church? As noted in 3.1.2 Knapton has the most complete surviving Purbeck coffin lids in the county. As far as Barnack products are concerned it is harder to say as they have not been catalogued, and tend to be over-looked by Pevsner. It is however the best group I know of in Norfolk, but this might be tempered by a reminder that there are 40 or more such slabs in the churchyard at Barnack and 22 at nearby Tallington – although these examples are most exceptional¹².

¹¹ Butler 1964 page129.

¹² Cross slabs without moulded edges also have a rich tradition in the north of England. At Brancepeth church (Co. Durham) there is the greatest number known in the north, with over 100 being present, many discovered as having been re-used in walls, when the church was restored after the disastrous fire in 1998. These are

In conclusion, this is a remarkable collection of high status memorial sculpture dating to between c.1120-1250, unique as a group in Norfolk at least, and all pre-dating the present church at Knapton. As such there is no doubt that they are of exceptional regional as well as local cultural significance.

4 Assessment of viability of relocation

4.1 A specific part of the brief for this report is to assess whether the coffin lids are sufficiently sound for them to be moved. The following observations have already been made by this report:

- The coffin lids as a group are of exceptional regional significance.
- They have been countersunk in a cement screed of unknown depth probably at the 1881-3 restoration.
- All but one was previously broken. They appear to have been installed by placing the broken sections up to one another and pointing up the joins with hard cement mortar, with no metal pins.
- Coffin lid 8, the only unbroken one, is deteriorating as a result of soluble salts emanating from its present environment.
- In their current positions some of the slabs are deteriorating as a result of a combination of foot traffic and from objects being stored on top of them.

4.2 The proposed method statement raises the following points:

- By following a careful and measured process with suitably experienced persons carrying out the work it should be possible to separate the coffin lids from the cement screed and to separate the principal fragments without causing further damage.
- Special conservation measures will be required to stabilise fragile parts of coffin lids 3 and 8.
- Coffin lid 5, which is to be relocated in the niche of the north wall of the sanctuary, is more complicated.
- There are some unknowns, for example the current bed of the coffin lids is assumed not to be neat cement, and if it is that they are not set in it.
- Thought needs to be given as to how the fragments are placed in their new locations. For those to be left on the floor there could be a risk of theft or further moving. It is proposed to mitigate against this by bedding in lime mortar and to point up the joins.
- A return visit by a conservator after 12 months is advised, in particular to monitor coffin lid 8.

4.3 In conclusion I consider it not only viable to re-locate the coffin lids, but also potentially very much an improvement in their environment. There are risks, which can be carefully managed, and parts of the process outlined in section 5 will require the skills of a specialist stone conservator.

5 Proposed method statement

The following method statement is proposed for moving the coffin lids:

1. Make a record of the coffin lids including sketches as required to allow reconstruction and photographs.
2. Coffin lids 3 and 8 both have vulnerable edges which should be pre-consolidated using a combination of dispersed lime injection mortar and suitably coloured lime mortar repair fillets. Should disaggregating stonework require consolidating in order to allow fillets to be installed this might be achieved using nanolime (Calosil E25) or by using 5-10% Paraloid B72 acrylic resin in a 50/50 acetone/IMS solvent mix, all subject to site trials. Further repairs of a similar nature may be required to these areas when the slabs are lifted and re-positioned.
3. The cement screed around the slabs needs freeing, firstly by cutting a chase through it about 20mm away from the edge of each coffin lid edge using a diamond blade on an angle grinder, controlling dust as much as possible. At this stage the depth of the cement will be established. Now the cement can be carefully separated from the edge of the coffin lids using hand tools, primarily using small (eg. 12mm wide) sharp chisels. Note that some of the tiles to the north of coffin lid 5 will need carefully breaking up.
4. Given that no metal has been detected at the joints on the broken slabs it seems certain that the cement fills we can see were made in-situ. It is likely that they are not especially deep, no more than say 50mm (but see further note on lid 5, below), but before any further work is done this should be investigated properly. Using small tungsten-tipped chisels in good light (providing additional lights if natural light levels are insufficient) carefully cut out cement from selected joints, being careful to avoid damage to the stone itself – some minor scratches to break surfaces will be inevitable but it ought to be viable to leave ‘original’ surfaces without further damage or loss. Where joints are wide enough the cement might be freed by ‘chain-drilling’ – i.e. using small drill bits to open up a series of holes in the cement without touching the stone. This can assist removal of cement by chisel. This further investigation should support the view that most of the old breaks will quite easily open up again when the lids are moved, and that it will not be viable to lift the broken slabs (so all but no. 8) ‘complete’. As such the separation of the slabs needs to be as carefully controlled as possible. These investigations, together with a developing a methodology as work progresses, will determine to what extent it is best to cut out cement fills prior to attempting to move and to what extent after. This may vary from slab to slab, and from repair to repair. Note that the extensive repairs to the centre portion of slab 5 will need a different approach

to elsewhere, and could be the most problematic. This is covered further in due course.

5. Investigate the existing bedding to the slabs. It is assumed that this is a fairly soft mortar, or a sand bed, from which they are relatively easily separated. If they are found to be set in hard cement from which they are not easily separated the methodology will have to be revised and no doubt the contingency sum dipped into.
6. Using wedges and pinch bars carefully and progressively prise up each slab so that there is sufficient clearance underneath to insert a strap or sling. As the old break lines open up (as is anticipated, subject to investigations noted above) carefully ease sections of slab apart to avoid abrasive damage.
7. The typical weight of a complete slab is calculated at about 400-500kg (depending on thickness). As such it might be surmised that a half-slab could be safely lifted onto a trolley in a controlled way using straps and slings (by up to four persons), but anything larger probably can't be safely. A far more controlled way to handle the pieces would be to use a portable light-weight aluminium gantry with a block and tackle. That way all pieces can be safely handled by two skilled people working together, with the possible exception of no. 8 which might need a third person. All slings and straps should have soft foam padding placed between them and the stone.
8. With the coffin lids out of the ground and old breaks separated where they are going to be, carefully remove any remaining cement repair material using hand tools such as sharp chisels, rifflers and scalpels.
9. The installation of the coffin lids in their new positions requires careful thought. If not joined together in some way there are parts of no.s 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 which could be relatively easily moved - and thus vulnerable to theft. Without in some way making these ones in particular at least semi-permanently installed there is a risk that they could either inadvertently damaged by well-intentioned moving by the parish at some stage in the future or have pieces stolen. Lid numbers 1 and 3 are scheduled to be set within the chancel floor, so these will not be an issue, but my suggestion for the others is that they are bedded in lime mortar on lead membranes cut to the shape of the slab. I suggest code 4 lead would suffice, painted on both sides with two coats of bitumastic paint and trimmed to the exact size of each slab. The lime mortar could act as both a bedding medium for the fragments (so they can be properly aligned and to stop them from rocking) and as a discouragement to moving them whilst remaining easily reversible should this be necessary in the future.
10. I suggest a bedding mortar made of 1 part NHL2 hydraulic lime and 2.5 parts aggregate (suitably graded sharp sand with some limestone dust) which is of

a suitably neutral colour and finish. Ideally the lead membrane will not be visible even if it is just pointed over at the edge. Its function is as a separating layer as much as a damp-proof membrane and the chancel floor appears quite dry so it doesn't matter if it is marginally 'bridged' by the mortar.

11. Where the lids are being countersunk in the floor it is assumed that a sound and level bedding screed will have been prepared for them. From that point on the methodology can be similar to the other slabs, noting that the membrane is somewhat ironically not required. There is no need to separate them from pammments below, and the extent of pointing up around the sides would well and truly negate any moisture-proof membrane, but to make a lead 'case' to go up the sides with welded joints would seem rather overkill. As such I suggest that these are bedded onto the (already dry) screed using a weak (say 1:5 NHL2 lime: sand) mortar, but pointed up as for the others.
12. A further note is required on the repair of the central part of coffin lid 5. We don't know at this stage how the five or more fragments forming it are going to separate. It may be that this part is best left bound together by cement, and the cement discretely toned in with a lime sheltercoat. Alternatively the pieces may separate quite easily and need to be built back up into a coherent section ready for reinstatement. Re-building might require pins (316 grade threaded stainless steel bar set in polyester resin) and extensive lime mortar reconstruction.
13. Other than for the central part of no. 5 no pinning is envisaged. When any separated fragments are re-positioned they will be bedded in the correct alignment, and once the bed is set then the joints will be pointed up using lime mortars coloured to match the un-weathered stone. A selection mortars will be needed for this across the range of slabs, based on lime putty.
14. Re-positioning the coffin lids will be using similar handling techniques to those already described. They can be moved from one position to another using trolleys.
15. With the coffin lids in their new positions, all bedding joints pointed up and all mortar fills dry, remove surface dirt using a soft bristle brush and a vacuum cleaner, avoiding direct contact of the vacuum cleaner with the stone surface.
16. Tone back any mortar fills as required using a wash of water-based paint on the fill.
17. Note that coffin lid 8 has been affected by soluble salt efflorescence. The salts also affect the surrounding cement screed and are assumed to originate from the ground and to be mobilised by liquid moisture movement. Re-locating the lid will remove it from the source of the salts but will leave some residual in the stone. It is not deemed viable to attempt to remove them by poulticing.

There does remain a danger however that as the lid dries out in the year or so after relocation that there could be further surface damage from salt crystallisation. It is recommended that a conservator re-visit this coffin lid (when the others might as well also be checked) 12 months after the relocation.

18. No allowance here is made for making good the floor at the west end of the nave or for opening up works in the chancel.

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Dr David Carrington ACR
31 March 2016