

Pamphlets on the Care of Churches

IV

THE CARE OF
MONUMENTAL
BRASSES
& LEDGER SLABS

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NO part of the ancient treasures of our Churches has suffered more from the ignorant "restorer" than the memorials of the dead. He found large ledger stones, or fine slabs inlaid with brasses. He either ruthlessly tore these up and ejected them from their places, or, as at Streatley, in Berkshire, and St. James, Bury St. Edmunds, he covered them with a bed of concrete on which he laid encaustic tiles, so making what he regarded as a neat floor. The slabs he tore up he cared not for, but left them to the mercies of the workmen. Says Hasted, the Kent Historian, in writing of what happened in his time to the gravestones in Sittingbourne Church, they were "in the most absurd manner removed, from the graves over which they before lay, from one aisle, and from one chancel of the church, to another part of it, and some even from the churchyard, just as it suited the workmen to make the pavement complete: so that there is now hardly a guess to be made, where the bodies lie, that the inscriptions commemorate."

Hasted viewed the proceeding from an historical and genealogical point of view. There is a higher view which we would rather adopt. That is, to regard these ledgers as precious reminders of those who before us have worshipped in our churches, and in that sense are one with us. We would, as they did, carry on the tradition of the churches of England. These neglected stones constantly before us cry out to us. We, therefore, resent with a sense of personal loss any action which involves the loss of the teaching they so silently yet forcefully convey.

Finally there is another point of view, which undoubtedly has its appeal to many—the artistic. These sumptuous large ledgers, as borders for the admirable lettering with which they are so often incised, remind one of the margins of a folio page from a great Venetian press. The cutting of them down is like the action of an ignorant binder with his guillotine. It is, moreover, common to find on these slabs coats of arms carved with considerable artistic ability. The loss of so many of such works of art is to be deplored.

There is one form of memorial, pre-eminently and peculiarly English, general to our churches. No such things as our memorial brasses are to be found elsewhere, formed as they are from engraved latten plates let into and, as it were, framed by the quiet tones of the Purbeck, Bethersden

or other marble which they adorn. The restorer often prized out the brasses and nailed them on the wall, "out of harm's way," as he speciously asserted. They were far safer in their slabs, and the reason given shows complete lack of artistic perception. The artist in latten knew how his lovely engravings were enhanced by the blue-grey of the marble. No other form of stone gives quite the same result, and just as a mount of a water colour may make or mar its effect, so the combination of latten and Purbeck gives the most harmonious result. Further, the slab cannot tell its tale in all its completeness when severed from its brasses, while an inscription commencing "Here lies" nailed to a pillar in the nave is both ridiculous and unsafe, since it soon works loose, and is more apparent to the eyes of those who would help it so to do.

In the treatment of these slabs, therefore, the following points should be insisted on:—

I. Except in cases of extraordinary necessity, no slab should be moved unless there is evidence that it is not in its original place.

II. The brasses should remain in their slabs. Even if some part is lost, the indents may form valuable guides to identification.

III. If any parts of a brass are loose they should be carefully re-fixed AS SOON AS POSSIBLE and UNDER SKILLED ADVICE, which can be obtained by all incumbents, freely, from the Monumental Brass Society, c/o The Society of Antiquaries of London, Burlington House, W. 1.

IV. When a brass is on the floor and likely to be much walked over, it should be kept carefully covered. Coconut matting and its like act as an abrasive and are harmful unless under them there is placed on the brass a covering of felt as used under carpets. This method of covering involves little expense, and should be adopted in every case, whatever the upper covering may be; but the felt is not sightly by itself.

V. A brass should NEVER BE POLISHED. The plate, though called brass, is of latten, a softer composition, and ANY KIND OF METAL POLISH REMOVES THE SURFACE AND WILL SHORTLY DESTROY THE ENGRAVING. If dirty or corroded, it should be well cleaned with paraffin or petrol, which will preserve the brown

patina, and then wiped dry. If the plate is badly attacked by verdigris, the process should be repeated at monthly intervals until it is clean, after which an occasional rub with a proprietary wax floor polish, will suffice to keep it in order.

VI. The slabs are usually of Purbeck, Bethersden or other marble, which has a tendency, unless kept well polished, to flake. Such marble is best treated with oily or fatty matter, and responds admirably to treatment, which should be done as follows :—

First clean with soap and water, and if necessary with benzine. Then polish with beeswax and turpentine, or if necessary a little putty powder on a cloth, or a paste made of ceresine wax and toluene.