



20<sup>th</sup> January 2021

## **Bishop's Castle Churchyard begins to reveal its newly conserved Georgian tombs**

In Bishop's Castle churchyard the National Lottery Heritage Funded '**Georgians in Stone Project**' is well under way with the conservation of twelve Georgian listed (Grade II) tombs nearing completion and interpretive notice board and leaflets soon to become available. The Project, which is being managed by Caring for God's Acre for the Parochial Church Council (PCC) of St John the Baptist church will support tourism in the town and explain the new 'Georgian Churchyard Trail' to visitors and residents. Local Town guides have been trained to provide further information on the Georgian tombs and the stories of the people they commemorate.

Conservators from Elliott Ryder Conservation working on the tombs have said 'We are coming to the end of the satisfying but detailed and difficult work of conserving the stone tombs which are all Historic England Grade II listed. One of the most notable memorials to be conserved commemorates an African, inscribed with the words:

"Here lieth the Body of I. D. / A Native of Africa / who died in this Town / Sept 9th 1801 / God hath made of one Blood, all nations of Men/ Acts Ch.17 ver. 26."



The conservation work on this particular grave was funded by The Georgian Group through the FE Cleary Fund, which match funded the National Lottery Heritage Fund grant awarded for the rest of the project. The photograph shows the African's grave with Sue Cooper, fundraiser; Keiran Elliott, Conservator; Catherine Murphy, Town Guide (standing right to left).

The burial register records the interment of John Davies on 12 September 1801, and contains an historic annotation linking Davies with the I.D. tombstone. It seems likely that 'I. D.' came to Bishop's Castle at least initially, as a servant. We have so far been unable to find out more about him/her. The biblical quotation is one used by abolitionists, and its levelling sentiments suggest that the person(s) responsible for erecting the memorial were sympathetic to the Abolition of the Slave Trade. There is some evidence now that the stone, which is finely carved and would have been expensive, was erected and paid for by the townspeople of Bishops Castle, which suggests that 'I.D.' was held in affection and respect locally. The tombstone was listed (Grade II) in 2007, the bicentenary year of the 1807 Abolition Act. Judith Payne from Bishop's Castle has researched the history of the gravestone and the person commemorated.

Since its conservation the African's grave has been protected from harmful cold and damp by a specially constructed wooden winter cover. The Georgian Group through the FE Cleary Fund grant has secured this important gravestone and its inscription into the future.



Volunteers from Bishop's Castle Heritage Resource Centre have researched the lives of the men and women commemorated by the tombs. The exhibition of the archival research will be displayed at the Georgian History Day due to take place in March 2021. The new research has also informed a Georgian Churchyard Trail. Bishop's Castle was a particularly interesting town in the Georgian Period (1714-1831) and the **Georgians in Stone Project** aims to raise awareness of its renowned and eventful history keeping the story alive and the stones conserved so that the story is not lost.



Conservators Sue Ryder and Kieran Elliott have spent many hours working on conserving the stones. Kieran Elliott, said 'It has been satisfying working on the project and meeting local people and passing visiting families who have stopped to chat and look round.' 'Although there have been challenges which we have not seen in 30 years of working in this field, each stone memorial had its own

problems and dismantling a tomb is always a last resort', he added.

Sue Ryder went on to say 'We re-built the impressive Toldervey box-tomb in consultation with the Hereford Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) County Archaeologist, in relation to the underlying interment and our strategy for back-filling without compromising the grave beneath.' Sue also said 'The grave-digger told us that many of the graves didn't go down the requisite 6 foot, due to the varying stratigraphy (sub-soil – rock etc) below ground-level.' The interment beneath the Toldervey box-tomb was obviously greater than 6 foot, due to the angle and rate of collapse and they were very close to the top of it, when the 850kg plinth was removed.



In conserving the tombs the team sought to maintain the original form and architectural elements, which is why conservation aims to retain the maximum original material in an unaltered a condition as possible. Hence the tombs are not being restored to their original condition but the original materials are being conserved where practicable. The Wollaston tomb did require a new stone top, however, due to extensive ivy damage. The replacement carved stone top has been supplied by McMillan Masonry, local stonemasons from Leebotwood.

Whilst working in the churchyard at Bishop's Castle the Conservators discovered that a few of the older locally carved stones were extremely finely and beautifully carved even though the local stone is often of variable quality. Kieran Elliott said 'There must have been a highly skilled stone carver living locally at a time when there were very few specialist letter-cutters and it would be interesting to research this further.

Valerie Hughes Chair of the Churchyard Committee, PCC St John the Baptist said 'The Parochial Church Council (PCC) is grateful to our funders who include Bishop's Castle Town

Council as well as those mentioned above'. 'This was always a community project and the PCC is pleased that so many people in the town have become involved and many more will do so when the planned History day and final celebration take place'.

**For further information, images and interviews, please contact**

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**About The National Lottery Heritage Fund**

Using money raised by the National Lottery, we inspire, lead and resource the UK's heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future.  
[www.heritagefund.org.uk](http://www.heritagefund.org.uk).

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**About the Parochial Church Council for St John the Baptist Church, Bishop's Castle**

The Church of St John the Baptist provides spiritual care for Bishops Castle and the surrounding area.

The Churchyard is the last resting place for many of its inhabitants and the church building is used for worship, funerals, weddings, community events and concerts. The Community comes together in the Churchyard for the Act of Remembrance. The Parochial Church Council has responsibility for the care, maintenance and insurance of the church and its contents and the care and maintenance of the churchyard. The Parochial Church Council also has responsibility for the conduct of the financial affairs of the parish. A Sub-committee was set up to make an application to conserve the listed Georgian monuments and to engage the local people in activities which raise awareness and understanding of Bishop's Castle during the Georgian period.

**About The Georgian Group** <https://georgiangroup.org.uk/>

**Aims** To save from destruction or disfigurement Georgian buildings, whether individually or as part of a group, monuments, parks and gardens of architectural and historic interest and, where necessary, encourage their appropriate repair or restoration and the protection and improvement of their setting.

To stimulate public knowledge and appreciation of Georgian architecture and town planning; of Georgian taste as displayed in the applied arts design and craftsmanship, and its influence on later periods.

**About Caring for God's Acre**

Caring for God's Acre (CfGA) is a national charity, based in Craven Arms, dedicated to the conservation of burial grounds. We encourage and support people to protect and enhance wildlife and preserve the built heritage within their local burial grounds; involving people in enjoying, learning about and helping to manage these sites.

For more information visit [www.caringforgodsacre.org](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org)

We produce a special Churchyard and Burial Ground Action pack full of useful information on a wide range of topics to help people with their local sites. We also have an Education Pack for primary schools and young people's clubs.

Our local volunteer group has been undertaking conservation work in burial grounds across Shropshire since 2006 and have put in over 10,000 hours of work.