

AN ANCIENT SITE

The earliest church on the site is believed to have been built around 1291, and the tower dates from this time. Standing on the Kerry Ridgeway, an ancient trackway and drovers' route from Wales, it may have replaced an earlier place of worship. The first church was damaged in a fire in 1592 and partly rebuilt, and then damaged again in 1644 during the Civil War. The Victorian craze for remodelling churches didn't pass Bishop's Castle by, and the church was redesigned in 1859-60. Plans from that time show the Norman tower replaced with a new tower with a spire but fortunately second thoughts, or budgetary constraints, led to the tower we see today being retained.

GEORGIANS IN STONE

Bishop's Castle churchyard contains many Georgian monuments including 12 which are Grade II listed in recognition of their heritage importance. In 2019 the Parochial Church Council of St John the Baptist Church was awarded a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to conserve these tombs and to research the Georgian era in Bishop's Castle. As part of the project volunteers from Bishop's Castle Heritage Resource Centre researched family histories from the Georgian period 1713 -1831.

The monuments are marked GS on the map inside this leaflet.

WONDERFUL WILDLIFE

Churchyards such as this one are havens for wildlife. This churchyard was probably consecrated and enclosed when the first church was built; it has been managed, with little change for over 800 years so the plants, animals, fungi and lichens that you see here have developed over time into a complex ecosystem. Until the 17th churchyards rarely contained grave markers or monuments so this would have been a meadow, full of flowers and used by local people for games, fairs, outdoor services and archery practice. Whatever time of year you visit, there is always something interesting to see. Look for nesting spotted flycatchers in spring, grasshoppers amongst the long summer grass, scarlet, orange, pink and yellow waxcap fungi by the war memorial in autumn and thrushes such as redwing, fieldfare and mistle thrush gathering in winter to feed on yew berries.

This churchyard is managed by volunteers who have also recorded the wildlife they see. So far we have found 170 different species and there will be more to be found! Please contact Caring for God's Acre and tell us what you see here.



Let's keep burial grounds beautiful!



1 LYCHGATE

Lychgate is derived from the Old English word "lich" meaning corpse, and the coffin would be rested in there to wait for the clergyman to arrive and start the burial service. Our Victorian lychgate has an inscription to the Griffiths family carved inside the lintels.

3 MARY HETET GRAVE

Mary Hetet (nee Morgan) ran a haberdashery shop with her parents. In 1813 she married Joseph Louis Hetet, a lieutenant in the French navy and prisoner of war held in the town. Joseph and their son Louis left Mary behind and travelled to New Zealand, where Louis married the daughter of a Maori chief.

5 COMMON YEW

Yew trees are found in most churchyards but have been largely lost from our woodlands. All parts of the tree are toxic apart from the flesh of the red berry or 'aril' which is a favourite of winter thrushes.

Look and listen for the tiny goldcrest which can be seen flitting amongst the foliage.

7 HOWARD FAMILY

Sir Albert Howard was an important pioneer of organic farming and wrote many foundational books on the subject. He was born in Bishop's Castle, and although his grave is not among those in this churchyard, his farming roots are clearly shown in this group of Howard family graves.

2 THOMAS TOMB

This elegant tomb is one of 12 that were conserved and restored as part of the PCC's 'Georgians in Stone' project. One of the local 'great and the good', William Thomas was elected Burgess in 1764 aged 21, Town Clerk at 24, and served as a Justice at the court until his death.

4 AFRICAN'S GRAVE

This Grade II listed headstone commemorates "I.D. A Native of Africa" who died in the town in 1801. At the time very few graves had a headstone; the inscription "God hath made of one Blood all nations of Men" hints that it was put up by someone working towards the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.

6 IRISH YEW

Standing by the large yew, you can see both Common and Irish yews nearby. The Common Yew has wide, spreading branches, often drooping to the ground and rooting, making a ring of trees. The Irish has vertical branches and is thought to have developed from a mutant found in Co Fermanagh in the 1700s.

8 GOTHIC ARCHWAY

The archway through to the Old Vicarage garden is believed to be formed from parts moved here from the original medieval Church. Romantically crumbling and draped with ivy it has the air of a Georgian Picturesque folly, an unusual feature for a churchyard in a small rural market town.



9 VICARS MEMORIALS

As the vicar walked through from his garden to the church door he would have passed this small group of graves and stones inscribed with the names of some of his predecessors. Were they supporting or judging him, or was it a kind of memento mori, a reminder that sooner or later he would join them?

11 THE THIN RED LINE

Originally the churchyard was an open space without memorials, used for markets and for games. The painted red line at the bottom of the tower was used in the game of 'Fives'. Notice the one-handed clock; it reflects a period when time flowed slowly and minutes could be ignored.

13 HONEST BURGESS

Bishop's Castle was a notorious Rotten Borough, where the most lucrative occupation was the sale of votes. When Burgess Matthew Marston died in 1802 it was a source of pride that his 'steady and uncorrupt conduct presents...a useful lesson to the Parliamentary Representatives of the Borough that Opulence and Power cannot alone secure independent suffrage'.

10 NORMAN TOWER

This would have been one of the few stone-built structures in the town; one of its purposes was defensive, offering sanctuary in times of conflict. It now acts as a safe place for nesting swifts; nest boxes can be seen behind the belfry openings at the top of the tower.

12 FRENCH NAPOLEONIC LIEUTENANT COLONEL

Up to 57 French officers taken prisoner during the Napoleonic wars were housed in Bishop's Castle. Louis Paces, Lt Col of Light Horse, Knight of the Orders of the Two Sicilies and Spain, died here in 1814. His headstone with its French inscription was presumably erected by his fellow officers.

14 CHURCHYARD WALL

As you walk towards the edge of the churchyard take great care! The ground falls away several feet to the pavement below, typical of an ancient churchyard like this. Over many centuries the numbers of people buried raises the ground level within the churchyard, leading to the characteristic discrepancy in height.

We hope you enjoy this self-guided trail around some of the interesting gravestones and tombs in our churchyard. Look out for the tombs that were conserved through our Georgians in Stone project, marked with GS on the map.

