

## FASCINATING REVELATIONS OF CUMBRIAN GRAVESTONES

On 16 June, our monthly meeting included the AGM followed by a talk entitled 'Understanding the symbolism on 18th Century Gravestones in Cumbria'. It sounded an inauspicious combination for such a beautiful day. However, members turned up in good measure and were not disappointed by Mark Hatton's offering. He indicated, through well-chosen photos, a fascinating topic revealing far more than one might expect from a study of gravestones. These artefacts help us to engage directly with the thoughts and feelings of people who lived in our area some 300 years ago.

Mark's interest was sparked by a visit to Greyfriars in Edinburgh and has grown into a major interest. The wording and subjects depicted on the gravestones reveal the prevailing beliefs about life, death and the world beyond. Mark's particular focus is on the 18<sup>th</sup> century and intriguingly the themes of the Edinburgh stones are often seen on Cumbrian memorials from this period, too.

The practice of carving stone has gone on for millennia, as seen on 'cup and ring' stones in Scotland and northern England which may well have a sacred significance, as have stone circles and standing stones such as Long Meg and Penrith's 'Giant's Grave'. Early memorials of the Christian era were often outside of the church, incorporated into its stonework or contained within the porch. Only the most significant were afforded burial within the building. During the Reformation from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards the religious beliefs of many changed and some benefited from growing trade. Increasingly one can see memorials of many in burial grounds outside the churches, not just of the nobles and the very wealthy which were still to be seen inside the building. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the size of the memorials increased and the carvings on gravestones became much more revealing artefacts.

What might one look out for on gravestones? Some of the symbols including hourglasses or skulls and crossbones may look grim but they give a kind warning about living life on earth thoughtfully; winged human figures symbolise the flight of the soul to heaven; a profusion of foliage conveys the Christian promise of a new resurrected life after this one; and the joyful depictions of husbands, wives and children suggest the resumption of life with our nearest and dearest. Mark emphasised the exuberance and hope demonstrated in such symbolism. Another intriguing grave motif found throughout the ages is of a serpent or snake, 'ouroboros', symbolising the cycle of life and death as a continuum.

Mark's photos indicated a number of local burial grounds where fascinating revelations can be found. Crosthwaite, in Keswick was a key one where Revd Thomas Christian, father of Fletcher was vicar; Bewcastle is another, along with Welton and Annandale. Mark Hatton provided the image below and interpreted it, suggesting the ladies are eagerly looking forward to life beyond the grave when they will be reuniting with their husband and father.

