

MCNEILAGE CONSERVATION

Weeks Farm | Talaton | Exeter EX5 2RG | T: 01404 822076
enquiries@mcneilage-conservation.co.uk | www.mcneilage-conservation.co.uk

Partners: Torquil McNeilage ACR | Ruth McNeilage ACR
VAT No. 736 7680 95

St Peter's Thornbury (Devon – Diocese of Exeter)

Tomb of Elizabeth Johns

Conservation Report



December 2019

1. Introduction: Brief and Summary

This report describes work undertaken during 2019 to the Grade II listed chest tomb of Elizabeth Johns in the churchyard of St Peter's, Thornbury, Devon. The project essentially followed the recommendations laid out in our condition assessment report of October 2017, and was commissioned on behalf of the PCC by Mr Meg Galley-Taylor. During the work I met and discussed the project a number of times with members of the parish, who were universally helpful and supportive in our experience.

The purpose of the project was to repair the failing structure of the chest itself, which had been undermined by ivy and plants, lost mortar and some stonework and was no longer supporting the slab; and secondly, to undertake a number of repairs to the slab itself, including the stopping of the two large holes, securing and filling of laminations, repair of a large transverse crack and various small surface repairs.

This report includes a brief description of the monument and its condition as found; it then describes the work undertaken to both the slab and the body of the chest tomb, together with materials used and discoveries made along the way. The report is illustrated with digital images taken with a Canon EOS 7D.

2. The Johns Tomb – brief description

Location

The tomb stands approximately 6 metres to the south of the south transept of the church.

Description, construction and materials

Dimensions (mm): *H: 800* *L: 1680* *W: 920*

The tomb consists of a rectangular chest oriented east to west *see photos 1 - 4* with a slate top slab incised with a border inscription inaccurately suggested in the listing to be “virtually illegible” (possibly when the listing inspection was carried out, the inscription was more heavily covered with ivy), an epitaph in the centre and various memento mori. There is an hourglass representing the fleeting nature of life and a winged skull suggesting mortality. The capitals of the border inscription are beautifully rendered, akin to illuminated capitals of a medieval manuscript. The inscription reads

Elizabeth the late wife of John Johns jun(?) of this parish (abbr) was here under Buried June ye XXVII Anno Dom. 1702 Anno AEtatis suae 54

The epitaph is currently more difficult to make out although it is beautifully lettered. *See photos 30 31 and 32.*

The tomb is a fairly simple structure, with squared stone chest and top slab of slate. In our previous report, we expressed doubts as to whether there was any organised internal structure; the project revealed that the chest had in fact been backfilled with rubble mortar

and earth without any discernible method. There is no plinth moulding at ground level. The slate top slab has a chamfered edge.

The stone of the chest was not immediately identifiable; in fact, there were several different types of stone in evidence, suggesting that the chest may have been cobbled together using fragments readily available locally – perhaps from a stone pile the church kept, or from a recently demolished building nearby. Some blocks appeared to be tuff, a readily cut volcanic material, whilst others were a very hard and dense sandstone material. Dismantling revealed that many were reused mouldings from windows or doorways, but whether these came from the church or possibly a nearby manor house known to have been demolished around this time is unclear.

Previous Interventions

There was evidence that the chest has been repaired before, in that some areas were filled in with brick as opposed to the original stone material.

Two curious and rather perfect circular holes had been cut in the slate top slab. *See photo 5* They did not appear to relate to the original design and in fact cut into the lettering of the epitaph inscription, but they were very deliberately – and rather skilfully cut with a recessed centre, suggesting that they were made for some definite purpose as opposed to accidental or vandalistic interventions. What that purpose was, however, is unclear. In any case, they formed holes into the central structure of the tomb chest into which light and water could penetrate, encouraging growth. There was ivy growing out of these holes when we arrived.

Values – Artistic and Historical

This tomb, an early eighteenth century survival, carries a beautifully executed inscription panel and a simple but attractive chest section.

It is one of only two chest tombs in the churchyard and commemorates a member of a locally prominent family. The monument of John Johns, husband of Elizabeth, is fixed inside the church in the north aisle, suggesting he was a figure of some importance and means. Information provided by Mrs Galley-Taylor tells us that “ In 1693 John Johns of Brendon married Elizabeth Cole and the oldest tombstone in the churchyard is a memorial to this Elizabeth and three of her children dated 1702.”

Mrs Galley-Taylor has since been following up her research and has found locally surviving members of the family with whom she has communicated.

3. Condition as Found

Chest

The tomb chest was variously undermined by the penetration of ivy and other plants, the loss and failure of mortar and of poorly executed old repairs, and some settlement. *See photos 1-4*

The chest therefore no longer adequately supported the top slab; this may have led to the formation of the transverse crack across the eastern end of the slab mentioned below.

Internally, the chest was inappropriately filled with a selection of random rubble, old mortar, soil and earth, and some brick. *See photos 11 and 12* Interestingly, some of the infill from the base of the interior of the chest was Victorian brick with some glass fragments that appeared to be late nineteenth century in origin; this suggests that the tomb was re-built at least once in its time. One might speculate that it was at this time that the curious circles were cut in the slab – was it once used for something else in another location?

Slab

The slab had a number of problems associated with damage, weathering and neglect. The long crack mentioned above was probably the greatest immediate threat to its integrity; it was not clear until the slab was removed to the workshop how far this crack extended across the width of the slab but it clearly required attention. The slab as further distorted and twisted over its length, partly due to the crack and partly to lack of support in some areas (this is not unknown - marble slabs in particular are known to bend and distort under pressure). *See photo 6*

There were significant laminations all around the edge of the slab, where the strongly fissile stone had begun to open up under pressure from water penetration and associated frost damage. *See photo 4* Further small areas of superficial lamination had led to the loss of some areas of the inscriptions, although the majority of the carved detail survives in remarkably good condition. Some flakes of surface stone of many different sizes were, however, under threat of loss.

There were also the two large perfectly circular holes cut in the slab, with a recessed rebate within each. The reason or purpose for these is still unknown, but it may be that the slab was reused in some way and then later reinstated in its current location.

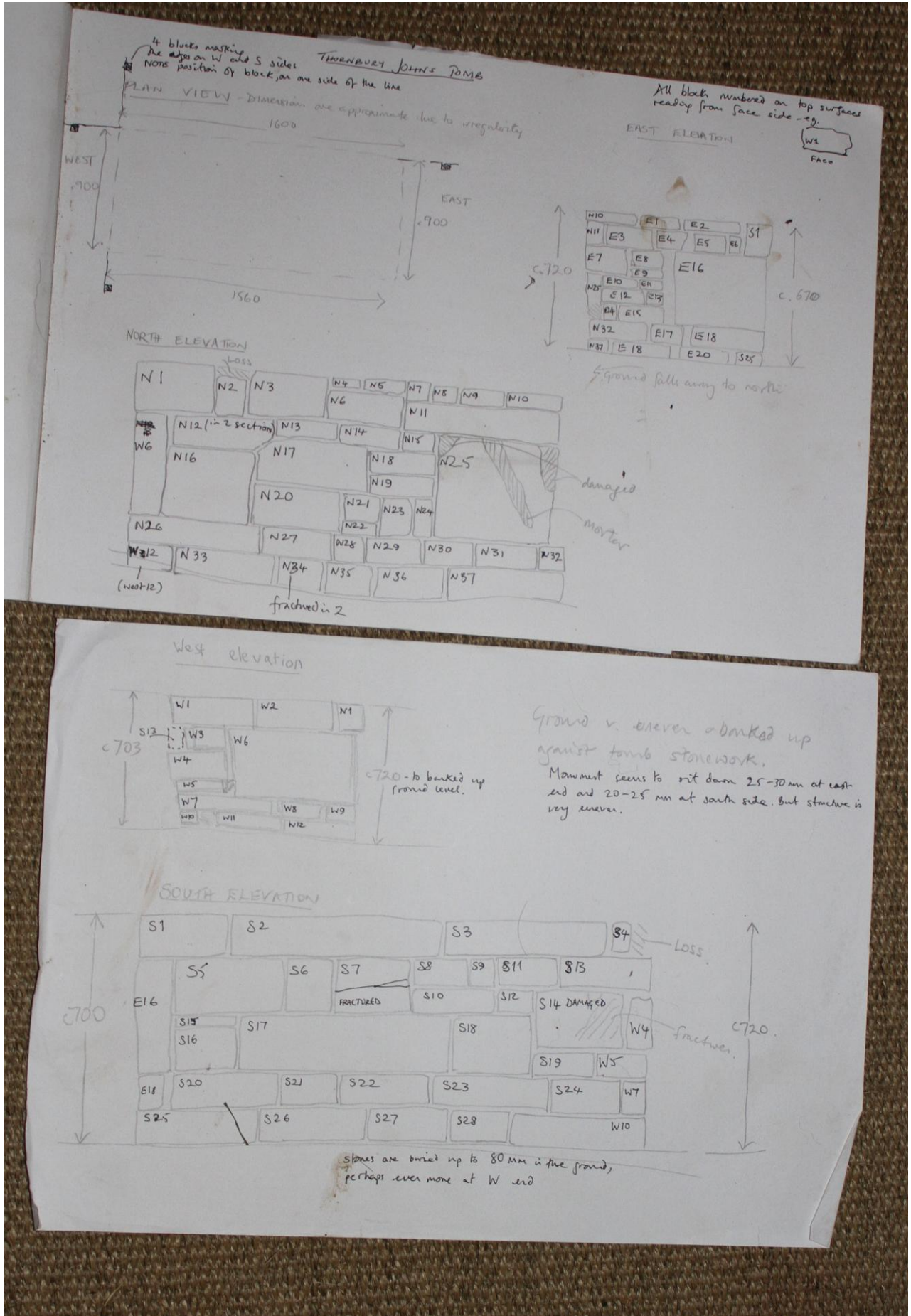
The carved detail was in places obscured somewhat by the growth of lichen. This however, we regarded as being a part of the patina of age and in itself of value and beauty. In addition, an attempt to remove this lichen would almost certainly have involved damaging the delicate carving in that area; in some places indeed, the lichen appears to be helping to preserve the carved surface.

4. Conservation Programme

Recording and documentation

The monument was recorded as found; records were maintained with digital images throughout the project and these are appended to this report. *See Fig. 1* Sketch drawings were undertaken to allow us to record the precise configuration of all side of the chest, so that it could be rebuilt as near as possible in the same way.

Fig. 1. Drawings used to record locations of tomb stones



Removal of slab

The slab needed to be dried before necessary repair work could be undertaken; it was therefore removed to the workshop. This entailed a delicate operation of introducing timber boards and graphite skids under the slab and moving it to a trestle and from there to a wheeled truck for transfer to the van and transport to the workshop. *See photos 7-10*

Dismantling of Chest

Once the slab had gone, the chest could be fully recorded as described above. It was then dismantled and the external, visible sections numbered and stored on boards close by. These surface blocks were found to be of extremely variable depth - some as deep as 400 mm, others barely 50 mm deep. This certainly suggested that the tomb was a “cobble-up” of random available blocks rather than a planned structure. Areas of more modern brick repair were retained as representing part of the history of the monument.

The internal rubble, soil and mortar fill was also broken up; a few pieces of carved architectural moulding were found amongst the rubble *see photo 14* and these have been retained in the new internal structure; the small rubble and fill was discarded as a better support to the walls of the chest and the slab was required.

Clearing of Site and New Base

The ground on which the tomb stood was cleared, ivy roots were removed as far as possible and the area flattened to receive the rebuilt structure. An application of SBK weed killer was made to inhibit immediate resurgence of damaging ivy under the tomb. The effectiveness of this is not certain and the parish should remain vigilant about ivy re-growth.

A foundation of three 600 x 900 mm concrete slabs was laid to spread the load of the tomb as evenly as possible, to provide a secure base from which to build and to further discourage future ivy invasion. *See photo 15*

Removal of mortars and Stone Repairs

Old mortars were removed from all monument stones; some stones had been fractured and were reassembled with epoxy resin and filled as necessary with hydraulic lime mortar. Two stones were so badly shattered that they could not be reused, and these were accordingly replaced with stone from the interior infill to the tomb.

Re-building of the tomb chest

The tomb chest was rebuilt, as mentioned above in the exact configuration of stones that it had displayed before work began. *See photos 16-21* Stones were laid and pointed in mortar based on NHL 2 natural hydraulic lime. Surface pointing was carried out once the structure had had time to settle and dry out, with the following mortar

1 part NHL 2 lime

1.5 parts Moreton Cullimore limestone sand

0.5 part Portland stone dust (10)

The tomb chest was rebuilt with a new internal support structure of lightweight blocks, providing both support to the walls of the chest and to the slab when it was reinstated. Lightweight blocks were used as a stable and reliable material that could be easily cut to shape to support the irregular rear face of the surface stones, and that would not add massively to the weight of the tomb.

Repairs to the top slab

The large transverse crack at the east end of the slab was repaired and strengthened by the introduction of two 8mm gauge threaded rods of 316L grade austenitic stainless steel set into two grooves cut in the underside of the slab and fixed in place with Sprint Iridium® epoxy resin. *See photo 22* The crack was further repaired with a limited amount of crack injection using Sikadur 52® crack injection resin, to penetrate into the finest cracks, and then filled with hydraulic lime mortar matched as closely as possible to the colour of the surrounding stone.

Laminations in the edges of the slab were, as necessary, injected with Sika resin and filled with a fine mortar of natural hydraulic lime matched to the surrounding stone. This work has successfully filled the cracks and ensured that for the foreseeable future, water penetration will be limited.

Surface cracks and fissures were filled with mortar based on natural hydraulic lime, matched to the surrounding stone colour. Aggregates used in this work included natural green sand, PFA, Hornton brown stone dust (60) lamp black and raw umber earth pigments, in varying proportions according to the specific colour of the stone in that area.

The two large circles were filled with circular stone indents spot-fixed with resin and filled with hydraulic lime mortar. A riven faced stone was used for these infills, to match as closely as possible the weathered surface of the slab itself, and prevent the new pieces catching the eye so readily. *See photo 30*

Reinstatement of the top slab

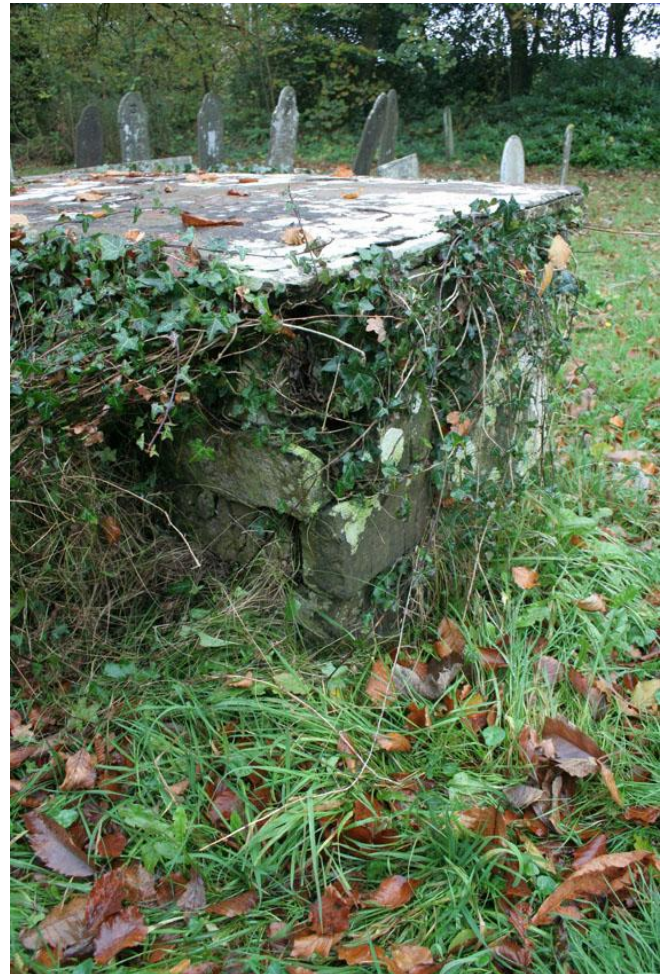
After repairs were complete, the slab was returned to site and reinstated in position, and pointed in place. *See photos 23-25* The distortion of the top slab was quite remarkable, presumably due a lack of support in some areas over many years, and so the joint beneath the slab was necessarily variable in depth, but the completed tomb is now sturdy and stable and presents the skilfully carved, newly repaired top slab appropriately.

PHOTOGRAPHS



1 and 2.

Views of the tomb before work, from the east end and, below, from the north west corner





3 and 4.

Further views of the tomb before work; from the south and below, serious laminations in the slab



5 and 6. The circular holes in the slab, with ivy emerging from them; and below, distortion of the slab made clear with timbers



7 and 8. Removal of the slab in progress; the slab removed to trestles and below, the lifting rig for transfer to the truck



9 and 10. Removal of the slab – on the truck and below, the chest after removal of the slab, showing the prevalence of ivy



11 and 12. Two shots of the rubble infill within the chest as dismantling progressed



13 and 14. Numbered stones from the chest laid out and bottom, a moulding revealed on the rear face of one of the stones



15 and 16. Foundation slabs laid and bottom, the first course of stones re-laid



17 and 18. Rebuilding in progress



19 and 20. Rebuilding in progress



21. Rebuilding in progress



22. Rod inserted in the underside of the slab to repair crack

23 and 24. The slab returned to site and being repositioned with graphite skids



25 and 26. Repointing the slab and bottom, the transverse crack repaired and filled



27 and 28. The Tomb after work was complete



29 and 30. The tomb after work was complete and the inscription



31 and 32. Further shots of the inscription after work

