The churchyard and aspect of the church.

It is often assumed that churchyards are immutable features of the town, lying within boundaries that are very old and unchanging over time. In fact they are encroached upon, reshaped, extended and enlarged, and subjected to differing ideas of what a graveyard should be, especially once closed to burials.

St Nicholas's church in Newport occupies a prominent but somewhat odd site. The church and its surrounding graveyard occupy an island site with roads on three sides and a narrow pedestrian passageway on the fourth. The site is restricted and the graveyard small for a populous town. But particularly from the north, the church has an open aspect. This attractive scene though is not of any great antiquity: the view of the church from Newport Bridge was impossible before 1825. That from the south is a creation of the early twentieth century, and it was only then that the churchyard took its present form. Here we trace the development of the churchyard in the century between c. 1825 and the early years of the twentieth century.

We gain a good sense of how the church was hemmed in by houses from a pencil sketch by David Parkes of 1819 which shows the houses fringing the churchyard demolished at the end of the 1820s to the left and those cleared away at the beginning of the twentieth to their right. (Figure 1).

In August 1824 Henry Ryder, recently translated from the Bishopric of Gloucester to that of Coventry and Lichfield, held his first visitation of the Shropshire part of his diocese. Amongst the towns he visited was Newport.[1] He expressed his displeasure with what he found there and whilst his exact comments are unknown, he plainly rebuked the churchwardens for the state of both the interior of the church and the churchyard. Here we simply consider the changes to the churchyard which the bishop prompted.

Following the visitation, on 28 October 1824, a meeting of the inhabitants of Newport was convened to consider the Bishop's remarks and any following letters. They decided that their chief effort would be to improve the churchyard and its plain enough that suggestions about how to do this were discussed, but not minuted. The matter of the churchyard then disappears from the minutes (except for committees being appointed to consider the question) until the end of 1825. A minute on 2 January 1826 agreed to buy two houses adjoining the

[1] The following is based on minutes in the Vestry book, P207/C/1/1.

churchyard. In September it was agreed that a rate should be levied for the repair of the church and the purchase of buildings. But whilst there seems to have been much interest in improving the interior of the church, little appears to have been done about the burial ground until the Bishop raised the question again in a letter of October or early November 1828 after a afurther visitation. A resolution was passed at a meeting on 20 November 1828 saying that 'it is expedient that the burial ground should be enlarged'. A committee was established and negotiated with the owners of the houses adjoining the lower [north] end of the churchyard. By the end of 1828 some owners had agreed to sell and others were in negotiation. The Bishop was informed in December that the town had a plan for the enlargement of the churchyard but he was warned that the costs were so great that the re-pewing of the church would have to be deferred.

It seems to have been policy that the houses were pulled down on acquisition and the building materials sold. It was suggested that the cellars could be utilised as burial vaults. In all the area acquired amounted to 905 square yards: we are told the number of owners from whom the land was purchased but not the number of houses acquired and demolished (although one report says 14 including the town almshouses).[2] The area was delineated on a plan in the agreement between the inhabitants and the Commissioners for New Churches. The extension of the churchyard was a triangular piece of land with its apex cut off: the land fell between the old churchyard wall and the Angel (Figure 2). This remains the shape of the churchyard at its northern end, roughly coffin shaped.

There are no extant accounts for the acquisition of property, the clearance of the site and its enclosure with low walls and cast-iron palisade. The agreement between the inhabitants of Newport and the Commissioners for New Churches gives £873 as the sum raised from the inhabitants and their rural neighbours by subscription. A further £800 was raised on a mortgage from the Newport Amicable Society, to be repaid at a rate of £75 per annum (to include interest). The commissioners gave their retrospective permission for this course of action at the end of 1830.[3]

The extension to the churchyard was consecrated by the Bishop when he attended for a confirmation on 19 July 1831.[4]

The loss of the Bishop's correspondence means that his motives remain obscure. Ryder may have been motivated by reasons of propriety and decency. The churchyard was

[2] P207/Q/10/2, p. 233.
[3] P207/B/4/1-3.
[4] P207/Q/10/2, p. 233; *SC*, 22 July 1831.

extremely small for the size of the town and whilst we have no evidence for burial practice, it may be that bodies were merely dipped in the soil before the skeletal remains were removed to a carnal house. I seems a large number of burials were made inside the church itself. If that was how the town dealt with a problem of insufficient space, then the enlargement churchyard was not likely to have made a great deal of difference. The removal of the houses may have increased the size of the churchyard but it also improved the aspect of the church on the entry into Newport from the north. How much weight Ryder gave to this consideration is unknown but the demands he made for the improvement of the interior of the church suggests that he wished to see its beautification, and it unlikely that this approach began and ended at the church porch.

On the east side of the churchyard, facing onto St Mary's Street stood the town's almshouses. There is neither a picture of these nor any extant plan. In 1836 new almshouses were built on Vineyard Road in circumstances which are obscure. Whilst they may have been far superior as accommodation to the medieval buildings, the demolition of the older almshouses may also be seen as part of a policy of improvement.[5]

The purchase of property for demolition, whether to widen streets or improve the follow of traffic or simply to remove unattractive or rundown buildings was a part of the standard repertoire of nineteenth-century urban improvement. It is therefore no surprise that the act establishing the Marsh and Town Trustees of 1854 gave them power to acquire property with this kind of objective in mind.[6] In the absence of Improvement Commissioners in Newport, the Marsh Trustees were active in fulfilling their role and this included the acquisition of property to remodel aspects of the town.

The extent to which the trustees used these powers will be discussed elsewhere. But they made two important interventions in the shape and appearance of the south end of the churchyard and these will be discussed here.

The tithe map shows two groups of buildings at the south end of the churchyard. At the south corner was a building (number 434 on the tithe map) which appears to have stood within the churchyard (and may therefore have been an encroachment on it). At the time of the tithe apportionment the building was divided into three cottages (Figure 3). The passage

[5] Fore the almshouses see Charity Commission fifth Report, pp. 412-16. There appear to be no newspaper reports of the move and I have been unable to find any subscription lists. The new buildings bear a plaque giving the date of their erection.
[6] 17 & 18 Vic. c. 81, sect. 45. The trustees' power of compulsory purchase had expired: sect. 47.

way from the High St to St Mary's St passed in front of this building. As it was evidently narrow and overhung by the property, it was called the Gullet. A much later recollection says that the Gullet was spanned by a room which was supported on one side by two iron pillars. A man who tried to ride through the gullet struck his head on the overhang with some force.[7]

In January 1867 the Trustees decided to improve the town by the purchase of the cottages 'projecting into the churchyard' and opening up the Gullet.[8] The sanction of the Charity Commissioners for the purchase was sought in the late Summer of 1868 and public notices posted in September. Once approved, the two properties were formally bought at the end of the year and pulled down in the first months of 1869.[9] This made the present pedestrian route.

This appears to have been done without attracting much public comment or complaint. Some years later the Marsh Trustees decided to improve the town further by acquiring the houses at the south-west corner of the churchyard. This was a long-term project, seemingly decided upon before 1886 but not put into effect for most of 20 years.

It was agreed that these properties were poor and mean dwellings. In a letter to the Charity Commissioners of October 1903 justifying their policy[10], the Marsh Trustees enclosed a photograph showing how the houses obscured the view of the church from the High Street. They wanted rid of them to widen and improve the High St and the sanitary condition of the town. Moreover,

> years ago they were all occupied as dwelling houses but during recent years, with one exception, they have been used as lock up shops or offices. None of the houses can be considered sanitary. None have out-offices or yards and the kitchens of three of them were underground and below the level of the churchyard.

It was generally agreed that the demolition of these properties would improve the appearance of the town.

When it became became possible to implement the plan, there was a great deal of complaint and the projected clearance of the buildings became mired in a number of other local issues. These need to be rehearsed quickly. First questions were asked about the standing and position of the Marsh and Town trustees. This was at heart a tension between a rate-payer elected public body and a private charitable corporation with Trustees appointed for life. It was said that the act of 1854 which governed the Marsh Trustees was badly out of

[7] The name is found as early as 1758: NTM/6/3/25. For the anecdote, *Newport and Market Drayton Adv.*, 10 Sept. 1892, pr. *Newport people and places*, II, pp. 23-4.
[8] NTM 1/4, 20 Jan. 1867- 2 Mar. 1869 passim.
[9] NTM/6/2/7, 58.
[10] The text is printed in *Wellington J.*, 17 Oct. 1903.

date and no longer served given that the place of the Marsh Trust in the town had changed dramatically with first the Local Board and then from 1894, Newport Urban District Council. Where the Marsh Trust had made an annual donation to the Local Board for the maintenance of the streets, the Trust withdrew this when responsibility for the streets passed to the new county council. Questions were therefore asked what the Trust did for the town. The Trust itself seems to have been indifferently run in the 1890s: in 1899 it was found that there was a substantial discrepancy in the Trust's accounts which had not been prepared for several years and the Trustees dismissed both their clerk and auditor.[11] Moreover, the number of trustees had fallen. Any assumption that the Trust would simply wither away was dispelled when it called for nominations to fill its vacancies: the Urban District Council responded by petitioning the Charity Commissioners not to allow the Trust to reinforce its numbers and it moved to draft a bill to abolish the Trust and annex its lands to the council.[12]

The more immediate problem was that the UDC was promoting a sewerage scheme which it could not afford. In these circumstances, for the Marsh Trustees to buy property in order to demolish it, in effect wasting its capital and reducing its rental income, seemed perverse in the extreme even if the town as a whole could see merit in clearing the site of the properties.

As the trustees told the Charity Commissioners, their policy was to purchase the four houses 'when time and circumstances permitted'. The first house had been bought in 1886, two more followed in 1895 and the last in 1901. This last was the subject of allegations against the Trust made to the Charity Commissioners in 1903.[13] It had belonged to a Trustee, the Newport solicitor R. N. Heane.[14] He refused overtures from the Marsh Trustees to sell until March 1901. He asked for it for more than the Trustees wished to pay but refused to negotiate on the price. They finally accepted his offer because it was the last of the four and its acquisition allowed them to demolish the others. It was claimed though that this was an inside job and the Trustees had paid twice its market value, an allegation which the Trustees rejected.

The first of the properties, probably the one to the west, had been occupied by the Newport auctioneers Furber and Burton. They gave notice of quitting their tenancy at Michaelmas 1901. It was agreed that once vacated, the property should be pulled down.[15] The

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[12] See the account of the later history of the Marsh Trustees for these events.

[13] See below p. 000.

[14] Heane died on 2 Sept. 1903.

[15] Report of the Quarterly meeting of the Trustees, *SC* 14 June 1901; *Wellington J.*, 15 June 1901.

Trustees knew that this would be contentious. Mr Collins, the Vice-chairman observed that 'He never heard any remark against the purchase of the property [meaning the four houses] until it came to the time to buy the last house'. 'When that was known it seemed as though the thunderstorm burst'. The Urban District Council agreed a resolution against the demolition at its June meeting and forwarded a copy to the Charity Commissioners.[16] It then proposed that it should take over the Furber and Burton tenancy and use the premises as council offices.[17] No more is heard of this proposal and the trustees at their meeting of 3 December restated their intention to demolishing. It was reported at their next meeting that the deed had been done.[18]

A public meeting between the UDC and the Trustees was held on 14 December.[19] This was primarily about the bill sponsored by the Council to abolish the Trust and annex its lands. Mr Horne, speaking on behalf of the council, suggested that in the past it would have been acceptable to demolish the four houses, but in the financial situation faced by the town he though it 'reckless and wicked'. He accepted that they were an eyesore though. Mr Collins, speaking for the Trust reflected that when they started to acquire the houses, 'they thought it would be a fine thing to open out the street and so make it one of the finest streets of any town in the county'. But, bowing to local pressure, he assured the meeting that the Trust had no intention of pulling down the houses at that time. This may have been disingenuous: the Trustees had already been warned by their surveyor that the houses could not be pulled doen before the expiry of leases at Lady Day 1903.[20]

An understanding was achieved after this meeting between the Council and the Trust and the council's bill withdrawn: this is explained elsewhere. It might be noticed though that the draft bill empowered the Council, once it had made the Trust's estate its own, to demolish the buildings adjoining the churchyard and part of the cleared site to the churchyard, on condition that two-thirds of the value of the property demolished was raised by public subscription or by other means.[21] This makes it abundantly clear that the discontent was primarily about timing and the fact that the Trustee's policy had come to ahead at a time when the town was under pressure from the cost of its projected sewage works.

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[16] *Wellington J.,* 22 June 1901.
[17] *Wellington J.,* 13 July 1901.
[18] *Wellington J.,* 7 Dec. 1901.
[19] There are independent accounts of this meeting in *Wellington J.* 20 Dec. 1901 and *SC* 21 Dec. 1901.
[20] *Wellington J.*, 7 Dec. 1901. In fact the date may have been Lady Day 1904: see below p. 000.
[21] The draft bill is printed in abstract in *Wellington J.*, 00 Dec. 0000.

Having come to an agreement with the council which transferred much of the Trust's income to the council for the relief of the rates, the question of the future of the remaining houses was raised at the Quarterly Meeting of the Marsh Trustees in June 1903.[22] By this time the Trustees had been augmented by newly-appointed individuals, one of whom moved a motion that the tenants should be given notice so that the Trust could get on and demolish. The motion was opposed by Mr Collins. It is fairly clear that the trustees divided between those of long standing and the new members. The old members felt that an implicit undertaking not to demolish for the time being had been given eighteen months before as part of the quid pro quo for the withdrawal of the bill. Collins felt that the time was still not right given the continued concern about the burden of the sewage scheme on the rates. Demolition would reduce the ratable value of the town. He thought that opinion in the town was generally against the demolition although he seems to have conceded that demolition might be made more palatable if a fund was raised as a sweetener. Other Trustees echoed this position.

Speaking from the chair, the new Rector of Newport, Prebendary W. T. Burges, who chaired the Trustees ex-officio, pointed out that one of the tenants had given notice to the Trustees. A great deal of work would have to be done before the property could be relet. The trustees were under pressure from the Council to connect the houses to mains sewage. This would cost about three years' rent. And he made the point that the houses had been purchased for a single purpose and their removal would be to the improvement of the town. In effect, Burges argued that the Trustees could not be seen to be the owners of 'insanitary and unhealthy' houses.

In the event the meeting adjourned to see if any financial assistance could be found to compensate the Trustees for loss of income which would follow on demolition. There was a view that the neighbouring owners of property whose property would be improved by demolition should contribute. During June a committee of townspeople, whose spokesman was C. W. Smallman, took the initiative and raised promises of £150 to be paid to the Marsh Trustees on condition that the houses were promptly pulled down and the land needed to complete the circuit of the churchyard wall was conveyed over to the church. This as not entirely welcome to the Trustees (who had hoped for more and some of whom were doubtful about accepting), but on a split vote they agreed to accept the money and treat it as capital.[23]

[22] *Wellington J.,* 6 June 1903.
[23] *WJ* 27 June 1903; *SC* 26 June (including editorial) and letter by C. W. Smallman, 3 July 1903.

No more could be done until the last of the tenants' term ran out of 25 March 1904. The houses were, as the newspapers said, 'doomed'. But there was a further twist. An unknown person wrote to the Charity Commissioners complaining about the Trustees' policy and making allegations about their conduct. They told the Trustees

> a complaint has been received … that the trustees of this charity propose, in consideration of £150, to pull down the remainder of a block of houses which cost about £1500, with the view to improve the churchyard and the properties of some persons living in the vicinity. It is further stated that part of the buildings to be pulled down was purchased only two years ago from one of the trustees for double its market value and that the properties of several trustees will benefit by the proposed demolition. The complainant also argues that in accordance with the very generally established principles, where property is taken down for the improvement of a particular neighbourhood, the owners of such properties as may be improved in consequence should contribute proportionately to the cost.[24]

This gave the Trustees the opportunity to expound their policy to the Commissioners and describe its implementation over many years. The allegations did not encourage them to back down. They told the commissioners that they proposed to pull down the remaining houses as soon as circumstances permitted 'not for the betterment of the property in the particular neighbourhood, but for the general improvement of the High Street and the town'.

There appears to have been no objection made to this course of action by the Charity Commissioners. The end drew near for what the newspapers called 'the Doomed Houses'. At a meeting of the Trustees in December it was agreed to allow all the tenancies to run to 25 March 1904. On 22 July 1904 it was reported that the houses had been demolished. The land added to the churchyard was formally conveyed to the church on 25 March 1905.[25]

Other than the letter making scandalous allegations against the Trustees, the final stage of the clearing of the site of the houses seems to have attracted little local criticism. The opening up of the view of the church from the High St., it also made the addition of a new porch to the church possible.[26] And when in time it became necessary to find a location for a war memorial, it was located where it could be seen from the High St. However, one can agree with those at the time who admitted that the clearance of the houses would have been an unexceptional piece of civic improvement in an earlier generation: but by the turn of the nineteenth century a hardnosed attitude had emerged which weighed the loss of capital, rent

[24] *WJ* 17 Oct. 1903.
[25] *SC* 25 Dec. 1903, 22 July 1904; SA, P207/B/4/5/2; 4/6.
[26] The offer of a donor to pay for a new porch was referred to at a meeting of the Trustees on 2 June 1903: *WJ* 6 June 1903.

and rates against the less tangible and certainly fiscally unremunerative improvement of the environment.

Figures

Figure 1. View of Newport church from the south, 1819, showing buildings removed before 1830 (left) and those removed 1902-4 (right). To the right is the market hall.
SA, 6000/7675, fo. 17.

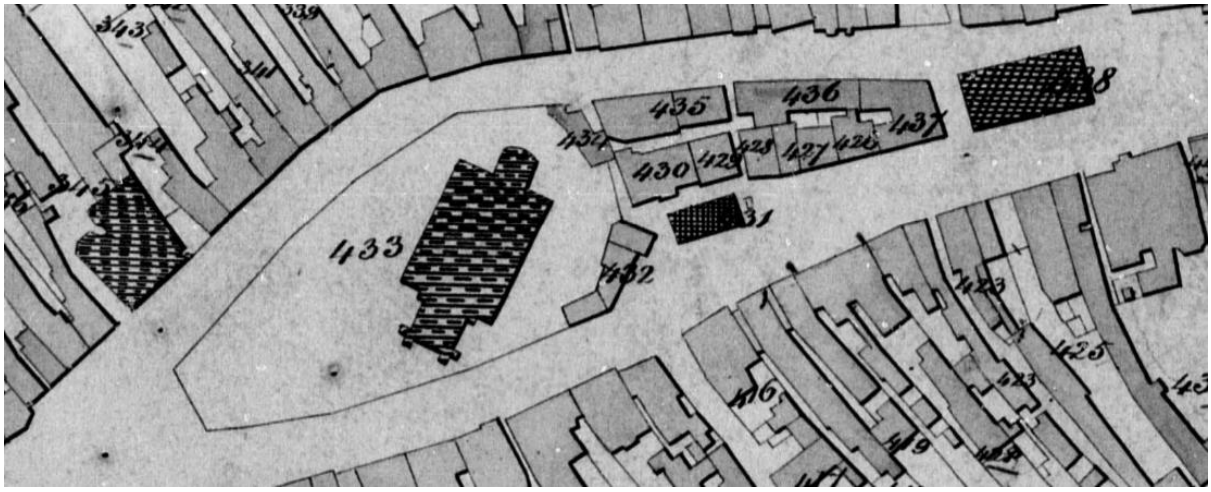

Figure 2. Newport church and churchyard, 1840, from the tithe map. North is to the left

Figure 3. The extension to the graveyard, from the conveyance of 1830. The square feature to the north (lower right) is the Angel cistern. North is towards the right hand corner of the plan. SA, P207/B/4/2.

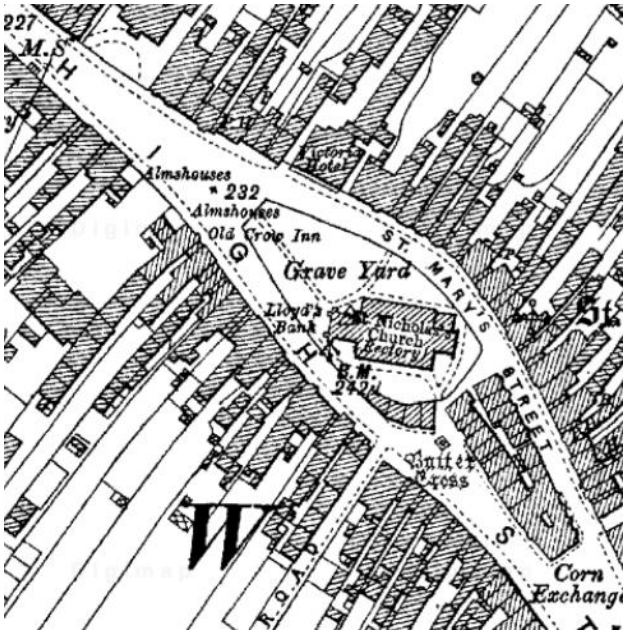

Figure 4. Ordnance Survey revision of 1902 showing the four properties on the south-west corner of the churchyard

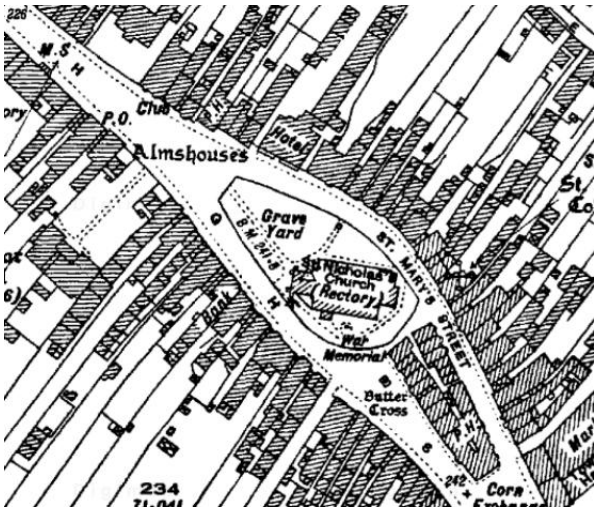

Figure 5. Ordnance Survey revision of 1926 showing the churchyard with the adjacent buildings removed and in its modern form.