

MAIDENS' GARLANDS AT HOLY TRINITY, ASHFORD-IN-THE-WATER

The church of Holy Trinity, Ashford-in-the-Water, is well known for being one of the few places where the now rare relics known as "maidens' garlands" have survived, and one of even fewer where they are on permanent public display.

They are also known as virgins' crants, as referred to in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when the priest objects to Ophelia, suspected of having taken her own life, being nevertheless "allow'd her virgin crants, her maiden strewments".

Dr Thomas Nadauld Brushfield, one of the chroniclers of Ashford's history, explains their use, and how they were constructed, in an article he wrote in 1899:

"It was formerly the custom in many English counties, and one which extended into the present century, on the occasion of the death of an unmarried woman who had led a pure and blameless life, for her friends and neighbours to construct in her honour a light framework, nearly always of wood, and decorated with flowers (real and artificial), ribbons and paper ornaments, several emblematical articles being suspended in the interior. This was generally termed a funeral garland, and was borne with much ceremony before her coffin on its way to the place of interment; and at the conclusion of the burial service, was hung up in a conspicuous position in the church."

The "emblematical articles" that he refers to would typically have been a handkerchief; a paper or kid glove; or a collar. On these would be written the name and date of death of the maiden and, on occasion, some lines of poetry.

One reason why so few maidens' garlands have survived is that they are extremely fragile and subject to decay, and their preservation has depended largely on the care bestowed on them by successive incumbents.

We learn from Dr Brushfield that seven were known to exist at Ashford "within living memory". The five that remained by the time of the church's 1868-1870 restoration were scrupulously preserved by Revd John Reddaway Luxmoore (1829-1917), who was the parish priest here for 52 years.



*One of the four surviving ancient maidens' garlands at Ashford Church.
(Photo: Martin Crampin).*



Five maidens' garlands on display at Ashford Church, in a photograph published by Revd John Reddaway Luxmoore in 1908.

Revd JR Luxmoore's son, John Stonhouse Luxmoore, recorded that, in 1891, the frame of one garland "was worm-eaten to such an extent that it was practically of wafer-thin thickness only, filled with dust". In this particular case, it was necessary to construct a new framework. In 1899, the garlands benefitted from further minor restoration.

Despite the care lavished upon them, one fell to the ground in 1936, and was damaged beyond repair.

The four ancient garlands that currently remain were expertly cleaned and conserved in 1987, and then resuspended inside protective transparent covers, under the aegis of Ven Gerald Phizackerley.

The histories associated with the deceased maidens of Ashford who were accorded the honour of a funeral garland are, unfortunately, far from complete: we have relied principally on the research of a number of Victorian antiquaries, and on narratives passed down to us by oral tradition.

1. Ann Howard (or Hayward), buried April 13th 1797

The oldest garland is probably that of Ann Howard (or Hayward). Most accounts state that Ann was buried on April 12th 1747, although there is no record in the parish registers of the burial of anyone with that name around that time. This date was first assigned by the historian Llewellynn Frederick William Jewitt in 1860, and has been assumed correct ever since. However, Jewitt acknowledged that deciphering the date written on that garland necessitated "very careful examination"; and also that the "six lines of poetry" on the same garland were by then "perfectly illegible".

Further inspection of the parish records reveals that an "Ann, daughter of John and Mary Hayward" was baptised on December 31st 1775; and that an "Ann, daughter of John and Mary Howard" was buried on April 13th 1797. If these entries each refer to the same individual (as seems likely), Ann would have

been 21 years old when she died – the age that Jewitt stated was written on her garland.

It seems probable, therefore, that Jewitt misinterpreted 1797 as 1747; and April 13 as April 12. Given the obviously indistinct writing, this would be understandable. Indeed, by the time that Dr Brushfield inspected this garland in 1899, he commented that “no traces of the inscription are now left”.

2. Ann Swindel, buried December 12th 1798

We have confirmation in the parish registers that an Ann Swindel, the daughter of Ralph and Mary Swindel, was buried the following year, on Dec 12 1798, and that she was baptised 22 years earlier on June 2 1776. Jewitt “succeeded with considerable difficulty in deciphering the following lines” of poetry on Ann’s garland:

*Be always ready no time delay,
I in my youth was called away,
Great grief to those that’s left behind,
But I hope I’m great joy to find.*

Ann Swindel.

Aged 22 years.

Dec 9 1798.

Brushfield comments that, once again, most of these lines had disappeared when he inspected the garlands nearly 40 years later.

3. Elizabeth Blackwell, buried November 12th 1801

The story of Elizabeth Blackwell’s garland is the most well documented, not least because she is memorialised on a plaque mounted on the east wall of the outer vestry, where we read that she died on November 9th 1801, aged 16. Also inscribed are the names of Elizabeth’s parents, John and Mary Blackwell; her nephew, John, who died a month short of his first birthday, 16 years after Elizabeth’s own death; and baby John’s parents, Joshua (Elizabeth’s elder brother) and Hannah (née Baxter).

At this time, burials within the church walls were common, and were known at Ashford to include members of the Blackwell family. The placement of Elizabeth’s memorial inside the church suggests that she and her family may be among them.

The late Leonard French Blackwell passed down to us the story of his great-grandaunt Elizabeth’s tragic demise on a recording about village life and the history of Ashford, distributed a few years after his death. He tells how she died in a whirlpool as she was bathing in the river, which was close to Bridge Foot, the

family home. It seems unlikely that anyone could have survived for very long on that November night, in what would have been frigid water.

A similar story was told by one of Leonard's younger cousins who, in about 1895, had been given a photograph showing the five Ashford garlands – quite possibly the photograph on page 2, taken by Revd Luxmoore.

When John Charles Cox, another Victorian historian, wrote about the Ashford garlands in 1875, he did not know the date that Elizabeth Blackwell had died. He says that he had been informed that "an old man, who had died in 1869 at about the age of 80, had carried [Elizabeth's garland] before the coffin". However, this date seems not to be correct, since this "old man" would at that time have been only 12.

Dr Brushfield, in following up Cox's story, had been unable to locate Elizabeth's burial record in the parish registers, and did not come across "any local tradition relating to it". Given that we are now confident that she died in 1801, and that both her baptism and burial are, indeed, documented in the parish registers, I conjecture that the "old man" may have been Elizabeth's 79-year-old father: he died himself 18 months after Elizabeth, at the age of 80.



A tablet, mounted on the east wall of Ashford Church's outer vestry, memorialises Elizabeth and other members of the Blackwell family.

4. Rebecca Sheldon, buried October 16th 1825

John Stonhouse Luxmoore writes that another garland commemorated the memory of a Rebecca Sheldon, who is confirmed in the registers to have been buried on October 16th 1825 at the age of 19 years. He mentions that Rebecca's garland was carried before the coffin by her sister.

However, with appropriate caution – given the fact that there were many Sheldons in Ashford around this time – he ponders in a pencilled aside whether

this identification is correct. For example, we find that another Rebecca Sheldon was buried at Ashford on November 7th 1847, aged 21 years.

5. Baxter ?

Luxmoore also states that a garland was made in memory of a girl whose surname was Baxter, and he questions whether this person may have been related to Robert Baxter (1748-1822) who lived in the Old Parsonage on Court Lane, and who was clerk of Ashford Church for 37 years. It is presumably just a coincidence that Robert Baxter's daughter, Hannah, is one of those named on the Blackwell family memorial: Hannah and her husband, Joshua, were the parents of the deceased infant, John Blackwell.

6. Joy Price, died October 7th 1995

In 1995, Revd Clive Thrower, then Vicar of Holy Trinity, Ashford-in-the-Water, together with a member of the church's congregation, Mrs Linda Foster, revived this ancient and affecting custom by making a garland for the funeral of Miss Joy Suzanne Price, who died at the age of 72. Joy, a member of the Third Order of Saint Francis, served Ashford Church and the community in numerous ways: as lay reader; Sunday School teacher; secretary and treasurer of the Parochial Church Council; a school governor; and "Akela" to the wolf cubs. She was also active at St Michael and All Angels' Church, Sheldon, where she is buried. Professionally, she managed to find time to be a lecturer in English at Matlock Training College.

Her garland, together with her handkerchief suspended inside, now hangs on the west wall of the north aisle, over the pew where she used to sit.



Miss Joy Price of Ashford in her "Akela" uniform (photograph ca. 1955, courtesy of David Windle) and the modern funeral garland made in her honour in 1995.