

Two after-dinner talks by David Smith

13 July

The townscape of Market Harborough

The lateness of the hour unfortunately meant David Smith had to curtail his presentations. Nevertheless, he thoroughly deconstructed Market Harborough, tracing its development from a mid-12th century informal market at a convenient crossing point of the River Welland. He showed how trading had influenced the street plan and dwellings with their business frontages and rear burgage plots. David revealed timber-framed houses behind later properties and market areas in the Square and the broad High Street. Even the prominent 1788 Town Hall and Robert Smyth's Grammar School (1614) accommodated street level markets.

Distinctive architecture, like the dominant St Dionysius church, largely 14th and 15th centuries with a crocketed broache spire, caught visitors' attention. Lack of a churchyard reflects its foundation as a chapel-of-ease. Handsome Georgian and Victorian buildings bear witness to Market Harborough's growth as an important staging post and fox-hunting centre. Diverse local industry developed, despite initial bypassing of the town by major

canal and railway routes. Good access to London and growth in housing and shops mean Market Harborough retains a flavour of its trading origins.

The Tulipman: An 18th Century Slate Letter Cutter

David introduced the work of an anonymous and distinctive gravestone slate cutter, so called for his fondness in using a tulip motif. Typically found on a group of gravestones in Stanford-on-Avon churchyard, this motif is most commonly a first letter decoration, but other presumably symbolic flowers are depicted, including scabious, sunflowers and roses. Other defining features are idiosyncratic lettering which mixes upper and lower cases, cursive and Gothic script, and there are some extended exuberant letter-forms, for example, on the letter r. Lettering is generally enclosed within a shield, sometimes ornamented with a tassel decoration. These delicately incised and substantial gravestones are of Swithland slate, a charnian rock from north east Leicester.

This craftsman apparently operated largely in the area centred on the south west corner of Leicestershire from about 1700 to 1740, but it is likely there were several copyists, adopting some of the features. Careful recording of extant gravestones has produced a clear distribution map, with currently 61 examples, showing Theddingworth as the central focus and extending to villages and towns some six miles beyond in all directions: Lutterworth to Market Harborough; West Haddon to North Kilworth.

Many questions were posed and discussed. No stones are signed, but the letter cutter could be a village schoolmaster, using a handwriting copybook. Kinship issues were postulated: several stones are for members of the same family. The inclusion of Latin phrases on certain headstones might mean a possible recusant link. Probate inventories indicate yeoman status for those commemorated, but a study of wills yielded no further information. The popularity of the tulip form in contemporaneous woodwork and matters of regional style were aired. Appreciation was shown of David's local knowledge and in the thoroughness of his recording methods.