

Crossing point

Have you ever noticed a church in a setting that looks odd, or incomplete? Perhaps it's because there is no burial ground, and hence no lych-gate. Think of the classic 'picture postcard' church, and your mind's eye may well put a lych-gate in prominent place; a substantial roofed gateway leading into the churchyard. Here at Edgbaston Old Church, there is a fine Victorian example:



Inside an ancient lych-gate there would have been slabs of stone at the sides, resembling seats. In fact these slabs were meant as resting places for a coffin, and in medieval times the priest would begin the funeral service at this point, with readings.

The name lych-gate is an amalgam of two words: 'lich' (*Old English* - corpse), and 'gat' (*Old Norse* - a path, or way). Some modern dictionaries remove the hyphen and spell it 'lychgate', but still refer the reader to a list of words beginning with 'lich'. You may find in such a list a 'lich-stone'; this is the place where (in times when only the rich could afford coffins), the poor would be wrapped in simple shrouds for burial. Lich-stones can be found in the ruined monasteries in Yorkshire.

'Lich' is retained in northern English dialect as 'Lyke'. In recent times *The Lyke Wake Walk* has become known as a hikers' slog across dangerous (sometimes boggy) parts of the Yorkshire moors. But the origins of *The Lyke Wake Walk* go back hundreds of years to a poem about the imagined journey of the soul after death; the composer Benjamin Britten made a wonderfully evocative setting of this text.

The lych-gate offers a transition point. As we go to and from the church, we pass beneath its roof with a sense of approaching or leaving a special sacred space. But on the occasion of a funeral there is an added resonance: the lych-gate representing the boundary crossed by the soul, as it frees itself from earthly ties.