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## Lych-gates in Newfoundland

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An undated photograph in the collection of the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador shows an unidentified woman standing in front of an elaborately-beamed Gothic-Revival style structure with a detailed wrought-iron gate (fig. 001). The edifice marks the entranceway to the cemetery grounds of the Alexander Chapel of All Souls, located on Coster Street in Bonavista.

The structure in the photograph is what is known as a lych-gate. The lych-gate was once a feature typical of Anglican churchyards; "lych" is a form of the Anglo-Saxon word "līc" meaning body or corpse. In England, the structure was known by a variety of names and spellings, including bier-house, lich-gate, and scallenge-gate (Dyer 153-154).

A lych-gate, succinctly, is a "covered wooden gateway with open sides at the entrance to a churchyard, providing a resting place for a coffin" (Fleming et al. 277). In the medieval period, few churchyards would have been without a lych-gate of some kind (Brown 1998: 23). A common feature in English churchyards, the concept of the lych-gate was transplanted to the new world, and made its way into the vernacular architecture of Newfoundland.

In traditional usage, the gate was "the sheltered point at which the coffin was set down at a funeral to await the clergyman's arrival" (Veillette and White 98). An English commentator, writing in 1899, noted that the lych-gate, "or

Fig. 001 - Undated photo from the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador photo collection, showing the original Coster Street lych-gate; Fig. 002 - Interior of the St Wulfran's Church lych-gate, Ovingdean, Brighton, East Sussex. Photo by Sarah Leedham. Note the recessed seating along the side of the gate; Fig. 003 - Exterior of the St Wulfran's Church lych-gate, Ovingdean, Brighton, East Sussex. Photo by Sarah Leedham. "Holiness unto the Lord" is carved into one of the wooden beams.



corpse-gate, with its pent-house roof, is specially provided for the shelter of a funeral while awaiting the priest, but it is only in a few cases that it is exclusively use for that purpose; it is frequently, perhaps, where it exists, commonly, the principal gateway of the churchyard" (Tyack 67).

Lych-gates followed a somewhat predictable pattern, though great variations in form could be seen. Typically, they were gable or hipped roofed, often with benches where mourners could sit, or with a lych-stone, coffin-stool or trestle, upon which a coffin could be rested. "All lychgates would formerly have had a stone or timber ledge or shelf for the coffin to be rested on, but these have often been removed," writes architectural historian Brian Bailey (47) (fig. 002).

Architectural historian R.J. Brown notes, "although some lych-gates were made of stone, such as the one at St. Just-in-Roseland in Cornwall, the majority were of timber or with stone bases and timber superstructures, and many would have decayed over the centuries. In the eighteenth century, when their use declined, they were demolished rather than repaired, often being replaced by timber or iron gates. Sometimes central pivots or tapsels were provided, allowing the pall bearers to pass either side with the coffin in the middle (Brown 2004: 132). (see figs. 003-005).

Lych-gates mark the division between consecrated and unconsecrated ground. It was here, in this liminal space that was part of neither the world of the living, nor the world of the dead, that funeral-bearers stopped with their load. In some parts of Devon and Cornwall, the gates were known as "trim-trams" – a term which, it has been suggested, refers to a spot where the funeral train (tram) was "trimmed" or brought into the proper order "so as to be in a state of preparation for the officiating minister, on his coming forth to meet them there" (Dyer 153-154).

On a purely functional level, these covered gateways served to shelter a coffin and its bearers while awaiting the arrival of the priest to conduct the burial procession. Once the officiant arrived, part of the funeral service could be



Fig. 004 - Undated postcard of St Margaret's Church lych-gate, Rottingdean, Brighton, East Sussex. Lych-gate erected in 1897 in memory of the Rev. Arthur Thomas, vicar for forty-seven years. Postcard copyright attributed to A.W. Wardell's, Brighton and Worthing. Courtesy of Sarah Leedham; Fig. 005 - St Margaret's Church lych-gate, Rottingdean, Brighton, East Sussex in 2013. Photo by Sarah Leedham.



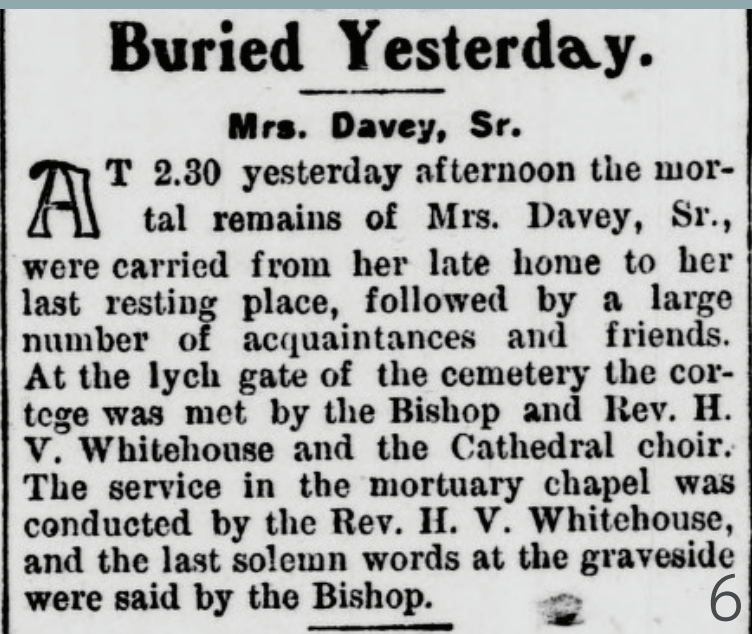
conducted within the lych-gate, before leading the procession to a church or mortuary chapel (Brown 1997:22).

A selection from the "Buried Yesterday" column of the St. John's Evening Telegram (fig. 006), from the 29th of November, 1905, gives a good picture of how the now-demolished lych-gate at the Anglican Cemetery on Forest Road in St. John's fitted into the burial ritual:

"At 2:30 yesterday the mortal remains of Mrs. Davey, Sr., were carried from her late home to her last resting place, followed by a large number of acquaintances and friends. At the lych gate of the cemetery the cortege was met by the Bishop and Rev. H.V. Whitehouse and the Cathedral choir. The service in the mortuary chapel was conducted by the Rev. H.V. Whitehouse, and the last solemn words at the graveside were said by the Bishop" (Buried 3).

In addition to its roof, side walls and possible interior benches or coffin-stools, the lych-gates typically had a hinged gate (fig 007). "The actual gates may be single or double," writes Bailey (47), "or – as at Chalfont St. Giles, Buckinghamshire – a pivoted swing gate which is a great attraction to local children, blissfully unaware of the gloomy import of their plaything."

As gateways to, and for, the dead, it was perhaps unsurprising that notions of "gloomy import" attached themselves to lych-gates. Supernatural folk beliefs around lych-gates in the historic period were at times quite strong. One English writer noted in 1892, "in days gone by, the lich-gate was often the scene of a curious superstition – one which still lingers on, here and there, in different places – the idea being that the spirit of the last person watches round the churchyard till another is buried, to whom he delivers his charge....Serious consequences have resulted from this notion, and terrific fights have taken place, at the entrance of the churchyard, to decide which corpse should be buried first" (Dyer 156).



Funeral processions were not the only social ritual to need access to the church through the gate; wedding processions needed admittance as well. In 1899, it was noted that "it is considered unlucky for a wedding party to meet a funeral; and in some few churchyards, where there are two or more entrances, the different processions use different gates. No bridal pair would under any conditions pass through the lych-gate at Barthomley, in Cheshire; and at Madely, in Shropshire, funeral and wedding trains approach and leave by separate ways" (Tyack 67).

One interesting tradition related to the lych-gate in England was the tying the gate, where children would tie the gates shut during weddings. The departing bride and bridegroom would then have to make a payment of some kind to the children upon leaving the church. It was a tradition practiced in Cumbria, the Peak District, and the Yorkshire Dales, and other places.

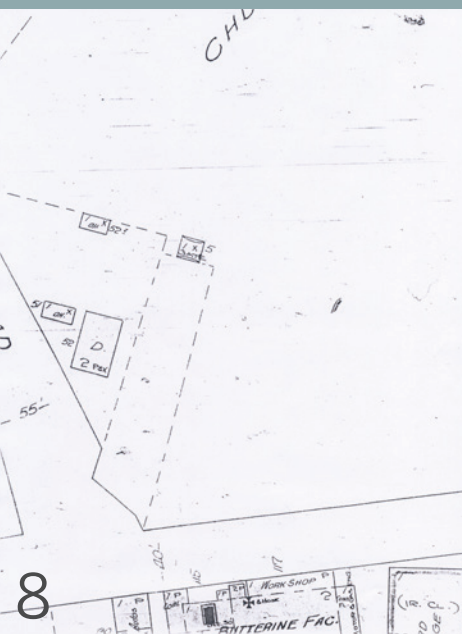
As noted earlier, in medieval times most English churchyards would have featured a lych-gate of some kind, but the use of the gate dwindled over time. "Many were destroyed or damaged after the Reformation," notes Brown (1998:23), "and many of those that remained, being made of timber, decayed and were demolished in the eighteenth century, when the use of lych-gates declined."

The Forest Road Anglican Cemetery's lych gate was torn down at some point in the second half of the 20th century. It is shown clearly on early insurance atlases as one story wooden structure with a shingle roof, open at each end (fig. 008). It appears, partially obscured by trees, on aerial photographs from 1961, and seems to have been a mid- to sharp-peak gable structure (fig. 009). At some point in the 1970s or 80s it was demolished. According to Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador Executive Director, Mr George Chalker, the Forest Road lych-gate was removed to allow motorized hearses access to the cemetery.

Today, one of only two surviving Newfoundland examples is the Coster Street lych-gate in Bonavista (fig. 010). The



Fig. 008 - Detail from the St. John's Insurance Atlas, showing the lych-gate at the end of a lane off the intersection of Forest Road and what is now Empire Avenue. Courtesy City of St. John's Archives; Fig. 009 - Detail of a 1961 aerial photograph of the Forest Road Cemetery. Courtesy of City of St. John's Archives; Fig. 010 - View of the Alexander Chapel of All Souls lych-gate, Coster Street, Bonavista, 2012, with the chapel itself in the background. Photo by Dale Jarvis.



original lych-gate was constructed circa 1899 and was financed by the Church of England Women's Association of Bonavista (Simms). One S. Rees of Bonavista, in a letter dated Dec. 7, 1893 to the St. John's Evening Telegram, noted,

"Dear Sir, – on Monday the 4th inst., there was no small stir here among the members of the C.E. Sewing Class, and one would naturally ask the cause. But a poster would apprise of the fact that a 'sale of work,' under the auspices of the above ladies, was about about to take place; its object, to provide funds to provide a lych gate for the new cemetery. At about 6.40 p.m. the doors were open to purchasers, and when I arrived a few minutes later – considering inclemency of weather – quite A Crowd Had Gathered" (Rees 2).

According to the author, the amount raised, \$76, "was far above expectation" (Rees 2). The fact that it was the women of the church who had raised the fund is perhaps not unusual. Only a few years before, in 1890, the "Ladies of St. Paul's Church Committee" in nearby Trinity, Trinity Bay, had raised the impressive sum of \$1,313.26 to aid in the construction of the Gothic Revival style St. Paul's Church (Coffmann 177).

It has been argued that most lych-gates to be found today are not of great age. "Many were rebuilt," notes Brown (1998:24) "particularly during the Gothic Revival of the Victorian times, yet they still add charm to village churchyards."

The construction of the Bonavista lych-gate was most likely part of this Gothic Revival movement in Newfoundland at the end of the nineteenth century (fig. 011). It is associated with one of only two Newfoundland mortuary chapels, the Alexander Chapel of All Souls, begun in 1896 by local builder Ronald Strathie (Coffmann 175). The other mortuary chapel, located in Trinity, had been been constructed in 1880 by an unknown builder clearly familiar with ecclesiastical Gothic Revival buildings (Coffmann 172).

Over the years, the Bonavista lych-gate fell into disrepair, and was partially dismantled (fig. 012), though it was

eventually restored by 2008 by a local committee headed by Bill Abbott (fig. 013). The replication of the structure was designed Cal Ryder, who based his blueprint solely on a picture of the original lych-gate, taken in 1935 by Abbott's father, a local priest (see Simms).

The only other similar structure in the province is the heavily beamed lych-gate located adjacent to the 1934 Cathedral of St. John The Evangelist, located on Main Street, Corner Brook (figs. 014-015). The gate is very similar in style to English lych-gates. While it is not associated with a graveyard, its placement close to the church is, in a sense, more traditional than either the Bonavista or St. John's lych-gates.

According to Baxter Park, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, construction on the Corner Brook lych-gate started the same year as the church, 1934, and was finished by 1935, making it the oldest continuously standing lych-gate in the province. The gate was repaired in October of 2012, and then additional repairs were carried out in the summer of 2013. The gate is painted a deep red, a colour it has always traditionally been painted, and provides





access through a low stone wall running along Main Street. To the Dean's knowledge, the gate has been used throughout the years in both funeral and wedding ceremonies.

Although there are differences between the two extant Newfoundland lych-gates, they are similar in their use of heaving beaming, and both stand as a testament to long-standing Anglican traditions. And while they are simple structures, they also stand as good examples of how architecture and ritual are linked. Both of them deserve recognition for their important place in the architectural history and the intangible cultural heritage of the province.

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Fig. 011 - "The cemetery, Bonavista: Mr Bray entering." [1911] Curnow album of Newfoundland and Labrador photographs, The Rooms Provincial Archives VA 90-7.6; Fig. 012 - Alexander Chapel of All Souls lych-gate prior to restoration. Photo from the slide collection of the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, circa 1995-1996, by Dale Jarvis; Fig. 013 - Alexander Chapel of All Souls lych-gate beam detail, 2012. Photo by Dale Jarvis; Fig. 014 - The 1934-1935 lych-gate at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Main Street, Corner Brook, 2013. Photo by Sarah Wade; Fig. 015 - Detail of the interior roofing beams of the lych-gate at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Main Street, Corner Brook, 2013. Photo by Sarah Wade.

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## Our Mission

HFNL was established in 1984 to promote, preserve and protect the built heritage of the province. In 2008, HFNL was chosen to be the agency that would implement the province's ICH Strategy. Our mission is to safeguard and sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs.