



“The Curfew Tolls the Knell . . .”

THE lowing herd — thanks to private endowment and public policy — still winds slowly o’er the lea beyond the headstones at Stoke Poges, just as it did when Gray wrote his Elegy 200 years ago. **WALTER BROOKES**, who visited the Country Churchyard recently, here contributes a New Zealander’s footnote to what is perhaps the best-remembered poem in English.

WHEN Gray wrote his Elegy he probably expected that his Country Churchyard would still remain a country churchyard in 200 years’ time. The odd thing, in view of so much change in this part of the country, is that it does; but the district near by is very different indeed. My wife and I made two visits there when we were in England — and I got some information in a note from the vicar, the Rev. D. Bryant Bevan. Stoke Poges is reached after little more than half an hour’s run in the train from Paddington Station to Slough, and about 20 minutes’ walk by road and field from there.

We first went one Saturday afternoon in the winter. Well, there it was. The tower was no longer ivy-mantled, but the church and the old churchyard round the door seemed, by comparison with old pictures and Gray’s own description, not to have altered much. “Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree’s shade,” still “heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap”; and, yes, “some frail memorial still erected nigh,” a surviving wooden grave-board, its “uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture” all but obliterated, continues to “implore the passing tribute of a sigh.”

We walked up to the church. The sound of music came through the doors — the Wedding March!

Soon the young couple came out and walked down the path, followed by the congregation. The waiting photographers clicked their cameras, and when “some hoary-headed swain,” an old man indeed, brought up the rear, helped along by two young men, they took his photograph, too. Life still went on in Stoke Poges.

We went inside the church. Very old. Norman, early Gothic, Tudor, and a bit of work since. Beautifully kept, fresh and bright. An old fireplace, no longer used, of course. And on sale, with a box to put the money in, were souvenirs made from pieces of the old yew tree, book-ends, paper-weights, and other articles. We bought a paper-weight — 7/6.

The English winter day soon grew dark and cold. We set off home, stopping only to have a closer look at the massive monument to the poet, in the form of a sarcophagus on a pedestal, designed by the architect Benjamin Wyatt, and erected in 1799. Inscribed with information about Gray, eulogistic and pious observations and some stanzas

from the Elegy and the Eton College Ode, it has an extremely classical appearance, and looks odd indeed surrounded by an iron railing in a corner of the lea o’er which a lowing herd still slowly winds. Private benefactors (Mr W. A. Judd and Sir B. Oppenheimer) and a public subscription have combined to place this monument and 13 acres of land in the possession of the National Trust.

“You can climb over the railing and have a look,” said a small boy standing by. “It’s only to keep the cows away.”

When we got home, feeling that we had found out very little, I wrote to the vicar, asking him if he would tell me about the numbers of visitors and any other points that might be of interest to readers of *The New Zealand Listener*. I am grateful to him for his prompt reply:

Dear Mr Brookes,

We do receive a large number of visitors every year, I should say somewhere about

100,000. The yew tree some years ago in a violent storm parted with some of its huge branches, and, rather than burn them up, we got them made into souvenirs. We have sufficient pieces to last for years yet, and the pieces travel to the ends of the earth.

People come from distant places of the world to be married here. Some time ago a bride flew over from California. We recently married a young doctor who, with his bride, came from Australia to be married here.

We have requests for the ashes of cremated people to be buried here from all parts of the world, but, of course, we cannot accede to these.

Yours sincerely,
D. Bryant Bevan, Vicar.

Our next visit was in the summer — nearer to the time of the year to which the Elegy refers. There was much more sign of activity, and several big cars with chauffeurs were drawn up in the lane outside the churchyard.

A man was mowing the grass round the tombstones; I had been living in London for a year, I felt just like push-

ing a lawnmower, and I offered to help him. He very gladly accepted. He could do with a spell — that was obvious — and I flatter myself that he watched my exhibition of New Zealand lawn-mowing with respect.

“It’s a hot day,” he said. “You get tired doing this — it’s awkward — and getting round the tombstones. The sexton has been ill, and I just come for two days a week. They had a boy here, but he was no good. It’s hard to get anyone nowadays.”

He told me that he had just turned 70, and that he had been in Stoke Poges 50 years — since he had come from Reading at the age of 20.

“There’s been a lot of changes round here since then,” he went on. “It used to be all corn land where there’s factories now at Slough. We used to send wheat abroad in those days.”

“There seems to be a lot of farmland still just near here?” I asked.



THE COUNTRY CHURCHYARD today —
“The most famous gathering of undis-
tinguished dead in the world”