

e-Bulletin 8

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EDITORIAL

By Jim Sharpe

So the Friends of York Art Gallery celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary this year, meaning that the organisation is two years younger than I am. I am afraid that I was unable to attend the celebration garden party at Heslington Manor in June, but I have my ticket to hear Tristram Hunt speaking at the Tempest Anderson Hall on 16 October. It is a pleasure to be involved in what is such a long-running and successful organisation, not least because York Art Gallery itself is clearly back into its post-Covid stride. The 'Bloom' exhibition, supported by the Friends, is a gorgeous celebration of depictions of flowers, plants, and gardens, while the 'Wall of Women' exhibition of pots, by way of a contrast, celebrates the achievements of (mainly modern) female ceramicists, displaying about 250 items. The exhibition of 'Treasures from the Stores' continues, with some of the 1,000 or so paintings owned by the Gallery making a welcome appearance after, in many cases, years of being, of necessity, hidden away. A forthcoming treat, scheduled to commence on 10 May next year, is an exhibition centred on Claude Monet's The Water-Lilly Pond (1899). York Art Gallery has been selected as one of twelve partner venues which have been invited to participate in the National Gallery's 'National scheme, part of the National Gallery's bicentenary Treasures' celebrations in 2024. Each of the venues is being loaned an important artwork from the Gallery's collection, around which an exhibition will be curated. I am in no doubt that York Art Gallery will pull off something special to mark this event.

I am also happy to have received a good spread of contributions to this e-Bulletin. The Friends are lucky to have a hard-working Events Sub-Committee, under the overall direction of Moira Fulton as Events Coordinator, and Dorothy Nott has contributed a characteristically informative and entertaining account of a recent event, a visit to explore the artistic and architectural treasures of Glasgow. Lesley Woodfield contributes an appreciation of one of her favourite works from the Gallery, Richard Jack's *The Return to the Front: Victoria Station* (incidentally, also one of my favourites from the Gallery's collections). Anne McLean introduces us to Richard Nicholson, brother-in-law and business associate of George Hudson, the 'Railway King', who probably committed suicide after Hudson's enterprises collapsed, but who was an art collector with, according to one source, around fifty works by William Etty in his collection. There is a further contribution by Dorothy Nott, written at the time of the 'Sin' exhibition which ran at the Gallery from October 2022 until January of this year, which examines Carel Victor Morlais Weight's *Betrayal of Christ*, one of the works then exhibited. To round things off, I have contributed a review I was invited to write of a short but fascinating work on the nineteenth-century York-based architect James Pigott Pritchett, whose work will also be the subject of a day colloquium to be held at York Cemetery (Pritchett designed the chapel there) in October. Information about the colloquium may be found <u>here</u>. Pritchett may not be a familiar name to many York residents today, but his contribution to the built environment of the city centre was substantial.

Finally, our President, Peter Miller, has asked me to remind readers of another successful activity associated with the Friends, the Friends' Bookstall in the Gallery entrance hall. This, he tells me, has raised over \pounds 9,000 for the Gallery. He offers many thanks to those of the Friends who have contributed books, but he finds that his stock of works for sale is now low, and that donations of any books on art or the history of art (both broadly defined) would be very welcome. He is happy to collect, and can be contacted on peter.miller30@btinternet.com or 01904 612751.

© Jim Sharpe August 2023 The events programme organised by the Friends offers a wide variety of activities, including visits, both national and international, to cities offering a distinctive grouping of galleries and other attractions. Here we have an account of what appears to have been an extremely stimulating and successful Friends' visit to Glasgow

FRIENDS OF YORK ART GALLERY VISIT TO GLASGOW

27-30 April 2023

The Friends' tour of Glasgow started with a visit to the newly refurbished Burrell Collection. Set in beautiful parkland to the south of the city centre, the collection is imaginatively curated with examples of glass, ceramics, tapestry, paintings, sculpture, and furniture, all rubbing shoulders with each other but not over-crowded and appropriately lit. It was a joy to wander through the eclectic assemblage with our knowledgeable guide, Robin Cairns, who offered a critique but did not intrude.

From there it was a short walk through the park to Pollock House, now in the hands of the Scottish National Trust but originally designed for the Maxwell family by William Adam, brother of Robert. It was a stark contrast to the light and airy Burrell and has clearly seen better days. Nevertheless, it is obviously well loved by the enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff.

Day Two started at the Hunterian Art Gallery where Robin took us round the reconstructed Mackintosh interior in two groups. Walking up to the gallery we had been faced with the unprepossessing exterior of the house with a door half-way up the wall, but once inside the attention to detail in the re-assemblage of Mackintosh's own Victorian end-of-terrace property was breath-taking. We are all too familiar now with the style made famous by the Glasgow Four, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Margaret Macdonald, Herbert McNair, and Frances Macdonald, not to recognise their work, but to see an entire property with its austere, decluttered lines, and where the soft furnishings, paintwork, and furniture presented an integrated whole, was impressive. A second reconstruction in view, and equally as dramatic, was the guest bedroom at 78 Derngate, Northampton, where a panel of bold stripes walked up the wall and fanned out onto the ceiling, all echoed by striped bed linen, hardly the most restful of decor, but striking nevertheless.

The Hunterian is more than just a homage to the Glasgow Four; it houses an enviable collection of Whistlers, a Ramsay to rival York's own *Jean* Abercromby, and a Rembrandt. Again, the exhibits were well spaced and the absence of captions encouraged a more measured appreciation.

Then on to the Willow Tearooms in Sauchiehall Street – one of four tearooms designed by Mackintosh for Miss Cranston – where we lunched in the *Room de Luxe* (originally the Ladies' Room). Here we were able to discover how comfortable high-backed (reproduction) Mackintosh chairs really are and to appreciate the cutlery at first hand.



Friends dining at the Willow Tea Rooms, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow Photo credit: Kathleen Kiernan

The afternoon was taken up by a visit to Queen's Cross Church, the only one designed by Mackintosh and an early work. It is no longer a working church, and today serves as a museum and community centre. The central space is large and airy with two asymmetric balconies, a barrelvaulted roof and an intensely blue heart motif in the western window. Then off to the Tenement House Museum, largely preserved as it was in 1965 when the last resident, Miss Agnes Toward, left. It was instructive to understand that the word *tenement* can mean anything from a luxury flat to a single room in multi-occupation. Agnes' tenement comprised four comfortable rooms now in the care of the Scottish National Trust, while others in the same building remain in private hands.

At the start of our visit to Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Robin helpfully guided us through a couple of galleries, focussing on the Glasgow Boys and Salvador Dali's *Christ of St John of the Cross*,

explaining how the gallery came to acquire this unusual painting of the Crucifixion. We were then left to wander in our own time through some spectacular art: Scottish Colourists, Impressionists, Dutch paintings including a magnificent Rembrandt, possibly of Alexander the Great, alongside a full-sized Spitfire hanging from the ceiling.

We then journeyed out of Glasgow to Helensburgh where we met up with Mackintosh enthusiasts, Bruce and Nicola Jamieson, both architects, who are intent on bringing back this first completed Mackintosh commission to life. From there we travelled to The Hill House built for publisher Walter Blackie. Unfortunately, the exterior, rendered in Portland cement, does not suit the Glasgow climate, and the true grandeur of the property is obscured by an extraordinary protective shell installed at the cost of some £4 million by the Scottish National Trust and which is served by steps offering a bird's eye view of the roof. Inside, however, this does not detract from the distinctive features of the house with its integrated decorative schemes, fine furniture, and textiles, not to mention a panoramic view of the Clyde.

During our coach ride, we were able to watch a film of Glasgow architecture kindly provided by Tony Burton of the Glasgow Royal Philosophical Society and good friend of our president, Peter Miller, which highlighted the grid system, Glasgow's green spaces, and some of the very grand terraces which grace the city, including those by Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, in advance of our visit to probably his finest work at Holmwood House the following morning. Designed for James Couper in the mid-nineteenth century, Holmwood House is extremely impressive. Set in relatively modest grounds, the house stands proud with a symmetrical entrance, but asymmetric wings on either side. Inside the decoration is of the Greek and Trojan wars, designed by York-born John Flaxman and rescued from the whitewash era of the nuns, the last residents of the property, which is surprisingly comfortable. Windows in the ceiling let in extra light, while sash windows were so designed as to open from both top and bottom to accommodate different activities.

Our last visit was just outside Edinburgh at Jupiter Artland, shortlisted for Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2016 alongside York Art Gallery. In spite of the dreich weather, the entrance through Charles Jencks' vivid green *Cells of Life* was inspiring and set the scene for our later walks through the woodland area exhibiting site-specific sculptures by individually commissioned artists.



Jupiter Artland Photo credit: Dorothy Nott

Looking back, it is amazing that we were able to see so much in such a short time, and, although the trip was primarily Mackintosh themed, there was so much more to appreciate. We were extremely fortunate in our guide; Robin was erudite, witty, friendly, and helpful. We learnt a great deal from him, not in a didactic manner, but with humour and a light touch. His off-the-cuff remarks when waiting for doors to open were always apposite and entertaining - a real bonus. And then there was Roy, our reliable driver, who even made a speech! Although the trip was arranged through Travel Editions, and Ellen Walker worked hard on our account, the smooth running and the little extras were all down to Sue Greenhow, who deserves our thanks.

© Dorothy Nott May 2023 Lesley Woodfield, member of the Friends, writes about one of her favourite paintings from the Gallery's holdings and considers its wider relevance

RICHARD JACK, THE RETURN TO THE FRONT: VICTORIA STATION



Richard Jack (1866-1952), *The Return to the Front: Victoria Station,* 1916, oil on canvas, 203.3 x 319 cm, YORAG: 395. Photo credit: York Museums Trust ©

The Return to the Front: Victoria Station for a long time dominated the staircase landing of York Art Gallery. I used to love seeing it as I climbed the stairs, and studied it time and time again. It's by Richard Jack, born in 1866 in Sunderland, who started his art studies at the York School of Art before winning a scholarship to the Royal College of Art. He was a versatile artist, perhaps best known initially for his portraits, but also known for his figure studies and landscapes. *The Return to the Front*, painted in early 1916, established him as a war artist. Later that year he was made (with the honorary rank of major) an official artist with the Canadian Army, and emigrated to Canada in 1930, dying in Montreal in 1952. He donated *The Return to the Front* to York Art Gallery in 1928, one would like to think on the strength of happy memories of his time as an art student in the city.

We are all used now to seeing images of war, often of men in action, or the barren, scarred landscapes of World War I, which have been graphically depicted by many other war artists. Since World War II we have become used to seeing vivid reenactions of war in films, and now, sadly, we see war come to life in Ukraine on our television screens.

Richard Jack's impressive, very large painting takes a different slant. We are looking at a crowded station platform of khaki-clad soldiers readying themselves to take the train (depicted in the background, carriage doors open), on their journey back to war. In the centre, the subject of our gaze, is a Scottish soldier in kilt and bonnet with his kit beside him (the only seated figure in the painting), gazing unseeingly at nothing. Unlike the chattering folk around him, he is lost in thought – oblivious to the noise and activity of the crowded platform.

Among the crowd there are only five women. Four of them are engaged in animated conversation with their men, very likely saying goodbye. There is no one saying goodbye to the sad Scottish soldier. But the fifth woman has approached him. She is perhaps wearing a uniform and carrying a tray of small books (perhaps religious tracts?), and seems to want to distract him. There is just one other person who has noticed him – another soldier, weary-looking, loaded with rifle and equipment, who looks with concern towards him. Maybe he is going to talk to him. I find myself hoping that he will.

This image of soldiers returning to the battlefield is also timeless. Their trepidation, fear, dread – even excitement – will be familiar to serving soldiers anywhere and at any time in history. We can apply it to soldiers today – to the courageous men and women of Ukraine, fighting for 'their land' - but also to the poor conscripts on the other side.

Our soldier in the painting embodies them all.

© Lesley Woodfield August 2023

For a Youtube presentation on this painting made by the Gallery, visit <u>https://youtu.be/dOSJcEweUr4</u>

Anne McLean, a member of the Friends' Committee, explores the sad story of a York art collector affected by the fall of George Hudson, the Railway King

THE STORY OF RICHARD NICHOLSON'S ART COLLECTION

On the evening of the 8 May 1849, a man's body was pulled from the river Ouse in York, close to Museum Gardens. The deceased was a local man, fifty-six-year-old Richard Nicholson, who lived in Clifton, close to St Peter's School. Earlier that evening he had been seen walking along the riverbank looking very dejected. There was no doubt that he had a lot on his mind. He was the brother-in-law and close business associate of George Hudson, the 'Railway King'. The value of railway shares had collapsed, and many investors, Hudson and Nicholson included, faced ruin. As a co-director of both Hudson's railway company and the bank that he controlled, Nicholson was directly implicated in accusations of financial mismanagement. A committee of investigation was about to be appointed, and he knew he would be held to account.

Nicholson's death caused a sensation in York and was widely reported in both the local and national press. All accounts were quick to mention his connection with Hudson, but his good character and wonderful art collection were always mentioned too. He had been a keen patron of the arts in York, a supporter of the York School of Design from its establishment in 1842 and an avid collector of paintings by William Etty R.A.. According to John Ward Knowles, the chronicler of York's artistic life in the nineteenth-century, Nicholson owned as many as fifty paintings by Etty.

Nicholson's is a sad story reflecting the devastating impact of railway mania on individual citizens of York. He had invested heavily in railway shares – to the value of at least £81,000 (the equivalent of five million pounds today), and at the height of the boom was able to move to a prestigious new home in Clifton and indulge his passion for art. When the house was advertised for let after his death, it was described as 'replete with every convenience', including pure filtered water from the new Water Works. Its location on the (then) edge of York was described as 'one of the most desirable as well as delightful places of Residence in the Kingdom' (*Yorkshire Gazette*, 15 September 1849).

If Nicholson did indeed own more than fifty paintings by Etty, his fourbedroomed house must have been crammed with artworks, some of which had only recently been bought. When the collection was sold at auction in July 1849, it realised the sum of £8,000, about £650,000 at current values. The sale catalogue lists numerous paintings by Etty, including '<u>The Graces'</u>, '<u>The Coral Fishers'</u> [sic] and 'To Arms, Ye Brave'. Other artists mentioned, in addition to several lesser-known names, were David Wilkie, J.M.W. Turner, and Landseer. There were also Old Masters of the Dutch and Italian schools. Several pieces from Nicholson's collection have found their way to York Art Gallery, for example The Graces and St John the Baptist (illustrated below).



William Etty, *St. John the Baptist*, 1824-5, oil on paper on plywood, 50.1 x 40.7cm Photo credit: York Museums Trust ©

The inquest into Nicholson's death returned a verdict of 'found drowned', on the basis that no one had witnessed him enter the water, so an accident or foul play could not be ruled out. Suicide was still a crime at this time and burial in consecrated ground would not have been permitted. He was buried in St Olave's churchyard, Marygate. Six months later William Etty passed away at his home in York aged sixty-two, and was also buried there.



The grave of Richard Nicholson in the churchyard of St. Olave's churchyard, Marygate

Find a Grave, <u>memorial page for Richard Nicholson</u>. Photo: AradiaB

Nicholson was not the only York art collector to be affected by the fall of George Hudson - George Townsend Andrews, the 'Railway Architect' to the 'Railway King', was another, his collection being sold at auction a few weeks before Nicholson's. He was not, however, impelled to commit suicide. How many other speculators in railway shares invested in art and what happened to their collections? The topic, with relevance to York's artistic heritage and railway history, offers scope for more interesting research in the future.

© Anne McLean August 2023 Composed while the Gallery's 'Sin' Exhibition was showing, Dorothy Nott offers an analysis of a fascinating painting by a British artist who clearly deserves to be better known

CAREL VICTOR MORLAIS WEIGHT (1908-97), THE BETRAYAL OF CHRIST

Carel Weight was probably much better known during his lifetime than he is today. But it has been said that no important collection of twentiethcentury art would be complete without a Carel Weight, a sentiment which was clearly echoed by the Friends of York Art Gallery when this painting, *The Betrayal of Christ*, was purchased in order to complement the Milner-White collection. At the time it was described as a 'striking and substantial work', a description justified by its inclusion in the recent exhibition at the gallery entitled 'Sin', where it sat well with the concept of sin (and innocence), profiling both the sin of Judas Iscariot and the innocence of Christ in the infamous kiss of betrayal.

Weight started off life in Paddington, then a rather downmarket area of London, and battled with his parents for the opportunity to train as an artist. Somewhat surprisingly they had set their sights on his becoming an opera singer, and he was hard pressed to escape the clutches of a rather plump teacher who used to sit on him! However, his father relented and agreed to allow him a year to prove himself as an artist, which led to his attending the Hammersmith School of Art and meeting the painter Ruskin Spear, and where he stayed two years rather than twelve months. Although he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art (RCA), he was unable to take it up owing to lack of funds. Fortunately, he gained a teaching post, and, together with a few sales, was thus able to support himself through the 1930s, spending some of those years at Goldsmiths.

Towards the end of the Second World War Weight secured a commission as an official war artist, working in Austria, Greece, and Italy, focussing on the aftermath of war and the clearing up process. On his return to the UK, he took up a post at the RCA, graduating to Professor in 1957. By then he had become an Associate of the Royal Academy, and five years later a full member. Sadly, much of Weight's early work was lost owing to a direct hit on his studio in the war. Weight said of his work that he was 'very interested in trying to paint humanistic subjects, things about people or that concern people', and rejected what he called the 'inhuman side of abstractions'. Many of his works are situated, as is this one, in British suburbia - ordinary streets and parks haunted by menace, anxiety, and the supernatural. Speaking about this work, he said that he had always been attracted to the subject, though it was not really intended to be a religious painting as such. It was not the only time, however, that he chose subjects with a religious content, painting *The Crucifixion* in 1959, *The Assumption of the Virgin* in 1971 and various of the *Seven Deadly Sins*, among others.

In this busy painting Christ is not situated in the centre of the painting. Instead, he is on the extreme left, almost as a side-show beside the dramatic rendition of the sky and the movement of the other figures in the scene. Using a fairly large canvas, akin to a wide-angle camera, Weight is able to capture the whole scene in a single shot. The soldiers are wearing German uniforms, for, as Weight explained, he had grown up in a world where such soldiers had epitomised his idea of brutality; and, it is apposite to remember, this work was painted not long after the end of the Second World War, a war in which Weight had been painting scenes of devastation. Given the current situation with the war in Ukraine the painting has added relevance and poignancy, reminding the viewer that conflict is an ever-present undercurrent to modern life.

The sense of danger is heightened by setting the scene in a local suburban surrounding, which imbues it with a greater reality, and to which the contemporary viewer can more easily relate. Weight described how he found it a 'troublesome job finding the place grand enough and cold enough' to serve his purpose, looking for somewhere familiar and yet a little remote and powerful. Eventually he came across an article in the Sunday papers on the Crystal Palace which he hastened to visit. He was delighted with what he saw, seeing the staircase as an ideal backdrop and loving the way the urn was just about to topple over. This he felt symbolised the destruction of the temple with the death of Christ. He then had to give some sort of cohesion to the story by balancing the more static figures, such as Christ and Judas, with the soldiers, so as to show how this took us beyond just the simple kiss of betrayal to the effect on other participants in the drama. By using the monumental statues on a grand parapet he has rather cleverly suggested the momentous consequences of a simple act between what appear to be two very ordinary looking men. There is no indication of Christ being holy: there is no halo, no white dove,

nothing but the setting, combined with the fiery sky to signify that this act is memorable, life changing.

Rather like works by Stanley Spencer, Weight's painting has a strong narrative and imaginative element, and, like Spencer, a religious referent. Unlike Spencer, though, Weight uses many anonymous and differing settings, whereas Spencer tends to dwell on his home ground of Cookham. Weight had learnt a great deal about colour from Matisse and Picasso, while from Poussin he derived an ability to construct his works in a dynamic manner, his objective being to intensify the visual world already familiar to us. He explained his working process as using drawing as 'something which should be expressive of the idea', and not caring very much whether the anatomy was absolutely correct underneath; so, although he drew a little to begin with, he tended to work out the painting on the canvas as he went along.

At the time of purchase this painting was already on loan to the gallery, so curators and Friends could really see what they were getting. They were obviously pleased with their purchase as at one time it featured on the Friends brochure and Weight himself was the focus of a school project with Knaresborough in 1987. Not everyone thought a great deal of Weight, however, though the late Brian Sewell referred to him as 'the darling of the RA each summer' and 'the professional amateur and the amateur professional whose genuine incompetence is redeemed by madness, mysticism or eccentricity - a line that began with Blake and continued in this century with Alfred Wallis, Stanley Spencer, Cecil Collins and their kind'. But it is precisely with this combination of attributes that Weight brings to this work a sense of awe and foreboding which is so in tune with current world events.

© Dorothy Nott November 2022 And to end this e-Bulletin, a review of a recent work on the architect and Congregationalist James Pigott Pritchett

JAMES PIGOTT PRITCHETT, ARCHITECT AND CONGREGATIONALIST: REVIEW

Edward Royal, *James Pigott Pritchett (1789-1868): Congregational Deacon and Architect of Victorian York and Yorkshire* (Borthwick Paper 133, Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York, 2023).

James Pigott Pritchett had two, but, as Edward Royle demonstrates, constantly interacting major interests. The first was as an architect, who was responsible for numerous buildings throughout Yorkshire, with particular concentrations in York, the south Yorkshire estates of the Earl Fitzwilliam, and Huddersfield. The second was as a Congregational Deacon, based at the Lendal Chapel in York, who was to emerge as a defender of Nonconformist interests in the sometimes embittered ecclesiastical politics of early Victorian England. He was born the son of a Church of England clergyman, and two of his brothers followed their father's footsteps. Pritchett, it seems, converted to Congregationalism while apprenticed to the London architect James Medland, and had to conform to his master's family's chapel-going habits. The conversion was to be deep and permanent. Pritchett moved to York, and in 1813 entered into a partnership with Charles Watson, and the Pritchett-Watson partnership was to prove a powerful force in the county's architecture up to Watson's death in 1836.

Edward Royle, Emeritus Professor at the University of York and an established expert in nineteenth-century British history, is eminently suited to be the author of this short introduction to Pritchett's achievements. It is generously illustrated, with photographs of many of the Pritchett-Watson partnership's and, latterly, Pritchett's, major works, some of them now demolished, with reproductions of architect's drawings and similar documents, and also with a striking photographic portrait of Pritchett himself. Buildings attributed to Pigott included, naturally enough, Congregationalist and other Nonconformist chapels, but also Anglican churches (Pritchett, a devotee of the classical style, apparently had problems adapting to the contemporary Anglican taste for Gothic churches), and a wide range of secular buildings, which included, *inter alia*, Huddersfield Railway Station, Hanover Square in Leeds, and the Wakefield Public Library and Reading Room.

Friends of York Art Gallery will probably be especially interested in Pritchett's contributions to the built environment in York. These are too numerous to be listed fully here, but, as well as the Lendal Chapel (long since passed into secular use, but still facing Judges' Lodgings pub), Pritchett, as part of a scheme by the Dean and Chapter for extensive rebuilding around the Minster, was responsible for much of what currently stands to the south and west of the Minster, including the houses facing the west front of the Minster at the end of High Petergate, and the imposing Cemetery Chapel at York, a monument to Pritchett's devotion to the classical style.



The Chapel at York Cemetery by kind permission of York Cemetery Trust ©

Royle also gives us insights into Pritchett the man. He married twice, producing four children (one of whom died in infancy) from his first marriage, and five from his second (again, one died in infancy). Two of his sons, one of them also, and potentially confusingly, named James Pigott Pritchett (eventually based in Darlington, and responsible for many buildings in the North East), became architects, while one of his daughters married one. One of his other sons became a Congregational minister, two became surgeons, while the daughter of his second marriage who survived into adulthood, as Royle puts it, 'met the fate of many youngest daughters and never married but stayed at home to look after her aging parents' (p. 39). Pritchett was unable to work by the mid 1860s, was incapacitated after a fall in the street in 1866, and died following a stroke in May 1868. He was an occasionally difficult and consistently strongwilled man, but this should not detract from his undoubted achievements. Edward Royle is to be congratulated for providing us with a short, detailed, but eminently readable introduction to James Pigott Pritchett and his work.

© Jim Sharpe August 2023

York Cemetery Trust will be hosting an academic colloquium *James Pigott Prichett: York Architect (1789-1868)* at York Cemetery on Saturday 21 October 2023 10:00 – 17:00. More details may be found on the <u>James</u> <u>Pigott Pritchett website</u> or <u>York Cemetery Trust's website</u>.