

## The Story of the Old Stone Church (A Ghost Story for Christmas)

By William Jeffrey Rankin, Fri Dec 9 2022

*Note:* A story related by Jonathan Thomas Quint to Richard Harvey et al. following the incident in the upstairs hallway. See the related papers. —*Editor*

Of the many works of man that populate the landscape of England, few are more quaint and evocative than an old country church. Small, and made of stone, the most affecting examples are found among suitable surroundings: atop a high prominence, hidden within a deep valley, or in the midst of a forest glade.

Usually close by are the gravestones of the departed church membership, the inscriptions they once bore long since worn away. Many lean precariously to one side or the other. Those less fortunate lie flat upon their face, half-buried in the soil or overgrown with ivy. Others lie broken, with bases still firmly planted in the earth.

The noblest examples of this species of church appear untouched by the hand of man. Indeed, it is as if they sprang from the soil of their own accord. They share its common color, texture, and substance. Too, their materials reflect the sky above. Some are as dark as storm clouds while others, decorated in lichen, are as blue as the rain-washed sky.

The condition of these spiritual outposts varies. Some are little more than crumbling walls. Others, intact for the most part, have been demoted and serve as a place to store farm equipment. Or, they serve as shelter for livestock during the winter. But there are many that remain faithful to their mission. By necessity, they have a diligent staff dedicated to their upkeep.

Such places have long memories. Sometimes, these memories awaken and manifest in unexpected ways. Just such an awakening occurred some years ago in an old, North Yorkshire church.

It started as Denton, the handyman, arrived at the church early one November morning. The night before, he had spoken with Father Harrison. Over a pint, the vicar asked him to attend to repairs in the wall of the south transept, where it met that of the chancel.

It was dark, inside and out, as Denton let himself into the church. Lighting a lamp the vicar had left next to the door, he passed through the nave. His breath shone in the frigid air. Reaching the south transept, he examined the wall. A pile of mortar, dust, and rock lay at its base. High above, near a corner, dark gaps were visible where the wall had crumbled away.

Denton returned to his cart to retrieve his tools. The sky, pale and overcast, spoke of the dreary weather to come. Grateful to be inside for the day, Denton lifted his toolbox from the back of the cart. He made another trip as well to retrieve a scaffold. By nine, he had assembled it next to the affected portion of the wall. As he climbed to the top, dim light filtered through the colored glass in the eastern wall and the tall window close by.

Placing a lamp next to the wall, he surveyed the damage. The ancient mortar had disintegrated, revealing dark gaps between the stone. Placing his hand against one of them, he felt a chill draft. The job was simple enough: chisel away the bad mortar and apply a new batch. He would be done before lunchtime.

Soon the church rang with the sound of Denton's hammer. He had been working for a quarter of an hour when he paused. There had been another noise: a muffled tap. It had been sufficiently loud as to be audible over the sound of his hammer. He turned toward the door, expecting that he had heard the vicar or sexton enter. But he was alone in the church. With a shrug, he returned to his work.

After only a minute or two, the handyman once more suspended his work. He had heard it again: another tap. It was not unlike the sound of his own hammer, but it was as if it came from far away. He turned round once more to survey the church. It was somewhat brighter now, the corners no longer so dark. But he was still alone. Glancing at his watch, he wondered what was keeping the others.

Out of curiosity, Denton tapped hard on the stone in front of him. The impact echoed through the church. A moment later, the muffled tap repeated. But this time, it seemed closer. He repeated the experiment, varying it by delivering two hard blows. Before he could let his breath out, two muffled but equally loud taps came in reply. Denton paused and scratched his head, then jumped as the voice of the vicar, who had recently arrived, rang out from below.

“What on earth are you doing, Denton?” he said.

The handyman looked down at the vicar.

“Someone’s hammering back,” he said, after some hesitation.

“Nonsense,” said the vicar, “it’s the sound of your own hammer, echoing off the walls.”

“Can’t be that, sir. The tone is all wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it sounds different from my hammer. It’s muffled, like it’s coming from somewhere else. And it happens too long after my blow to be an echo.”

“Ridiculous,” insisted the vicar.

“Listen for yourself, sir,” said Denton. Climbing partway down the scaffold, he offered the man a hand up.

With a sigh, the vicar took his hand. In another moment, both men stood atop the scaffold. The handyman gave the stone in front of him a solid rap. It echoed about them. The vicar looked at the handyman with a raised eyebrow. But in the length of time it would take you to count to two, a muffled rap sounded from close by. The vicar’s expression changed to one of bafflement.

“What do you make of that?” said Denton.

“A bird on the roof, tapping on the slate.”

“It doesn’t sound like it’s coming from the roof. It sounds like it’s coming from this here stone.”

“A rat then, behind the wall.”

“So high up? And I’ve never heard of a rat making such a noise.”

“Nor have I. Well, whatever it is, I must attend to my duties. When will you finish?”

“By lunchtime, I should think,” said Denton.

Climbing down from the scaffold, the vicar entered his office. There he tried to concentrate on writing the upcoming sermon. This proved difficult as the sound of Denton’s hammer echoed around him. He tried closing the office door, but it was to little avail.

He pressed on. In time, he grew accustomed to the pattern of noise: three or four taps of the hammer followed by the swish of a broom.

Some time later the pattern changed, distracting the vicar once more from his work. There was a scraping sound, as of the shifting of something large and heavy. Several seconds of silence followed. He caught the sound of the handyman’s voice. He couldn’t hear what was said, but there was something odd in its tone. A moment later a fearful cry and a tremendous crash echoed from beyond his office door.

The vicar was up from his desk and through the door in an instant. Aside from the echo of his footsteps, the church was silent once more. Crossing the chancel to the south transept, he came to a sudden stop. On the ground before him, a large stone lay shattered upon the floor. High above, slumped over the top rail of the scaffold, was Denton.

“Good Lord,” said the vicar, running down the central aisle between the pews. Opening the door, he called out to Roberts, the sexton. The two men climbed the scaffold and lowered the stricken man to the floor. They lay him upon a bench near the entrance and the vicar covered him with his overcoat.

The two men sat close by as Denton woke with a sudden spasm. Wild-eyed, he covered his face with his hands as if to ward something off. The vicar placed his hand on his shoulder.

“I thought you’d fallen off the scaffold, old man,” he said, attempting to affect a light tone. “What happened?”

Denton was silent for a moment, and the wild look in his eyes began to fade. When he finally spoke, it was in a whisper.

“Something was there,” he said, “behind the stone. I saw it.”

“But how?” said the sexton. “There’s naught behind it but the wall of the chancel.”

“No, there’s a dark space,” said the handyman. “I shined my light in, but couldn’t see much beyond a bit of white in the distance. Then it rushed up and filled the opening. I put my hands in front of my face. I couldn’t bear to look at it.”

“What was it?” said the sexton.

“A face. Very pale, and only one eye.”

“That’s enough,” said the vicar, fearing to further excite the handyman. The sexton returned to his work and the vicar to his office, there retrieving a small flask of brandy from his desk. He gave it to Denton. He was soon feeling well enough to work once more, but the vicar insisted he go home for the day.

Having seen the handyman to his cart, the vicar climbed to the top of the scaffold and examined the hole. It was roughly one foot square and twice that in depth. It appeared as the sexton had described: the rock of the chancel wall was visible beyond the open space. To what to attribute the dark space Denton had seen, not to mention the face, the vicar was uncertain.

As he lifted the lamp higher, he spotted an object lodged behind one of the stones. Reaching into the opening, he felt a wooden handle. It came loose as he pulled it. From the opening he withdrew a hammer. At first, he thought it must have been left there by Denton. However, it was in poor repair and, in fact, appeared quite old. When Denton returned the next day to finish his work, he stated he had never seen it.

There is a postscript to this story. It came to light some years after the incident with Denton as the vicar was reviewing old church records. One document, written around the time of the church’s construction, recorded a casualty: a worker had died after falling from the top of the south transept. Among the few specifics documented was the fact that he had only one eye.