

Why has this woman taken 220,000 pictures of Norfolk gravestones?

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HERITAGE



Lou Cocker amongst the gravestones at the Chapel Cemetery in North Walsham, as she photographs and catalogues the stones and memorials in Norfolk. Picture: DENISE BRADLEY (Image: Archant 2021)



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   Comments

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Norfolk to add to her collection of more than 220,000 pictures.

For more than a decade, Lou, from North Walsham, has spent her spare time visiting more than 700 of the county's cemeteries and graveyards to document the tombstones she finds.



Lou Cocker amongst the gravestones at the Chapel Cemetery in North Walsham, as she photographs and catalogues the stones and memorials in Norfolk. Lou's mum, Angela Parke, also cleans the stones. Picture: DENISE BRADLEY (*Image: Archant 2021*)

Along with Mum Angela, the pair have created a unique record of Norfolk life – and death – that she hopes will be a valuable resource in the future.

The collection contains headstones, memorials, plaques, war dedications and dates back as far as the 1600s and up to the present day.



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Roba Margeson's grave at Blickling *(Image: Lou Cocker)*

Lou admits that some people – when they hear about her hobby – wonder if she’s lost the (grave) plot.

“Some people think that it’s a bit morbid and others can’t think why I’d want to go into graveyards or cemeteries when I have a choice not to,” she said.

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One of Lou's favourite stones that she's photographed is Anthony Oliver Briton Riviere's at Sustead *(Image: Lou Cocker)*

“But they are just such peaceful, beautiful places and I’ve never thought that they’re spooky, that’s just something we’re used to seeing on TV and in films.”

Her interest in making such a comprehensive record of Norfolk’s dead stems from her own

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Her interest was piqued and she began to dig deeper into the past.

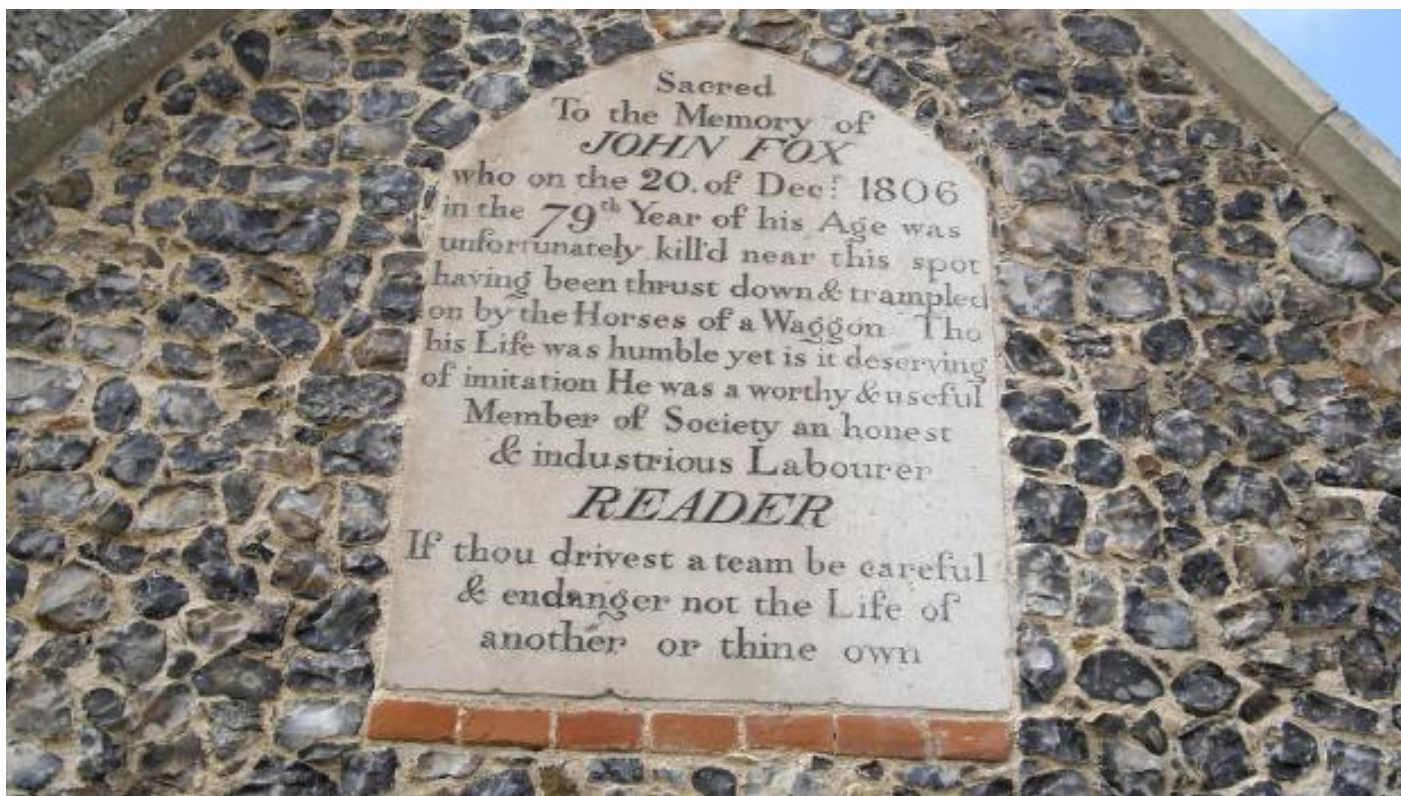
Her research led her to a graveyard at Feltwell, where she looked for some of her ancestors’ gravestones, a link to her family’s past (as an aside, she has also discovered that Horatio

Nelson was her second cousin seven times removed).

"I found them and I took a few photographs," she said, "I had no idea what I had started and where it would take me!

"Back at home, I realised there were more in Feltwell, so I went back again and I thought 'I'll just take photographs of them all'. The thought at first was that it meant I wouldn't have to go back if I'd missed any.

"And somehow, that was how it started. I realised how much I'd enjoyed taking the photographs and transcribing the stones back at home.



One of Lou's favourite memorials in Norfolk is John Fox's in Colney which comes with a warning to others (*Image: Lou Cocker*)

"It didn't take long for my family tree to take a back seat - the real interest for me became cataloguing the gravestones and plaques."

Fast forward more than a decade and Lou's files contain more than 220,000 images of gravestones from hundreds of different locations across the county and at other locations around the country and the world.

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Lou Cocker amongst the gravestones at the Chapel Cemetery in North Walsham, as she photographs and catalogues the stones and memorials in Norfolk. Picture: DENISE BRADLEY
(Image: Archant 2021)

“When I went to school I wasn’t really interested in history but now I love it and gravestones can tell us so much about people, so much more than you’d think,” she said.

“There are the names, the relationships they had to other people, the designs on the stones, sometimes you get an idea of what they loved to do or what job they had.



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The beautiful carvings on Ann Johnson's grave at Langley drew Lou Cocker's eye (*Image: Lou Cocker*)

"You can see some really moving inscriptions that show you just how other people felt about the person who has died and it brings them back to life just for a moment.

"It's hard to choose which stones I like best, but I have a soft spot for stones from the early 1700s and Victorian stones because the work on them is so beautiful.



Francis Hill's grave at Shereford, one of Lou's most memorable graves she's photographed (*Image: Lou Cocker*)

"And then there are the names that catch your eye, for example the grave for a man called Golden Balls who was buried in Aylsham!"

Lou works full-time as a shift manager at a busy supermarket and so her passion for preserving the past is limited to her days off and holidays.

"When there's good weather, I can be in a graveyard with mum and my camera for a good six to eight hours at a time," she explains, "when the weather isn't so good I'll be in front of my computer transcribing the headstones."

She added, laughing: "Mum always says that she'd rather spend the day in a graveyard with

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you do could help someone, it feels really rewarding."



One of the beautifully-carved stones that has caught Lou's eye: Hilda Amenda Goodwin's at Westwick in Norfolk (*Image: Lou Cocker*)

When visiting a new graveyard, Lou has strict rules for herself about how she will approach it: for each file she needs an exterior and interior shot and then every plaque, memorial and stone will be photographed.

At each church, she will buy a leaflet if one is on offer to “give something back” and while she is in charge of taking photographs, Angela will gently ensure that stones are ready for pictures.

“She’s the best grave cleaner you’ll ever come across and she loves it,” said Lou, “all she uses is water and a little nylon brush, nothing that would ever damage a stone.”

The pair’s latest purchase is a backpack where water can be stored for cleaning.

One of Lou and Angela’s biggest feats has been the cataloguing of Earlham Cemetery in Norwich – it took more than two years to photograph more than 33,000 accessible graves. A true labour of love.



The grave of Anne Atkinson and her daughter Anne Priest at Earlham Cemetery (*Image: Lou Cocker*)

Like other 'tombstone tourists', Lou plans family holidays around cemeteries or graveyards she'd like to visit.

Prague, Malta, Berlin, Crete, Hamburg, Krakov, Rimini, Cyprus, Italy...just a handful of the places she's visited specifically because she wants to photograph a cemetery.

Next on the list, when restrictions allow, is Athens.

"My Mum doesn't like travelling but I take my husband Neil and my Dad Lewis and they're very good about it and will come along although they might disappear once I start to work," said Lou.

Lou's love of recording the dead comes from a place of deep respect.

"The very fact that someone has a gravestone means that they mattered, that someone wanted that stone to be seen and to be remembered," she says.

"I remember going to a graveyard once and there was a skip outside and there were gravestones thrown in it and it broke my heart.

"You sometimes get the feeling that you're the first people to really take notice of a gravestone for years. particularly when it's very old or very neglected. I don't want to leave

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As the decades and centuries pass, the inscriptions and decorations on older graves begin to disappear, while sometimes the stones themselves crumble.

Aware of the fragility of these reminders of those who have been loved and lost, Lou is keen to preserve some of these memories before they are lost forever.

Her work represents how we might interact with our family history in the future and will help make the work of genealogists in the future a far easier process.

To this end, Lou is working with [findmypast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk), a British-based genealogy website where her photographs will help those with Norfolk links find their relatives.

For someone who spends so much time among the dead, it may come as a surprise that the grave photographer hasn't thought about whether or not she will have a headstone of her own when the time comes.

"I don't like to think about it," she admitted, "so I've not planned what will happen, other than that I know I'd like to be cremated. I don't think I could be buried.

"Will I have a stone? I suppose that's up to other people!"



Lou Cocker amongst the gravestones at the Chapel Cemetery in North Walsham, as she photographs and catalogues the stones and memorials in Norfolk. Picture: DENISE BRADLEY
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Four of Lou's favourite graveyards and cemeteries in Norfolk

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Terence Henry Ford Barclay's grave at Colney St Andrew (Image: Lou Cocker)

1 Colney St Andrew's churchyard : Look out for an unusual story on a grave. The Barclay family lived nearby at Colney Hall and their estate boasted a landscaped park, an aviary, grottos, a

manmade cave and – for a short time – two pet African lions, Fritzi and Mitzi. The family plot includes a grave for Terence Henry Ford Barclay, 29, who died shortly after Christmas 1911 after being pounced on by a lion allowed to wander in the Colney grounds. His gravestone notes he died “from the result of an accident”.



Rebecca and William Musk's grave at Earham Cemetery (Image: Lou Cocker)

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Norwich: 1856. In the first 10 months of its opening there were 745 burials but only four of the mourning families could afford gravestones.