

ST.JOHN'S CHURCHYARD, HAGLEY

No-one can be absolutely sure that the present site of the church is the one that existed pre-1066, but there is no reason why it should not be.

We know from the Domesday¹ entry for Hagley that the Saxon lord of the manor pre-1066 was Godric, a thegn of King Edward and that there was a priest in Hagley.

One of the qualifications for being a thegn was that he had a church on his estate, therefore we can be sure that a church with a priest existed.

As far as organised Christianity goes it is known that Bishop Bosel was at Worcester in 680² and that Husmere³ (modern Ismere in Churchill parish) became the site of a Saxon monastery in 736. The position of this monastery is unknown but it is likely that it was the earliest Minster church in what is now north Worcestershire and that Kidderminster developed as the religious centre in the centuries prior to the conquest.

Minster churches were the bases for priests, who visited the surrounding villages preaching in the open. It is believed that early crosses were often in areas that, in due course, became churchyards. Minster churches often had a monopoly on burials and all funerals in the area covered by the Minster would be conducted at the Minster with "donations" made for the service provided.

This practice continued in many parishes until fairly recently. It was only in the mid-nineteenth⁴ century that St.Kenelm's, Romsley was licensed to bury the dead in the churchyard.

Stepping out of line was not tolerated. In 1236 the Chaplain of Frankley⁵, Ralph, was hauled up before the Dean and Chapter of Kidderminster at Broome church. He confessed to causing a body to be buried at Frankley when Halesowen church should have had the privilege. An apology, plus the offerings made at the funeral, was given to the official from Halesowen Abbey and the matter seems to have been concluded satisfactorily.

A tomb in the north wall of the north aisle marks the earliest known burial at Hagley. This was in the north wall of the nave until c.1828 when the north aisle was first built. From the appearance of the tomb slab and the surround, it is suggested that it dates from c1300 when the nave and south aisle were built in the Decorated style of architecture. The tomb bears no means of identifying its occupant, but the shaft of the

¹ Morris Ed. Domesday Book – Worcestershire 23,9

² Houghton F.T.S. Worcesterhire p.225

³ Ford D. Journal of English Place Name Society No.12 p.66

⁴ Hunt J. Gravestones & Inscriptions in St.Kenelm's Churchyard iii

⁵ Jeayes I.H. Charters & Muniments at Hagley No.10

cross plunging into the mouth of a dragon suggests good overcoming evil with perhaps religious connotations.

Records for burials started officially in 1538 when on the 25th October⁶ John Danser became the first person to be entered in the register for Hagley.

Monuments in churchyards for ordinary people were virtually unknown, and earth mounds marked the graves. In 1674 and again in 1676 inspections carried out by a team of clergy from Kidderminster deanery found, among other problems, that the "mounds in the churchyard (were) insufficient", and that the "churchyard mounds are out of repair".

A plan of the churchyard made in 1922 shows some 400 burial plots, with the split between memorial stones and earth mounds almost equal.

The survey carried out in 1999 by members of the Hagley Historical and Field Society identified 186 monuments and one mound. The extension to the churchyard was open by 1959 and now contains over 160 inhumations and cremations numbering 163. Most of the burials in the extension have either a headstone or a memorial tablet in the case of cremation plots.

From the above numbers of burials relating to the recent past it does not take much imagination to think about the people buried over the time since burials first took place. It is estimated, and it can only be an estimate, that 6-7,000 persons have been buried in the churchyard since the early 11th century.

Stone memorials have become almost a universal feature of burials in modern times reversing the fashion pre-1700 of earth mounds being the accepted norm for marking burials.

The range of memorials covers most examples found in books on the subject. Examples to be seen in Hagley churchyard include headstones, foot stones, flat slabs, chest tombs and vaults.

Materials include sandstone (some local, some from further away and more durable), limestone, granite, slate, marble and coadstone.

The variations in the design of headstones and other memorials vary from simple rectangles to those with four-centred arch profiles, Ionic scrolls, Latin and Celtic crosses, and so on.

Most lettering is incised but, occasionally, part of the decoration is raised. Some lettering is made of lead characters let into incised spaces.

⁶ Hagley first register

Wrought iron railings were part of the decoration of tombs, especially the large vaults to be found in a group of six at the south end of the churchyard. The fashion for railings covered a short period from 1856 to 1870. In the 1939-45 war the railings were all removed and recycled, leaving only the short stumps of the rails to be seen.

Bible quotations are quite common and are taken from both the Authorised version and the Revised version 1881-85. One wonders if the people commissioning the memorial stonework knew their bible quotations well enough to make a suitable choice or if the stonemasons had a notebook with a range of appropriate verses to select from. It is interesting to cross check the references given against the quotations in various editions of the bible.

Many headstones line the path leading up to the churchyard extension and they were removed from their positions to the newly created path at about the same time as the extension was brought into use.

The following examples of memorials have been selected to give a cross section of what was recorded in 1999 during a survey to note all the information still legible on the stones.

Near to the entrance to the extension and on the southern edge of the path is a stone with the names of three members of the ASHMORE family on one side and two members of the ROWLEY family noted on the other side. All the dates are between 1825 and 1846. A check in the registers has failed to find any connection by marriage of the two families. Bearing in mind that this headstone would originally have been placed at the western end of a grave, presumably for the first occupant, it will be interesting to find out why the other family was placed on the opposite side. It is assumed it was on the "wrong" side of the headstone.

Lower down the path, approaching the gate leading to the north side of the church, there are headstones of men with military careers, one each side of the path. On the south side is the memorial to Captain George Isaac AUSTIN of the 3rd Regiment of Buffs, who died in 1858 aged 52. Opposite is a stone recording Thomas Zaggheus MARRIOT, a Crimean veteran. He died in 1900 aged 64, which means that he was only 20 when the Crimean war finished in 1856.

The railed vaults have already been mentioned and it is easy to appreciate that, from their size alone, they represent wealth. Two are worthy of further explanation. Both are limited to names, dates and ages on the slabs covering the vaults and both only contain three coffins although they give the impression of being able to hold several more. While the RICHARDS tomb only tells us the basic facts, it is known that John RICHARDS owned Wassell Grove, an estate in the north west of the parish, where, in 1838, he farmed 500 acres (200 ha). He was an M.P. for Knaresborough, Yorkshire 1832-37 and High Sheriff of Worcestershire in 1844 and died three years later aged 67.

A neighbouring vault for the BATE family again gives only the bare facts plus the name of their house, "The Birches". Thomas BATE was a banker in Stourbridge who must have been fairly successful. Soon after the 1830 Enclosure Act relating to the Brake to the west of the railway line, he purchased quite a lot of land in this part of Hagley and leased much of it out to tenant farmers. He died in 1846 aged 67 and must have enjoyed a comparatively short time in the newly built house, "The Birches".

Both RICHARDS and BATE had done well in their careers but it is interesting to note that tombs, while on a grand scale, were not ostentatious in the detail, unlike some of the same period.

Two other graves tell different stories. Both mark the burials of people who spent time in the service of George William, Lord Lyttelton. At a time when the majority of people had an earth mound to mark their graves it is a reflection on the two-way loyalty operating between servant and master. Joseph CHARKE died in 1859 aged 70 having been butler to Lord Lyttelton. The inscription on his tomb says that he was for many years a valued and trusted servant in the family of Lord Lyttelton. His wife, Sophia, is interred with him.

Hannah ELLIS died in 1870 aged 90 and was "more than 50 years a servant and a friend in the family of Lord Lyttelton". Mrs Ellis was housekeeper until about 1868.

Another housekeeper was Ann BOWDLER who died in 1850 aged 57. She worked for William ROBINS of Hagley House sited on the corner of Stourbridge Road and Birmingham Road. The ROBINS vault is near to the RICHARDS and BATE vaults and of the same period.

A more recent memorial is to Thomas Crosbee CANTRILL 1867-1931 who was for 31 years on H.M. Geological Survey. According to the notes on the 1975 O.S. Geological map for the local area CANTRILL was one of five District Geologists involved in the last full survey prior to 1975. It is assumed that geology does not alter very rapidly although surface features do.

An interesting note on a memorial to Hannah HOLDSWORTH and Harriet Ellen CHARKE, records that the latter, who died in 1850 aged 20, was the late organist. CHARKE is an unusual name so one may assume some relationship with the butler and his wife above, but it also suggests that St. John's church had an organ prior to the rebuilding by G.E. STREET in 1856.

There are a number of memorial stones to children that are poignant but there is one to Alexander BIRD of Wassell Grove, who "unfortunately drowned". The details of the sad story are unknown at present.

The oldest memorial stone is on the chancel wall behind the oil tank and it records the lives of Thomas PENN who died in 1710 aged 88, and his wife Joanne, who died the previous year, and was also 88. It is not known where the grave is because part of the inscription reads "beneath this seat lieth". Was the grave in the earlier porch, which was one bay to the east of the present one?

In the present porch is an inscription under the seat which tells us that "Beneath this porch rest in the Lord John TURNER 43 years rector of this parish". who died in 1847 aged 72. His wife and his sister are also recorded. It seems that plans for the rebuilding of the church were not being considered seven years before the work was started. The result is a regular march past by visitors and members of the congregation unaware of the nature of what is under their feet.

The LYTTELTON family, who have been lords of the manor since 1564 have, with a few exceptions, only been buried in the churchyard since 1875. Earlier burials were at Halesowen, Upper Arley or Worcester, again with a few exceptions.

One of these was Meriel LYTTELTON regarded as the saviour of the family fortunes in the early 17th century. At her own request she was "buried among the poor". This occurred in 1630 and an earth mound marked the spot but her son Thomas had a chest tomb built with its cover bearing the initials M.L. Later Bishop Charles Lyttelton erected a tablet in 1768 listing her many virtues. It is now positioned under the tower.

A little further to the south is another tomb engraved with the name of Mrs.Cath LYTTELTON "who lived free from the cares of this world and died happily in the 68th year of her age. In the year of our Lord 1742". Questions are raised by the title used. Dr.T.Nash in his history of Worcestershire shows on the Lyttelton family tree⁷ that Catherine was the fourth daughter out of a family of five sons and eight daughters, and that she died in 1742. However, it also shows that she married someone from Elmhurst. This person may have held the estate at Elmhurst Hall⁸, north of Lichfield. Whether or not the geography is correct it is intriguing to see that she reverted to her maiden name and was buried at Hagley. Mrs indicates that she was married but without a higher title. This particular memorial has certainly posed more questions than answers.

The above represents a cross section of the memorials in the churchyard at St.John's, Hagley and it is hoped that the notes show the wealth of information that is available to genealogists, local historians and others. For those interested in the summary of all burials, along with the location of the memorials in the churchyard, copies are lodged with the church and in the local library.

⁷ Nash T. History of Worcestershire Vol I facing p493

⁸ Village Press. The Village Atlas – West Midlands p18