

History in the Churchyard

Some late Benson Residents and a few Grave Matters

A walk around the churchyard for the Churchyard Festival 8th June 2019

Follow the Tomb Reader numbers in a wide circuit clockwise around the church to find some Benson notables and some conservation dilemmas.

- 1 William Henry Dines: widely known for his work as a meteorologist with a particular interest in wind. Dines lived in Brook Street at Colne House (now replaced by Observatory Close) from 1914. While his observatory there was eventually superseded by the present weather station on the RAF base, it is Dines we must thank for Benson's prominence in the national weather forecast and hence its reputation as the coldest place in England!
- 2 Yew trees are often found in churchyards, and there are a good number here, the more drooping common yews being the older. While not necessarily medieval they are old! Enclosed churchyards provided places where yews might grow without danger of livestock eating their toxic leaves and berry pips, and their wood was prized for its tough but springy qualities. The notion that churchyard yews provided for all the longbows of medieval England is perhaps over-played, but they may well have provided for a few. It is also likely that the trees were valued for their more spiritual connotations – evergreen symbols of resurrection and eternity - inherited from pre-Christian associations with sacredness, death and the power of nature.
- 3 The Grantham tombs: these are listed Grade II and were once fine monuments with pilasters and urns. The ivy may initially have been picturesque but it has ravaged the inscriptions and external decoration and is wrecking them from within. Efforts are currently being made to stem this problem elsewhere, but perhaps a future strategy for managing the conflict between nature and the survival of heritage could be useful?

William Grantham was born in Benson and died in 1772. Thomas Grantham, who died in 1781, is (was) described on the tomb as a "Builder/ late of Wardour Street Soho". For "builder" read "property developer". His prosperity as such is evident in the fine styling of the tombs and in the will of John Grantham, who died in 1787 leaving very extensive property in London, including the Angel Inn in St Clements. One of John's executors was his brother-in-law Stephen Townsend, mason (who completed the top stage of the church tower in 1781), and there are bequests, among others, to Thomas Coles, and to William and Richard Costar, who were all active in running stage coaches through Benson to London.

Before moving on, note the headstone to Ann wife of William Jacob, and the way in which the face of the stone is delaminating due to frost damage. The headstones just beyond the Grantham tombs clearly illustrate the inevitable effects of weather wear and the growth of lichens. One of the just-legible stones is to Thomas Smith of Swallow Street, London, coachmaker, whose bequest of £500 per year to be distributed in bread to the poor of Benson, is recorded on the charity board inside the church. Thomas died in 1809.

4 Headstones in front of the Canons' Room commemorate the Shrubb family. John Shrubb ran the White Hart Inn in Castle Square between about 1750 and 1793, and established it as one of a series of staging posts on the Oxford to London coaching route via Henley. James and Sarah took over, Sarah continuing the business as a widow long after his James' death in 1811.

6 The parish registers record the high rates of infant mortality in the 18th and 19th centuries. Two headstones in the area close to the north of the church are particularly poignant in recording infant deaths in the Hicks and Burgis families. Both are marked with similar sets of 3 winged angel heads. The Hicks headstone, opposite the doors to the Canon's Room commemorates Metilda, who died at 4 months, Thomas at 8 years, and Isaac Thomas at 4 months. The Burgis headstone, by the corner of the vestry, commemorates Ann aged 7 months, Elizabeth aged 7 years, and C??? aged 10 weeks.

7 Coaching families buried in the area to the east of the church:

In front of the wall to the vicarage, there are headstones to the Coles and Costar families. Both worked in the wheelwright business in the mid 18th century and were making coaches by the early 19th. Thomas Coles was considered a particularly eminent coachmaker. One branch of the prolific Costars married into the Pleasant family in 1785 and so acquired the Crown Inn. The Richard Costar who died in 1858 was from this branch and was both an innkeeper and "a much respected inhabitant of this parish". He carried out the Census in 1851. In another branch one of the several William Costars (d.1802) married first Sarah Shrubb (a daughter of the previous James and Sarah) and then Martha Coles (d. Martha Costar 1820), and set up in Oxford running first the Cross Inn and then the Angel. His son Richard Costar built up a huge coaching business, at times in partnership with the Coles, running multiple daily services to London and elsewhere, using over 300 horses. He was buried in the churchyard with great ceremony in 1840 but his memorial is sadly missing or unrecognisable.

The lower of the 2 chest tombs commemorates Edward Biggs who died in 1761. The (worn) inscription proudly describes him as a Coachmaster. He ran services

from Cirencester through Benson to London, out of the King's Arms Inn. His son added The Round House to the main inn building in 1769 and re-branded the Inn as The Castle.

The larger ivy-clad tomb chest is that of Thomas Powell d. 1851, with inscriptions also to Thomas' wife (Fanny Coles) who died much earlier in 1827, and to their only son Thomas who had died in 1810 aged only 4. The 1851 census shows that Thomas was living in Kingsford House (on the High Street to the left of the dentist) with only a spinster sister and a servant for company. He had left Benson, along with brothers Peter, John and Richard to work in a coachmaking business in Clerkenwell, and seems to have done exceptionally well. When he returned to Benson he invested in property all over the village and dispensed it around his surviving siblings, nephews and nieces, who are mostly buried between him and the east end of the church – see the cluster of Powell headstones. Thomas' inheritance secured the newly enclosed Hale Farm for his nephew Richard – a return to farming after the eclipse of the coach trade by the faster railway. The family came together to fund the stained glass in the east window of the church as a mark of gratitude – see the inscriptions inside. (The window was made in 1861 – for the chancel as rebuilt by the Victorian architect Charles Buckeridge – NB the contrast between the new flint walls and the earlier rendered walls of the main church.)

- 8 Look first for the headstone to Robert Aldworth Newton of Fifield Manor. The Newton family held large farms at Fifield and Preston Crowmarsh throughout the 19th century and were avid promoters of both enclosure and mechanisation. Kate Tiller gives a vivid account of the local resistance in the “Blue Book” on the history of Benson. While other farming families (eg Hutchings and Shrubbs) also have headstones there is a notable absence of headstones to the many farm labourers known to have been working in the parish. While this is readily explained by the cost of providing a stone, there is also the possibility of alternative allegiance to nonconformist chapels.

The nearby headstone to Anne, wife of William Gibbs alias Hutchings is one of the earliest surviving headstones in the churchyard. Anne died in 1716, and her stone is carved to show 2 trumpeters, in all likelihood a reference to the trumpeters of the Day of Judgment as described in the Book of Revelations.

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PLEASE RETURN THESE NOTES FOR OTHERS TO USE – THANK YOU!

