

A History of the Churchyard

Introduction

For how long there has been a parish church at Uppingham is now beyond memory as also the name of its first dedication. That a church existed here in Saxon times seems indicated by the Confessor's Will leaving the royal estate of Roteland to his widow for life with reversion to his Abbey Church of St Peter's at Westminster where he would be buried. Certainly the monks thought so and later produced a number of pious forgeries to prove their claim. But when Queen Edith died in 1075 the Conqueror seized everything leaving nothing to the abbey.

Struck by remorse it is said or perhaps in fear for his immortal soul, at the end of the Conqueror's life or early in the reign of his successor Rufus, three royal charters gave the churches and tithes of Rutland to the Abbey, going some way to recompense the monks for their earlier disappointment. One gave the tithes of Rutland to the Abbey provided it could collect them. Until early in the 17th century the Rector of Uppingham paid the Abbey 40s a year pension, in lieu of tithes it is supposed. Another gave the churches of Oakham and Hambleton formerly belonging to Albert the Clerk who received them from the Confessor. This necessitated the third charter giving the Abbey the remaining churches of Martinsley Hundred; that is of Uppingham, Wardley and Belton in the royal manor of Ridlington, including the right to nominate Uppingham's Rector.

The church's dedication to St Peter and St Paul dates only from the 16th century when Rutland became part of the Peterborough Diocese. Tantalisingly one or two earlier wills refer to the church as St Peter's, coincidentally the name of the Abbey with the right to appoint its Rectors. Could this have been the dedication of the parish church from the time of the Confessor to the Reformation?

Similarly we have no knowledge when Uppingham ceased to be a chapel-of-ease to Ridlington the residence of the Steward of the King's Manor and its church, to become a church in its own right with its own burial ground. The evidence is ambiguous though the charters hint that before Domesday Uppingham had a church of its own. And where was that church? Generally it is assumed the parish church stands where it has always been, though one eminent historian has wondered whether it stood in the southern part of the market area and only moved to its present position at the end of the 12th century as part of the planned town improvements. Suffice to say there is no evidence of burials yet found under the market place.

As noted by Professor Pevsner, the position of the church is singularly attractive. One enters it directly from the market place and on the other side it opens straight on to open country with fine views to the south from the churchyard.

The limits of this original churchyard was the market place to its north, the London Road then called Church Lane to the west dividing it from the parson's house and demesne land, on the east the back of buildings part of Swan Yard and on the south the pathway forming part of the earlier south back lane linking Leamington Terrace with South View. Looked at across London Road from the former Rectory house latterly Uppingham Surgery, the higher of the two walls marks the position of the original churchyard on that side.

In the past the churchyard wall may have extended round to divide the burial ground from the market area before encroachments like The Vaults and Ashdale Pharmacy happened. In Tudor times it was customary for traders attending the annual fairs to spread their clothes for sale on these same walls. Perhaps it was a fracas over pitches that led to the wounding of Gabriel Grenoppre on 25 February 1591 and his burial the following day. The scandal was not that he was killed, such events seem to have been common enough, but that it took place on consecrated ground.

Records of burials commence in 1571. In a few cases old burials can be identified from early Wills. When that wealthy yeoman Clement Brettayne died in 1589, his Will made two years earlier directed –

“I bequeath my soul unto Almighty God, my body to be buried in the Church of Uppingham.”

The Will of his even wealthier son Everard who died in 1618, stated –

“My body to be buried in the Chancel of the Parish Church of Uppingham”

If his wish was honoured his bones must lie beneath the Nave somewhere between the Chancel Rail and the first pair of columns but neither his grave nor his father's, is known.

In the churchyard the oldest surviving headstone is John Beaver's –

*“That honest Man
which stood up for the
Common of Uppingham”*

buried on 11 November 1632. It stands to the right of the path leading from the church's South Door. Like so many others the stone has been moved from its original position and the position of Beaver's grave is lost. The Beavers owned the inn later known as the White Hart but then probably called the Cross Keys. In those days Uppingham and Lyddington parishes shared a common pasture called The Brand extending either side of their common boundary. John it was who successfully headed Uppingham's defence when Lyddington attempted to seize control and exclude them from their immemorial rights.

During the 17th and early 18th centuries Uppingham's population had been growing steadily, so much so that by the 1720s space in their churchyard was proving too limited to accommodate demands for new graves. Already some two hundred generations lay buried within the shadow of the church spire seen in the raised ground levels above Church Lane and below the footpath to the Grammar School. The slow circuit of interments allowed their bodies to become dust before the land was re-used. By 1724 this was no longer the case. In that year the Rector, Churchwardens and principal inhabitants – that is the Vestry, the town's ordinary folk did not count – petitioned their Bishop –

“That the Bounds of the Churchyard... are so small and narrow that there is not Room enough to bury their dead... So the dead are often laid so near one another that the Graves of such as have been lately buried are by that means often opened and broke into to the Great Disquiet and Complaint of the parishioners and inhabitants of the said parish.”

The Bishop duly licensed an enlargement to take in the adjacent little close immediately below and extending the churchyard down the hill to the South Back Lane today called South View. And here is a mystery – a reason the petitioners gave for offering the close –

“There is a piece of Ground adjoining to the said Churchyard on the south side thereof Commonly called Wing Churchyard Which has formerly been a burying place as appears by the Bones of Dead Bodies dug up there.”

The land had already been used in the past to bury the dead but for some reason it had not been licensed for burials (perhaps for lack of time) and in 1724 there existed no knowledge of when those interments took place. Do we have evidence here of plague pits and if so from when? Plague was a regular visitor to Uppingham, but not usually on this scale. The London plague of 1665/6 and any others for at least the previous century would still be remembered in 1724. From 1571 nowhere in the burial registers and churchwardens books is there an explanation. Looking further into the past, could this be evidence of the devastating effects of the Black Death of 1348/9 on the town's inhabitants for which no record has come down?

Eighteenth century churchyards went unkempt and often the incumbent increased his income by letting out the grazing – after all it was parson's freehold. Drawings of Uppingham church show how little regard the Rector and churchwardens had at this time, and indeed the relatives of the dead too whose responsibility it was for upkeep of the graves of their loved ones. In the 1780s and '90s William Ironman landlord of the Chequers Inn on the other side of Church Lane was paying Shs 7/6d yearly to rent the churchyard and at the same time only Shs 4/2d copyhold rent for his inn. Perhaps it was grazing for the horses of travellers lodging at the Inn.

At the start of the 19th century came work on London Road affecting the churchyard. The approach from the south up Church Lane was then much steeper and more hazardous as can be judged from the position of the higher of the two churchyard walls. In 1666 the Burial Register records –

“John Richardson dying by a fall off his horse, June 19th, was buried June 20th.”

And again in 1751 –

“July 19th. Buried John Blyth Esq, Mayor of Huntingdon. His leg was cut off first below the knee, then above the knee.”

Neither accident can be linked directly to the hill; they serve instead to illustrate the dangers it presented. Between 1802 & 1804 the road by the churchyard was lowered some ten feet and the spoil placed in the valley to raise it crossing the stream. It is said the work was carried out by prisoners taken in the Napoleonic Wars. It necessitated the building of the second lower churchyard wall. Even so it was found necessary to provide niches in the lower wall, whose filled-in outlines can be seen a few yards up hill from the steps, as refuges for those on foot from carts and carriages careering down the still steep gradient.

The 1724 enlargement served the needs of Uppingham's community for the next 140 years before the Vestry had to find additional land. During that time two notable burials took place. The first was of the famous Victorian educationalist Rev'd Edward Thring, Headmaster of Uppingham School 1853-87 whose grave is one of the four listed structures in the Churchyard. Close by lies Rev'd Robert J Hodgkinson assistant master, who apart from Thring did more than anyone else to make possible the development of the School.

But the old churchyard has provided one more puzzle. In the 1930s the writers of the Victoria County History found it believed locally the Church's old medieval font had been dug up in the churchyard at the time of Chancellor Wales' restoration of the church building in 1861/2. This cannot be true because there is reliable evidence it was present in the church in 1839. During the Civil War and Commonwealth many ancient fonts were destroyed by Parliamentarians. At Uppingham the majority of ordinary folk sided with them. The Churchwardens Book records that a tailor George Greene was chosen by the inhabitants of the town as their Parish Register (sic) and sworn on 25 June 1649 *“in the time that Oliver Cromwell rebelled being one of his confederates”*. Before Rector Jeremy Taylor left to join the King at the outbreak of the Civil War could he and his churchwardens have buried the church's ancient font for its safety and is the story reported in VCH a lingering distorted folk memory of that event ?

After the close of the World War of 1914-18 it was decided to site the town War Memorial in the Upper Churchyard. The cost of the memorial, £500 was met by public subscription and built by HH Clarke of Lyddington. Made of Clipsham stone in the form of a pillar topped by a reliquary in lantern form standing 19ft 6ins high. The Memorial records the names of 44 men who gave their lives in the First World War and of the 10 who were killed in the Second. The cross was dedicated 19 July 1920. Originally built into the wall in the extreme south-west corner, after two years it was moved to its present position due the appearance of cracks at its base.

By 1860 little space remained in the Upper Churchyard and the town's expanding population again made urgent the need for a new burial ground. Work proceeded in parallel with the rebuilding and enlargement of the Parish Church. In 1859 the Vestry acquired from Mr Adderley the field 1 acre 2 roods & 9 perches in size at the corner of South View and London Road known as the Cross Road Place below South View. Purchase and construction cost £846 17s met by public subscription. In 1862 the Lower or Bottom Churchyard as it came to be known was consecrated by the Bishop. Demarcated against both roads by a handsome stone wall of yellow limestone with a little gazebo at the corner, on the South View frontage the wall was topped by iron railings to match the gates. The railings were paid by subscription raised by masters at Uppingham School witness to one of the many generousities of the School and its staff, a number of whom came to rest within the churchyard's bounds. Though the gates survive, the railings became a sacrifice to the war effort in about 1944.

After Italy's entry in the War, in 1940 the Bishop wrote to all parishes advising incumbents they should no longer allow foreign materials or marble in graveyards, urging instead use of native stone and slate. The circular hinted that to be buried with a headstone of Italian marble came close to treason, but His Grace failed to indicate if the guilty party was the bereaved, the incumbent, the stonemason or the deceased. With the source now closed the Bishop's aim was achieved. The majority of headstones, certainly for burials prior to 1850, are of local limestone. Alas weather and ivy have made too many inscriptions unreadable and nowhere near the quality of those crafted from Swithland and Welsh slates or marble.

The new burial ground served the town until the 1950s.

With the death or departure of descendants of those buried here, many of the graves now need repair. Yet the impression of genteel decay is softened by the snowdrops that flower plentifully every spring amongst the headstones in the lower area nearest the stream. In another part some two thirds of the way down against the eastern boundary the ground is bare, even to the absence of trees to shade. It is not empty. Here lie buried the paupers from Uppingham's Union Workhouse whose relatives, if they had any, were too poor to afford even a simple wooden cross with a name to mark a grave. For a record of who these are, one can only consult the death and burial registers now kept at the Record Office at Wigston.

Amongst the last burials in the Bottom Churchyard are those of servicemen who died in the Second World War including one, at least, prisoner of war. By 1950 most interments were of those with family graves here. Soon afterwards the local authority opened a new cemetery the other side of London Road near to Fircroft Boys' Boarding House.

In the 1970s and '80s it became customary for the ashes of those cremated to be buried in the Upper Churchyard opposite the church's West Door but they were not numerous. By Order in Council dated 21 May 1980 both churchyards were closed with limited exception relating to those with family graves in the Bottom Churchyard where room for further interments existed. A Faculty for the burial of ashes against the church's south wall was granted in 2002 and a proper and fitting area marked out for their reception.

Since closure of both churchyards it has been arranged for the Local Authority to take over responsibility for their maintenance and upkeep; financially a great relief to the PCC and Church funds. Churchwardens' Accounts books include numerous payments for repairs to these walls in past times. The PCC alleged much damage was caused during the Second World War by military vehicles passing up and down London Road but the War Office proved unsympathetic to their claim.

Burial registers commenced in 1571. They are deposited at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (acc ref DE 1784) at Wigston, Leicester. Copies on fiche and/or film are available there and at the Rutland County Museum, Oakham.

This illustrates the desirability of checking both burial register entries against headstone inscriptions which often provide conflicting information.

In some few cases information about pre-1571 burials can be found from wills. The Diocesan Wills at NRO and check also with PCC Wills on line. Bishops Transcripts at NRO with copies at Wigston.