

Village Echoes

Many of us have strolled through St Mary's churchyard without stopping to look at the memorials, which range from the grand monuments of the wealthy to the smaller ones of the less affluent. Some people were buried with no memorial at all. Over the last two years, members of the Local History Society have carried out a comprehensive survey of the churchyard, methodically comparing the existing memorials with the findings of a survey done in the 1920s. Since that date, some memorials previously recorded have disappeared, while the inscriptions on many others have become illegible. A new map of the churchyard showing the location of the remaining memorials, as well as an updated index to the names recorded on them, is now available on the Local History Society's website. A few of the inscriptions are described below.

Thomas Martin died in 1801 and was buried under "*a large altar in rails*" but today the grave is almost hidden under a bush and the enclosing rails have disappeared. The inscription describes him as "*A Gentleman, late of this Parish*". In his will Thomas bequeathed stocks, which today would be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, and a substantial amount of land and property. He was clearly a man of wealth and distinction who has faded into obscurity.

The inscriptions tell us about illnesses that were prevalent. Another Martin grave shows us how illness could strike a family. Thomas and Ann Martin lost five children. One died in 1792 aged 8 weeks and the remaining four all died in November 1795 aged from 3 to 10 years. The Sivyer family lost four children "*taken away by fever*" in 1848. In 1796 a vaccine had been developed against smallpox but Ann Freeman died "*with the enoculation of the smallpox*" in 1798 aged 11 years. However, Joseph and Mary Doust had 21 children but we know of only 3 who died in infancy. Tuberculosis was also fatal. Charles Down died in 1828 aged 40 and his tombstone records that "*the pale consumption struck the fatal blow*".

Inscriptions were sometimes a verse and others a simple line. The verse on Elizabeth Allen's headstone is now illegible but from old records we can tell that it probably read "*You that are young and do pass by, I was young and here must lie, My marriage bed is in the dust, and Christ my bridegroom in whom I trust*". The line on Jane Honess' headstone reads "*A sudden change, dear friends, upon me fell*".

During the days of the British Empire a number of Goudhurst residents died and were buried abroad but they are still remembered in the churchyard. John Tompsett Collens died in Jamaica in 1805 aged 27 years. James Jarvis died in Calcutta in 1787 aged 38 and his wife Jane died in Bencoolen (Indonesia) in 1792 aged 36 during her journey home to England.

So much information can be gleaned from burial inscriptions but the words are wearing away fast. So next time you walk through the churchyard just stop for a moment and read a few before they are gone forever.

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