

VILLAGE ECHOES

Murders and Deaths at Goudhurst

An article from the Kentish Advertiser in March 1938 came to light recently. The piece was written about extracts from the Church Registers found by the then President of the Goudhurst Village History Society, Mr J A Druce JP. The author was shocked with the 'appalling number of murders and sudden deaths, which took place in the good old days'.



Mr Druce in 1937 at a coronation tree planting

It was in July 1535 that Henry VIII appointed Thomas Cromwell his Vicar General, and one of his first acts was to prepare a scheme for the registration of all births, deaths and marriages. It was not until three years later however, that he issued an injunction ordering every parson to enter each Sunday in the presence of the Church Wardens all the baptisms, marriages and burials of the previous week in a book, which was to be kept in a chest with two locks. This injunction was indifferently obeyed so few registers exist that begin in 1538. Goudhurst's register started in 1558. It was not until the reign of Queen Elizabeth that the system was put into general and permanent operation.



A parish chest

The Civil War and the ejection of certain clergy brought about considerable irregularity in the keeping of registers and in 1663 Parliament issued an order that all registers should be kept by laymen Parish Registrars, to be elected by the people. In the Goudhurst register Mr Druce remarked that the letter P appears after many names, which he suggested must indicate that owing to poverty the person had not paid the then current tax. Mr Druce, in his introduction says that to prevent further mischief (some of the entries have become very indistinct) and to guard against loss he felt these earlier registers should be copied. This was done by members of the History Society including Mr Druce himself. There were two volumes that were sent to the Kent Archaeology Society.

Some examples of the more interesting early burial entries were printed at the end of the article. 1581 - *John Newman being killed by his own brother*, 1583 - *Jeames Huggett of Brenchlie, was slayne the 8th daie of the same monthe in a great fraye by the churchyard side, there were many wounded and hurt*, on May 19th 1584 John Hover and Edward Pecocks were buried *one killed in a marle pit and the other drowned*. Marle pits seem to have been a common source of danger, Gregorie Meriall in 1583 and Robert Overy in 1652 also succumbed to the same fate. Marle pits were dug to get at the rich clay or marl to be used as an agricultural fertilizer in the post-medieval period and therefore many fields had one. 1652 - *Roger Golding killed with a fall from a loade of hay*, 1676 - *Mr Edward Thurman the, Vicar who, about nine of the Clock in the night was buried in the chancel of the Church*, 1701 - *Thomas Lamkin killed by Twopenny for which he was hanged*, 1757 - *Jacques Godde, Frenchman, Prisoner on parole*, In 1789 a bizarre entry stated that *on the 25th of August a corpse was found in the field of Mr Springate called the Mill-wish partly in and partly out of the water. The day following the coroner sat on the body but it being much decayed he was not able to determine whether it was male or female or how and what means it came by its end, was buried on the 26th*. Hopefully, this was not a literal description rather that he sat in judgement of the incident. The Goudhurst Tithe apportionments list two fields of pasture belonging to the Finchcocks estate, owner Richard Springett, called *upper mill wish* and *lower mill wish*. Perhaps a corruption of mill wash? Two burials in 1588 had very short descriptions – *Annes Myer, a harlett and George Hamen, a walking man*. In contrast Robert Gawin was blessed with a long obituary which reads – *as he said and liklie to be trewe of the age of a hundrith and sixe, out of the parsonage, farmer there a longe tyme*. We shall never know.