



Cirencester Archaeological and Historical Society

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THE CHURCHYARD OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, CIRENCESTER

This churchyard was before the Reformation, the burial ground of the Abbey of Our Blessed Mary, for the Abbot here had prior right of burial until Henry VIII suppressed the monasteries. Such was his power that six interments arranged and completed by the priest without the knowledge of the Abbot, had to be re-interred on his authority.

That bodies were buried within the parish church is shown by the number of medieval grave covers both large and small that are used as bases for columns in Abbot Hakebourne's nave; some can also be seen at the south eastern corner of the tower and two, or rather one and a half, the whole one quite possibly a thirteenth century cover. Near these, and of some interest, is a small rectangular stone that has a cross patee contained within an embattled circle, but whether this is an extremely early headstone it is impossible to say, for it could have been placed horizontally in the earth. At Brimpsfield a stone with a similar cross, but without the embattled surround, was placed upright in the earth. Going outside, east of the south porch and beneath the south wall are two more covers, one badly weathered and the other incised with a cross.

A book published in Cirencester in the year 1842 refers to some grave covers in the Trinity Chapel on the north side of the nave, but these were probably removed when the new floor was put down. St. Katherine's chapel has a beautifully coped cover, which may originally have come from the Abbey, under the arch on the south side of the sacrum as it has an incised cross of seven points, the shaft making the eighth, which is similar to one that was excavated during 1965 in the abbey precincts.

According to an illustration from Atkyn's State of Gloucestershire, dated 1712, the parish church graveyard did not seem to extend beyond the east end of the church, but now it extends virtually to the end of the market place, but is not visible from it at any point.

There are two entrances to this haven of quiet; one on the north side of the church (which seems frequently locked) and the other a gateway to the east of the south porch, going round behind the shops. This, latter, is the better approach, for the whole yard opens up gradually in front, well tended and orderly with rose trees and clipped grass; there being some thousand memorials either box, altar, standing stones or headstones. It is to be regretted that many show signs of rapid weathering, to such an extent, that some, readable in 1957, are now extremely difficult to decipher. It would appear, that about the first quarter of the nineteenth century that many if not all of the earlier headstones were stripped out together with some of the larger flat ledgers; for some of them were used as pitching for the drainage area around the east end of the church. What happened to the headstones is anyone's guess except that some are fixed around what appears to be the sexton's tool house. These must evidently have been considered museum specimens. Four, two either side of the door are classifiable under the churchyard sculpture rating as 'Class A' but these are all the evidence left of the earlier years. One headstone of interest, dated 1666, one hundred and twenty years after the Abbey had lost the right of burial, is a little half round stone about foot across inscribed 'Alexander.' There are a number of classical headstones with columns and architraves but many of these show considerable signs of disintegration.

Of the gravestones actually in position in the churchyard, the large majority are Victorian, and the lettering on many of them is very good. Two modern replicas of early eighteenth century stones at the western

end also have good lettering, but the carving is a little stiff, the life is gone from it. One which catches the eye, to an old midwife who died aged eighty, commemorates her thus;-

Thirty seven years the Almighty gave me power. To aid my sex in nature's trying hour,

Through heat and cold, by day and dreary night, To save the hapless was my soul's delight. Adieu.

There are a considerable number of altar, or box tombs ; one, to Captain Day, dated April 1790 stands out. A monumental base supports an almost baroque sarcophagus with a flaming urn surmounting it. The style suggests it may have its roots among the Burford school of masons.

Immediately behind the church are two groups of tombs of which the group nearest the church represent a fairly rare form - usually with semi-circular ends and the lettering cut centrally on the rectangular panels and the ledger stone is cut to match. Across the path there is a group of three, contained within an iron railing, belonging to the Croome family. The centre one is carved with flowers leaves and cherubs but it is decaying somewhat. Others have only the plinth stone chamfered or even just left square like the base. Older examples of this style had excellently moulded bases and ledger stones and these plain ones come within the Victorian period.

One altar tomb, some way down the churchyard. is partly panelled and in between the long and short panelling there are four (two to a side) of the saddest faces that the writer has ever seen. The inscription has practically disappeared but the tomb belonged to the family of Clutterbuck, and they too have all gone now. Towards the far end the memorials are mostly standing crosses, head and footstones, curbs, and some large grave covers about eight feet by four feet and anything up to nine inches thick. Rumour has it that these large stones were placed on the graves to deter body snatchers but they have not been used for the last three hundred years.

The enquiring mind can pose many questions from the inscriptions, forms and fashions of tombstones and one which springs to mind here is to do with the little headstone of Alexander, for where it was usual with these small stones only to carve the initials and date he has been made almost unique with his full name. Can we read here a human touch where records do not reach?

A wander round this particular sanctuary, mellowed and quiet, cannot but offer refreshment to the spirit of those who want to escape from the traffic, trade and beyond the gate.

L. Jones.

LIST OF DOCUMENTS RECEIVED, 1961-65 RELATING TO THE CIRENCESTER AREA

Will of Richard Kitson of Cirencester, 1568.

Miscellaneous papers relating to Cirencester, including election posters, 1820-37.

Court rolls of the manor and seven hundreds of Cirencester. 1550-74.