

The Parish Church Of St John Baptist.  
Market Place, Cirencester. GL7 2NH

Gloucestershire's largest parish church looks southward across the market place, hub of the historic town's prosperity. To the north of the church is the walled precinct of the former Augustinian monastery founded by Henry I in 1117. After the abbey had been founded, partly on the site of a Saxon church, a new parish church was commenced, a relic of which exists in the form of a late Norman doorway in the north wall of the Lady Chapel. The chancel is the oldest part of the church. Construction started around 1115. The tower is fifteenth century and remarkable for the large buttresses which shore it up at its junction with the nave.

The churchyard was closed to burials in 1871 and a new cemetery was opened at Chesterton Lane, however, a lawn area is still used for cremated remains to be interred or scattered. Cirencester Town Council accepted responsibility for the maintenance of the Churchyard in 1975 but lack of funding has resulted in only minimal attention:-safety inspections of the trees and headstones since then. There are some 25 chest tombs which are Grade 2 listed monuments and one Grade 2 star chest tomb. Comprehensive records of who was interred and the location of the graves are held in the Parish Church, Bingham Library and County Records Office. Sadly many of the graves and tombs have gradually deteriorated and are badly in need of repair.



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 pattee contained within an embattled circle. 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.

During alterations carried out in 2008 and 2009, a comprehensive survey was undertaken of all the memorials and graves within the church. The investigation was formally recorded and all information is held within the vestry of the Parish Church. As such this exercise has purely recorded the external resting places.

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. Mrs Powell left the grant of the churchyard and adjoining gardens to her husband's nephew Robert George in her will of 1722, reserving the right of burial to Cirencester residents.

New regulations were occasionally introduced to manage the graveyard. In 1791 the minister and churchwardens set a new fee of £5 5s for obtaining a grave for anyone who did not purchase a plot when they were living. The churchyard was extended 45 ft into the surrounding gardens in 1792, to remedy the long-standing complaint that there was not enough room for burials. The new piece of ground was consecrated in 1793.

There are two entrances; one on the north side of the church 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. 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.

There are a considerable number of altar, or box tombs; one, to Richmondus Day and his son 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 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.

During the summer of 1991, as part of a course in family history at the Nicol Centre, a small group were given a demonstration of how to read and record old tombstones by Mr Julian Rawes of the Gloucestershire Family History Association. He had previously recorded the graves in the old Unitarian graveyard. It was then discovered by Miss Joyce Barker that the graveyard behind Cirencester Parish Church of St. John was on the Association's list as one which needed to be recorded. Many of the stones were eroding rapidly.

Although other people had apparently 'pottered', the last full survey was included in Ralph Bigland's Survey for Gloucestershire c.1780 - 90, leaving a gap of two hundred years. Very few of the stones recorded by Bigland are now traceable.

The group decided to undertake the survey without really appreciating the enormity of the task. Bigland records only one hundred and the tombs. These records of Bigland have also been incorporated within the database. The original group of readers dwindled to six. Then thanks to the good offices of Miss June Stacey they obtained a list of interested members of the archaeological society from which they gained a further nine readers. They also received a generous grant from that society to help with photography and stationery.

A topographical was undertaken by Alan Perry who gave us two full days of his time and expertise during a cold snap in February 1992. He used his, then, modern instruments to pin-point most of the tombs and produced plans giving each a number. Christopher Bishop also supported with expert advice and literature, in the initial stages.

Peter Harris gave us fifteen hundred forms for use in the field and Anthony Harris produced a collection of superb slides to illustrate the surveys numerous interests and difficulties. Stephen Harris adapted a computer programme to record all the information in a modern way. This information is held in various locations.

Along with Joyce Barker (original chairman) and Jean King (then chairman) others involved in the project were Joyce Dawson, Michael Oakeshott, Margaret Fryer, Joan Oakeshott, Nadine Fendley, Marilee Parrott, Don Harris, Ethel Rodwell, Olive Harris, Jean Roseblade, Joey Jacobs, June Stacey, Patricia Nicholas, Elizabeth Waters, Margaret Oswald, Margaret Wesley, Raymond Wesley and Members of Cirencester Archaeological & Historical Society.

The field survey of the graves started in the late spring of 1992 by the prompting of Miss Joyce Barker and the main part of the reading took over five years. The exercise also examined the parish church burial records in the library to check on certain names. Over the centuries there have been burials on burials and only a few had memorial stones. When the cemetery in Chesterton Lane opened in 1871, burial in the churchyard was allowed only in existing brick lined tombs.

As far as I am aware that is complete a list of those buried in the graveyard as I can find. I am sure there are still gaps but I have endeavoured to reconcile all the entries and also resolve any duplicate and mis-represented entries as far as I can.

I am quite willing to amend the records or plan if there are any points that I might of missed.

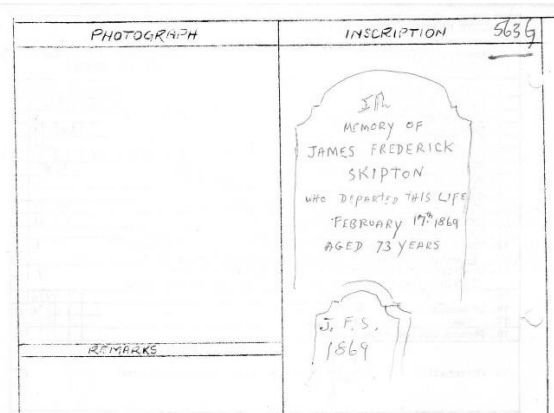
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To access the complete database of graveyards in Cirencester the QR code will enable you to view all the records as best as can be reconciled as of early 2024. <https://www.sitechsurveying.co.uk/graveyards/index.html>

GRAVE MEMORIAL RECORDING FORM.	
Cirencester Parish Church, St John the Baptist	
1. National Grid No. Ref:	IS1012131021
2. Date of Record:	15/10/13
3. Name of Recorder or Group:	M.P.S.E.R.
4. Memorial No. & Letter:	141018
5. No. of Components:	1
6. Associated Form Letters:	PLAN 50/11
7. Memorial type: 1. Flat 2. Head 3. Tomb 4. Foot 5. Other:	2, 4, 5
8. Material & Geology:	SANDSTONE
9. Stone Mason or Undertaker:	
10. Which faces are inscribed? 7 Compass points (see 19)	7, 0, 5
11. Number of people commemorated:	1
12. Technique of inscription:	ENGRAVE
13. Condition of monument? 1. Sound insitu 2. Sound displaced 3. Leaning or falling apart 4. Collapsed 5. Overgrown:	1
14. Condition of inscription? 1. Mint 2. Clear but worn 3. Mainly decipherable 4. Traces 5. Illegible or destroyed:	1
15. Dimensions:	Height: 716
16. Width:	716
17. Thickness:	716
18. Photograph Negative Number:	
19. Orientation:	



The topographical survey of the graveyard positioned the graves with a cross and a unique reference number. This number was then used in all records and photographs to be that specific graves reference. When the current survey was undertaken, these were the references used to define each grave. The field forms record every memorial, even the illegible ones and are a much more comprehensive survey (rather more bulky) which contains more details of the memorial stones; e.g. position, alignment, condition, type of stone, type of inscription, decoration and verse. We have not, as yet digitised all these larger records which may be housed in the Gloucester Record Office and the Bingham Library. Some graves have also been suffixed with a letter, this usually denotes that a number of graves identified within a single reference number. Cremated remains have been added and these are referenced with the letter and number relating to the area set aside to the south-east of the graveyard. Some of the recent memorial tablets installed around 19?? (650-656) have a suffix of E or W, this denotes which face the name appears. There is ongoing work to investigate fully the records of cremated remains.

Undigitised sources can be found at the Parish Church, Bingham Library and the County Records Office. The Parish Church has details of all the internal memorials etc. They also hold original field sheets of the graveyard for graves numbered 530-606. The transcribed records from field sheets to data sheets of 000-606 in two volumes. Lastly a hand written and typed alphabetical listings of graves from the original survey. The Bingham Library also holds the transcribed records from field sheets to data sheets of 000-606 in two volumes along with typed alphabetical listings of graves from the original survey with the original survey plan. I have not ventured to the County Records Office to realise what they have. Certainly digitizing the original field sheets would be a worthwhile project, but would be quite time consuming.