

Collecting the Inscriptions at St. James, Hampton Hill

Hampton Hill is very close to where I live in Teddington, Middlesex, so I have been familiar with the dominating profile of St. James's Church almost all my life (yes I was born in Teddington, and am a returnee), and their substantial churchyard has definitely attracted my eye since I made reading gravestones a favoured pastime in recent years.



The Church

I was therefore surprised to find that St. James was not listed as one of our 'parish' churches. If you look at the 'Ancient parishes' map on the back cover of our journal Hampton is shown there, but not Hampton Hill. It's down to dates. The church is not quite so old as it looks. It was in fact consecrated in 1863, and the first burial was in 1864.

I had done a little research on the church from its website, and found the Burials Index there which provides a search facility on all burials at St. James, searching by surname or year of death. Further, for all burials in marked graves the index gives a grave reference, and good maps are provided to direct the enquirer straight to the grave of interest. This is the first time I have met a church which provides such information online, and it posed the question whether doing a new survey of the gravestones would have added value.

Of course I think it does, for when we do these surveys of the memorial inscriptions at a church we not only produce a printed book of all the inscriptions with layouts where to find the graves, which we

give to the church, and in this case to Richmond Library, and a copy for our own library, but we also provide a fully indexed copy of the material to Find My Past, where it brings us in a small royalty. But the real purpose of submitting these records to Find My Past is that the data is then very accessible to all who are looking for where their ancestors are buried, whether they are aware of the Hampton Hill connection or not.

One thing in addition. Thus far we have only submitted the text of the inscriptions to Find My Past. For St. James, and in future, we will be submitting photos of all the gravestones to be found along with the inscriptions.

Most members will know that all our memorial inscriptions (MIs) can now be searched from the members section of our website. Less well-known is that a copy of the books presented to the churches is also available to members from the Digital Library section of the website.

The Graveyard

St. James has a sizeable graveyard containing 880 memorials, so it was always going to take a few months to complete a full survey. After a cold and wet start to the year, and as soon as spring looked as if it might be happening, I went to visit the church and met Nick Bagge, the parish administrator, who was enthusiastic about the project from the start, and I was soon mapping



Daffodils in April



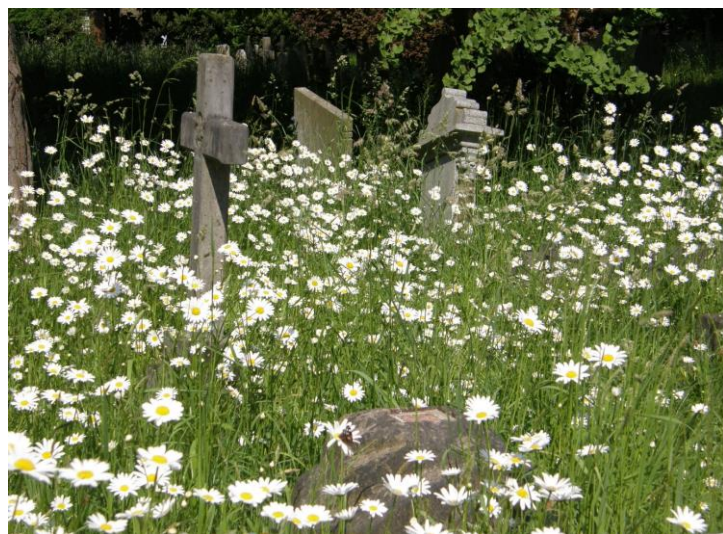
Bluebells in early May

the stones and then reading them. Yvonne Masson joined me, as she has done for all the more recent surveys, and we made good progress. In those spring days the churchyard was a pure delight, and I couldn't resist taking a few photos of the daffodils (April) and then the blue and white bluebells

(early May) and ox-eye daisies in late May. For the journal in colour you need to access it from the website from the Recent Journals page, or opt to receive the journal online by emailing the webmaster (that's me).

As May passed to June, there was beginning to be a problem. The church is very proud of its flowering churchyard, and in response to its parishioners' requests does not cut the grass while the flowers are in bloom. So Yvonne and I soon found that locating the kerb stones was becoming

increasingly hard. All graveyards have subsidence, but at St. James the subsidence is very pronounced, and hence we had to look quite hard to find some of the kerbs, and we then had to use a trowel (and a spade on occasions) to dig down to the actual inscriptions.



Ox-eye daisies end of May

It was here that the church's Burials Index was particularly helpful, for it enabled us to check if we had found all the graves which were mentioned there. There was one particular grave which the index referred to, but we had not found anything at first.



The most buried inscription

When revisiting the plot identified in the index we did find a rock just rising above the ground, but with no sign of it being a memorial. This time the digging was serious. At 6 inches down a metal plate began to be seen attached to the increasingly large boulder. And after another foot of excavation the metal plate could be read, and it was indeed the missing memorial. This was the one that nearly got away, but was found on account of the church's own records.

There was one section of the churchyard very notable for its clean



The Canadian war graves

appearance and the mown grass. This is a set of 13 graves for Canadian soldiers who were billeted in Bushy Park, Teddington during WW2, and who died from their war wounds at Upper Lodge, Hampton Hill, which became the King's Canadian

Hospital during the war.

How did that happen?



Which way is East?

One tends to think of a grave as an undisturbed resting place, and by and large graves are just that. But most graves do in fact have more than one person buried there, the first coffin being buried deep, and a second coffin then being placed above, but still being '6 foot under'. When there is

just a headstone the second burial can be accommodated without lifting out the existing memorial, but when there are crosses on plinths and/or kerbs involved these must be lifted clear and then put back when the soil is firm enough to do so. Just occasionally the graveyard workmen's concentration seems to falter, and the grave does not go back quite as it was removed. There were two notable cases of this at St. James. First there was the very substantial cross on three-tiered plinth at the north east corner of the church. From the photo it looks right, even if the cross is actually facing north. But once one reads the inscriptions it is clear that the cross and the top tier have ended up being rotated by 90 degrees from originally facing east to be facing north as they are today. It's a heavy cross, I think it is likely to stay that way for some time.



Something is not quite right

The other notable lack of concentration comes from a grave referenced 9F2a, again a cross on a three-tiered plinth. Here the picture says it all. How does one not notice that the bottom tier has been put back upside down? As you can imagine it adds a little joy to my day when I come across the unexpected. It will need a few volunteers to get that one back to its original state as well.

And next on Yvonne and my to-do list. We are currently busy deciphering some very difficult gravestones at St. Mary's Church in Teddington.