

St Mary's, Saffron Walden Burial Registers 1558-1892

by John Read

This article arises from the work I have done on transcribing the Saffron Walden burial registers onto computer disc for the National Burial Index (NBI). The NBI is a nationwide project organised by the Federation of Family History Societies to complement the index of baptisms and marriages which has long been available in the form of the Mormon Church's International Genealogical Index (IGI), but which contains few, if any, burials. Members of individual county Family History societies are undertaking the transcription of the registers on behalf of the Federation, and about 25% of Essex parishes have been started. Preliminary results for the whole country are available on a CD-ROM issued by the Federation, containing over 5 million burial records from 4300 churchyards and cemeteries, and for the county of Essex on a separate data-base created by the Essex Society for Family History, which by May this year had half a million names in it.

St Mary's Saffron Walden Burial Registers - Dates

The Saffron Walden burial registers commence from 17 November 1558, the date of the accession of Queen Elizabeth I.¹ This date is an extremely common commencement date for parish registers, since, although the clergy were obliged to keep registers by Thomas Cromwell's Injunction twenty years earlier, many of these were destroyed when an order was made in 1598 that all entries from the earlier paper registers should be copied onto parchment, 'especially since the first year of Her Majesty's reign'. Many copyists took this to mean that they could omit any entries before Elizabeth's accession, and this is probably what happened with Saffron Walden.² It is interesting that in 1559 – the first full year of entries – 176 burials are recorded, this being by far the highest number of burials in any year up to 1856. One possible explanation could be that an epidemic struck Saffron Walden that year, but I think it is at least possible that some of the 1559 entries related to pre-Elizabethan burials. The entries from 1558 to 1598 are written

in a very neat and uniform Secretary Hand, with each page certified by the Revd Thomas Dove who was the incumbent between 1580 and 1607, and by the two churchwardens in office in 1598, Thomas Clark and Richard Daye.

The burial registers officially continue until the end of 1856, when the churchyard was closed for burials due to overcrowding, and the incumbent, Revd Ralph Clutton, noted at the end of that year: 'The Burial Ground closed Jany. 1 1857'. Despite this, 18 further burials are recorded at sporadic intervals between 1858 and 1892, although from 1857 onwards all other burials took place at the Saffron Walden Cemetery in Radwinter Road. The reason these 18 burials took place in the closed churchyard is not clear. I checked the Cemetery registers (still held at Uttlesford District Council offices in Saffron Walden) to see if the 18 names were duplicated therein, but they were not. The only explanation I can think of is that the 18 were perhaps buried in family graves which were not full by 1856, and still had some reserved spaces. A special dispensation was however granted in 1982 when Lord Butler (better known as R A Butler), the former Cabinet Minister and M.P. for Saffron Walden died, and he was buried in a plot on the north-east side of the church.

The total number of burials recorded in the period 1558 to 1856 is over 18000, an overall average of 60 per year, but paradoxically yearly averages in the 16th and 17th centuries are in the 70s, the figures dipping into the 50s in the 18th century, then rising again to the 60s in the 19th. There are two possible explanations for this trend – firstly, the incidence of epidemics of the plague and other killer diseases in the 16th and 17th centuries, and secondly, the opening of Nonconformist burial grounds in the 18th century.³ However, as I shall show later, there is evidence that in the early 18th century, many burials in local Nonconformist burial grounds were recorded in St Mary's registers. Yearly totals increased once more when the new cemetery was opened in 1857, possibly because Nonconformists were included once more.

Historical Value

Most people would associate parish registers with family historians, and it is logical for family historians to be transcribing the burials. I will mention but two examples of the value of burial registers for family historians. One is the age of the deceased, which is given from 1813 onwards, and

although this is not always reliable, it helps the researcher in the century before the start of Civil Registration in 1837, by giving an idea of the year in which to search for the baptism. The other is the practice of giving the names of one or both parents of deceased infants or young children, and the names of husbands of married women, which is commonplace throughout the entire period of the registers.

However, the Saffron Walden burial registers contain a wealth of information of general local historical interest as well as the facts and figures associated with family history.

Burials in the Church and Church geography

Burials normally would have taken place in the parish churchyard (see cover picture), but in Saffron Walden and many other parishes it was customary for local gentry, civic dignitaries, prominent tradespeople, and their families, to be buried inside the church. As the largest church in Essex, the Parish Church had a lot of space inside for such burials, but, even so, it is difficult to imagine how the authorities found room for the 780 persons listed in the registers as having been buried inside the church. And the actual total would certainly have been a lot higher than that, as in the earlier period when references to in-church burials are sparse, many people were no doubt buried inside the church without that fact being recorded.

The first reference to an in-church burial was in March 1603, when Nicholas Wathe was buried 'in the church at the nether end on the north side', and the last was in June 1812, when Sarah Hall was buried with the simple note 'in the church'. In between these dates, the most prolific period for such burials was from 1644 to about 1800, around 10 percent of all burials taking place inside the church for most of this period. The registers go into incredible detail in noting the exact position inside the church where each burial took place. We are told for example whether a burial was sited in the north, south, middle, or cross 'alley', in the north, south, or middle chancel, and its proximity to reference points such as the pew of a prominent parishioner or civic dignitary, a pillar, the font, the steps up to the chancel, the porch, someone else's grave or monument. There is only space in this article for a limited number of examples to be quoted, but the following items will give a good idea of the type of information to be found (see also figure 1):

April 1648. William Nightingale. In the Cross Alley after you are downe the stepps as you come in at the North dore in the chancel against the seate where the Treasurer and Chamb. Sit.

July 1649. Robert Goodman. In the North Alley, under the stone layde in memorial of his ancestors, the brass of wch stone was lately taken up.

April 1651. Elizabeth Doughtie. In the north chancell, betweene the stones that lie in memoriall of Mr Edmund Turner & the chests at the East end of the Chancell.

February 1652/3. Mary Leader. In the north chancell, under the stone that hath so much brass taken off it, which stone lyes in the memoriall of the Nicholases.

February 1653/4. Richard Plummer. As you enter the South dore, the next great stone beyond the place where the font stood.

April 1665. Elizabeth Ellis. In the middle chancell, between the communion table & the seat on the South side with her feet at the head of her father-in-law Mr John Benfeld, late Vicar of this towne.

May 1675. Edward Holland. Coming down the stairs, with his feet right against the monument of Mr Thomas Barron, & his head close to the end of the youngmen's sceat.

May 1697. William Stanes. Inn the Cross Alley coming downe from the midel chancell one the left hand, his head att the corner of the Mayor's seatt.

June 1739. Edmund Harris. At the lower end of the church allmost under the lowest arch on the North side by the gallery.

August 1740. Edward Freeman. In the North Chancel with his head close to the steps and his feet within 3 feet of the North pillar.

N.B. The Goodman and Leader examples, which date from the Civil War period, could throw some light on the identification of several ledger stones in the church which have no inscriptions on them, but have indentations from which brasses have been removed.

With over 700 more burial locations given similar to those quoted above, it can be readily seen that it should in theory be possible to draw up a plan of the interior of the church before the great restoration of 1792, though I have not attempted this myself. During the most prolific period from 1644 to 1749, 662 persons were buried inside the church, and I have analysed the distribution between different sectors of the church as follows:

North chancel	90
Middle chancel and quire	91
South chancel	44
North alley	46
Middle alley	91
South alley	36
Cross alley	69
Vault of the Earls of Suffolk	28

N.B. The locations given for the remaining 167 burials do not identify any specific chancel or alley.

The north, south, and middle chancels would have been the areas which are now the north and south chapels and the choir chancel. The north, south and middle alleys would have been the aisles of the nave, and the cross alley appears to have run between the north and south doors. This alley is sometimes known as the 'lower cross alley', and there was apparently also an 'upper cross alley' just below the steps going up to the chancel. The present north and south chapels are no more than about 30 feet square, and the mind boggles at the density of burials which must have taken place in such small areas, though burials of members of the same family would usually have been in one grave. The paving stones of the church must have been constantly uplifted and replaced, and this would account for the numerous references to burials under a broken stone. One of the later entries mentions a bone vault, which suggests that old bones were removed to a central repository from time to time.

Despite the large numbers of in-church burials mentioned above, there are now only 61 ledger stones and under 20 wall memorials commemorating these people, to be found in the church today. Although some of these memorials commemorate more than one person, others are unidentifiable because the names were on brasses which have disappeared, and it would be fair to say that only between 10 and 20 percent of the in-church burials entered in the registers have surviving memorials. Some of the ledger stones which survive appear to have been moved from their original positions. For example, out of the eight ledger stones which are currently to be seen running across the west end of the nave just inside the west door, all but one relate to persons who were originally buried in the middle chancel (John & William Holgate, Walsingham, Mayo, Drake, Crane, Osborne and Monteth – the odd one out being Freeman from the north chancel).

The Howard Vault

The interments of all the Earls of Suffolk from the 3rd in 1688/9 to the 9th in 1733 are listed as having taken place in the Howard vault, which was situated underneath the middle chancel, and it must be assumed that the 1st, 2nd and 10th Earls are also laid to rest there. These three appear in the registers for 1626, 1640 and 1745 respectively, but without any note that they were buried in the Vault. (N.B. After the death of the 10th Earl, the title passed to a distant cousin who did not however inherit Audley End House.) The remaining interments during this

period were of Howard wives, children, and grandchildren. For example, Lady Elizabeth Felton, daughter of the third Earl, who had married a baronet, Sir Thomas Felton, was buried there in 1681, and Henry Felton, probably her son, in 1678. Two other ladies buried there were Lady Ann Walsingham, a daughter of the second Earl and wife of Colonel Thomas Walsingham, in 1695, and Lady Dianah Pitt, daughter of the 6th Earl, and wife of Colonel John Pitt, in 1710. In none of these cases were the sons-in-law given a place in the vault, though Colonel Walsingham was buried in the middle chancel of the church in 1691.

The Suffolks' successor at Audley End, Sir John Griffin Griffin, Lord Howard de Walden, (who had Howard blood only through a great-grandmother), as well as his two wives, continued the tradition of being buried in the Howard vault, but the Howard exclusivity was broken when Sir John's second wife, Katherine Clayton, had Henry Charles Fox, the young son of her sister Marianne, buried there in 1788. When Sir John Griffin Griffin died in 1797, the Vicar, Revd William Gretton, wrote in his register:

'The procession from the house began at eleven o'clock and the concourse of people of all ranks who were assembled at this awful solemnity, to offer the last mark of esteem for that truly respectable nobleman, was very great.' Gretton goes on to praise His Lordship's qualities at great length, and ends up by observing that he (Gretton) was 'his very humble and most obliged friend for 32 years, in the 26 last of which he officiated daily as his domestic chaplain in the chapel in the Audley End House'.

There follows in the register a lengthy extract from the will of Sir John, who had left £300 to the poor of the parish at the discretion of Gretton 'with the assistance of Mr Thomas Pennystone'. The will extract is accompanied by a covering letter from a lawyer in Lincoln's Inn, who addresses Gretton as 'Archdeacon Gretton', alluding to his recent appointment as Archdeacon of Essex.

The last burial in the vault appears to have been that of Sir John's second wife in 1807, there being no mention of any of the Neville Lords Braybrooke being buried there. The external entrance to the vault was blocked off in 1860, as evidenced by an inscription on the exterior east wall. There is no memorial statuary to the Suffolks in the interior of the church, and one wonders whether there was any in the blocked-off vault.

The Restoration of the Church in 1790-3

A few years earlier, Revd William Gretton had inserted in the burial register his 'Memoranda respecting the Great Repair of the Parish Church of Saffron Walden which commenced in October 1790'. This covers five folios in the register, and records that Sir John Griffin Griffin had donated £1000 towards the repair of the nave whilst his wife Katherine had paid for the east window in the north chancel. An Act of Parliament was also passed to allow for the raising of £4000 in bonds of £100 each. Unfortunately,

the repair was carried on, but coolly from the very outset, by the contractor, who soon gave too evident proofs of a disposition not too upright, which in the further progress of the business became unequivocally apparent, & caused the committee & the whole parish to lament bitterly that they had ever entered into any agreements with Richard Dyche of West Ham in this county.

This was in 1791, and it has been said that Dyche was subsequently dismissed, but Gretton mentions him again in November 1792, only a few months before the work was completed, recording that Dyche 'laid onto the church the Yorkshire stone for paving the same, precisely on the day when by his contract he should have completed the work instead of producing the materials. And from and after the 1st of December he called off all his workmen who were absent during the whole course of that month & part of January 1793.' The implication is perhaps that the workmen returned later in January to lay the paving stones.

Another tradition which is not supported by Gretton's Memoranda is that the congregation moved to Littlebury during the restoration works. Gretton says that the congregation used the chancel as a temporary church from 1790 to early 1792, when they moved into the north aisle which had been 'fitted up for Divine Worship', and finally back to the nave in December 1792.

Two other interesting pieces of information are mentioned by Gretton. Firstly he records that the two chest tombs of John Leche and Lord Audley now in the north and south chapels respectively, were moved from the middle chancel, and in both cases he states 'nothing was found enclosed nor any appearance of a grave or vault under it'. Secondly he says that 'an antique head of Henry 6th in stained glass, which was found in the church and repaired by Pearson at Lord Howard's charge, was put up in the west window of the south side'. This was then matched by a new head of George III in the west window of the north aisle. The antique glass remains in the west window of the south aisle, though it is generally thought to be the head of Henry VI's Queen, Margaret of Anjou.

Nonconformist Burials

Between 1715 and 1734 another feature appeared in the burial registers – the vicar was recording the names of persons buried in Nonconformist burial grounds in the town. These are distinguished by the addition of the words 'in the meeting yard' or occasionally 'in the Quaker meeting yard'. It seems likely that most of these burials were of Quakers. 'By the end of the 17th century, most meeting houses had (a burial ground), the Quakers being the first denomination to open these on any scale.'⁴ I have noted 38 burials of this category in the parish church register between the above dates, names recorded more than once being Cornell, Rowning, Lagden, Seamer, and Barns. Before the opening of burial grounds, it was common for Quakers to be buried in orchards and gardens, and an entry in September 1669 reads: 'Anthonie Penniston, a Quaker, buried his mother like a dog in his garden'.

Most commonly occurring surnames

For this purpose I have divided the years from 1558 up to 1856 into five periods, corresponding to the Essex Record Office microfiches of the original registers. The sections are accordingly as follows:

Period I	Fiche No D/P 192/1/1	1558-1630
Period II	Fiche No D/P 192/1/2	1630-1674
	Fiche No D/P 192/1/3	
Period III	Fiche No D/P 192/1/4	1674-1749
Period IV	Fiche No D/P 192/1/5	1749-1812
	Fiche No D/P 192/1/6	
Period V	Fiche No D/P 192/1/14	1813-1856
	Fiche No D/P 192/1/15	

The two most prolific names which stand out throughout the 300-year period are Archer and Cornell. Archer starts off in ninth place in the earliest period, but becomes the top name between 1674 and 1812, and remains popular into the 19th century. In all 295 Archers are recorded in the burial registers. Cornell is prominent in periods I-III, almost disappears in the 18th century, but reappears in the 19th and is still a common Walden name to this day. The current Walden mayor is of that name, and there are still 13 Cornells living in the town listed in the current telephone directory.

Pomfrett was very prolific in periods I-III, was just out of the list in eleventh place in period IV, but disappears thereafter, to be replaced in the last two periods by Erswell, Richardson and Barker. Another popular name throughout was Pettit, which, although it appears only in periods II, III and IV above, was in the top twenty names in the other two periods. And Adams, which appears in four of the lists, was only just out of the top ten in Period III. The ten most commonly occurring

surnames in each of these five periods are given below (table I).

1. ERO D/P 192/1/1-5,11,15
2. Steel, D. J. *National Index of Parish Registers*, 11, p9
3. *Op.cit.*, p553
4. *Op.cit.*, p675

Notes

ORDER	I: 1558-1630	II: 1630-1674	III: 1674-1749	IV: 1749-1812	V: 1813-1856
1	Turner	Cornell	Archer	Archer	Richardson
2	Clarke	Browne	Pettit	Smith	Barker
3	Pomfrett	Archer	Pomfrett	Erswell	Smith
4	Parker	Pomfrett	Turner	Barrett	Adams
5	Browne	Parker	Church	Pettit	Archer
6	Smith	Adams	Cornell	Barker	Wright
7	King	Pettit	Powell	Richardson	Cornell
8	Adams	White	Carter	Green	Erswell
9	Archer	Carter	Sheppard	Adams	Taylor
10	Cornell	Reader	Wright	Clarke	Housden

Table 1: St Mary's Saffron Walden Burial Registers: ten most commonly occurring surnames 1558-1856

Note: John Read is currently chairman of the Saffron Walden branch of the Essex Society for Family History. Contact: 16 Thorncroft, Saffron Walden, CB10 2AZ.

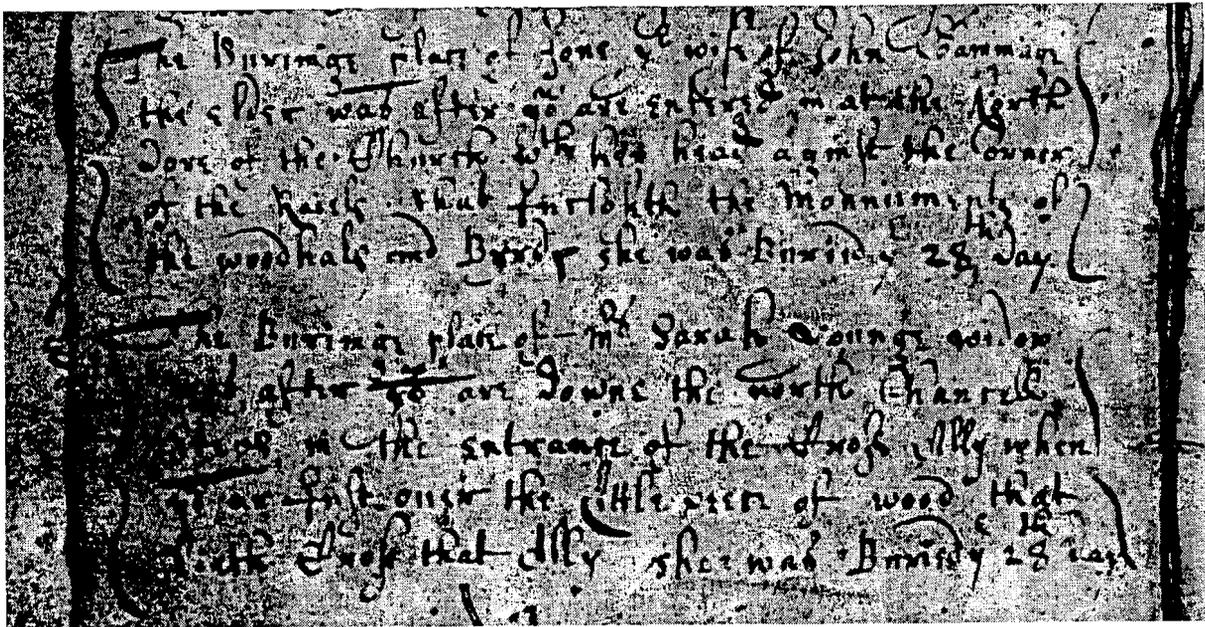


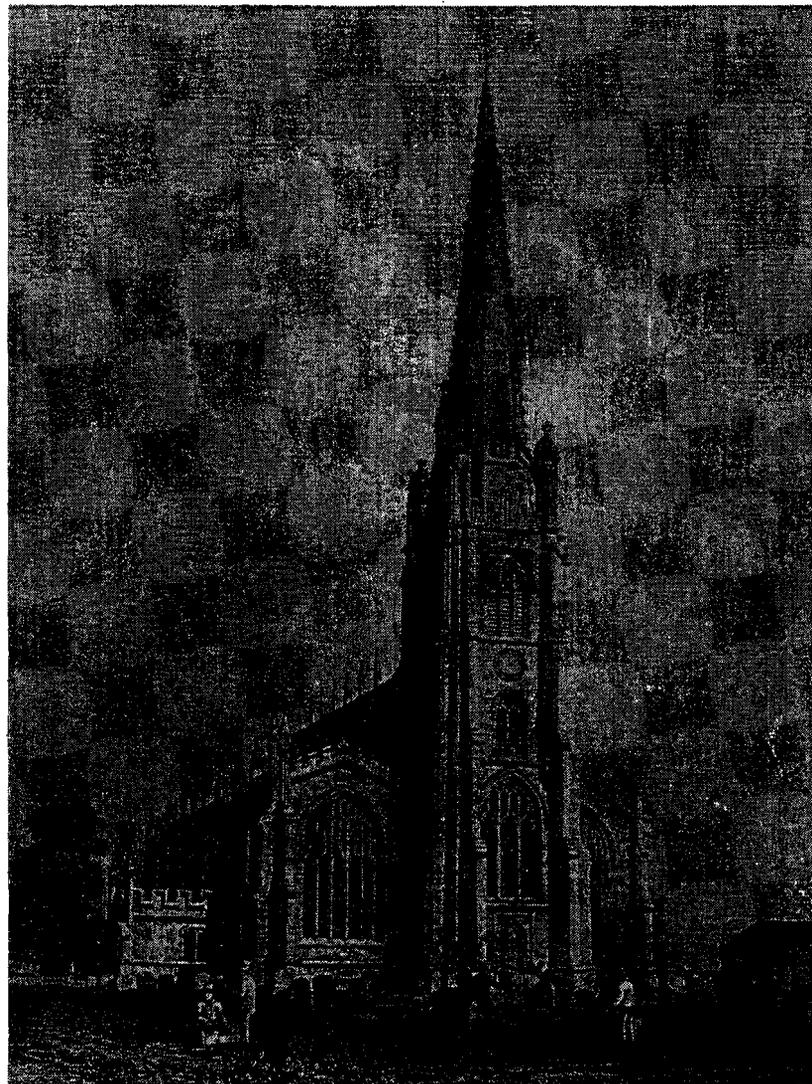
Figure 1: Extract from the Saffron Walden burial register for February 1652 (ERO D/P 192/1/2 reproduced by permission of the Essex Record Office). These two entries are enclosed by brackets on both left and right margins and record:

The Buriinge place of Jone ye wife of John Gammage the elder was after yow are entered in the North dore of the Church with her head aginst the Corner of the Raiels that incloseth the Monnuments of the Woodhals and Byrds she was buried ye 28th day.

The buriinge place of Mrs Sarah Younge widow was after yow are downe the north Chancell steps in the entrance of the Cross Ally when yow are just ouer the little peece of wood that lieth Cross that Ally she was buried ye 28th day.

The Woodhall and Byrd monuments are still to be seen on the north wall of the Church.

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