

The Byrde and Woodhall Memorials – from St Mary’s Parish News July 2011 by John Read

At the end of the ten o’clock service on a Sunday morning in St Mary’s, there is always a throng of people at the back of the church enjoying coffee and biscuits, and chatting to friends. Why not use this opportunity to have a look at two of the most impressive wall memorials in the church, those commemorating the Byrde and Woodhall families, which are located near the coffee stall in the north west corner of the church?

The memorials would have been erected shortly after the death in 1613 of Mary Woodhall, who was in turn wife of William Byrde (1537-68) and William Woodhall (1544-1603), the two men commemorated. The Byrde memorial on the right is by far the larger and most impressive of the two. This is understandable when we read at the foot of the inscription that it was erected at the expense of William Byrde’s two sons, one of whom was a lawyer who became Dean of the Arches in London, in memory of their parents. The Byrdes were probably the most important family in Walden at the time, having extensive land holdings to the north of the town on both sides of the Little Walden Road and the Cambridge road, as well as in Littlebury. Byrdes Farm and the lane leading to it on the right of Little Walden Road, take their names from the family. The top part of the inscription tells us that William Byrde was educated at Cambridge, sympathised with the old faith during the reign of Mary, but died at the age of 31. The middle part tells us that his wife, Mary Woodhall, came from a family which had originated in Cockermouth in Cumbria, and that they had four children.

It is not known what brought the Woodhall family all the way from Cockermouth to Walden, but they had been here for at least two generations before Mary was born, and her father James Woodhall held the position of town Treasurer, (equivalent to Mayor in later times). After William Byrde’s death in 1568 his widow Mary (still only 23) married a distant cousin, William Woodhall, who came from a branch of the family which had remained in Cumbria. The inscription on the smaller Woodhall memorial on the left, states that he came from the small village of Ulloch near Cockermouth, but more importantly that he was a nephew of Archbishop Edmund Grindall, the staunchly Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury from 1575 to 1583 who was also of Cumbrian origin. William was one of the executors and a beneficiary under the Archbishop’s will of 1583, but despite this, it appears that he was not financially successful, and when he died in 1603 left substantial debts. This no doubt accounts for the smaller size of his memorial compared with that of William Byrde, but even so, it has some interesting floral designs on the sides incorporating what appears to be an hour glass on the left, and a skull supported by wings on the right. These perhaps signify the mortality of man, and the idea of resurrection.

Entries in St Mary’s burial registers show that these two memorials were once surrounded by railings, and below the Woodhall memorial can be seen a stone slab let into the wall containing family armorial devices, which it is

thought was once part of an altar tomb. The fact that there were railings round the site gives credence to this theory.

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