

MONUMENTS AND MEMORIES IN WHILTON CHURCH

The society met in St Andrew's Church on Thursday 21st May 2009, which was Ascension Day. In medieval Whilton this was the culmination of Cross Week, when there would be processions around the parish and fields, and litanies would be sung, praying for good crops and that the parish should be free of the pestilence. As the procession went along people would carry banners, probably embroidered with symbols or pictures of saints. These were known as cross cloths, and were sometimes left to the church in parishioners' wills. They may have been hung near the crosses inside the church for the rest of the year. We have a record that Thomas Tobbye left 6 shillings in 1547 to buy a cross cloth for the best cross in Whilton. Cross Week therefore meant a holiday in Whilton, and with that went other celebrations, including the "parish drinking." The same Thomas Tobbye left six hives of bees and their increase to be used "*to make a parish drynkyng in the crose weke after ye procession.*"

We began by walking round the churchyard noting a few of the graves. It was not until the mid 1600's that gravestones were generally introduced. Among our earliest are those in memory of Ann Dixon, who died aged 26 in 1668, and of her brother, William, who died in 1671.

The first Emery gravestone dates from 1681 and they have a number of other memorials and chest or table tombs over a vault where several members of the family were buried. There is also an Elliott chest tomb. Richard Elliott was a boatman, who brought his baby son for baptism in 1811. He settled at the Locks, where he was variously described as a shopkeeper or grocer, innkeeper at The Spotted Cow, a farmer and a coal merchant. In fact he probably combined these activities for most of his life, serving the boat people. He died aged 68 in 1852.

By far the majority of memorials are to adults who reached a good old age in Whilton, many in their 80's, suggesting this was a healthy place to live. There are, however, a few to young children and babies, including a stone in memory of Frederick Main Walker, the little son of Whilton's second schoolmaster. He died in 1841 aged two and a half. George Watson was another child, aged 7 years 8 months. He died in 1825, after being accidentally drowned at Brownsover.

Inside the Church we noted particularly the memorials to the Freeman and Rose families. Richard Freeman was lord of Whilton Manor and died in 1749. The memorials in the Church tower include Richard, his wife Elizabeth and their daughter Jane. Richard and Elizabeth were parents of the eccentric Langton Freeman, whose body was sealed up in the summerhouse of the Manor House in 1784. There is no memorial to him.

At the west end of the Church are several monuments to members of the Rose family. Whilton benefited tremendously from the generosity, taste and genuine social concern shown by this family, especially by Rev William Lucas Rose and his wife, Ann. The memorials reflect this. This Rector died in the bitter January of 1814 when snowdrifts over 24 feet were recorded in Dunchurch.

His memorial is effusive, but records suggest that it genuinely reflects the feelings of his family and parishioners:

"Patron and Rector of this Church and for many years an active and upright Magistrate for the County. Constant in the practice of every Virtue that can adorn the Character of Master; Husband and Father; he directed his chiefest care to the more important concerns of the Pastoral Office, conducting them for thirty-seven years with a fidelity, diligence, and zeal, which afforded to all who knew him abundant testimony that the service of his God, and the Spiritual improvement of his Flock, constituted the first Business and Pleasure of his Life."

Set into the floor tiles in the chancel are two slabs in memory of John Spateman and his wife. Rev John Spateman was Rector and died in 1749 the same year as the lord of the manor, Richard Freeman. John was Whilton's poet Rector, writing long works in blank verse, entitled "Jesus" and "War." He attempted to get another 10,000 word poem printed, entitled "Tobias." This was going to be in twelve volumes, but there is no record that he managed to get enough subscribers.

We also noted that there are other unmarked burials beneath the Church itself. These include several Tudor villagers, among them Francis Hodge, a farmer, who requested to be buried in the church porch of Whilton in 1597. Our current porch and entrance date from a later period, and so his

remains may lie under or near the old tower door. It does mean that he expected parishioners would walk over his bones for centuries to come. Francis also showed concern for the community, leaving six shillings and eight pence to the church and four pence to every poor householder in this town of Whilton.