

WHAT TO SEE IN WHILTON CHURCHYARD

Members of Whilton Local History Society met on 19th May 2011 to begin work on producing a leaflet about Whilton Churchyard. The stone structure we know today as St Andrew's was probably first built in the late 1100s, but it is very likely that there was a wooden structure here before that, especially since we know there was a priest here in 1086. Some historians now think that in many cases the burial site around a church may have been in existence before there was a building. It is thus quite possible that our churchyard is a thousand years old.

It is very difficult to estimate how many burials there have been. Until recent times almost everyone dying in the parish would have been buried here, and a few important people were actually buried beneath the church. Since the parish registers have existed there is no record of a plague or disaster here. In fact there is every reason to think that Whilton, with its good clean water supply from springs, its hilltop atmosphere and fertile farming land was a very healthy place to live. Almost certainly it was affected by the Black Death in the late 1300s, when the lord of the manor and his son both died, and, if Whilton followed the national pattern, perhaps over half the inhabitants died. However, even this would only have been a relatively small number. Over the millennium perhaps a maximum of 7,000 bodies have been buried.

Throughout the middle ages most bodies were buried in a shroud, tied above the head and feet. As an attempt to help the woollen industry there were even Acts of Parliament between 1666 and 1680 to force people to use woollen shrouds. Whilton has records that burials in woollen were taking place. This law was officially in force until 1814. Coffins became more common for those who could afford it by the 19th century. While talking we found we did not know the derivation of the word "coffin". In fact, it comes through Old French and Latin from a Greek word, which means "basket".

On the whole, tombstones in churchyards date usually from the 17th century. This is so with Whilton. There are three listed stones outside the west wall of the south aisle, described by English Heritage as "*3 headstones. Dressed ironstone. Largest to north dated 1691 with cherubs head, middle stone with double volute head to Thomas Embry, Wool Winder, d. 1681, third with oval laurel wreath facing worn inscription and dated 1687.*"

There are others, some earlier, along the wall by Churchgate. Among them is this stone memorial to Henry Sneath.

The inscription reads:

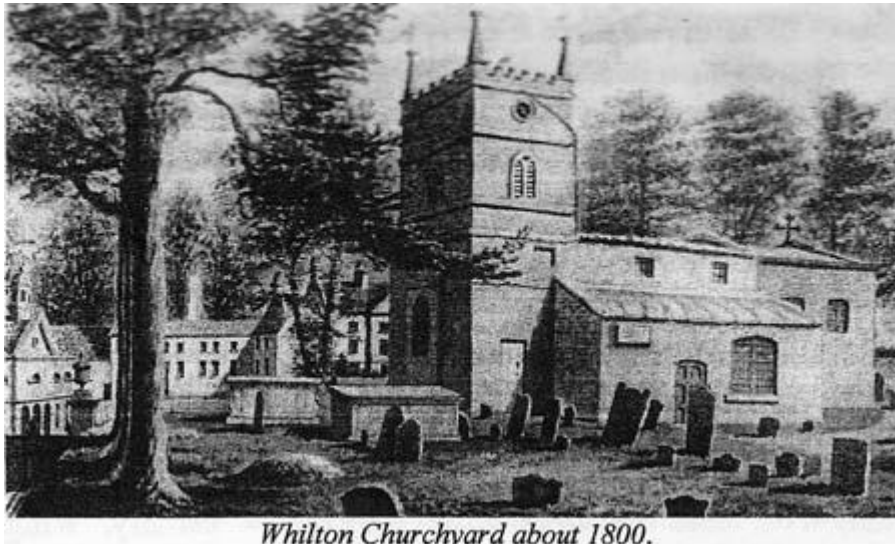
"HERE LYETH THE BODY OF
HENRY SNEATH HE DEPARTED
THIS LIFE THE 27TH DAY OF JULY
ANNO 1666* BEING OF AGE 60
YEARES WHEN HEE DIED"

* This date is hard to decipher but appears to be 1666



These early gravestones are small compared with later ones and some are decorated with worn cherubs' heads, often used as a symbol of resurrection.

They are so weathered that it is difficult, if not impossible, to read the inscriptions. This is one of the problems we face in the churchyard. The local stone used is very soft and crumbles away after time. We are also faced with a healthy growth of lichen, often a sign of clear air, but not very helpful to us here. This does mean that everything we can record or notice is quite important, because some things will be illegible after a few more years.



Whilton Churchyard about 1800.

Over years fashions have changed and different types of memorial have been popular. We do not have extravagant or showy memorials in Whilton, and that is probably in keeping with the history of the village, but we do have some examples of changes in fashion in Whilton. These include a few foot stones as well as head stones, with just the initials and date, and four chest tombs, of which that for the Elliott family of the Locks is listed. There are signs that at least two of these were surrounded by rails. These rails may have been surrendered in metal salvage collections during the Second World War.

The Greek Revival style in the early 1800s with plain geometric shapes and triangular heads can be seen in one or two examples here. After the coming of the railway there was more use of non local stones, which on the whole have weathered better, sometimes having the letters picked out in black, which helps us to read them. There was also a fashion for curbs around a grave, which can be seen in the Reynolds memorial to the south of the church. We only have a handful of crosses, and no standing angels, obelisks or broken columns which became very popular by the late 1800s, and which would have changed the character of Whilton churchyard.



This is one of the more ornate tombstones at Whilton. This is in memory of Henry Dunkley, who died just before the First World War on 26th May 1914, aged 55. Although the gravestone does not record this, he was drowned in the canal lock.

The space below was left for a memorial for his wife, Elizabeth. She was not buried in Whilton churchyard, and the inscription was never completed.

Society members looked at leaflets produced by other places and discussed a variety of possibilities which may be put into a leaflet about our churchyard. This may include its wildlife and the routes of paths leading into it. We also talked about what would be the best sort of illustrations. We hope to work on this idea and to produce something within the coming year. The Society intends that this will be the first of a series of leaflets on Whilton, including perhaps the interior of the church, the canal, and other aspects of the parish.