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ST. MARY'S, DOVER, MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS

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The project to transcribe the memorial inscriptions in the churchyard around Dover's parish church of St. Mary was undertaken, between June and September 1989, by a small team of researchers working on behalf of the Kent Family History Society. The summer of 1989 proved to be one of the finest and driest of the twentieth century, which gave an extra advantage to work that considerably exceeded original expectations.

St. Mary's is rather unusual in that the churchyard, which closed for burials in 1837, is divided into three sections: the first around the church itself, and the other two to the north side of Dieu Stone Lane and the south side of St. Mary's Passage, respectively. These now paved dividing paths appear to be rights of way across the burial ground that probably date back to ancient times.

Of the 343 or so memorial stones located there, two other features make this churchyard unusual. Foremost is the fact that some 147 of these, mostly headstones, are placed side by side around the inner perimeter flint wall which curves round from Dieu Stone Lane, alongside Stembrook car park to Church Street and thereby renders them all but unseen to passers-by. Most, if not all of these perimeter stones (marked 'P' on the plan) have been repositioned from the place of original interment – almost equalling the number, which still appear to be in their original positions.

The other unusual feature is the curious nature of the small burial area to the south of St. Mary's Passage (marked 'S' on the plan). There, headstones, tombs and even wall plaques, about 37, still all or in part legible, are mostly tucked away in an island-like enclosure overlooked on three sides by the rear of buildings in Cannon Street and Church Street. The remaining legible stones of the churchyard number 37 in the north-side site ('N'), 70 around the church itself ('C'), 58 small square stones marking the places of interment in more recent years, of cremated remains ('SQ'), and the War Memorial in memory of those St. Mary's parishioners who fell in the Great War.

Incredibly, for a site in the centre of an historic and busy town on one of the main thoroughfares, there appears to have been no previous complete transcription of memorial stones. However, the following is a summary of what little survives.

In 1892, Alfred Ridley Bax, barrister of the Middle Temple and an antiquarian, who had a marine residence at Dover, copied a number of St. Mary's (and other Kent) churchyard inscriptions. His pencilled notebooks are deposited at the library of the Society of Genealogists under the title 'Kent Monumental Inscriptions Volumes I-III'

In 1949, plans of the churchyard were prepared by the Borough Engineer's Office of Dover Council with a view, it appears, of providing public seating within the burial grounds. On these plans is a detailed numbering system (1-207) relative to the grave plots, but excluding the perimeter stones. The purpose of this, while not entirely clear, was probably with the removal of the numbered stones in mind.

A name list matching the numbers accompanied the plans, copies of which are now held at the Local Studies Section of Dover Library. In the event, however, the project itself never got off the ground.

In 1974, when an area of the north side burial ground was cleared for the construction of the new parish hall, some 14 gravestones had to be removed. A list of the inscriptions, then still legible, was made by a member of the Dover Archaeological Rescue Unit who at that time were excavating the Roman 'Painted House'. Most of these stones were not re-positioned in the churchyard and their whereabouts cannot be ascertained.

It might perhaps be supposed that when the headstones were set around the perimeter wall the opportunity would have been taken to transcribe the inscriptions for posterity, or at least a list of the family names involved. No such transcript can now be traced, if indeed one ever existed. However, Bax's work in 1892 probably came nearest to achieving this, if only in part. For his notebooks refer to 'sunk' or 'sunken' stones and inscriptions that are now readily identifiable in perimeter positions yet not actually indicated by him as being such.

For many years the exact time of the repositioning of these perimeter stones was lost to living memory, no satisfactory reference appearing in any printed history of Dover. Hitherto it had been speculated from a reference in St. Mary's Vestry Minutes for 22 April, 1843, that the repositioning had resulted from the removal of a number of memorial stones from 'a portion between the south wall and the railings'. Then, at the instigation of the enigmatic incumbent Canon Puckle, funds were authorised for the almost complete reconstruction of the greatly dilapidated church, and foundations. It was not thought, however, that this removal could ever have amounted to 147 stones. For when Canon Puckle wrote his account 'The Ancient Fabric of the Church of St.

Mary the Virgin, Dover', published in *Arch. Cant.*, xx (1893), 119-27, describing the church refurbishment of 1843, he made no mention whatever of the removal of any headstones.

The main authority on the local history of Dover, John Bavington-Jones, who was one-time editor and owner of the *Dover Express* newspaper, asserted that a section of the churchyard was taken away at the time Stembrook was re-aligned 'some thirty years after the last burial'. This assertion is repeated in his historically inspired article on the church lands appearing in the *Dover Express* of 21 July, 1905, but no clue was ever given as to just when exactly this was nor whether any headstones were moved at the same time.

After extensive research on the subject the authors have only recently discovered when the repositioning occurred. In two articles in the *Dover Express*, dated 6th March, 1891, and 29th May, 1891, respectively, the following was reported:

'The works which Mr. Herbert Stiff is carrying out around this church [St. Mary's] which were long delayed owing to the frost, are now approaching completion as far as the reconstruction of the boundary is concerned. The old rubble wall, which must have been erected solely on considerations of economy, has been levelled to the ground, and a dwarf wall, topped with dressed stone, has been raised, surmounting which is a handsome iron fence. When the fence is completed, the ground will be submitted to the hands of the landscape gardener, so that the resting place of so many old Dovorians may be a sightly and pleasant spectacle . . . and it occurs to us that no work taken in recent years has been more appropriate than that now going on to improve and beautify the surroundings of this old sacred edifice.

'We have already called attention to the improvement which has for some months been going on in St. Mary's Churchyard. As is generally known, the ground on Biggin Street frontage on each side of the church has for many years been kept in perfect order at the expense of the senior churchwarden Sir Richard Dickeson, and the appearance of that part of the ground, especially in the early summer, has always been a pleasant sight; but the other part of the ground has been for some time past in a state that was far from satisfactory. It was surrounded by a high and anything-but-ornamental stone wall, which afforded a screen for all the odds and ends of garbage that unscrupulous persons chose to throw over. The tombs and gravestones too were, many of them, in a ruinous state and the ground uneven. At several vestry meetings this was a matter of observation and it was, at length, resolved to commence an improvement. First of all the stone wall was removed and a handsomely-built dwarf wall, surmounted by an iron fence, has been erected all round. This work was done by Mr. Herbert Stiff at the expense of the parish, under the direction of the churchwardens and overseers; but if the work had ended there it would have been a very questionable improvement, for the open fence only showed more clearly the untidy state of the old resting place of the Dover dead. . . . The gardener's work was entrusted to Mr George Clark. The ground has been nicely levelled and about six feet from the fence all round, there has been made a slope or batter forming a sort of foss which, while it is an additional protection against fence climbers, has afforded a convenient place for fixing ancient headstones against the wall. Between two and three hundred in number of these 'sermons in stones' forming a most interesting collection of curiously carved and quaintly worded memorials of old Dovorians are there for the quiet study of those who have a liking for serious contemplation. . . .'

Thomas Rigden, in 1844 in his 'A Short Sketch of Dover' on the subject of the old churchyard of St. Martin le Grand, says: 'In 1631 [when the celebrated John Reading was minister], a portion of the churchyard was demised to the parishioners of St. Mary's. On the 17 Jan. 1630-1 a lease was directed to be made to the churchwardens and parishioners of the parish church of St. Mary of 'a peece of ground knowne by the name of St. Martin's Church yeard, conteyning in breadth twentie and twoe taylor's yards, and in length ffortie and sixe taylor's yards, OF LATE CONVERTED IN PARTE FOR A CHURCH YARD, to be holden for the terme of twentie one yeares, att the yearly rent of thirtene shillings.' About two years after this a more formidable opponent than Mindge appeared in the person of Mr James Hughessen, who had previously given one hundred pounds to the Corporation. In 1633, it was shewn that Sir Ralph Freeman and others had granted to Hughessen the church and church-yard of St. Martin, with other property; '. . . an Agreement was entered into between the parties as appears by the following resolution passed on the 9th Sept. 1633 [here he quotes] . . . Hughessen thus became possessed of the property in question; a portion of which [five years afterwards] he conveyed for 1000 years to the parish of St. Mary's by deed, bearing date the 18th May 1638 . . . all that land heretofore parcell of the churchyard of St. Martin to be hereafter used for a buriall place of the dead belonging to the parish of St. Mary.'

Old illustrations show gravestones and large tombs to the front of the church where Cannon Street passes, and it is known that vaults still lie under the Cannon street carriageway which was widened in 1858 and 1893-94. Mary Horsley, in her 'More Memories of Old Dover' published in 1895, says:

'Rather a favourite play place, which has been destroyed, was an altar tomb standing just outside the West door of St. Mary's Church. We often had races round and round this tomb, sitting on it when we tired, in company with wayfarers who rested there, putting their bundles or loads on its flat top. When some restorations were being done in the Church, this old play place was cleared away, the road paved, the entrance to the Church railed, and steps arranged outside, instead of inside, the building.'

Because so many of the repositioned stones are sunk, in some cases quite deeply, the inscriptions, 78 per cent of which are still discernible, while worn or illegible above ground, have been preserved in a good state below. There are several very old stones to be found here, up to 250 years old, sculpted in ornate shapes headed with skulls, cross-bones, tools, coffins and rising suns, often double width stones that must have been difficult to handle. The oldest readable stone in the churchyard, now propped against a wall of the church is that to one of the Dell family, who died in 1652.

All these stones represent merely a fraction of the total number of people who had to be buried in St. Mary's over the centuries. It staggers the imagination as to where space could be found for them all. Little wonder that the new cemetery at Cowgate had to be opened in 1837 and not surprising that from the seventeenth century another site was used to relieve the pressure.

In tackling the job of recording all these inscriptions, unwittingly done at the time almost exactly one hundred years after the repositioning, the copying team used proven methods where the eye failed. Fascias were enhanced with brushes, sandpaper, wet/dry blocks, the application of water, by inspection in different light, time of day, distance and angle of sight. Lettering was checked and re-checked. The hot weather almost throughout the project was of immense benefit. As to the sunken stones around the perimeter, more strenuous effort was involved in removal and replacement of what has been estimated to be at least one ton of soil to read and record the inscriptions below soil level.

The results greatly exceed original expectations, due in the main to the legibility of so many inscriptions below ground, protected by the soil of the years. Even those stones still standing in their original positions, although not wholly legible, have for the most part, yielded up their information by reference to burial registers and Bax's transcripts, cross-checks which were applied in all cases.

Although very time consuming, consulting the parish records has enabled transcribers to confirm details on inscriptions, both of names, dates and other details, and to add complimentary information to this finished list. In most cases the typed transcript of St. Mary's Registers, covering all dates up to about 1840-41 was used; as this is indexed, it facilitated easier checking of names than long searches through the original registers, particularly when a date was in doubt on the inscription. However, researchers are advised to check original registers whenever possible, as there are mistakes in the transcript, information from which was also used for the International Genealogical Index produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons).

Some stones recorded by Bax could not be identified, but his details have nevertheless been included in the finished list.

THE PATTENDENS OF DOVER

Two memorials, now gone, deserve special mention. Unrecorded by Bax, although obviously existing in 1892, and more particularly in 1908 when featured, with photograph, in an article published in the *Dover Express*, were gravestones of the Pattenden family. Thomas

Pattenden, schoolmaster, died in 1748 and his son Thomas in 1819. With their respective wives they occupied a squared-off grave plot in the centre churchyard facing Church Street, with their headstones side by side (Thomas Pattenden Junior is known for his diary, covering local life in Dover at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, now deposited at the Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone), and for his water colour paintings of Dover, many in the care of Dover Museum. More recently, a tree grew from the centre of their graves, which reached such a size by modern times, that it had to be completely removed. In doing so, the stones must have been damaged, and they were never put back. Their whereabouts is not known. Only a dip in the ground now identifies the spot. It is of interest that Thomas Pattenden, Junr., by his will dated 1817, left the sum of £800, a fortune in those days, to St. Mary's, in annuities, the dividends arising from which were to be partly used for keeping the grave in good repair, the remainder to be yearly given for relief of six poor widows whose husbands were 'most recently' lost at sea.

Other thoughtful parishioners of times past left investments to St. Mary's church to help pay for maintenance and upkeep of their memorials in the churchyard, as well as for charitable causes in the parish. Some details have been included in the memorials list.

In St. Mary's churchyard, Dover's history is there to read. Mariners, pilots, customs and naval officers, soldiers, militia-men, transients and those who died at sea and abroad only connected to Dover by their last landfall, are united in their burial place with local artisans: blacksmiths, solicitors, publicans, a surgeon, a plumber, a marine artist, jurats and mayors, not to mention the many others whose only testimonial is their names and dates of death. It is remarkable how many of these surnames are still familiar among present-day townfolk of Dover and the names of their streets.

If not their inscriptions, the very stones themselves bear witness to the history of the generations which have almost literally swept past and over them. Some of the removed grime must have resulted from the effects of the bombing and shelling of the town between the years 1940-44, acts of war which no doubt destroyed some and might well have destroyed all of them for ever. At last this gap in Dover's records has been filled. It is hoped that at some time in the near future, a complete listing of the memorials inside the Church will be completed.

In 1956, a Book of Remembrance with written memorials to many of Dover's departed citizens, in war and peace over many years was dedicated in memory of the Revd. A.S. Cooper. It was placed within the church on view to all who might care to inspect its pages. Mr Cooper is understood to have had an active interest and involvement in the compilation and preservation of his parish records. It is, therefore, hoped that in pursuit of these ideals, the finished list of churchyard

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memorials will be kept with the Book of Remembrance as an added and lasting record for posterity.

Copies of the list of churchyard memorials with map, photographs and drawings, are deposited with St. Mary's Church, the Kent Family History Society, who are making available microfiche copies, Kent County Archives at Canterbury Cathedral and Maidstone, The Society of Genealogists, Dover District Council, and Dover Public Library Local Studies Collection.

Transcribing Team: Bob and Kathleen Hollingsbee, Ruth Nicol, Martyn C. Webster, and the late Colin Jervis.

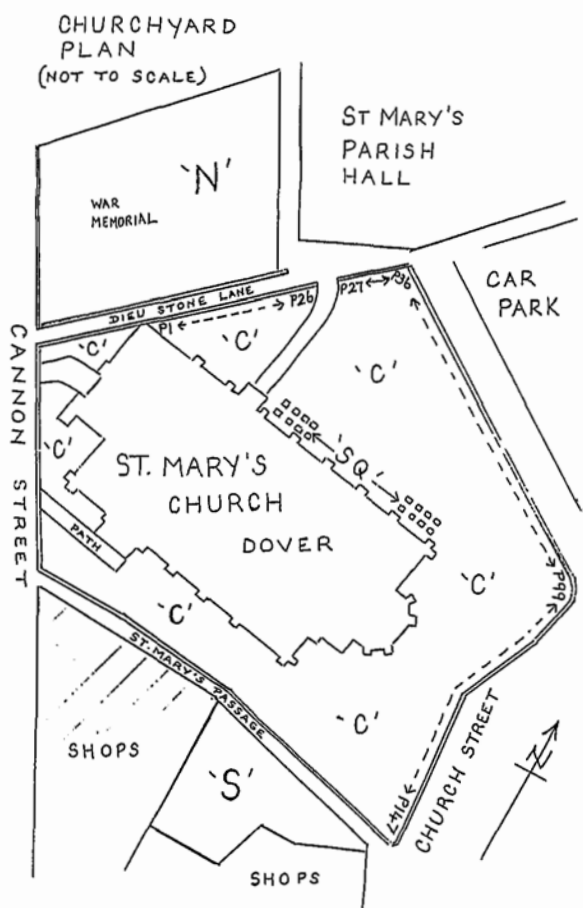


Fig. 1. Churchyard Plan (not to scale).



East view of St. Mary's Church, 1792.