

From the February 2012 edition of St Mary's 'Church News'

Burials inside St Mary's

A unique feature of St Mary's burial registers between 1600 and 1800 is the recording of the names of people buried inside the church. This privilege would have been reserved for the more prominent families in the town, but over these two centuries 780 people are recorded as having been buried inside the church. This involved the constant lifting and repositioning of the paving stones, and in some cases we are told about stones being broken. Some cracked stones can still be seen today e.g. in the north chapel.

The register entries about these burials are of exceptional interest in that they not only tell us the name of the deceased, but also record exactly where in the church the burial took place in relation to certain fixed points or where certain people sat. So we can learn a lot about the geography of the church interior in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, there were two cross aisles, an upper aisle and a lower aisle, and it is likely that the lower aisle ran across the church between the south and north porches, and that the seating perhaps stretched right back to the wall at the rear of the church. The upper cross aisle ran across the church, as now, below the chancel steps. Also whilst there are frequent references to burials near the north or south porches, there is not a single reference to the west door or west porch, and the implication is that it did not exist, at least as an entrance to the church. This area may have been used by the bell ringers. The ledger stones laid across the floor just inside the west entrance were not originally there, and have been moved from other parts of the church.

Burials are recorded in the two cross aisles, the north, south, and middle aisles, and in the north, south and middle chancels. The north and south chancels are now the north chapel and the choir robing area. In addition, there was the Howard vault beneath the chancel, where members of the families who lived at Audley End House were buried.

From about 1750 there was a gallery around the west end of the church, as there are references to burials near the supporting pillars, but one entry records that this was pulled down in 1792, during the great restoration of the church in that year. Earlier in 1669 there is a reference to the marrying church door (the south door), presumably because marrying couples would enter from that door, and there are many references to the "maids' seats", not, I think, in the sense of serving maids, but meaning unmarried girls who did not, it seems, sit with their parents. These seats were near the lower cross aisle mainly on the south side near the "marrying door". Even more intriguing is one reference to the "young men's seats", and other parts of the church were reserved for servants and the Grammar School boys.

The VIPs of course sat in more exalted positions. The Earl and Countess of Suffolk from Audley End had seats facing each other at the entrance to the chancel, and the Mayor and Corporation sat in the front rows on the north side. Many other important families had seats reserved for them in various parts of the church – presumably the closer they were to the Earl of Suffolk or the Mayor the better.

If anyone is interested in the full list and locations of in-church burials, please see the church website under "History".

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