

THE BYRDE AND WOODHALL MEMORIALS

These two memorials date back to the early 1600s and are the oldest on the church walls. They are situated side by side in a prominent position on the north wall of the church towards the west end, and can be seen by turning left after entering the main west door. They are mentioned only in passing in the existing church histories.

The larger memorial commemorates William Byrde who died in 1568 at the early age of 31 and his widow Mary (nee Woodhall) who died in 1613. It is an impressive memorial with a Latin inscription in gold lettering on a black background, flanked by black marble pillars supporting the pediment, with the arms of Byrde above, and those of Woodhall and Thinley supporting the right and left pillars respectively.

William Byrde was a member of one of Walden's most notable families. There had been Byrdes in Walden since at least the early 1400s, and William's grandfather was one of the five prominent residents who petitioned Henry VIII in 1513 resulting in the establishment of the Guild of the Holy Trinity. The family held substantial property in the town and surrounding areas, particularly on the north side of the town on both sides of the Little Walden Road and between Little Walden Road and Windmill Hill, and also in Littlebury. Byrds Farm on the right of Little Walden Road, takes its name from the family.

William Byrde himself, along with his three brothers, had been educated at Cambridge University, and in 1561 he married Mary Woodhall, from another prominent Walden family. Mary's father and grandfather had both held the position of borough Treasurer (equivalent to Mayor in later times), the family having originally migrated from Cumbria in the first decade of the sixteenth century. William and Mary had three sons, one of whom, William, was a distinguished lawyer, who became Dean of the Arches in London, and one daughter.

Following William Byrde's death in 1568, Mary became a widow at the early age of 23, and it was only a year later that she remarried to William Woodhall, a distant cousin from that part of the Woodhall family which had remained in Cumbria. Not only was William Woodhall related to Mary, but he was well-connected in another way, being a nephew of Edmund Grindall, who at the time of the marriage was Bishop of London, the diocese which then included the whole of Essex. Grindall, like the Woodhalls, was of Cumbrian origin, and was promoted to be Archbishop of York in 1570 and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1575.

Mary Woodhall gave birth to eleven more children by her second marriage, and she was widowed for the second time when William Woodhall died in 1603. It is William Woodhall who is commemorated in the smaller Latin memorial on the left of the Byrde memorial. The Woodhall memorial is flanked by columns with floral designs, incorporating on the left, what appears to be an hour-glass possibly signifying the mortality of man, and on the right a

skull supported by wings, possibly signifying the idea of resurrection. The memorial bears the arms of Woodhall quartered with Grindall above. Below the memorial and set in the wall separate from it, there are three large roundels containing the Woodhall/Grindall arms in the middle flanked by Woodhall alone on each side. It certainly looks as though these roundels formed part of an altar tomb which has since been removed. If the Woodhalls had an altar tomb, the Byrdes probably had one too.

We do know from the burial registers that the Byrde and Woodhall tombs were originally surrounded by railings, since some of the burial locations of individuals within the church, are given in relation to the railings. A much fuller account of the Byrde and Woodhall families is given in an article by John Read in the Saffron Walden Historical Journal Volume 6 No 12 Autumn 2006.

John Read