

Thomas Turner father and son by John Read. No 11 From the May 2016 edition of Saint Mary's Parish News.

If you look down at the floor after going up the steps into the North Chapel, you will see two large ledger stones which have had their brass removed. The one on the right contains the outline of a couple, and that on the left a single male figure. It was only recently that I realised that these two stones must be the burial places of Thomas Turner the elder (died 1610) together with his wife Joane, and their son, Thomas Turner the younger (died 1623). The evidence is the dull brass wall plate on the wall to the left of the north door, commemorating Thomas the elder and his wife. The height and width of this plate match exactly with the dimensions of the rectangular indentations at the feet of the ledger stone figures, and the wall plate also has a number of screw holes at top and bottom, which match exactly with marks on the ledger stones. The church register entries for father and son also confirm that they were both buried in the North Chapel. It is remarkable that, having been removed from the floor, the brass somehow survived the destructive Civil War period and the restoration of the 1790s, to be affixed to the wall.

The Turners were one of the most prominent families in Saffron Walden in the seventeenth century, and we can learn a lot about them from their wills in the National Archives, which can be read online. The will of Thomas Turner the elder shows that he was a mercer (dealer in cloth) with many properties in Saffron Walden, Debden and Wimbish, including his house in Hill Street with two acres of pasture ground behind it. One can only speculate that this might have included the present Jubilee Gardens and/or the Waitrose site. Thomas the elder divided his substantial estate between most of his seven sons and three daughters, including Thomas the younger.

Thomas the younger, who died a bachelor in June 1623, is best known for the story that he one day got lost in the forest around Audley End, and was guided back to Walden by the sound of the church bells. In gratitude for this, he left money in his will for the bellringers to ring each year on the anniversary of his death in June, which they still do every year on Great Ringing Day. The story of Thomas getting lost in the forest may be apocryphal, but he certainly did leave money for the ringers in his will, a bequest which the Saffron Walden Society of Change Ringers still receive every year. In his will, where he is named as a weaver, he instructed his executors to invest some of his money in land or buildings within forty miles of Walden with an annual income of twenty pounds, which was to be divided into 'parcells' to provide for the payment annually of various gifts. Among these was a 'parcell' of twenty shillings for a preacher to make a memorial sermon yearly on the date of his burial, another 'parcell' of thirty three shillings and four pence 'to be bestowed yearly upon such persons which shall ring the bells of the church of Walden upon the day of the year on which I shall be buried', and another 'parcell' of six shillings and eight pence to the parish clerk 'for his pains in preparing the bells, and five dozen of penny breads to be bestowed weekly every Sunday after divine service upon the poor people of Walden'.

John Read