

A GRAVE AFFAIR

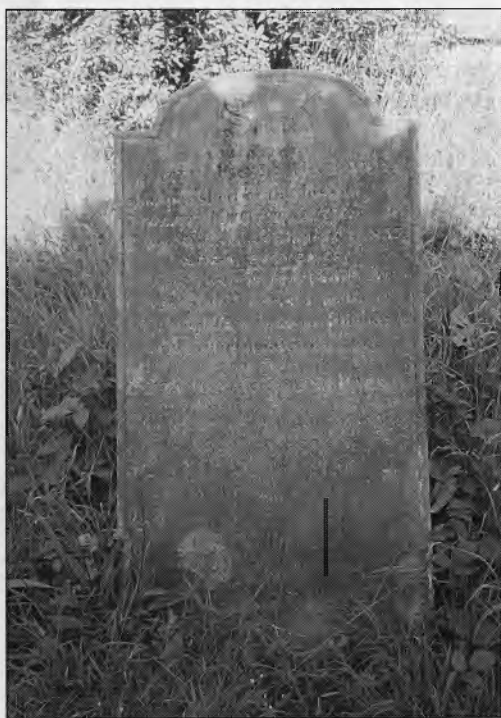
by Derek Leach

On Saturday 12 August Martyn Webster, an Immigration Officer now living in Brighton but born and brought up in Dover - as were several generations before him - led a group of 28, including several from the Dover Society, round the churchyards of Dover town centre. Earlier this year he had led a group round the municipal cemeteries on Copse Hill. Martyn is a very active member of the Kent Family History Society and has been involved in transcribing the words on all the remaining headstones of these churchyards on to microfiche which is now available in Dover Reference Library.

We started with old St. James' where most of the old churchyard was cleared of its ancient tombstones and skeletal remains in 1973 to make way for the Leisure Centre car park. We were shown the very few tombstones remaining but most were broken up for hardcore. There is no record of where the human remains were taken, but apparently some were buried in a long trench in the new Charlton cemetery and, perhaps because of the sheer quantity, the remainder may have gone to the council rubbish tip at Sleed Wood. With this demolition went a 1000 years of history except for the transcriptions of all 461 monuments. Tombs underneath the nave of the 'tidy ruin' remain intact.

Moving on to St. Mary's churchyard, Martyn first pointed out the 'Waterloo Memorial' of the Hart family which includes a son killed

at Waterloo. Over the years a number of graves have been lost by building encroaching upon the churchyard: Canon Puckle's restoration of the church in 1843, the Biggin Street road widening in 1893 and the building of the new church hall more recently. In 1891, 147 headstones were moved to stand against the boundary walls due to the severe congestion and in 1989 all 343 of the remaining memorials were transcribed on to microfiche. Headstones give a good indication of



Headstone of Nathaniel Harmer of the Mailpacket "Violet"

14 who were the local families and who were the people of influence. Sometimes they give biographical detail that is not available anywhere else. Martyn told us of the Pattenden memorial to father (died 1748) and son, Thomas (died 1819) which no longer exists. Thomas Pattenden wrote detailed diaries covering his domestic life and that of the town which are preserved in the County Records Office. He left £800 to keep his grave in order and to provide money for six poor widows. We wondered what had happened to this bequest. We were shown the memorial to Robert Cleveley (died 1809) a maritime painter, the three adjacent headstones of the King family - an old Dover name, the Worthington tomb - another well-known local family of coopers - and the Shipdem tomb. John Shipdem built the Round House in old Townwall Street which was such a landmark for many years. The oldest stone found was that of Mary Dell who died in 1652. The churchyard remained in use for burials until 1837 when the Mowll family donated ground for the new churchyard at the foot of the Western Heights which we know as Cowgate Cemetery.

We left St. Mary's with a mystery. Martyn thought that the small separate churchyard behind Hughes, the gents' outfitters, was not part of St. Mary's churchyard since apparently none of the burials feature in St. Mary's records. This raised the possibility that this small churchyard could be the sole remnant of old St. Peter's Church which stood in the Market Square in mediaeval times on the site of the present Lloyds/TSB Bank; however, the burial dates on the headstones are far too recent for St. Peter's. Ivan Green believes that, following the demolition of old St. Peter's Church, its churchyard became an open cemetery. If so, this



Members Sheila Cope and David Attwood inspect the Sgt. Monger monument

would explain headstones later than the demise of the church.

On our way to Cowgate Cemetery we stopped by the Unitarian Church where there are still a number of headstones and Martyn also told us of Taverners Gardens (now under York Street) which was the graveyard for the Baptists of the town.

Entering Cowgate Cemetery we heard that it was used mainly from 1837 to 1870 with only a few burials thereafter. At that time the 2.5 acres on the lower slopes of the Western Heights would have given a splendid view over the town to the Castle - a fitting site for the 'movers and shakers' of Dover in the nineteenth century, such as the Knockers, the Mannerings, the Mowlls and Steriker Finnis, who are buried in vaults built into the side of the hill.

These neglected and decaying vaults are now fortunately being repaired. Just inside the entrance, until demolished in 1952, was a small chapel and sexton's house. The most recent stone is in fact of the sexton, William Petchey, who died in 1981. It was in 1952 that it was decided to plant shrubs and trees throughout the cemetery which have since run riot and, with the brambles, now obscure most of the headstones as well as the glorious view. We did see the memorial to Nathaniel Harmer aged 26, one of only three bodies recovered from the loss of the Dover mail packet, *Violet*, on the Goodwins during a terrible storm in 1857. This tragedy left 16 widows with 42 children. The monument to Sergeant John Monger of Dover Artillery Volunteers can still be seen. He was killed in 1860 by the bursting of a gun at Archcliffe Fort during practice. The simple memorial to Jane (died 1858)



Jane and Emanuel Sochaczewski memorial

and Emanuel Sochaczewski (died 1865), who was agent for the Belgian government at Dover, conceals another tragic story. Dashing from the Ship Hotel opposite the Granville Dock to the boat train in the old Harbour Station, Emanuel ran into a supporting pillar and fell between the train and the platform. His mangled body was retrieved but he was alive and was taken to his home in York Street where he died. We also heard that one corner of the cemetery was reserved for unknown shipwrecked sailors.

As we left Cowgate at the end of our tour we wondered why this cemetery should be so neglected. Apparently, concern about its poor state was raised in 1978 and there was a campaign to improve matters. The White Cliffs Countryside Project now manages the cemetery for Dover District Council, with the aim of conserving its wild life and plants as well as its memorials, but, apparently, without any separate financial assistance. No doubt the WCCP is doing its best within its limited resources, but surely Dover's famous people and ordinary folk of the nineteenth century deserve better!

Footnote (received from Derek Leach, November 2000)

The state of Cowgate Cemetery was reported in the local press and Kirk Alexander of the White Cliffs Countryside Project invited the Dover Society to consider assisting with the upkeep of the cemetery as an ongoing project. Representatives of the Dover Society and of the WCCP met at Cowgate in October. As a result we are satisfied that the prime concern of both organisations - restoring some dignity to the cemetery and preserving its wildlife - can be met by an ongoing programme supplemented by the Dover Society. Proposals will be considered by the Society's Executive Committee at its November meeting.