

St James' Church, Dover – A Moratorium

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The year 2023 saw the fiftieth anniversary of the total clearance in 1973 of the graveyard at the former ancient second parish of Dover, St James', off Woolcomber Street.

There has not till now ever been any recognition of that fact anywhere. The last "Historic Dover" information board fixed by Dover District Council out of sight against the inner flint wall of the former nave within the church ruin, never made mention of it, having now been removed as part of a regeneration scheme and not replaced. As a result, anyone with family or local history interest relating to former parishioners, also the many visitors who pass by on their way to and from the castle who might wonder, have no idea that a burial ground was once there. More importantly they cannot know where those who were buried, with or without gravestones and memorials there, were actually removed to and in what circumstances.

The 1973 clearance made way for a car park attached to a new leisure centre and swimming pool that came to be built adjacent to the junction of Woolcomber Street, the former Trevanion Street and the extended Townwall Street. A somewhat forlorn looking, little used, car park still stands on the old graveyard site, yet the leisure centre was demolished in 2019, leaving a large gravel covered empty space where plans are now afoot to emplace a drive-in McDonald's fast foodery.

Before extensive second world war destruction by enemy shelling and bombing from across the Channel, St James' parish was the well populated, close-knit so-called "Trevanion"

community of small roads and streets, with little houses, shops and pubs etc. that had been there for centuries. Without looking at old photographs and street plans it is almost impossible now to realise, or even imagine, just what a busy built-up place this was and how much has been lost.

St James' church itself was victim of this irretrievable destruction through the years 1942-4 which demolished the vestry and half of the tower. The remaining tower structure then collapsed in 1950 before any renovations could be made, even had there been the will and the money to do so.

By a church faculty in 1953 St James parish was merged with St Mary's and the fallen building purposely left as a memorial to those killed by the shelling, named the "Tidy Ruin". This was tragic for Dover, a town that lost so much of its physical history. But in losing the graveyard remains of its departed citizens in 1973 without record was even worse for the burials that had taken place here for centuries.



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The graveyard was once walled and railed at the side of the church, but by the time of its clearance had become seriously overgrown and neglected. In its time however it would have clearly appeared crowded out with grave-stones, tomb monuments and memorials. Old photos clearly show this. To the rear of the site there were three levels of vaults cut into the chalky hillside (one such may still be seen today) accessible by way of a side entrance and steps at the top of Hubert Passage, the now bricked up gateway only just discernible within the surrounding wall and undergrowth. The way over these vaults was called St James Walk, a stone low down in the passage wall bearing that name still legible. Graveyard burials ceased in 1854 when the new St James' cemetery was opened at Copt Hill, although it was still possible to make interments in existing family graves in the original graveyard.

Many of Dover's important deceased citizens, and indeed a number, some distinguished, who died while travelling through the port, were buried here as well as in more vaults, still existing, below the floor of the church interior itself. The walls of that interior bore many memorial tablets, long since removed, a number it is believed being relocated to St Mary's Church.

Dover is immensely fortunate however that diligent work has been done over many years to record the memorial inscriptions from St James' graves, vaults, interior wall and flagstone tablets so that it is as complete and exhaustive as it can be. This is the one good thing to emerge from a tragedy.

The first record of any memorials appeared in a sketch plan of 1801 with pencilled updates in 1826 and 1832

attributable, it is believed, to the parish clerk, a Mr Bushell, showing the locations of vaults and bricked graves within the church allocated by surname only. They are still there. This is important to know in case any excavation work is ever contemplated. In 1838 a partial listing of selected interior memorials appeared in the "Epitome of the History of Kent".

A list of headstone inscriptions in the churchyard was undertaken in handwritten notebooks accompanied by a numbered ground plan by H M and J H Mowl, later compiled and alphabetically indexed anonymously in 1949, after the church's destruction.

In 1973 Dover Borough Council made a summary surname listing for publication in the local press prior to imminent clearance of the churchyard so as to inform anyone who was interested in any particular grave. At the same time local journalist Graham Tutthill wrote two informative articles expanding on the subject for the Dover Express with photos on 22nd and 29th June 1973.

Douglas Welby in his book "The Tidy Ruin" (1976) published on behalf of the Dover Archaeological Group, which had involved itself, gave much detail on the history and clearance of the site, which is the best of all in explaining the story of the graveyard and its contents. This too gives an alphabetical list of interments with biographical detail for some of them. Finally, the Kent Family History Society produced microfiches bringing all the aforementioned data together co-ordinated by Kathleen Hollingsbee and myself, with one major exception - news of the ultimate fate of the gravestones of which there were 491 in total including the hillside vaults with the human remains of those interred beneath and within.

The 1953 merging of St James' parish with that of St Mary's into a unitary parish and the deconsecrating of the church resulted in its graveyard becoming by definition "disused" although it seems that the domain remained the property of the Church of England until 1970 when acquired by compulsory purchase order by Dover Borough Council (the archive for this has alas been lost). Thus under council control the removal of the human remains at St James' graveyard became one of the last major decisions made by the old Dover Borough Council before it became Dover District Council in 1974. Unbelievably, no contemporary records of any of these events now survives!

As it turned out, the council had little previous experience in dealing with graveyard clearance on such a scale, nor for that matter on any scale. The legalities required for this gruesome operation fell under two laws as follows:

Burial Act 1875 Section 25 makes it unlawful in England and Wales to disturb human burials without a license from the Secretary of State, or on ground consecrated by the rites of the Church of England, without the permission of the church.

Open Spaces Act 1906 section 11 also lays down a procedure to be followed in the event of tombstones etc. being removed from disused burial grounds. Basically, the obligations are as follows: - • at least three months before removing (or changing the position of) any tombstone etc. to record details of the stone (i.e. inscription thereon); to insert (at least three times) an advertisement in a local newspaper of the proposal; to post a notice on the church door (if there is one); and to give similar notice to known relatives of the deceased; and • in the case of consecrated ground, to obtain a faculty from the Diocesan Authority.

Notices were therefore placed in the local press and consent of the Secretary of State was obtained. The Folkestone firm J. H. Walker, which is still in business, was awarded the task of clearance, which was no doubt challengingly novel to them, also of a magnitude that no one had anticipated due to the extent and depth of the buried remains below the graves. This was of course a very delicate matter, and the site was suitably screened off from public view.

From research carried out by me largely based on verbal evidence from witnesses at the time, it has been established that lorry after lorry carted off through the town their pitiful cargoes for reburial at a trench created along the lower hedge line to the side of Charlton Cemetery along the



St James' charnel house, looking towards Dover Street, not long before the clearance of the foundations and stone monuments.



Two stereo photographs views of the church and charnel house during the 1665 annular restoration, looking towards St James' Street. - Note pictures from Rev Hollingshead collection.

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Old Guston Road at Copt Hill. No written record can be found of it all however (perhaps conveniently so). There are few people now who remember the operation, but this author has heard that other unknown deposit sites were also used, though to a lesser extent. Irreverent comments were apparently overheard from passers-by as the trucks went through town, many asking where the bones were being taken.

From our point of view fifty years later this all seems a very sorry and covert end for Dover's former citizens and one can only ask on hindsight whether it could have perhaps been handled differently or any better.

The standing remains of St James' were grade II listed as early as 1949. The grounds on which the ruins sit was designated a scheduled monument in 1950. These first designations recognize the historic and architectural value of St James' at national level as a heritage asset. The approved Dover District Heritage Strategy 2013 identified the ecclesiastical heritage of the district to be of outstanding significance.

In 2016 the architectural firm Purcells were commissioned by the Dover District Council to undertake a condition survey of



St James' Church Tidy Ruin

the ruinous masonry at St James'.

In 2018 the upstanding fabric of the ruined church was included by Historic England in the Heritage at Risk Register.

On 4th February 2019, the detailed "Purcell Report" was deliberated upon by the cabinet of Dover District Council under the heading "Works to St James' Church, Dover". The resulting recommendations were as follows:

1. To approve a project that undertakes essential works to safeguard the structure in the short to medium-term and introduces railings to protect the structure, the space within the structure and anyone in the vicinity.

2. To delegate to the Strategic Director (Operations and Commercial) in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Property Management and Environmental Health, to take all necessary steps to deliver the project, including the awarding of relevant contracts.

The report notes that all work at St James' is subject to obtaining scheduled monument consent and any necessary planning consents. Thus, following a subsequent programme of council approved works to stabilise and conserve the ruins, Historic England inspected the site on 30 September 2022 and recommended that it should be removed from the register following the improvements in the site's condition. It is not known what consents, if any, were obtained.

All this having been said, no railings were installed around the site as had been recommended by the Purcell report nor explanation made publicly available for their absence. Ironically shortly after all this St James' church Tidy Ruin interior in 2023 was partly closed off and the south east wall put under scaffolding. This was

because the Walker family vault clearly depicted on the plan of 1832 had partly collapsed. A delicate operation then ensued to rebuild the vault and flint wall above in the process clearing away a lot of ivy and overgrowth which is now complete giving a much cleaner defined finish to the ruin.

It is encouraging however to note that the DDC did report desires, although not yet achieved, to have such protective railings emplaced around the ruins, and also, we hope to a gated front entrance facing the street. This would set the site off to best advantage, and as a deterrence to the current prevailing intrusion of graffiti and anti-social activities which blight a former sacred place. Examples to follow may be seen at other destroyed church ruin sites around the country in such places as Bristol, Southampton, Liverpool and London.

So much good work having been done thus far is nonetheless still incomplete and has been blighted by a planning application in 2024 for a McDonald's 24-hour drive-in to be sited directly next to the ruin with no barrier in between. The food outlet is proposed to be positioned exactly on the footprint of the former cleared graveyard site where it is believed that when the former leisure centre was built in 1974 that same site was left as an open space used for car parking only because of what it

once was. This planning proposal has been widely objected to not only by many locals but also very eminent bodies such as Historic England for what will be one of the most challenging planning applications to come before Dover District Council in modern times. In the opinion of this writer, it gives all the more reason for the recommended railing off of the monument to be undertaken as soon as possible for the threat that such a development would be to a former consecrated place, a scheduled monument and a listed building in a historically visual prominent position.

It is hoped that a new information board will be sited at the ruin in a prominent place so as to make amends for a long overdue omission at this 50th anniversary. To the side of the front entrance would seem to be the best for this, where old photographs show the church notice board once stood. All depends on the decision of a Heritage Officer and of course the McDonald's planning application.

Good news is that Dover District Council have now commissioned a memorial plinth to be placed later this year at Charlton cemetery to record the reinterment there of all those whose last resting place was once at the old church.

The people, now and who have gone before, of the ancient town and Cinque Port of Dover, and indeed the former St James' Parish Church (once Court till 1857 of the Lord Warden himself), deserve as much in amends for a major historical event that has been so sadly neglected and abandoned until now. The Tidy Ruin (that is perhaps not so tidy any more) now stands at another cross roads in its history and its continued protection by our generation as a memorial into the future is vital.



Proposed McDonald's