

Old St James' Churchyard and the Rawlinson Report

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During 2024, the Dover Society Executive took a special interest in the former Church of St. James the Apostle, known as 'The Tidy Ruin', and the adjoining site of its former churchyard. Severely damaged during WWII, the building was not demolished, but preserved as a 'tidy ruin', a memorial of the suffering endured by the people and town of Dover. Concerned about the deterioration of the building, our representations to DDC resulted in essential repairs being undertaken. We also lobbied DDC for protective railings around the building, which has not been successful to date.

The churchyard site became a car park for the new Dover Leisure Centre in the 1970s. The remains of those buried for centuries were first removed and then reinterred in Charlton Cemetery on Copt Hill.

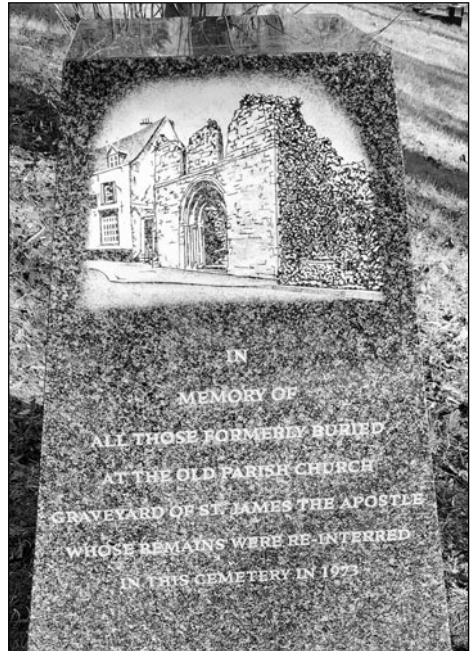
The Leisure Centre was demolished following the opening of the new Dover District Sports Centre at Whitfield. During 2024, a highly controversial planning application, covering the empty site and the car park, was submitted for a drive-through McDonald's. The Dover Society objected strongly to the application because of the likely adverse impact on both local and ferry

traffic, but we were also concerned about its close proximity to 'The Tidy Ruin'. After a lengthy delay, and despite a considerable number of objections, the DDC Planning Committee approved the application just before Christmas.

Our interest in the churchyard site revealed that the removal of human remains and their reburial elsewhere in 1973 had not been recognised at the time or since. Discussions with DDC have resulted in a commemorative plinth being erected close to the remains in Charlton Cemetery. The Society and DDC are planning a suitable 'unveiling' of the plinth in the spring.



Old St James



Plinth

Edwin Chadwick, one of the great social reformers of the 19th century, produced a national report in 1842, claiming that poor sanitary conditions, bad drainage, poor water supplies and overcrowded living conditions were the causes of cholera, typhoid and other prevalent diseases. As a result, the 1848 Public Health Act created local boards to oversee street cleaning, refuse collection, water supply and sewerage systems. Councils all over the country were soon enquiring about the state of their towns. Dover appointed Sir Robert Rawlinson (1810-1898) as first sanitary inspector and engineer under the Act to report on the state of the town, as he did for other towns and cities around the country.

Rawlinson's 1849 report makes terrifying reading today. There was no combined system of sewers and drains. Better class houses had cesspools; others made do with a tub under a privy seat, which was emptied at night into the scavengers' carts. The worst slums had no sanitation at all. Carts toured the town with clean water and collected waste water. Drinking water came from pumps and wells. Samples were taken from wells and were found to be contaminated by cesspool material and nearby burial grounds. These were full to overflowing, with the same plots being used over and over again, with some corpses only three feet underground. The smell was overpowering.

Rawlinson's research included the inspection of the town's churchyards and interviewing the local church officials responsible for them. The following is that portion of the Rawlinson Report concerning old St. James: "Intermural internment is not regarded as a monster evil and the feeling is very generally entertained in Dover by clergymen, grave diggers and many of the inhabitants; yet such was the state of the law that no local authority possessed the

power to prevent certain contaminated portions of ground being opened, if parishioners having what are termed family graves, demanded burial for their dead relations. The subject of fees is also found to induce pernicious interments.

John Carswell, sexton of St. James' parish, stated: 'The burial ground is attached to the church. There are dwelling houses bounding three sides of the graveyard. The ground is old but not full, I have, however, no wish to receive any more other than those who have ground here at present. Burials take place in vaults inside the church. There was a committee appointed some time ago to provide another ground and I have constantly asked for additional ground in which to bury strangers. I live near the churchyard and get more stench and nuisance from the dwelling houses near than I do from the graveyard.'

In this graveyard there are vaults formed in the face of the cliff and above the general surface of the ground, all of which have perforations for ventilation before spoken of. Up to this time there has not been any other burial grounds provided for this parish and great annoyance and inconvenience is suffered by the parishioners in consequence. In Woolcomber Street a small burial ground formerly existed, which belonged to the Society of Friends, the ground is now used as a coal yard. Full half the burial ground is occupied by brick vaults and brick graves; the other half part is not all applicable to general burial purposes, there being a custom to keep graves for twenty years and upwards where the deceased's friends are able to pay to the sexton one shilling or two a year. This causes the graves of paupers, soldiers, their wives and children, to be greatly crowded and, in many cases their graves are opened for the reception of a body, which is placed one on another in three weeks or a month

after the burial of the first. In these cases, the smell arising has been very great; so that your informant and the minister officiating have often complained of it, and the sexton has often complained of the difficulty he has had in opening them, arising from the nauseous smell. There are many corpses not more than three feet under the ground. I know of no part of the churchyard, excepting the small piece in the bank aforementioned, that can be opened without disturbing the remains of the dead in a very improper manner. The churchyard is also much crowded with tombs, headstones, rails, etc., and is altogether inapplicable for the purpose of a burial place for the parishioners of the parish and has been so considered for upwards of twenty years; the old sexton having, at that time, often told me he knew not where to dig a fresh grave.

The inhabitants of the parish in the year 1831 consisted of 1674 persons and 272 inhabited houses; in the year 1841 of 3056 persons and 521 houses, and extra-parochial district adjoining 205 inhabitants and 37 houses. The extra-parochial district having no burial ground of its own, [residents] are, with the parishioners of the parish, compelled to seek a burial place in the new burial ground of St. Mary's, (Cowgate), which is fast filling up, and subjects the parties to payment of double fees. Burial is allowed in the church in brick vaults and brick graves but is seldom applied for, and, when such is the case, proof is required that the corpse is in lead, and the vaults and brick graves are properly secured.

William Minter Bushell, parish clerk, your informant, has resided in the parish for upwards of forty years and succeeded his grandfather in the office in the year 1826, having officiated for some years previous. The churchyard of St. James, on the north, south and west sides is surrounded with

dwelling houses; those on the north and west sides having recently been erected. On the east side is a steep bank, adjoining a government battery, which has not more than two feet of earth on hard chalk rock. This bank, which was originally covered with trees and shrubs, has, within the last few years, been all excavated for the purpose of brick vaults and brick graves, excepting a small piece at the south end, which cannot be applied for general burial purpose. There are three tiers of vaults in the bank aforementioned; many of them have air bricks and apertures for ventilation, which I consider highly injurious to the health of the residents adjoining, and to children, who are generally, when allowed in the churchyard, peeping into and smelling at them.

The rector and the parishioners are desirous of obtaining a new burial ground."

The report led to the closure of the town's churchyards and the opening of the Copt Hill cemeteries from 1855 as legislated in the Burial Acts 1852-1857. It also recommended that the town should take over the three independent water companies and new waterworks to be built on Connaught Hill, drawing 2,000,000 gallons of water a day from 200-foot wells. Construction began in 1850 and was completed in 1854, followed soon by a sewage works and main drainage system. Following the 1853 Public Health Act for Dover, £70,000 was spent on a mains water supply with the whole of Dover covered over the next 25 years.

It is of note to record that nearly two hundred years later the Law Commission produced in 2024 a consultation paper (no.263) entitled Burial and Cremation which, interestingly, revisits the whole question for review and re-legislation in the modern context.