

# St James Memorial Plinth Unveiling

Words by Martyn Webster

At Charlton Cemetery 11am 19th April 2025

This event is unique and long overdue. It must be added to the annals of Dover as a significant moment in our town and port's illustrious history. To our generation, in our time, has now come the responsibility to put right where our predecessors fifty years ago, alas, fell short. Eastertide offers us the perfect opportunity to do this.

In 1973 the then Dover Corporation, as one of its last major decisions before the creation of Dover District Council the following year, agreed upon a plan to completely clear the graveyard at the old former parish church of St James the Apostle in Woolcomber Street to make way for a car park to a new (now demolished) leisure centre.

St James was for centuries Dover's second smaller parish, deconsecrated and merged with St Mary's in 1953. The population in the 1851 census was nearly 5,000 people.

The church building was severely damaged by shelling during the last war and compulsorily purchased by the corporation in 1970. It now stands as the so-called *Tidy Ruin*, an ancient monument and listed building, bearing permanent testimonial to the suffering of the people of Dover in wartime. Throughout and until this time the old graveyard had become overgrown and badly neglected.

In order to achieve its plan, the corporation had first to obtain the permission of the Secretary of State for the Home Office under the appropriate legislation (which pertains to this day) for the removal and reburial of all interred

human remains. All monuments and tombstones would be removed at the council's expense and destroyed. Heirs to those buried could apply for permission to rebury or cremate the remains. It is not known if anyone did.

Walker Brothers of Folkestone were engaged to undertake the huge, unenviable clearing operation which they did in June and July of 1973. This included the excavation of three tiers of vaults carved into the cliff face. This was a unique operation without local precedence for them and for Dover Corporation, all work discreetly done behind suitable screening. To everyone's consternation however, when thinking there were about one thousand graves to clear, the workmen were confronted with the harrowing task of removing several times that number interred to an approximate depth of four metres (thirteen feet).

All these human remains were conveyed to a site here at Charlton Cemetery and were reburied in a long trench by the roadside where the hedge now stands. It is believed that a small ceremony of blessing was conducted by St Mary's parish, but no record can be traced of it. In fact, despite sustained and persistent research by me and many others over the years, no official records of any kind can be found to have survived for any of this ponderous operation. This, therefore, is all the more reason for our presence here today fifty years later.

Although the burial register begins in 1576 the number of human souls represented by the reinterments here is incalculable

and must number among the thousands through the nearly one thousand years of the St James church's existence. Burials in the graveyard ceased in 1854 when the new St James Cemetery opposite was opened.

Nearly 500 graves and vaults with headstones were removed, with the loss of their valuable inscriptions. Fortunately, we have record of most of them, which include mayors, distinguished, sometimes titled citizens of our town and elsewhere as well as those from abroad and afar who died while passing through the port, not to mention the countless numbers of local townfolk and also many unknowns washed up on our shores. But the sad fact remains that the vast majority of the deceased are known only unto God.

Thus, we have arrived here today. On behalf of the Dover Society and the people



*St James Memorial Plaque - Rev Melissa Carter, Jenny Olpin, Councillor Briggs and Councillor Cowan*

of Dover past and present, I would like to thank Councillor Cowan, Chairman Dover District Council, in their responding to the omission in our history by their generously funding this fine memorial plinth on the fiftieth anniversary of the event. Also, for the presence here today of Councillor Briggs, Town Mayor, whose Town and Castle Ward embraces the old St James church and graveyard site. I must also add in the tributes particular mention of John Fagg and Neil Scrivener.

As all written record of the St James reburials was lost, reliance has had to be placed entirely upon first hand witness memories. Much knowledge of these events might otherwise have been lost forever. This is truly invaluable. John was park keeper and has maintained a close personal interest in these fine municipal cemeteries around us, having photographed every single headstone here. Thank you, John.

Neil Scrivener's work as the stonemason for this fine plinth could not have been excelled, so that this memorial will long endure as testimony to the people of the former St James' parish reburied here. I thank him most sincerely for his collaboration with Jon Iveson of Dover Museum in the creation of this wonderful piece of work.

*I then invited Councillors Cowan and Briggs to step forward and together unveil the plinth with some words of their own.*

*This was followed by blessings and prayers, given by Rev Melissa, incumbent of Charlton church, as is appropriate for the consecrated ground upon which we stand, where the remains lay and to the Christian rites to which their bodies were all first set to earth.*