

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
BLAKE MUSEUM



BRIDGWATER BURIAL GROUNDS

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE COMPILED BY MILES PETERSON OF THE FRIENDS OF
WEMBDON ROAD CEMETERY.



Wembdon Road Cemetery

Photo: Friends of Wembdon Road Cemetery

Medieval

Not much is known about burial practice in the vicinity of Bridgwater before the Middle Ages, besides the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries nearby in Wembdon and Cannington. For the town itself the earliest evidence we have is medieval and we know of four burial places in the old town.

The largest was St Mary's Parish Church. Burial took place outside in the churchyard, or inside the church for richer members of the community and important clergy, near to the sacred altars. Not much evidence for these early times survives, but on the north side of the church can be seen the much eroded remains of two reclining medieval effigies, evidently important people in their time and possibly the benefactors for the building of that side aisle of the church. Most of the townsfolk would be buried in the churchyard, which extends to about half an acre in extent, which meant the re-use of graves over time was necessary. After a

number of years the grave's occupant would be dug up and the bones either deposited at the bottom of the new cut, or removed to the charnel house in St Mary's crypt for reverent storage. Once the charnel house became full of bones, a deep pit in the churchyard would be dug for them.

More permanent burial took place at Bridgwater's two other large ecclesiastic establishments, at the Franciscan Friary in Friarn Street and at St John's Hospital in Eastover. Here would be buried the respective friars or canons, as well as wealthy patrons, or in the case of the hospital, those who died in its care. Few reminders of these institutions survive today; two incised grave slabs from the hospital were recovered in the nineteenth century and can be seen in the niches inside St Mary's Church on the south side. There was also found half of an effigy of a knight, which was painted, which was kept for a time at Chilton Polden Priory. Its current whereabouts is unknown. Both institutions were suppressed at the reformation. The Friary is somewhere under the Broadway and Friarn Avenue, while the Hospital is under the southeast end of Eastover.

The fourth burial place was along the north edge of what is now Chandos Street. This was the small bank of mud between the castle wall and the moat. A row of shallow cut graves were found here in the 1980s and probably represent where criminals executed in the castle were buried.

The Reformation

Although doctrinal changes in worship followed the break from the Catholic Church of Rome, and attitudes to death were likewise transformed with the ending of purgatory and intercession with and for the dead, burial practice in St Mary's church continued largely unchanged. The poor were buried outside; the rich buried inside, as evidenced by the fantastic alabaster memorial in the chancel of the church, which remembers the Irish knight Sir Francis Kingsmill and his two sons.



The Kingsmill monument in Saint Mary's Church

Photo: the late Dr Peter Cattermole .

After the legalising of religious non-conformity in 1688 - (the allowing of religious movements other than the Church of England)- smaller independent congregations formed about the town and set up their own chapels and burial places.

The oldest was established in Dampiet Street in 1688 and now homes the Unitarian community. They had a small burial ground to the back of the chapel, which is now under the school room. The Unitarians also

had a burial ground on Friarn Street which is now below the garage next to the Green Dragon Pub.

The Baptist congregation established themselves in St Mary Street in 1692 and they had a small burial ground in front of the chapel behind a small row of cottages, which once obscured the main building. This burial ground now lies under the car park, although a few memorials can be found propped against the alleyway wall.

The Quakers established a burial ground in Albert Street by at least 1781, which continued in use until 1917. Aside from a small part being cut off for the construction of the Broadway, it can still be seen today and a number of memorials survive.

The Congregationalist movement built a chapel in Friarn Street in 1822, the Zion Chapel, which had a burial ground to its front, which was in use from then until 1859. This burial ground was destroyed when it was dug up in 2015. In 1837 the Mariners congregation founded a chapel in St John Street and had a small burial ground at the back, which is now a car park. This was closed for burial in 1853.

The Roman Catholic community had a small chapel in Gordon Street which had a small burial ground, which was in use between 1848 and 1890. This burial ground was destroyed when it was dug up in 2006.

Along with all these Dissenting burial grounds, in the nineteenth century two further Church of England burial grounds were added. In 1839 the church and churchyard of Holy Trinity Church were built and laid out. Burial was ceased in 1853 and the church was demolished in 1963 although the churchyard and its memorials can be seen today. On the east side of the river, in 1845 the new parish church of St John's was built, which also had a large churchyard, which contains many impressive memorials.

The Garden Cemeteries

Despite this apparent abundance of burial grounds, these were mostly very small and the majority of burials still took place in St Mary's Churchyard in the medieval manner as they had for countless generations. Bridgwater's population grew during the nineteenth century

3,634	1801
4,910	1811
6,155	1821
7,808	1831
10,430	1841
10,883	1851
12,120	1861
12,636	1871
12,704	1881
12,419	1891

Bridgwater Census figures – 1801-1891

Complaints were made throughout the 1840s about the disgusting conditions there, where bones littered the ground and the need to disturb old burials meant that bodies were being dug up without having properly decomposed. There were far more burials than the site could cope with and three waves of cholera made a bad situation worse and also choked all the other small burial places. There was a public outcry.

The solution was found in the newly established fashion for out-of-town garden cemeteries, large open spaces for permanent burial in garden settings. As such the Bridgwater Cemetery, now known as the Wembdon Road Cemetery, was opened in 1851. This was technically two cemeteries, one Church of England, the other Dissenter, and each had its own chapel. In 1853 an Act of Council forbade further burials in the town's overcrowded burial grounds, namely St Mary's, Holy Trinity, the Mariners, the Unitarian, the Congregationalist and the Baptist. The Quaker, Catholic and St John's burial grounds remained open.



*Photo: Friends of Wembdon Road Cemetery
The restored James Cook memorial*

When St John's churchyard in Eastover filled up two decades later, a second cemetery, even larger than the one on the Wembdon Road, was opened on the Bristol Road in 1878, containing Church of England, Dissenting and Catholic sections. Although the combined chapel was demolished in the 1990s, this cemetery remains in use to this day.

To the west, in 1924, it was found that the Wembdon Road Cemetery was almost full. Instead of extending the existing burial ground, which had slowly been surrounded by the town's suburbs, it was decided to lay out a third cemetery on the new Quantock Road, which was laid out in 1930 and remains in use to this day.



*Photo: Mike Berrill
Quantock Road Cemetery Chapel*

The Wembdon Road Cemetery fast fell into decay and remained in a sorry state for a number of decades. The old chapels were destroyed and many of the memorials were toppled. However, in 2010 the Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery formed to properly research and conserve this neglected spot and turn it into a memorial garden.

For the Friends of Wembdon Road Cemetery see;

<http://www.bridgwatercemeteries.org.uk>

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