The Bitton Churchyard Survey

**A guide to mapping and recording churchyard gravestones**

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Living next to Bitton churchyard as I do, I am very familiar with the site. It is huge and holds over 1000 tombs, some from the 17th Century, but sadly apart from the post war burials there was no record or map of who was buried where. This, along with the overgrown churchyard and crumbling stones that were losing their inscriptions, had prompted several people in the village years ago, to start making a record of the stone inscriptions and there was rumour that the site had been surveyed but despite a search, all was now lost.

Phase 1 – Mapping

Rising to the challenge I persuaded John Oswin and his team to start surveying the churchyard to locate the position of each gravestone. However it was a time consuming business and because the area was so large and the tombs so close together, I was finding it difficult to convert the readings into a useable map. Then hey presto, someone in the village moved house and found the survey document from 1993, this provided us with a map to reference the gravestones.

Areas of the survey document were scanned and the churchyard divided into three manageable sections. Then using Quark, a publishing computer programme, we were able to enhance the original survey document. We added missing graves including the cremation graves in the top left hand corner, deleted others that had disappeared, numbered each grave and also added grid lines to help locate the stones, which to the eye, appear to be randomly positioned. We started with Section A the area in front of the church. *(Figure 1)*
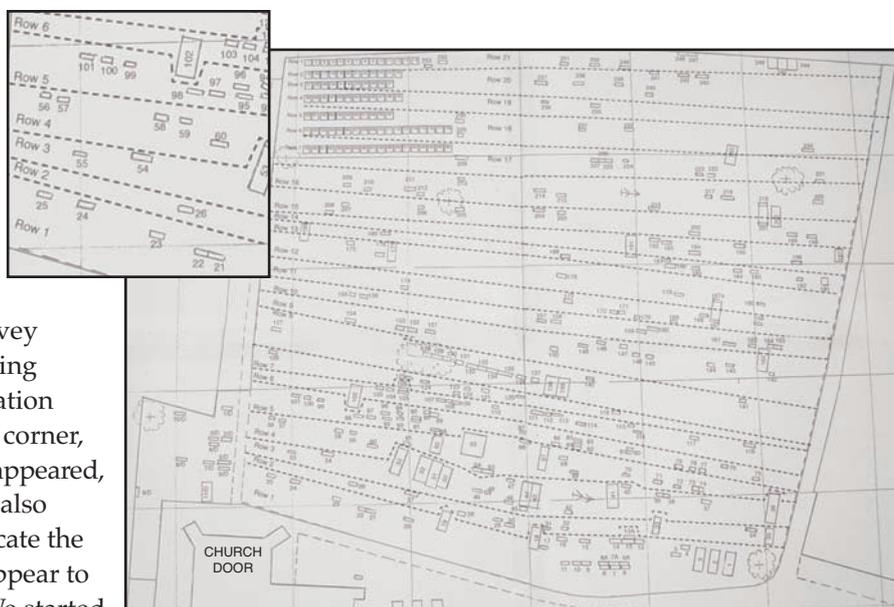
Figure 1
The computer enhanced map of Section A, Bitton Churchyard. Insert a section of the map in detail.

Phase 2 – Recording

Next we set about photographing each grave in Section A, then embedded the images into a document so that they could be numbered to match the map. Now we were ready to start our work in the churchyard.

Armed each with a set of numbered grave photographs and a map to help find them, the team of ten volunteers set about reading and recording the stone inscriptions. However this was easier said than done. Sometimes the light conditions were perfect but often we couldn't read the inscriptions easily or accurately, until one of the volunteers made a discovery. We could make the inscriptions appear like magic, simply by rubbing ordinary, biodegradable flour over the surface of the stone see *(Figure 2)*. This transformed the project because each stone could now be deciphered relatively quickly and accurately and in fact we went back to the beginning rubbing each stone with flour to be sure of the accuracy of our readings.

As the team worked their way around Section A, their hand written transcriptions were typed into the image document to complete the record. In addition using Excel we documented the essential information so that it can be searched by name or date to discover the location of specific graves.

Churchyard Treasures

Much to our surprise we discovered that many of the graves hold five or six family members, sometimes more, buried over a period of 50 or more years, grandparents, first and second wives, children and their husbands or wives, all of which provides a treasure trove of information for anyone studying a family history. It also suggests that over 5000 people are buried in the churchyard.

Some stones deliver gems of social history; grave number 157 tells us of *George Jeffers who lost his life in a coal pit on 21 December 1762 Aged 16*. There are several coal miners buried in the churchyard. Another grave, number 223 offers details of *Hannah Ship, Midwife for 30 years who brought into this world upwards of 1100 children. Wife of Joseph Ship of this parish who died 17th of April 1817 Aged 58.*

Figure 2
A volunteer demonstrates how rubbing flour over the inscription makes it clearly visible.

History of Churchyards

The Bitton survey has revealed a few gravestones dated to the late 17th Century such as grave 136 *(Figure 3)*. Dated 1695 it is dedicated to William Foot and his wife Mary. The grave is located close to the church door on the west side and has a stunning death mask, symbolizing mortality, at the top of the stone. Interestingly many of the early tombstones in America follow a similar design and this made us inquisitive as to when churchyards as we know them today came into existence.

According to church historian Martin Palmer, churchyards have always existed but the tombstone churchyard is post reformation, starting in the early 17th Century when trust in the Church as an institution and the priest as an intercessor had faded. Prior to the reformation, the average person simply put their trust in the Church and the priest to ensure them entry to Heaven. However the doctrine of the Reformation emphasized the individual sinner standing alone before God and this brought a greater degree of anxiety about the afterlife and this instigated the use of gravestones.

According to Professor David Hey editor of *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History*, the earliest inscribed gravestones are those placed within the church by wealthy inhabitants during the 16th Century. Graves in churchyards were originally unmarked or perhaps marked by wooden crosses. It was common practice to clear graves from time to time and stack the bones in a Charnel House so that fresh burials could take place. During the 17th Century the yeomen and better off people in the community, (the middle class) began to erect tombstones in churchyards in imitation of their social superiors who were buried in the church.

Bitton Survey 2010

The project is now starting its third year, Sections A and B (690 graves) are now recorded and we are embarking on the final section. Besides the physical survey of the churchyard another member of the team has typed up all the burial records for the parish from 1572 to the present. Again we used a searchable Excel document and our plan is to eventually link in the grave numbers when we can match them. Most importantly of all we plan to put all our data online to make it freely available to everyone. But designing the Bitton Website is another story.

Figure 3
One of the oldest stones in the churchyard 1695.