

Raising the Dead

The man, the machine and the moment

Andy Lawrence

Five hours into a hot April day I stood staring disconsolately into my 1m by 2m test pit. By all of my own calculations and research, there should have been at least one grave cut and possibly a marker stone or two. Instead the trench had thrown up half a dozen fragments of bone china and virtually nothing else. I was supposed to be establishing the existence of a 17th Century Quaker burial ground but had instead drawn a complete blank. What, I asked myself, happens next? Clearly geophysics was indicated but the project had no money and, at that point, no access to or experience of, geophysical technique. At that point my project leader's voice behind me said, "Andy, I'd like you to meet Keith Turner..."

The East Tytherton Heritage project is a broad based project examining and recording the history of the village of East Tytherton near Chippenham. The village is a curiosity, it sits at one end of Maud Heath's Causeway (itself the subject of a great deal of historical research), has no village church but does contain an early Moravian settlement and burial ground (one of the earliest in the country) and also an early Quaker burial ground. The project has grown from one focused on the restoration of the Moravian burial ground to a broader focus on the whole history of the village.

Our attention had turned to the Quaker burial ground believed to exist in the grounds of a local house, there is a patch of lawn bounded by an outbuilding, on the wall of which, is a sign 'Friends Burial Ground 1659' (see Figures 1 and 2) and nothing else. The owner was keen to find out more, but there was nothing obvious to suggest that this was, in fact, a burial ground. Nor was there anything easily available which explained its history.

Archival research demonstrated that there had been such a burial ground in East Tytherton but was not specific as to its location. A general description of the burial ground's orientation and

relationship to other features existed and the garden site broadly fitted that description. What was needed early on was some empirical evidence that the garden site was the correct one.

Early Quaker burial practice is very different to anything one might find in a Parish church yard. 17th Century Quakers were a small, persecuted sect who rejected any connection to the established church or, in some circumstances, to any established authority. They met in houses and had no formal structure or record keeping in their early days. Perhaps the earliest properties that were dedicated to their use were patches of land bought as burial grounds, usually held in private hands. The Quakers rejected outward



Figure 1 above
The plaque on the garden wall suggesting that this may be a Quaker burial ground

Figure 2 left
The lawn surrounded by walls and outbuildings with the location of the diagonal trench pegged out and orientated North/East

display and did not regard burial grounds as anything other than a hygienic way of disposing of dead bodies. Certainly in the earliest part of their history no marker stones were used and there was no regard to family or other relationships in the sequence of burials. However we could assume that rows of graves would not be spaced more than about a metre apart and that a two metre long test pit placed diagonally across the ground stood a good chance of hitting something if there were graves there. We also knew from experience that subsided grave markers (if they existed) had not been found deeper than about 50cm below the ground surface, even given the length of time that this burial ground had been in use. Accordingly, we placed a 2m by 1m test pit diagonally to the orientation of the ground (see Figure 2). Despite taking this pit down to the natural sub soil nothing of any true significance was found.

On the same day Keith Turner arrived to have a look at our site and see whether it was suitable for a survey. Keith brought a Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) set with him and ran a quick series of passes to see if any response was likely. These very rough transections showed a consistent layer of noise about half a metre below the surface which could have been produced by large stones. On the basis of this we decided to go ahead with a complete survey and this was fixed for 19 June 2010.

Keith Turner and John Oswin both did a huge amount of work on that day and subsequently to provide a thorough survey of the burial ground. Starting with resistivity (see Figure 3) we began to see the first glimmer of what we were hoping for. It shows a solid anomaly to the right of the picture running almost the whole length of the lawn. We have no idea what this is at the moment, possibly a wall foundation. This may fit with the rather peculiar arrangement of buildings and walls visible in Figure 2. This shows a building to the left cut into the roof line of a building to the right that is in the grounds of the next door property. The wall visible to the right meets the second building very awkwardly close to a window and out of line with the proper end of the building. The anomaly is under the lawn to the left (west) of the wall. It may be the foundation for the original boundary wall.

The Magnetic Susceptibility survey was not particularly helpful other than confirming the anomaly shown in the resistivity survey and illustrating some obstructive tree roots. However the GPR survey was much more exciting (see Figure 4) which gives one view of the site survey in plan at 93 cm depth. The picture clearly shows groups of darker anomalies oriented east/west across the site and arranged in a rough grid pattern. This grouping is repeated in both deeper and shallower transections. Given the supposed nature of the site this very clearly seems to show grave cuts.

These results are of immense value to us as a project. They confirm beyond reasonable doubt that this is the Quaker burial ground and give us specific targets for the coming year. We hope to test both the 'wall' anomaly and a group of the anomalies on the GPR. Given that we are digging on a burial ground, specifically looking for grave cuts.

We will probably be looking for more help from BACAS to supervise the work that we want to do in the not too distant future.

Figure 3 right
The resistivity survey
showing a solid anomaly to the right
Figure 4 far right
The Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR)
survey showing anomalies in a grid
pattern suggesting possible grave cuts

