

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, HIGH WYCOMBE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING ACTION

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
MARCH 1998

All Saints Church, High Wycombe

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NGR 865 935

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

SUMMARY

The Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out a recording action in February 1998 on a burial vault located in the churchyard of All Saints Church, High Wycombe on behalf of Sir William Halcrow and Partners Ltd in respect of a faculty for landscaping of the churchyard and a brief set by, and a WSI agreed with, the County Archaeologist. The existence of the vault was unknown prior to the excavation of a trench for a new wall to be located adjacent to a new driveway in the northern area of the churchyard. It was not possible due to health and safety restrictions to gain entry into the vault, therefore recording was carried out from the exterior. The vault contained two triple-shelled wood and lead coffins with textile covering and is believed to date to the mid 19th century.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location and scope of work

In February 1998 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out an archaeological recording action at All Saints Church, High Wycombe on behalf of Sir William Halcrow and Partners Ltd in respect of a faculty for landscaping of the churchyard and a brief set by, and a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) agreed with, the County Archaeologist. The existence of the vault was unknown prior to the excavation of a trench for a new wall to be located adjacent to a new driveway to the northern area of the churchyard. The vault contained two triple-shelled wood- and lead-lined coffins with textile covering and is believed to date to the mid 19th century. The OAU was contracted only to undertake the recording of the burial vault and its contents.

All Saints Church is located in the centre of the town of High Wycombe, between Castle Street and High Street. The proposed new wall is to be constructed adjacent to a new north-south aligned driveway, and is located on the northern edge of the churchyard which is bounded by Castle Street.

2 AIMS OF RECORDING ACTION

The aims of the recording action were outlined in the WSI as follows:

- 1 to record the vault and its contents prior to resealing
- 2 to record the biographical data from coffin plaques
- 3 to identify surviving coffin fittings
- 4 to make available the results of the investigation

3 METHODOLOGY

The methodology as defined in the WSI had to be modified in the light of health and safety restrictions. As the discovery of the burial vault was unexpected, insufficient time was available for a site visit prior to the production of the WSI. On arrival at the site it immediately became clear that it would not be possible to enter the vault without compromising the safety of OAU staff. Therefore a decision was taken in consultation with the County Archaeologist to record the vault and its contents as far as possible from the exterior.

The burial vault and its contents were photographed using colour slide and black and white print film. Recording followed procedures laid down in the *OAU Fieldwork Manual* (Wilkinson 1992). It was not possible to produce plans and elevations of the burial vault at a scale of 1:50 as defined in the WSI. A sketch plan was produced instead.

Finds comprised the coffins and their associated fittings. These were recorded in as much detail as visibility allowed. Details appear below.

4 RESULTS: GENERAL

The burial vault was discovered during the excavation of a trench for a new wall to be constructed adjacent to a new north-south aligned driveway. The trench is located on the northern edge of the churchyard which is bounded by Castle Street. After the removal of c. 0.90 m of overburden the roof of the vault and a stone slab set into it were revealed. The capstone was removed by the client thus providing a view of the vault interior. This was done prior to the arrival of OAU on site. The brick-built vault contained two triple shelled wood- and lead-lined coffins.

5 RESULTS: DESCRIPTIONS

5.1 The vault

The burial vault (1) was brick-built with a barrel-vaulted ceiling which was rectangular in plan and measured c. 1.70 m in height, 2 m in length (west-east) and 1.50 m in width (north-south). A grey stone-slab with shaped edges measuring c. 0.54 x 0.40 m was set into the roof of the vault. A series of steps were set into the western wall of the vault and these presumably served as an access route which was subsequently blocked. The interior of the vault was white-washed. Two rows of two slots were set in the northern wall and a single row of two slots was set into the southern wall. It is presumed that these were intended for metal supports which would allow for the stacking of coffins within the vault. The provision of these metal supports was common as the use of shelves was rare and confined to the vaults of noble families (Litten 1985, 10). A mortar candle-holder was set into each of the four corners of the vault although there was no sign of scorching to indicate that they were ever used. Two triple-shelled wood and lead coffins were present within the vault.

5.2 The coffins

Two triple-shelled wood and lead coffins were housed within the vault. Both were aligned east-west (head end to east). The southern coffin (2) was quite badly decayed although traces of an outer textile covering were visible. This was discoloured brown. Much of the outer wooden shell had fallen away and the lead shell was punctured. Probable brass fittings were present although it was not possible to identify the design types: the group comprised a name-plate, an upper and lower lid motif, escutcheons, grips and grip-plates. The inscription on the coffin plate was partially legible and read as follows:

William Boswell

?

18th January 1844

The northern coffin (3) was quite badly decayed although, again, traces of an outer textile covering were visible. This was discoloured brown. Probable brass fittings were present: the group comprised a name plate, an upper and lower lid motif, escutcheons, grips and grip-plates. Only the surname on the coffin plate was legible and this was Boswell. The upper lid motif was identified as Christ Church, Spitalfields type 6 with a date range 1779-1847 (Reeve and Adams 1993) and the lower lid motif was identified

as Christ Church, Spitalfields type 2 with a date range of 1795-1847 (Reeve and Adams 1993).

6 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Reliability of field investigation

It was not possible, due to restricted access and poor lighting, to record the burial vault and its contents in as much detail as was originally intended. However, all of the aims as defined in the WSI have been substantially fulfilled.

6.2 Overall interpretation

It seems certain that the vault was constructed in the late 1830s or very early 1840s. William Boswell died in January 1844 and this does not disagree with the date range suggested by the identifiable coffin fittings. The discovery of the vault during landscaping was unexpected, but it is likely that reference to the parish records may produce some record of its construction or at least of the death of William Boswell and other members of his family. The vault was almost certainly intended to be the burial place of the Boswell family. It is interesting that provision was clearly made for the burial of further coffins within the vault, as indicated by the slots in the walls for metal supports, but that this had never taken place. As many as four further coffins could have been housed within the vault. It is conceivable that the coffins present contained the remains of William Boswell and his wife who died without issue. Clearly the Boswell family must have been wealthy and prestigious to have provided for the construction of a family vault of this type within the churchyard.

6.3 Further work

The burial vault is located directly below the new north-south aligned driveway and clearly some reinforcement of the structure will be required. The client proposes to provide a concrete slab measuring 3 x 2 x 0.20 m which will be laid on top of the roof of the vault. A layer of soil measuring 0.20-30 m in thickness will remain between the top of the vault and the base of the slab. A watching brief will be carried out during this work.

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