

A traditional English, rural churchyard?

Part 1 – 1100-1900



Aerial image of St James's church and the original and 'new' (to the northeast) churchyards, both now closed for new interments. Image from Ordnance Survey.

English churchyards, including Gretton's, have changed enormously over the centuries. While always the burial place of villagers, every churchyard's character has reflected contemporary and local attitudes to both death and life.

The churchyard immediately surrounding St James the Great, is probably around 900 years old. The oldest part of the existing [church building](#) dates to about 1100, so the churchyard is probably that age too, although it might be a little older if there was a wooden Anglo-Saxon church on the site before then - perhaps associated with the village priest mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. The 'new' extension, to

the north-east and beyond the row of lime trees, is just over 120 years old.

Earlier still, the Romans buried their dead outside cities and towns, by the roadside or in cemeteries, and ancient Judaic custom was to use fields or sometimes caves. The only exceptions were for emperors and kings. Early Anglo-Saxons also had fixed cemeteries, again away from villages and towns, and sometimes linked to Romano-British sites, with the Frankish fashion of barrows for the elite introduced in the sixth and seventh centuries. Churchyards are reported to have been introduced to Christian Anglo-Saxon England in 752 when Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had seen and liked the new fashion for urban churchyards in Rome, was apparently given permission by the Pope to develop consecrated areas around churches for Christian burials¹. By the tenth century, these yards² (the OED's earliest record of the word *cyrceiaerd* is from the Peterborough Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 1160 – the same time that St James's south aisle was built) were enclosed with walls, eventually giving rise to the notion of 'God's Acre' – although this term is actually Georgian, and imported, like the Georges, from Germany.

Our churchyards nowadays have many headstones and other memorials, some with inscriptions made illegible through time, wind and rain. Some headstones no longer mark graves but were

¹ Although much repeated, the origins, and therefore details, of this story seem to be obscure. John Weever published '[Antient Funeral Monuments...](#)' in 1631, in which he quoted from a now lost 'Appendix to [the Book of Rochester](#)' '*Cutbertus archiepiscopus Cant xi ab Augustino cum Romae videret plures intra civitates seperili, rogavit papam ut fibi liceret caemiteria facere, quod papa annuit, reversus itaque caemiteria ubique in Anglia fieri constituit.*

² Yard in this sense comes from the Old English, ie Anglo-Saxon word *geard* pronounced (probably) 'yaird'. It simply meant the patch or ground around any dwelling, and has kept that meaning in American English. Yard, the measurement, comes from the Anglo-Saxon wrod *gerd* or *gierd*, pronounced (probably) 'yerd' or 'yeard', which meant a stick or pole. It took on the meaning of a stick of standardised length (three feet) just before the Normans arrived but retains its old meaning in the nautical term 'yard-arm', the 'spar' tied at right angles to the ship's mast from which sails (and people) were hung.

moved to the boundary walls as part of past tidying, and a few into the church itself as flooring. Most recently, fallen headstones have been left where they are.

However, the oldest of our churchyard headstones, mainly near the east end of the church, date to the early eighteenth century, which is when permanent headstones first became affordable in England, at least to some families – merchants, farmers and the like. Before that, rich people and clergy were buried inside the church, or in vaults under it, hence the older memorials inside St James's, but common folk were always buried, in shrouds not coffins, outside. As space within churches filled up, even richer people and clergy had to make do with outside graves. Most burials in the churchyard would have been marked simply with mounds or maybe wooden headboards, both of which gradually disintegrated over a few decades.

Even after deaths and burials were recorded in Parish Registers (first ordered by Thomas Cromwell in 1538), grave locations were not. Grave sites were lost from family and community memory after a few generations and often only rediscovered when new graves were dug. Some churches (such as the [Holy Trinity, Rothwell](#)) had a charnel house or [bone crypt](#) for recovered bones (mainly skulls and long bones) others 'charnel pits' – essentially a spare grave into which larger bones could be reburied. In many cases, however, and most likely at St James's, new graves were inevitably, albeit inadvertently, cut through old



St James's churchyard looking from east of the church towards the new extension beyond the lime trees.

graves, and new bodies were buried amongst the remains of earlier generations of villagers. Raunds is a well-studied local example of intercut graves and charnel pits³. While modern laws mean that rediscovered remains are dealt with sensitively, that was not always the case. - Hilary Lees, in her book *Exploring English Churchyard Memorials*, writes that this was an age when, 'the living viewed death as the transition between this world and the next and seem to have had few emotional concerns about the physical remains.' An example of late sixteenth century attitudes can be found in Shakespeare's Hamlet: before Ophelia's burial, Prince Hamlet and his friend Horatio approach the gravedigger who, while digging Ophelia's grave, cheerfully throws up not one but several skulls, mostly unknown but one (alas!) that of Yorick. And while no doubt exaggerated for effect, Hogarth's 1747 print '[The Idle Prentice at play in the Church Yard during Divine Service](#)' shows a group of ne'er do wells gambling on a tomb outside an urban church, surrounded by the skeletal remains excavated from a neighbouring freshly dug grave. Or, as Sir William Scott, later Lord Stowell, put it in an 1820 ecclesiastical law case about coffins, which decay more slowly than shrouds and so reduced fee income from grave recycling, the churchyard 'is the common property of the living, and of generations yet unborn, and subject to only temporary appropriation.'

Oliver Rackham's classic book, *The History of the Countryside*, seems to be the source of the much-cited idea that 'the average English country churchyard contains at least 10,000 bodies.' I think this

³ For a discussion of charnel houses, pits and intercutting, including at Raunds, see Jennifer Crangle's PhD available online : [A Study of Post-Depositional Funerary Practices in Medieval England](#)

may be a bit of an exaggeration – but even if there were only five burials each year in Gretton, then over 800 years (from around 1100 until 1900, when the ‘new’ north-east churchyard extension was developed) this would mean 4,000 bodies being buried in St James’s. These would have been mostly to the east and sunny south of the church. Even if there were room to the west before the tower was



Ditches dug around the church show how much higher the graveyard is than the base of the church. The ditch was probably dug during Victorian renovations. This was common practice, mainly to help stop damp and flooding - and without it, the door to the south chancel could not be used. It can be seen, though, that the ditch came perilously close to cutting through graves near to the church's walls.

built in the fifteenth century, the west side and, even more so, the dark north side of the church were traditionally not used for all kinds of superstitious and quasi-religious reasons. Until the late nineteenth century, north-side burials were often limited to executed criminals, suicides and the un-baptised. As in many other old churchyards, centuries of burials doubtless account for St James’s churchyard being so much higher to the south and east of the church than it is the rest of the churchyard, and a ditch having to be dug out during Victorian renovations to allow the south door from the chancel (now a fire exit) to be used, and drains to be put in to prevent damp and flooding of the building.

So what did the ‘traditional’ churchyard look like before all these gravestones? We know from old records that, as was the case for most medieval parish churches, St James’s was an important centre of local administration, with official and business meetings held within the church building. And while we have little direct evidence for it, like most medieval churches, community events would have been held in the churchyard.

The whole churchyard would have been an open area, and the site of markets, fairs and games, and despite numerous edicts from the church authorities, churchyards were where

medieval carollers sang and Morris dancers danced – although knowingly dancing on fresh graves was considered poor form. Cock fighting and competitive stone, bone and axe and axle throwing were apparently common and ball games, such as fives, made use of medieval church walls. Then there were the [church ales](#) (a tradition worth [reviving](#)?), the medieval equivalent of the modern church fete, that sold church-brewed beer to raise funds for building repairs.

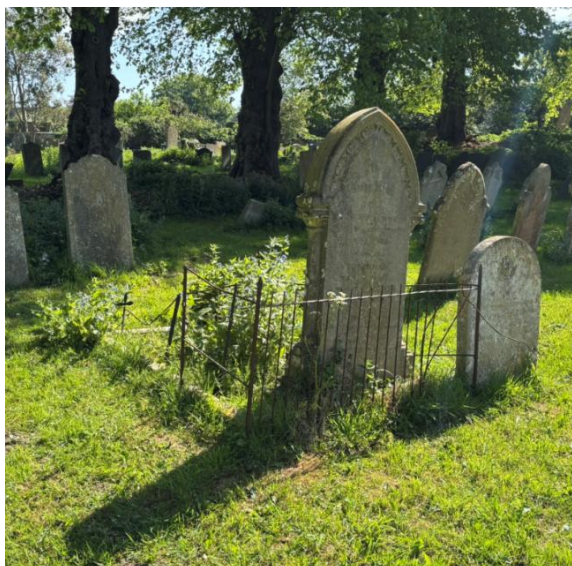
Priests were encouraged to push back, of course. According to the verse-form ‘*Instructions to a Parish Priest*’, written by [John Myrc](#), a Canon of Lilleshall Abbey in the early fifteenth century:

*Also wyth ynne chyrche and seyntwary
Do ryzt thus as I the say,
Songe and cry and suche fare,
Sor to stynte þow schalt not spare;
Castyng of axtre and eke of ston,
Sofere hem þere to vse non;*

*Bal and bares⁴ and suche play,
Out of Chyrcheyorde put a-way.*

But this made little difference. More than a hundred years later, during the Reformation, a common lament of English sermons was, *'What shall we say of the assemblies of our time, such as are gathered together in the Churches ... a man shall see nothing but riot and superfluity, and an unbridled liberty of drinking, dancing, playing, and reveling: they sanctify their assemblies not unto God, but unto Bacchus and Venus⁵'*. When James VI of Scotland became James I of England, his 'Declaration of Sports' (1617) banned playing football and other 'violent' games in churchyards but, not wanting to go the whole puritan hog, compromised by encouraging 'lawful' sports (i.e. sports and games with rules) such as archery (by this time purely a sport as guns were widespread), and specifically allowed dancing, maypoles and leaping on Sunday afternoons, as long as there was no service going on at the time⁶.

Throughout the medieval period and well into the nineteenth century, some services would be held and sermons preached in the churchyard, not just in the church buildings and not just by travelling friars, Lollards and later 'dissenters'. Much later, Gilbert White, author of *'The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne'* in 1789, still conducted many services in the churchyard of All Saints in Farringdon – possibly with one eye on the wildlife around him – not least as there was more room than inside the church.



Fence around a Victorian grave – was this simply decorative or a response to grazing in the churchyard?

As well as being a recreation ground for community events, churchyards might also be either grazed or used for hay, another practice that continued well into the modern period. Leasing grazing rights, or selling harvested hay, provided extra income on top of the tithes for the church and priest. Hay was more easily harvested before the introduction of headstones (although scythes are more controllable than modern strimmers), but perhaps not so compatible with the trampling that resulted from community events.

Susanna Blamire, in 1766, wrote a poem entitled *'Written in a Churchyard, on seeing a number of cattle grazing in it'*, but sheep, being smaller, were less destructive, and thus more popular, than cattle. While still used in some churches today - sheep were grazed in St James's churchyard within living memory - there were frequent complaints from the early nineteenth century onwards about

⁴ Bares, or barres, refers to a medieval team game, later called prisoner's base or Chivvy. John Myrc also advised priests not to worry too much about their Latin, as the congregation didn't understand it anyhow, and how to help during childbirth, including the importance of immediate baptism so that dead infants could be buried in the consecrated churchyard.

⁵ Although commonly quoted in history books, and variously attributed to Calvin or Thomas Bentham, I can't find its real source.

⁶ *'...And as for Our good peoples lawfull Recreation, Our Pleasure like is, That after the end of Diuine Seruice, Our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawfull recreation, Such as dauncing, either men or women, archery for men, leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmlesse Recreation, nor from hauing of May-Games, Whitson Ales, and Morris-dances, and the setting vp of May-poles & other sports therewith vsed, so as the same be had in due & conuenient time, without impediment or neglect of Diuine Seruice: And that women shall haue leaue to carry rushes to the Churches for the decoring of it, according to their old custome. But withall We doe here account still as prohibited all vnlawfull games to bee vsed vpon Sundayes onely, as Beare and Bullbaitings, Interludes, and at all times in the meaner sort of people by law prohibited, Bowling.'*

the mess they left and the damage done to the increasingly ornate, and expensive, Georgian and Victorian memorials, hence the fences you see around some Victorian graves. Those with less money often put willow branches or other objects over family graves to keep off animals, a practice called 'brambling'.

Modern attempts at grazing in churchyards are often based on arguments about churchyard maintenance costs and sustainability, but remain [controversial](#). What is the carbon footprint of methane-producing ruminants compared to petrol-powered mowing? And who clears up the mess and fixes the damage done by animals?

Both attitudes to death and the look of churchyards began to change in the eighteenth century. Notwithstanding Hogarth's cartoon, perhaps the most famous description of a rural churchyard of the period, and probably the root of many modern visions of an idyllic rural churchyard, is Thomas Gray's [Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard](#), published in 1751. We've noted before Gray's love of the 'picturesque' view⁷, sometimes literally as seen 'through a glass darkly'. For all that, his description of a rural churchyard in the early Georgian period has many similarities to Gretton's churchyard today: *'the beetle [that] wheels his droning flight'* (cockchafers); *'The moping owl [who] does to the moon complain'* (we have tawny owls); *'The swallow twitt'ring'*, with aerial acrobatics hunting insects over the long grass of the new churchyard. He also describes the familiarly bumpy ground to the south of the church:

*'Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.'*

He also contrasts the many 'mould'ring heaps' of the poor parishioners with the 'storied urn or animated bust' of richer memorials, pointing out that these, as for us, are often in vaults or inside the church's aisles and chancel. Early nineteenth century sketches of St Giles's churchyard, where Thomas Gray and his parents are buried, show few stone memorials, and mostly mounds, sometimes with wooden headboards (some of which still exist). His poem describes that transition from unmarked graves, or with wooden markers, to the gravestones that became so much more common in the late Georgian and Victorian period. Mid-nineteenth century images of St Giles's churchyard show increasing numbers of headstones, amongst a mixture of cropped turf and areas of rough. By the early twentieth century, [photographs of St Giles's](#), like those of St James's, show a profusion of ivy-covered Victorian headstones, often in a sea of long grass punctuated by small shrubs, shaded by trees.

Writing fifty years after Gray, William Wordsworth, arguably the founder of English eco-literature, combined landscape, rural community and rural heritage in his poetry, contrasting it with industrial urbanisation. There's a description of a Cumbrian churchyard in *The Brothers*, where the Priest explains that:

*...In our churchyard
Is neither epitaph nor monument,
Tombstone nor name – only the turf we tread,
And a few natural graves...*

And later:

*The Stone-cutters, 'tis true, might beg their bread
If every churchyard were like ours.*

The increase in headstones and other permanent memorials in churchyards, combined with Victorian attitudes to – arguably pre-occupation with – death and the etiquette of public mourning (at least for

⁷ See [Wildlife by the Month](#), December 2025

those who could afford it) was reinforced by developing notions of hygiene⁸ and tidiness being next to Godliness. Thus the typically higgledy-piggledy crush of graves of Gretton's original churchyard, seen bordering the south and east of the church, gradually gave way to neater and planned rows of permanently marked burial plots. The family grave was established, was a status symbol, and visited regularly. In Victorian cities, the lack of churchyard space led to the development of private and later local authority-run out-of-town cemeteries, which could be reached by the new railways. At Gretton, it led to the 'new', planned churchyard extension, beyond the lime trees.

Victorian churchyard design was heavily influenced by Gray's *Elegy*, but descriptions in Victorian literature focus on memorials and the 'feel'. Mid-nineteenth century accounts of churchyards in tend – not surprisingly – towards the urban, gloomy and Gothic, with few descriptions of life in the churchyard itself. Even rural John Clare, succumbs to nettle beds of gloom:

*There the lank nettles sicken ere they seed
Where from old trees eves cordial vainly falls
To raise or comfort each dejected weed*

And again:

*The maiden when she leaves the church,
Stands where the nettles wave;
Upon a mound against the porch...*

Paintings and illustrations rural churchyards, however, while focussing on human activity, have backgrounds of romantic long grass and wild flowers, with mown or simply worn, paths leading to graves, for example in Frank Holl's 1872 '[I am the Resurrection and the Life \(The Village Funeral\)](#)' or 1876 '[Her firstborn, Horsham Churchyard](#)', and Benjamin Haughton's '[Woman in a Churchyard](#)'. Even less romantic book illustrations depict similar backdrops, for example illustrations of [Dickens's puppeteers](#) in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The new suburban cemeteries were similarly designed be naturalistic-ish, with symbolic trees (weeping willows, yews and cedars) although some later became

more formal gardens, manned by teams armed with new-fangled mechanical lawn mowers.

At Gretton, the more permanent, marked (and unrecycled) graves of the new churchyard meant that it was quickly filled. Thus, in little more than one hundred years, there was a need for a new burial ground, and hence the Lower Churchyard down Station Road.

Indeed, the twentieth century brought multiple waves of social change and fashions. Reduced churchgoing and manpower after two world wars, increased mechanisation, urbanisation and migration and the popularity of cremation over burial were all reflected in the management of rural churchyards, including ours at St James's. We'll discuss some of these in part 2.



A plan of the 'new' churchyard from the 1950s, showing the neat layout of plots.

⁸ There were very real problems with overcrowded urban burial grounds, described in horrific detail in a House of Commons Report, '[Health in Towns \(Effect of Interment of Bodies\)](#)' in 1842