

The Background to the Burial Vaults.

St Michael's church Betchworth is replacing its organ and a vestry/meeting room is being installed in its place. The old organ sat on a raised step at the east end of the 14th century south chancel. This step is being lowered to provide level access to the new room while the new organ will be situated at the east end of the south chancel.

The south chancel was traditionally associated with the sub-manors within Betchworth, particularly Brockham. It was refurbished in the early Victorian period by Henry Thomas Hope of Deepdene, then Lord of the Manor of Brockham, and had a thoroughly Victorian encaustic tile floor. Set into this floor was one slate ledger, commemorating Andrew Cade (d.1662). This previously formed the top of an altar tomb which a Hassell painting shows stood further west.

Where the new organ is to be sited the Victorian tiles were lifted, and immediately underneath, a pammet floor was revealed. It seemed the Victorian makeover had been far less comprehensive than assumed. The pammets were to be expected, but these filled the margin around a series of enormous slabs of Reigate stone (up to 93x191x23cm) which unexpectedly were the main paving surface.

When the Victorian tiles of the raised east end were lifted, more stones and pammets were uncovered, but this time the stones were inscribed. To the north was a fine slate slab commemorating James Marten (d. 1729). To the south was a Sussex Marble slab that clearly once had a small post-box size brass set in it. On the south wall is a brass of identical size to the hole, commemorating Thomas Morsted (d.c.1420). Between these a third slab of Reigate stone appears just to have been paving.

In the process of lifting the slabs the builders accidentally broke into two unexpected vaults. This caused a flurry of e-mails to pass between the church and the diocesan office and for the Rector and Churchwardens to have sleepless nights. Eventually it was agreed that providing officers from English Heritage and the local council, Mole Valley, agreed with the proposal that the tops of the brick vaults could be removed and replaced with a lower concrete roof to accommodate the new floor level. Surrey County Council kindly allowed its Heritage Conservation Team to record the archaeological evidence uncovered which minimised the delay to the project.

Three lead coffins were exposed. The earliest was to the north, in a single well-made vault. The brickwork of the vault suggested a date in the mid 18th century, but no obvious name plate could be seen so this was left undisturbed. To the south of this was a double vault, with a precariously shallow arched top. A well-preserved lead coffin of Henry Wight, Lord of the Manor of Brockham (d. 1793) occupied the north side. The coffin had both a lead and brass plate, and the outer wooden coffin was extensively ornamented with brass studs and pressed brass floral panels. To the south was a partially flattened lead coffin, two sides of which were built into the brick wall of the 1793 vault. It appears that the flattened coffin had been in a single vault which was opened and rebuilt to accommodate the coffin of Henry Wight. Unfortunately there was no

indication of the name of this individual but wall memorials nearby include other Wights, so it was almost certainly a near ancestor of Henry.

A number of disarticulated bones were uncovered from the fill around the vaults and broken ledgers. The county bone specialist said the bones represented perhaps five individuals, including one new born. A casket for these was created from one of the old organ pipes and they were deposited in the larger vault together with a brass plaque and details of the circumstances under which they were uncovered. Fragments of old ledgers found in the fill were deposited under the new floor. The two slate ledgers have been set in the new floor surface.

Martin Higgins
Keeper of the Church Fabric.

Attached photos:

The vaults from the east, just minutes before the concrete block and beam floor was added. The organ pipe containing the recovered bones is to the left of Henry Wight's coffin in the double vault.

If you would rather not have coffins, the broken slate ledger could be used.

The broken remains of John Woodman's slate ledger (1679) were placed under the new beam and block concrete floor.