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Ledger stones yield clues to 'lost' family histories



Removing a lead coffin during an archaeological 'dig' at St George's Church, Canterbury. (Photo: Canterbury Archaeological Trust).



A 'heraldic ledger stone' salvaged from a grave during the 'dig' at St George's Church. (Photo: Ann Pinder)

Hundreds of memorial inscriptions ('MIs') on graves marked by 'heraldic ledger stones' in Kent parish churches, Canterbury Cathedral and Rochester Cathedral can now be accessed on-line following the completion of a transcription and digital imaging project by Kent Archaeological Society volunteers.

Among those recorded are ledger stones of the grandfather of Samuel Pepys's mistress; the founder of almshouses immortalized in a Charles Dickens story; a 'gentlewoman' buried in a Canterbury church whose tower is all that survived after the city's devastating Blitz in 1942; Lydd's youngest Town Clerk; and possibly New Romney's youngest Mayor.

Heraldic ledger stones were favoured by middle-class families who wanted to bury their dead beneath church floors, near the more grandiose memorials erected by their wealthier fellow-parishioners.

The practice peaked in the 18th century and ceased in the 1850s when burials within churches, except in existing family vaults, were banned.

A typical Kent heraldic ledger stone is cut from bluish-black Belgian limestone and decorated with the deceased's 'coat-of-arms' carved into a roundel above an 'MI' or epitaph detailing his or her date of death, age, spouse, children, occupation and other information of vital interest to today's family history enthusiasts and professional genealogists.

Over time the foot-traffic of generations of churchgoers and visitors has rendered many of the MIs illegible. Others were destroyed by war damage or during church restorations, or have become concealed, virtually inaccessible, under pews or new flooring.

But all is not lost thanks to the KAS's project, in which volunteers Ted Connell, Ann Pinder and Pat Tritton have brought to light pioneer antiquarians' comprehensive records made up to 250 years ago, when the stones were still in pristine condition.

The earliest records were made by Rev Bryan Faussett soon after he became Curate of St Giles, Kingston, south-east of Canterbury, in 1750.

Born at Heppington, in Nackington parish, near Canterbury, he led a colourful life before being ordained in 1746. While a student at Oxford he was accused of 'not being a person of a chaste and virtuous life,' of 'having criminal intercourse with a strumpet,' and of 'harbouring a prostitute in his chambers' with whom he was caught '*in flagrante delicto*.'

He had calmed down and was a reformed character by the time, aged 30, he became domiciled in Kingston, from where he embarked on a series of exhausting archaeological expeditions and 'digs' in Kent, amassing the world's greatest collection of Anglo-Saxon jewellery and antiquities. Between 1756 and 1760 he recorded hundreds of MIs in 160 parishes, generally ignoring the graves of 'common people' and selecting those who were 'armigerous' (entitled to display a heraldic achievement) and interred under heraldic ledger stones.

After Faussett died in 1776, aged 56, by when he was Rector of Monks Horton, his four substantial leather-bound books detailing his research were deposited at the Society of Antiquaries in London where, 150 years later they were transcribed by Valentine John de Jersey Berry Torr, a dedicated antiquarian and long-serving KAS member.

Next on the ledger stone trail was Nicholas Eyare Toke of Penfillan House, 156 Sandgate Road, Folkestone, a descendant of the Toke family of Godington Park, near Ashford. An Army and University tutor, he had worked for the Local Government Board in WW1, helping the thousands of French and Belgian refugees who landed at Folkestone. For his services he was appointed MBE and received the *Médaille de la Reconnaissance française* (Medal of French Gratitude) and the Belgian *Ordre de la Couronne*.

After the war Toke spent most of his leisure-time visiting churches to make 'rubblings' of monumental brasses, using a heelball of hard wax and lampblack. He adapted this method to reproducing coats-of-arms on ledger stones after noticing that those in Canterbury Cathedral were rapidly becoming eroded under the feet of thousands of visitors.

'It is possible to make photographs of valuable memorials,' he wrote in 1929, 'but an exposure of an hour or two is necessary even in a well-lit church.'

Guided by Torr's transcriptions, Toke went to the churches that Faussett had visited, and many others, and by 1938 had made nearly 300 rubbings, which he donated to the V&A in London after photographing them on glass-plate negatives for the KAS.

His negatives were carefully stored in the KAS Library in Maidstone, seldom inspected until, more than 50 years after he died in 1960, aged 94, the society decided they should be scanned and the images made freely available on the internet to researchers who would otherwise be unaware that they existed or know their content.

Said Ted Connell: 'Historians are forever grateful to Faussett for his work as a pioneer recorder of "MIs," to Torr for ensuring that his notes at the Society of Antiquaries became more accessible, and to Toke for using the best methods available in the early twentieth century to make lasting images of the beautiful craftsmanship of the unidentified stone masons who created the ledger stones.'

The story of Faussett's life and pioneering research ends at St Mary's, Nackington, where he was baptised in November 1720. Here, appropriately marked by a heraldic ledger stone, is his own grave, close to the similarly-distinguished grave of his father, also Bryan, who died in 1750. The family name also lives on at 'Faussett Hill,' Street End, a mile from St Mary's.

Other KAS members are now adding their own MI transcriptions and images to Toke's collection, which can be accessed on <http://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/19/000.htm>.

A biography entitled 'Bryan Faussett, Antiquarian Extraordinary' by David Wright was published recently by Archaeopress Archaeology.

Survivor of Canterbury's Blitz

The ledger stone of Margaret Greenhill can be seen in the floor of St George's Tower, Canterbury. The tower is all that remains of the medieval parish church of St George the Martyr, gutted by fire in the June 1942 Blitz and later demolished to make way for the redevelopment of the area in the 1950s.

Margaret, a daughter of William Nethersole, 'gent,' married Richard Greenhill in 1689. She died in January 1753, aged 93, and in her Will asked to be 'decently interred in the parish church of St George....as near as conveniently may be to the grave where my late husband lies buried, and that a handsome marble stone of the price of £10 [*about £2,000 in today's money*] be laid over my grave.'

Nicholas Toke rubbed the stone in 1917. Fortunately it has survived for more than 260 years, unnoticed by most of the thousands of shoppers and visitors who pass it every day. But Margaret no longer rests beneath it. Says local historian Paul Crampton: 'In 1952 any coffins that could easily be removed from the church's vaults were reburied in Canterbury Cemetery. In 1991, during a "dig" conducted by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, further intact lead coffins were found in the main body of the church and, likewise, reburied in the cemetery.'

Victim of Dover's air raids

When Old St James's Church, Dover, was devastated during air raids in WW2, the grave of 17th century wine and fine-goods merchant Daniel Skynner (aka Skinner) and his wife Elizabeth was destroyed, along with its ledger stone. Happily, Nicholas Toke had rubbed the stone in 1928.

Daniel was born c. 1579 in Braintree, Essex. He lived in Antwerp, where he married Elizabeth Van Elslant, and moved to Dover in about 1627. The Skinners had two daughters, 13 sons (two of whom were buried in their grave) and many grandchildren, one of whom, Mary Skinner, was Samuel Pepys's mistress.

Many other gravestones at Old St James's were lost in the war. Those that survived (including Daniel's, perhaps) may have been walled-up in a nearby cave when the church ruins were stabilized.

A generous philanthropist

Richard Watts of Rochester, the city's generous 16th century philanthropist, was the founder of the charity that bears his name. His almshouse provided board and lodgings for poor travellers and was immortalized in Charles Dickens's short story *The Seven Poor Travellers*. Watts died in 1579 and was accorded an elaborate monument in Rochester Cathedral's Lady Chapel. About 200 years later a heraldic ledger stone was inserted in the cathedral floor above his grave.

They died in office ...

John Fowle of Dymchurch, who is buried in All Saints, Lydd, was appointed Town Clerk of Lydd when he was 22 and was still in office when he died 39 years later, in 1727. He had also been Clerk to the Lords of Romney Marsh for 21 years at the time he died.

Another of Romney Marsh's long-serving public officers was Benjamin Cobb, buried at St Nicholas, New Romney. He was Mayor of New Romney five times. First elected in 1736, when he was 29, he died in office in 1756. His ledger stone survives in good condition. Nearby is the grave of his daughter, Anne, whose MI also commemorates First Lieutenant Charles Cobb, who was Anne's nephew and Benjamin's grandson, killed by a cannon ball while serving on HMS *Castillon* in a battle with the French off Boulogne in 1811.

The *Naval Chronicle* reported that he looked at his shattered arm, hanging by a small portion of flesh, and exclaimed with the greatest composure, 'Never mind, it's only an arm.' He also suffered injuries to his ribs and lungs and died 50 minutes after his arm was amputated.

Staunch Royalists

Cecilia Stede of Hollingbourne was 'the most entirely beloved wife of Colonel Edwin Stede, His Majesty's Lieutenant Governor of the Island of Barbados' and daughter of Sir William Clark, a Royalist leader who was killed during the Civil War at the Battle of Cropredy Bridge in 1644. Cecilia's grandfather was Sir Thomas Culpeper the elder, who bought Leeds Castle in 1632; her mother was Mary Culpeper, who married William Clark in 1636.

St Mary's, Patrixbourne, is the last resting place of John Bargrave, from a family of prosperous yeomen farmers and tanners who were staunch Royalists during the Civil War.

Bargrave's father, Captain John Bargrave, was a mercenary soldier and adventurer in the wars with Spain. 'Upwardly mobile' and ambitious, he married Jane Crouch, daughter and heiress of a London haberdasher, and subsequently financed the construction of an impressive mansion known as Bifrons at Patrixbourne, which in 1820 became the seat of Elizabeth Conyngham, Marchioness Conyngham, last mistress of George IV.

The Romneys of Maidstone

All Saints, Maidstone, has an impressive array of more than 300 ledger stones, several of which mark the graves of members of the town's eminent Romney family. Prominent among the graves are those of Frances, Lady Romney, daughter of Charles, Earl of Egremont, who died in 1795, and her consort Charles, 5th Earl of Romney, who died March 1811

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1. Removing a lead coffin during an archaeological 'dig' at St George's Church, Canterbury. (Photo: Canterbury Archaeological Trust).



2. Excavating a burial chamber at St George's Church, Canterbury. (Photo: Paul Crampton)



3. A 'heraldic ledger stone' salvaged from Margaret Greenhill's grave during the 'dig' at St George's Church, Canterbury. (Photo: Ann Pinder)



4. St George's Church, Canterbury. Margaret Greenhill's ledger in the floor of the tower is passed, unnoticed, by thousands of people every day.



5. St Mary's Church, Nackington, where the graves of Rev Bryan Faussett and his father are marked with heraldic ledger stones.



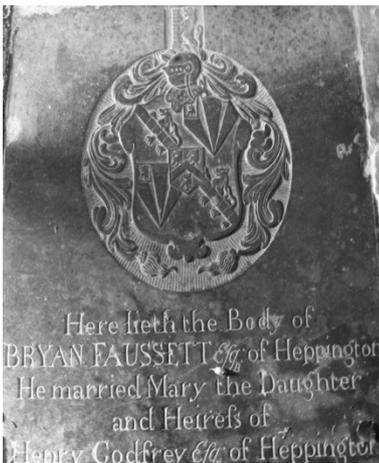
6. Toke's rubbing of Bryan Faussett's ledger stone.



7. Toke's rubbing of Rev Bryan Faussett's ledger stone.



10. Toke's rubbing of Richard Watts's ledger stone



8. The ledger stone of Bryan Faussett .(Photo: Neil Anthony, NA Creative Media)



11. Toke's rubbing of John Fowle's ledger stone



9. The ledger stone of Rev Bryan Faussett .(Photo: Neil Anthony, NA Creative Media)



12. Toke's rubbing of Benjamin Cobb's ledger stone



13. Toke's rubbing of Cecilia Stede's ledger stone.



14. Toke's rubbing John Bargrave's ledger stone



15. The ledger stone on the grave of Frances and Charles.



16. The ledger stone of other members of the Romney family, including (foreground) Robert, Lord Romney and Priscilla, Lady Romney, and (background) four of their children.