

Remarkable Deaths

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Mrs Booth and other remarkable deaths from the Church Register

The funeral of the indomitable Mrs Joan Booth of Michaelmas Lodge, Parsons Lane, was held in the church on 18th December 2017. Mrs Booth attained the amazing age of 104 on August 29th. She is the oldest person by 6 years recorded in the church burial register. To verify this achievement, a trawl was made through St Mary's burial register and revealed that no funeral was recorded for anyone over 98 years of age.

The burial register began on January 22nd 1599, therefore we have to assume that half a century of records are missing. (The registers of some local parishes go back to the late 1530's, shortly after Henry VIII established the Church of England in 1536). Ages were not recorded before 1783 and there is a brief gap early in the 17th century, but interesting facts were often recorded in the burial registers. These were dependent on the diligence of the curate and the majority recorded minimum details, but some were more expansive and provide invaluable information.

Unusual or tragic deaths prompted entries, and some are quite bizarre. In 1619 widow Bannister was '*caught in a great tempest by the river and stricken by lightning.*' Two mystery bodies were discovered. The first in April 1638 – '*a stranger was found dead in the field*', and in 1786 Richard Grommitt who '*was said to be from Middlesex*', was found dead in the snow.

Being an agricultural community, several fatal accidents involve working on the land. In 1621 John Hughes, '*a poor labouring man was killed in the Manor*'. In 1797 Thomas Simpson, 42, had a barley corn fly into his eye and he died of the inflammation. In 1799, James Elton, 46, died from falling from a cherry tree. In 1849, 13 year old Henry Munday died after an accident with a waggon, and a particularly distressing entry in 1855 records Joseph Smith, aged 8, being killed by a chaff cutting machine.

Open fires could be fatal for toddlers. In 1850 Charles Tuckwell, aged 2, died after his clothing caught fire and again in 1878 James Keene, aged 3, died of burns. Many children succumbed to whooping cough and diphtheria.

Diseases such as smallpox, typhoid and scarlet fever wiped out almost whole families. In 1789 John and Jane King and their three daughters died of smallpox after being moved to Pyrton Hill to avoid infecting others. Fortunately, two children recovered. In 1790 James Hammond developed Putrid Fever [Typhus] after burying his brother in Hagburn, Berks, who had died of the same disease. His wife Mary and their two daughters also died. The Franklin family lost four children to scarlet fever in January 1854.

Causes worthy of recording were from childbirth, consumption, dropsy and decline (old age). Others were more unusual. In 1786 almsman Francis Treadwell, 60, died '*from a sudden and violent seizure of inflammation of the bowels*'. Bargeman John Steevens, [sic] 42, died of '*dissipation*' in 1789, and ten years later in 1799 labourer Thomas Cooper, 67, had a merciful release from pain, having been '*crippled by rheumatism for more than 25 years and for the last 5 years, bedridden*'. In 1801 a Benson man called Eyton aged 52, was buried having suffered from cancer in the tongue. The curate recording ... '*His was a most extraordinary and melancholy complaint, as he was literally starved to death, being unable to take any sustenance*'.

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