

A century of burials - the lives behind six gravestones in St James' Graveyard

Something to think about first

What we can find out from historical sources about people in the past is very variable. If you were a man, wealthy and well known in society, you would leave behind you a long trail of public documents and probably images too.

If on the other hand you were a woman, looking after your family at home with no formal employment, the only public trace of you was likely to be in census records and possibly a gravestone. Womens' lives are far better documented now. But do not be too surprised to see more about the six men whose gravestones we are investigating than about their wives or sisters.

John and Ann Buddle

John Buddle was born in County Durham in the little village of Kyo in 1773. When he grew up he moved to Wallsend. His first job was as manager of Wallsend Colliery. He then became the manager of Benwell Colliery as well, and eventually he made enough money to buy Benwell Colliery and some of the land south of Charlotte Pit, near High Cross Farm.

Benwell Colliery had several pitheads, such as Charlotte Pit, and lots of pitmen working there. The men needed to have light to see what they were doing but there was often gas underground so it was dangerous to have naked flames, as these could cause explosions. John wanted his miners to be safe so when safety lamps were invented he made sure his miners had them.

John also made maps showing where all the mine workings were underground. This helped stop accidents when new seams of coal were being explored.

John lived with his father and sister Ann in Wallsend. After their father's death, Ann, who was fifteen years younger than John, continued to live with him and look after the house. She helped him entertain all the many famous people he knew. As with many of the wives and sisters of Victorian men, we know very little about Ann – except that when she died in 1841, the shopkeepers of Seaham, where John had overseen the building of a new harbour, shut their shops for the day as a mark of respect.

John gave away some of his land for the building St James' Church and its graveyard. He knew there was a seam of coal running under the graveyard. So perhaps it's no surprise that in choosing Benwell rather than Wallsend as his final resting place he was able to be buried in coal when he died in 1843!

Their nephew Robert Atkinson is also buried with John and Ann in the family vault below the gravestone.

Richard and Rachel Grainger

Richard Grainger was born in Newcastle in 1797, near where Eldon Square is today. He was brought up by his widowed mother in poverty but went to school until he was 14 when he became an apprentice carpenter.

Once he had earned enough money he began his own business, building and then selling houses in Newcastle. His business was helped by the money he was given when he married Rachel Arundale, whose father was a very rich leather merchant. Rachel and Richard had thirteen children! Sadly she died giving birth to their last child.

Richard was ambitious and became very successful as a land developer. It was his idea to completely rebuild the centre of Newcastle, including Eldon Square. Richard employed great architects, so his buildings were beautiful and made to last.

In 1839 he bought Elswick Hall and its estate to live in. In his day it was still in the countryside and he had great ideas for developing the land around the Hall, including building a new suburb, a zoo and a railway terminus.

Elswick Hall was his home for two years but he had increasing money troubles and had to sell up. He moved to one of the houses he had built in Clayton Street, where he lived until his death in 1861, running his building business on a smaller scale. The Hall has now been demolished. It is now the site of a public swimming pool and park, from where you can still see how wonderful the view across the Tyne would have been in Grainger's time.

Richard was buried in St James' graveyard. His funeral was a huge event, showing how well he was regarded. His is the only name on the stone above his vault, but we know Rachel and other members of his family are buried there too.

John and Anne Sowerby

John Sowerby was born in 1808 and brought up on Shipcote Farm on the outskirts of Gateshead, where the Shipley Gallery now stands. His father ran the farm and also owned a coal mine and a glassmaking business. When John grew up he joined the business and built it up to become internationally famous.

His factory manufactured pressed glass, where items were made using moulds rather than being blown into shape (which was the traditional method). The Sowerby family made a lot of money from their business and their glassware was sold far and wide.

In 1842 John married Anne Robson, a neighbouring farmer's daughter, and they had six children. In 1867 John and Anne moved from Gateshead across the river, to a historic grand house, Benwell Tower. One of their daughters, Mattie, was married in 1869 at nearby St James' Church. When John retired his son, John George, took over the business.

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After John's death in 1879, Anne stayed on for a while at Benwell Tower, then decided to live in London to be nearer three of her married daughters who had moved south. But she came back to live in Northumberland and died at her son John George's house in Chollerton in 1896.

The Sowerby glassworks has gone now but collectors still buy glassware made in John's factory, and Benwell Tower is still standing. It has been used for many different purposes since the Sowerbys' day. Two people who have known it very well from the inside are Ant and Dec – it housed the studio for their first big TV break, as actors in the children's drama serial *Byker Grove*.

John and Jane Ferguson

John Ferguson was born in 1841 on a farm near Rothbury in Northumberland. His wife Jane also came from Northumberland. They had moved to Newburn by their early twenties and then on to Kenton where John supported his growing family through farm labouring and even mining in Kenton, before getting the chance to run his own farm at Benton Bridge, close to Jesmond Dene.

John and Jane must have done well there, as they were able to employ a good number of people. But possibly because Heaton's fields were being turned over to housing, they moved in 1892 right across the city to West Benwell Dairy Farm near Denton Burn.

John and Jane had five children but it seems not all survived to adulthood. It was their younger son, Charles, who grew up to work on the farm and take it over when John died in 1916 during the First World War. By then Jane had been dead for fifteen years and John had married again. Annie, his second wife, had his and her name added to Jane's gravestone.

The family continued to run their dairy business for many more years and were well known in the area. By the 1930s their farmland had given way to the houses and streets we see today, but the road to Benwell from the farm has remained and is still called Ferguson's Lane.

Thomas and Mary Alderson

Thomas Alderson was a draper. He was born in 1861 near Byker Bridge in Newcastle but moved to Benwell around 1887. He opened his own draper's shop on Adelaide Terrace, selling cloth and clothing, and soon after moved into the flat above the shop with his wife Mary. Trade directories show that he added bootselling to his business for a time, but this did not seem to last.

When Thomas opened his shop, Adelaide Terrace and the few streets around were less than twenty years old and Benwell was still a village, not yet part of Newcastle. Thomas lived in the West End for the rest of his life and would have witnessed it changing, with new streets continuing to be built on what had been fields (some of them once owned by mining engineer John Buddle). He lived in two of the new houses himself, first on Normanton Road and then Milvain Road.

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His daughters were all working girls after they left school, in jobs such as office work and teaching. In 1926 at St James', one of them, Vera, married John Elliott who went on to be Chairman of Swan and Hunter and receive a CBE. By then Thomas was resting in peace, buried in St James' graveyard alongside his wife Mary in 1931.

Joseph and Jane Ryan

Joseph Ryan was a coal miner. He was born in 1864 in West Hartlepool, far south of the Tyne, but came north for work to Wrekenton, where he must have met his wife Jane, who came from nearby Kibblesworth. After the birth of their first child they moved to Scotswood where Joseph found work in Montague Colliery's View Pit (also called Montagu Old Pit). By 1891 he and Jane were the parents of four children under five, living in two rooms on Chapel Terrace. Joseph had a post as an experienced 'rolleywayman', maintaining the rail tracks used to transfer coal from the coalfaces underground.

Just before Christmas 1891 he met with a fatal accident that killed him and the young lad who was with him. There was an enquiry into their deaths which can still be read in the archives of the Durham Mining Museum. Most mining families could not have afforded a headstone, but in this case, Jane was able to record her grief at his loss on his small memorial stone, paid for perhaps by his fellow miners or by the coal company.

Afterwards Jane moved away from the area to Kenton, where we can see from a census record that she found security for her children, and hopefully happiness again, by marrying Joseph's brother Daniel, who was also a miner.

St James' Local History KS2 Learning Package: BACKGROUNDER 2



Local history KS2 learning package
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