

"a beautiful little churchyard"



A SHORT HISTORY OF ST JAMES' GRAVEYARD, BENWELL



THE ORIGINAL CHURCHYARD

The original churchyard of St James' opened in 1832 at the same time as the church itself. At this time Benwell was a rural area containing several big houses surrounded by landscaped grounds, many farms, scattered groups of cottages linked to coal mines, and a small village which later became known as Old Benwell. The total population of Benwell was only 1,278 in 1831. The area was part of the large parish of St John which was one of Newcastle's four churches. The population of this parish had reached at least 14,000 by 1831 while there was only seating for 1,000 in the church. Instead of expanding its own building, St John's decided to build a new "chapel of ease" for its parishioners in the outlying parts of the parish some of whom had to travel almost three miles to church. Benwell was chosen as a convenient site for the scattered settlements to the west of the town.



Benwell High Cross cottages in the 1880s, looking to the west with St James' Church in the background.

The new stone church and its adjacent churchyard were consecrated on October 8th 1832 by the Lord Bishop of Bristol officiating for the Bishop of Durham whose diocese covered Newcastle until 1882. The church and churchyard stood on three-quarters of an acre of ground which had been given by John Buddle, the wealthy owner of Benwell Colliery. The waggonway that took coal from Buddle's pits down to the coal staithes on the riverbank had previously run across this land, after passing under Benwell Lane, but had recently been taken out of use. The stone for the church – and presumably



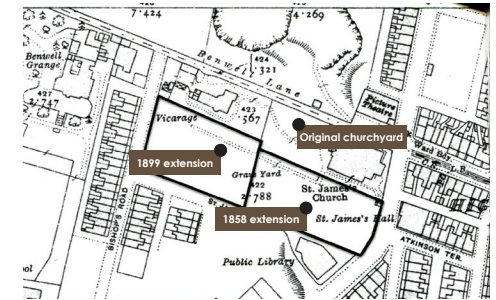
The original church, churchyard and vicarage were sited on a narrow strip of land parallel to Benwell Lane, as shown here in this extract from the 1864 OS map.

the boundary walls of the churchyard – had been given by the Newcastle MP John Hodgson from his quarry in Elswick.

When Benwell became a parish in 1843, a fine stone vicarage designed by John Dobson was built on half an acre of land donated by Robert Thomas Atkinson.

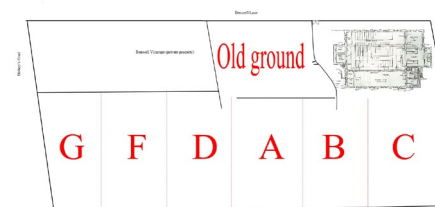
EXTENDING THE GRAVEYARD

When the church and its little churchyard were opened, Benwell was a predominantly rural area with a small population. Before long, however, an unanticipated demand arose for burials as a consequence of the establishment of Newcastle's new workhouse in 1839 on the site of what later became the General Hospital. Since this was within the parish boundaries, St James' found itself responsible for the burial of the inmates. As a result of the large number of such burials, the churchyard began to fill up much more quickly than had been expected. A letter written on 7th August 1854 from the Ratepayers and Parishioners of St James' asks the Board of Guardians of the Poor of the Union of Newcastle upon Tyne to "provide themselves with a burial ground elsewhere, and so relieve the Chapelry of St James' from the manifest unfairness of having to provide a place of inhumation for the whole Union." The letter complained that there were four times as many burials from the workhouse as from the rest of the parish, although the records show that the actual figure was only twice as many.



In the later decades of the 19th century there was further pressure for burials at St James' as a result of the rapid development of housing in South Benwell on the slopes above the river and in "New Benwell" around Adelaide Terrace. These densely built terraces accommodated thousands of families drawn into the area to work in the new industries springing up along the banks of the Tyne.

The first addition to the burial ground at St James' was consecrated in March 1862 by the Bishop of Durham. It comprised an acre of land to the south of the church which was purchased from the estate of the late Robert Thomas Atkinson who had inherited it from his uncle, John Buddle. The second addition was consecrated in July 1900 by the Bishop of Newcastle after an acre of land was donated by Sir Benjamin Browne.



Sections A to C on this plan were added in 1858 and consecrated in 1862. Sections D, F and G were added in 1899 and consecrated in 1900. There is no Section E. After these sections were added, the original churchyard became known as the "Old Ground."

Changes to the church building during the 19th and early 20th centuries also impacted on the graveyard. In the early years of the 20th century there were two minor changes to the graveyard. In 1913 a small part of the north-west corner was taken by the council for the purposes of rounding off the corner of Bishops Road. In 1922-3 the level of the south-west corner of the graveyard was raised using soil obtained free of charge from a council project to widen Benwell Lane. It was estimated that this would enable an additional 1,660 burials to take place.



Several carved stones which appear to have been used to mark sections A and C were recently unearthed by volunteers working in the graveyard. Their original position is unknown.

There was formerly an entrance with a wooden gate in the stone wall marking the west boundary of the graveyard, which may have been used for funerals. After the graveyard was closed for burials in 1966, this entrance was blocked off, and only a continuous stone wall is evident today. The carriageway running east from the old entrance to the church is still visible.

Another major change in this period was the sale of the vicarage and surrounding land in the north west corner of the site. In 1980, a section of land adjacent to Bishops Road on which stables had previously stood was sold to build flats, and in 2001 the vicarage and its garden were sold to a private owner.

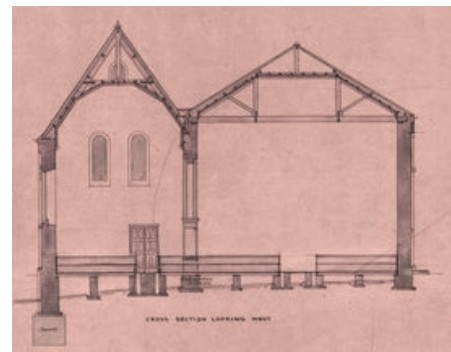
After closure in 1966 the graveyard received little care or attention for more than forty years. The City Council whose responsibility it became carried out a minimal level of maintenance, such as grass cutting, and it was an unmanageable burden for a church already faced with the problems of a decaying building and an impoverished community. In the 1970s some work was done by the Community Industry Scheme, which was funded by the government to help unemployed people gain skills and find jobs. The parish magazine for 1973 reports that some "unsightly" kerbs were buried, broken stones removed, and a large patch of ground near the vicarage gate was cleared. They may have also buried some gravestones beside the boundary wall with the vicarage. During the 1980s plans were drawn up to move all the gravestones to the edge of the site and create a large paved area in the centre. Fortunately the church was unable to raise the funds to carry out this scheme. The graveyard continued to be neglected until it was almost completely covered by weeds and rubbish and very few gravestones were visible. Then in 2009 the volunteers of St James' Heritage and Environment Group began the process of restoring it. Over the next ten years they cleared the rubbish and weeds and replaced it with new planting, including a variety of flowers and a new boundary hedge. More than fifty damaged gravestones were repaired by the volunteers working alongside a professional conservator with financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and new interpretation material was produced highlighting the historical significance of the graveyard.

THE IMPACT OF THE CHURCH EXTENSIONS

The first church was much smaller than the one we see today. It was rectangular, without the north and south aisles and the chancel. There would have been many burials in the area immediately around the church, which are now covered by the later extensions.

The south aisle was completed in 1864. When the Bishop of Durham granted the petition of the church officials and parishioners to build the south aisle in 1863, he gave them the power "to remove so much of the Soil and such of the Tombs, and if absolutely necessary, but not otherwise, to take up and re-inter the remains of any bodies from the outside of the Walls of the said Church, that may be needful in carrying the said plans into effect."

In the absence of any records saying that any bodies were re-interred, it seems likely that these burials still exist under the extended parts of the church.



Architect's drawing of proposal for addition of south aisle, as viewed from the east, 1863

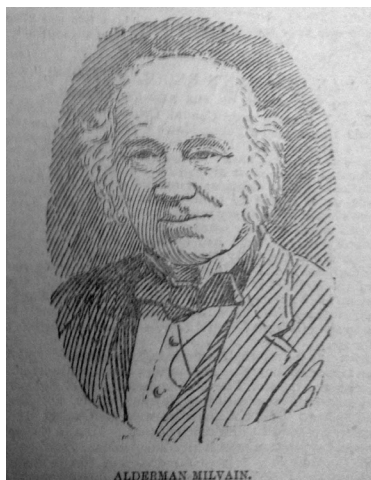


View from Atkinson Road of the east side of the church showing south aisle on left, north aisle on right, with chancel and nave in the centre, 2016

Care was taken not to disturb the vaults during the building work. The drawings by the architects, Messrs Austin and Johnson, show that the floor was raised up on pillars, allowing room for the vaults to remain in place. They designed three arches in the wall so that three tombs could remain in their original positions beneath by foundations. There is also a smaller arch at the west end of the wall, covering the tomb of the Rev. William Maughan, first vicar of Benwell.



William Maughan served as vicar of Benwell from the establishment of the parish in 1843 until 1877.



This memorial to Alderman Henry Milvain, 1804-1890, is on the south wall of the church under an arch. The tomb lies under the south aisle, now the church hall.



There were also graves to the north of the original church building where the north aisle was added in 1902-3. During the building work this ground was excavated so that the level is now lower than the original gravestones. If you walk around the south side of the church towards the junction of Atkinson Road and Benwell Lane, you can see how the addition of the north aisle covered land which would have contained burials.

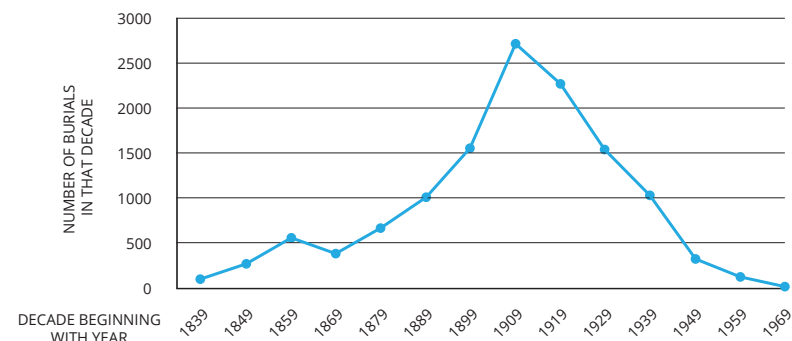


The Antill family grave is one of two gravestones on the eastern side of the church, which were probably part of the original churchyard. Philip and Ann Antill had three children buried here: Louisa Charlton who died in 1834 aged two, Ann Maria who died in 1838 aged seven, and Geage Gilbert who died in 1843 aged eight. There is at least one other burial here, but the inscription is illegible.

The second stone marks the grave of Jane Carr, a dressmaker, who died in 1853 of cholera.

BURIALS

There were 12,547 burials at St James' during the period from 1833 to 1966. The peak period was between 1900 and 1919, accounting for four-fifths of all burials there - more than 5,000 in all. By contrast there were only 89 burials after 1950.



To date 602 memorials or gravestones have been uncovered, but additional ones are still being discovered by the volunteers working in the graveyard. The Heritage and Environment Group holds copies of the complete burial records and has so far identified the location of more than 7,000 of the burials.

Rich and poor, young and old, lie side by side in the graveyard. They include some of Newcastle's wealthiest families such as the Sowerbys of Benwell Towers and the Cooksons of Benwell Hall, buried near to the 549 unfortunate people who died in the workhouse or its infirmary. More than a third of all burials were of children under ten. A variety of occupations are represented, including miners, engineers, boatmen, blacksmiths, farmers, shopkeepers and servants. Those who died as a result of war are also commemorated, and there are 20 official Commonwealth War Graves.

The first burials in the original churchyard at St James' were in 1833. They were conducted by John Fox, who was a Sub-curate of St. John's Church in Newcastle, as St James' did not become a parish church with its own vicar until 1843. Although this was an Anglican Church, many of those buried here worshipped at other churches, and their burials were conducted by priests from other denominations including Roman Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian. Elizabeth Clark of Benwell Colliery, aged five years, was the first person to be buried in the new churchyard on 17th April 1833. Although there are no records for this part of the graveyard, later known as the "Old Ground", the latest burial here is thought to have been that of Mary Ann Holmes, wife of Edward Holmes and resident of Rose Cottage, Edward Gardens, South Benwell, who was born in 1890 and buried on 27th March 1953.

A SHORT HISTORY OF ST JAMES' GRAVEYARD, BENWELL

"A beautiful little churchyard" was how St James' graveyard was described in 1901 by a contemporary historian. It served as the parish graveyard for Benwell and the surrounding area for about 130 years until its closure in the 1960s. During that time some of the most illustrious people in the history of 19th century Tyneside were buried there, along with the pitmen, engineers, boatmen, farmers, shopkeepers, servants and others who lived in the area with their families. After several decades of neglect, the graveyard was revived in 2009 by a group of volunteers who set up St James' Heritage & Environment Group with the aim of restoring and maintaining it as an important heritage site and an attractive green space for people to explore and enjoy.



Visit St James' Graveyard

St James' Church and Graveyard are on Benwell Lane, NE15 6RR, next to the junction with Atkinson Road, Condercum Road and Adelaide Terrace.

The graveyard is open to visitors every Tuesday between 11am – 4pm.

- Take a tour
- Consult the burial records

St James' Heritage & Environment Group

St James' Heritage & Environment Group is an independent voluntary organisation committed to maintaining and improving the historic graveyard and encouraging people of all ages to explore and celebrate the history of the west end of Newcastle through a programme of events, projects, exhibitions and publications.

Contact: St James' Heritage & Environment Group, c/o Pendower Good Neighbour Project, 12/14 Sunnybank Avenue, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE15 6SD

Email: stjamesbenwell@gmail.com

Website: <https://stjames.heritage.com>

This booklet would not have been possible without the efforts of all the volunteers who have worked to improve and maintain the graveyard during the past ten years and those who have carried out research into the history of the place and the people buried there. We are grateful for the support of Newcastle City Council who funded this booklet.

Images reproduced courtesy of St James' Church, West Newcastle Picture History Collection, Newcastle City Council Libraries and Information, Laing Art Gallery, Ordnance Survey and www.old-maps.co.uk, Ann Crighton-Harris, Pat Riley, and members of St James' Heritage and Environment Group.

Front cover images: changing view from the south west, (above) probably early 20th century (below) 2010.

Back cover images: (left to right) Christopherson children, coal miner, workers at Vickers Elswick, Anne Sowerby, blacksmith, Richard Grainger, Bishop Lloyd.