

BLETSOE: The Parish Church of St.Mary**The St.John vault beneath the north transept**

Visit on 23 June 1995 when the St.John vault was opened for the first time in over 50 years. An examination of the vault was included in the architect's Quinquennial Inspection on account of concern about settlement in the ground outside the west wall, and uneven settlement in the encaustic tiled pavement in the upper level of the vault. Lord St.John, the incumbent, the two churchwardens, church architect (Bruce Deacon), and David Baker and Chris Pickford were present.

The north transept was restored in about 1857-8 - probably under S.S.Teulon - for the Dowager Lady St.John. The work had been completed by December 1861. New oak doors to the transept were made by Rattee & Kett of Cambridge in 1885. The transept was again restored in 1951, when responsibility for the fabric was transferred to the parish.

The transept has distinctive Victorian window tracery, a wooden roof with elaborate decoration, a fine stone screen and steps to the upper level, and good encaustic floor tiles. There are mural tablets and hatchments to the St.Johns on the walls. The St.John monument (Sir John St.John d.1559 and family) was removed from the south wall of the transept to the north wall of the nave in 1977. In the wall behind the monument - now plastered over - a blocked mediaeval squint was found (photographs and details are held in the HER).

The vault occupies one half (the west side) of the transept, and is entered by a slab in the floor to the left of the steps leading to the upper level of the transept. The chamber is vaulted in brick and ventilated by openings at ground level in the west and north walls. There is a solid brick wall along the east side of the vault roughly below the central axis of the transept, and there may be a further chamber to the east. However, this chamber (if it exists) appears to have been sealed and there is no means of access. The present vault appears to date from the 1857-61 restoration of the north transept.

In the vault there are about 19 coffins, although as they have been stacked up to four-high full examination was not possible. They are mostly stacked east-west, but there is one coffin (John Lord St.John, d.27 April 1767 aged 41, and his daughter Louisa Theodosia, died 1766, aged 11 months) at right-angles in a north-south position along the east wall. The vault suffers from damp and appears to have been flooded at some time, and many of the timbers in contact with the floor - including the feet of the trestles supporting the coffins - are sodden or have suffered water damage.

There are engraved coffin-plates on top of most of the coffins, but none of them have identification on the sides or ends. The coffin-plates were mostly engraved (not cast) and transcription of the wording would have involved dusting or cleaning. This was not possible at the time of the visit - and it might arguably

have been considered an unwanted disturbance to the integrity of the contents of the vault. Legible inscriptions included dates of 1760s and 1770s.

There are some lead coffins, some with elaborate velvet covering, and two (the largest and probably most recent) in oak. The decayed wreath and garland remain on top of one of the oak coffins. At the far (north) end of the vault there is a child's coffin (... Matilda, daughter of Henry Beauchamp, Lord St. John, d.1785).

The vault was found to be in excellent condition structurally, and the unevenness in the floor tiles in the transept above must be attributable to settlement in the filling between the top-side of the vault and the tiled pavement.

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County Archivist

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