

DISSENTERS' GRAVEYARD EXCAVATIONS JUNE & JULY 2015

1. The small building

The remains of a small building, located beside the west boundary wall at the north end of the site, were identified and excavated in 2014. At this time, the north end of the building was obscured by the displaced slab from Tomb 6. The removal of the slab by the fire brigade in April this year allowed the remainder of the structure to be investigated. The north-east corner and return of the north wall, consisting of a single block of Heavitree stone, were found, establishing that it was a rectangular structure 2m long north/south and 1.5m long east/west. The break in the north wall footings may have been an entrance. A north/south slot 0.7m long, 0.10m wide and 0.15m deep that extended through the gap in the north wall, and a circular post-hole 0.20m in diameter and 0.30m deep located at the west edge of the building, were also found.



The full outline of the small building revealed by the removal of the fallen slab from Tomb 6. Looking north.



The small building with slot and post-hole at the north end. Base of Tomb 6 in foreground. Looking south.



The small building. Looking west.



The small building with slot and post-hole at the north end. Looking south.

The absence of a west wall footing could indicate that it was a lean-to structure built against the boundary wall. Alternatively, it is possible that the boundary wall was rebuilt when Bull Meadow Road was constructed (some time between 1877 and 1891), and the west side of the structure was removed. The finds recovered from the floor of the building were all C18th century in date, with some dating to c. 1720. It is possible, therefore, that the building pre-dates the graveyard. However, the fact that the burials do not encroach on the structure may show that it was standing when the graveyard was laid out. The 1877 OS 1:500 map, the earliest large scale map of the graveyard, does not show a building in this position, but shows one in the south-west corner instead. The earlier structure, possibly a storage shed for tools and equipment, may have been demolished and rebuilt in this more discreet position.

2. The underground vault

A trench 2.8m long east/west by 2m wide north/south was excavated to investigate a pronounced linear depression to the east of the railed chest tomb 45. It exposed a demolished underground vault, which would originally have been overlain by a tomb that no longer survives. The vault was excavated to a depth of 1m below ground level, but the floor was probably another metre below this. As a result, no human remains were encountered. The structure was built of red brick bonded with lime mortar and was 2.2m long by 1.6m wide internally. It had a circular barrel vaulted roof, which was mostly destroyed, but the lower courses survived in places. There were traces of limewash on the inside of the chamber. There was an 0.80m wide opening in the east wall, which provided access to the vault for successive burials. This had been blocked with bricks and stone rubble bonded with earth and mortar. The south-east corner of the vault had been badly disturbed by tree roots.

The vault was filled with a series of distinct deposits. The lowest one exposed contained a large number of individual bricks and also larger chunks of mortared brick from the roof, as well as pieces of broken tombstones. This deposit also contained bottle glass and pottery of 19th century date. The overlying deposits were all 20th century in date and one could be very precisely dated to 1984/5 by the 'best before' dates on a can of Heineken and an orange juice carton.

It appears that the vault, which was already blocked-up, was partly demolished and backfilled in the 19th century. The vault must have been uncovered during the restoration and landscaping work undertaken by the Manpower Services Commission in 1984/5, and was then completely backfilled and levelled.

Because there is no surviving memorial we do not know who is buried in the vault.



Underground vault to east of Tomb 45 before excavation. Looking east.



Excavating west end of vault.



Excavating west end of vault.



Excavating east end of vault.



Vault after excavation. Looking east.



Vault after excavation. Looking north.



Vault after excavation. Looking south.



Blocked entrance in east wall of vault.



Remains of arched roof at west end of vault.



The location of the vault in the graveyard. Looking west.



The location of the vault in the graveyard. Looking north.

Martin Dyer August 2015