

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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Who lies in the vault? An investigation of the occupants of Debden Church vault

©Henry Blackie

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In recent years, the vault beneath the chancel of the church has been open to the public during the Church Christmas Fair. On such occasions I have been delegated to be in the vault to help visitors negotiate the rather awkward stairs and to answer any questions. Understandably, the thing that everyone wanted to know was who was in the coffins. I had to admit I did not know and, as far as I was aware, nobody else did either. So I resolved to try to find out before the next Christmas Fair and what follows is the result of my research.

By way of a reminder, there are 18 niches in the vault divided into two groups. The first, which I have named the Outer Group are on the right hand side running from the bottom of the stairs to the far wall – the south wall of the church. They are lined up in a N-S direction. There are 8 niches in this group four each in the upper and lower tiers. All but one are occupied.

On the left hand side at the bottom of the stairs there is one large niche which looks as if it was used to hold coffins, perhaps during the funeral service, before they were placed in their final niches.

The second group, the Inner Group, is round the corner from the Outer Group and is at right angles to it being lined up in an E-W direction. There are 10 niches in this group in two tiers of which 8 are occupied. One niche contains two small coffins.

In order to assist identification, I have numbered the niches as follows:

Outer Group:

Window

Stairs

1	3	5	7
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2	4	6	8
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Inner Group:

West

East

9	11	13	15	17
10 a b	12	14	16	18

Niches 8, 14 and 16 are empty.

What sources of information have I used in identifying the occupants of the vault? The first are the coffins themselves. All but one have plates on their lids which name the occupant, the date of their death and their age at death. Usually there is other information such as 'wife of', 'daughter of' etc. Unfortunately it is very difficult to read many of these plates because of the short distance between the coffin lid and the ceiling of the niche.

I constructed a device to hold a digital camera which I used to photograph the plates but this revealed that many were in very poor condition. In many cases the photographs showed only some details such as a name or a date.

The second important source of information is the Debden Burial Register which is held on microfiche in Saffron Walden Library. This was very useful in corroborating and confirming the partial information gained from the photographs such as date of death. These two sources of information have enabled me to identify definitively most of the occupants.

Thirdly, the internet proved to be extremely useful. Finally, as will be seen, the monuments in the church confirmed information from the other sources.

Who then are the occupants? They are as follows:

Group	Niche	Occupant	Date of Death	Age	Description
Outer	1	Eleanor Totton	26 Feb 1843	77	2 nd Wife of Revd William Jurin Totton
	2	Elizabeth Maria Totton	12 Oct 1849	44	Daughter of Revd William Jurin Totton
	3	Frances Mary Anne Totton	13 June 1807	36	1 st Wife of Revd William Totton
	4	Catherine Totton	28 October 1876	73	Resident in Newport. Daughter of Revd

					William Jurin Totton
	5	Frances Vincent Totton	11 May 1815	9	Son of Revd William Jurin Totton
	6	Unidentified			
	7	Revd William Jurin Totton	17 Jan 1850	81	Rector of Debden
	8	Empty			

Group	Niche	Occupant	Date of Death	Age	Description
Inner	9	Mary Dowager Lady Vincent	8 June 1826	69	Daughter of R.M.T. Chiswell
	10a	Stillborn daughter of William Johnson Campbell and his wife Maria born 11 May 1818*			
	10b	Stillborn son of William Johnson Campbell and his wife Anna Maria born 4 June 1819*			
	11	Mary Trench Chiswell	11 May 1807	78	Daughter of James Jurin. Wife of RMT Chiswell
	12	Beatrice Charlotte Campbell	12 March 1848	58	Daughter of 5th Viscount Torrington
	13	Richard Muilman Trench Chiswell	3 Feb 1797	61	
	14	Empty			
	15	Jane, Lady Vincent	13 April 1805	24	Wife of Sir Francis Vincent
	16	Empty			
	17	Sir Francis Vincent	17 Jan 1809	29	Of Debden Hall
	18	Everard William Vincent	9 Mar 1816	13	From St George's Hanover Sq.

*These are the actual inscriptions on the plates on the coffins

There is one occupant that I have been unable to identify in Niche 6. There appears to be no identification on the coffin itself although it is evident from its shape and condition that it is one of the most recent to have been placed in the vault. There is a plate which contains Psalm 39 v8: 'And now Lord, what is my hope; truly my hope is even in thee'. But that is all.

Who are all these people? Beginning with the Inner Group, in the centre of the upper row, Niche 13, is Richard Muilman Trench Chiswell. His father was Peter

Muilman, a merchant from Amsterdam and his mother was Mary Chiswell, the sister of Richard Chiswell who had bought Debden Hall. He took the names Trench and Chiswell on inheriting the fortunes of both families. He restored the Church, built the chancel, the Chiswell Chapel and the vault. He committed suicide in 1797 and became the first occupant of the vault.

His wife, Mary, is in Niche 11. She was the daughter of James Jurin a famous 18th century polymath of Huguenot descent. He was a doctor of medicine and wrote on many subjects including mathematics and physics. He was Secretary of the Royal Society and President of the Royal College of Physicians. Mary Chiswell was related, through her father, to William Jurin Totton who, with his family, occupy most of the Outer Group (see below).

R. M. T. Chiswell had one daughter, Mary, who married Sir Francis Vincent. She is in Niche 9. Among other things she was patron of Widdington. She and Sir Francis had two children – the next Sir Francis and a daughter, Anna Maria, who married Captain William Johnson Campbell and it is their stillborn children who are in Niche 10.

William Johnson Campbell's brother, Colin, became Rector of Widdington and was married to Beatrice Charlotte (née Byng) who was the daughter of the 5th Viscount Torrington. She is in Niche 12. William Johnson Campbell succeeded his mother-in-law as patron of Widdington.

Sir Francis Vincent, son of Mary Chiswell, married Jane Bouverie, niece of the Earl of Radnor, another prominent Huguenot. He is in Niche 17 and Jane is in Niche 15. They both died at a young age as did their son, Everard William, who is in Niche 18.

Thus all the nine occupants of the Inner Group were in some way connected to R. M. T. Chiswell.

The two empty niches require some explanation. There is an elegant brass monument on the east wall of the south aisle above the chest. It is to Bridget Augusta Herbert and her daughter Augusta Elizabeth Vincent. Bridget Augusta died on March 4th 1876 aged just short of 97 and her daughter died a month later on April 3rd aged 73. Bridget Augusta was another daughter of the 5th Viscount Torrington and so was the sister of Beatrice Charlotte Campbell in Niche 12.

The monument states that 'Both are buried in the family vault in this church' but evidently they are not there. The Burial Register confirms that they were both interred in the vault after their deaths but there is a note in the margin which says 'The coffins containing the remains of these two ladies were removed from the Vincent vault to Kensal Green Cemetery on Monday June 28th 1884 by a faculty of removal granted by the Bishop of the Diocese'. So that is why they are not there and probably why Niches 14 and 16 are empty.

It is not clear why they were removed to Kensal Green Cemetery but, given the date, it must have been done at the behest of Blanche, daughter of Augusta, Lady Vincent, who had married J. R. Cely-Trevilian in 1871 and lived at Debden Hall until 1882.

The Outer Group are occupied by the Reverend William Jurin Totton, his two wives and three of his children. His mother, Frances, was another daughter of James Jurin and so she was the sister of Mary Chiswell. He was ordained priest in April 1794 at St Paul's and in the same month he was appointed curate of Denham in Buckinghamshire. In May 1794 he was instituted as Vicar of Meldreth in Cambridgeshire but his daughter Frances Jane was christened in Denham so he may have held both positions at the same time. He was instituted as Rector of Debden on 6 July 1796. The List of Rectors in the Church erroneously has him as Rector from 1798. There is a monument to him and the members of his family in the vault on the south side of the chancel with all the inscriptions in Latin.

He remained Rector of Debden until his death in 1850. His obituary notice in the Times says that he was Rector of Debden for 54 years and Vicar of Meldreth for 56 years so apparently he held both livings simultaneously.

It came as a surprise to find so many Tottons in the vault. One can understand that the Reverend William, being related to Mary Chiswell, had some right to be buried there. One must assume that he had the approval of the Vincents to bury his family as well since they were in occupation of Debden Hall until 1886. He had many other children besides those in the vault but, luckily, they are buried elsewhere.

There is one more mystery about the vault. R.M.T. Chiswell's entry in the Burial Register says that he is in the 'new vault under the East end of the Church'. We know that the vault was indeed new and that Chiswell was its first occupant but does this statement also imply that there is an 'old' vault?

There are two monuments on each side of the east window. The one on the South East side contains the following 'In the vault in the south-east corner of the Church are deposited the remains of Peter Muilman Esq...' The monument on the North West side is to Richard Chiswell and it says that he 'lies interred in the vault at the South East corner of the Church'. This vault has not yet been identified.

In the south-east corner of the vault there is evidence of a structure which does not fit with its vaulted ceiling - it looks as if there was once a way through to somewhere else. Finally, outside right against the south-east corner of the Church there is a large unmarked stone slab resting on a plinth of two or three courses of bricks. It is exactly adjacent to the structure in the vault described above. This might be thought to be the old vault but it is almost

certainly the old entrance into the Chiswell vault which was sealed in 1850 shortly after the death of William Jurin Totton. It was thought that there would be a danger of unauthorised entry into the vault with an external entrance. Thereafter, as now, the only entrance was in the vestry which was generally kept locked.

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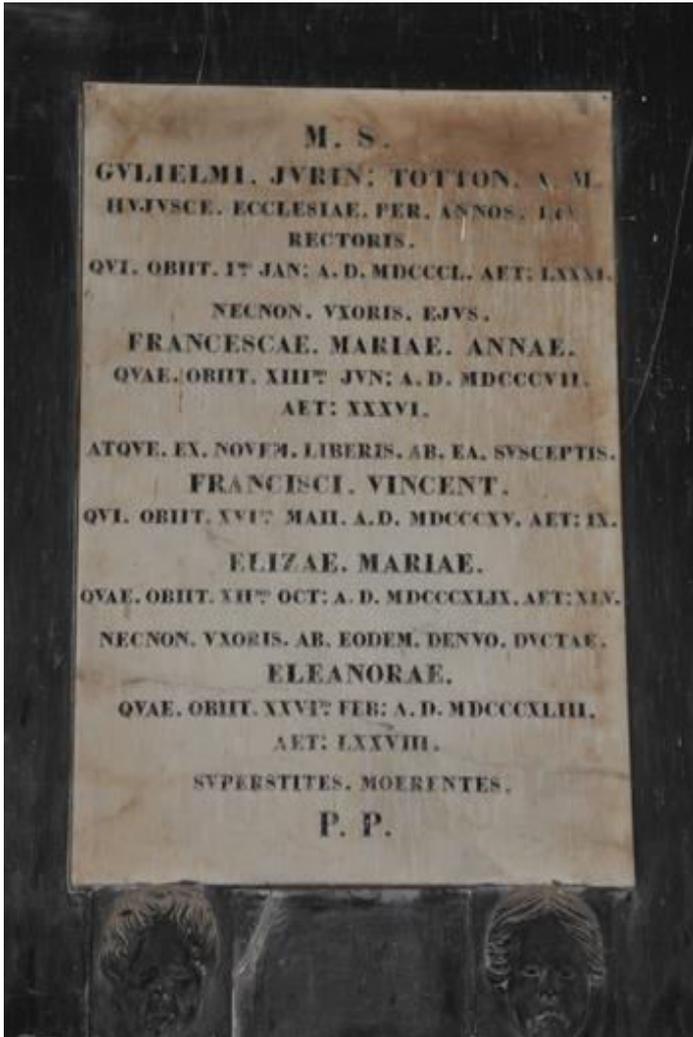
Illustrations



The Vault: The Outer Group ahead, The Inner Group to the right



The Herbert/Vincent Memorial



The Totton Memorial



'Debden Church Vault' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 20 (2010)

Evidence of Stairs into the Vault



Sealed Entrance to the Vault