

## Dagenham Churchyard

The Churchyard surrounding St Peter and St Paul's Church, Dagenham is enclosed by a brick wall and currently covers an area of just under 10,000 sq m.

The site is on part of a low ridge of sand and gravel, which runs in an east/west direction and is bisected by the Wantz Stream which flows in a southerly direction to join the River Beam and ultimately the Thames.

In 1998 the Archaeology Service of the Museum of London carried out an excavation approximately 18m west of the western boundary of the churchyard. This revealed that the geology of the area is sand and gravel, overlaid by subsoil, which in turn is overlaid by topsoil. It also revealed evidence of Late Bronze Age settlement (1,000-650 BC) in the form of pottery, ditches and other cut features. Examples of Saxo-Norman pottery were also discovered. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the area occupied by the churchyard has been part of a human settlement for 3,000 years.

The name Dagenham derives from the Saxon "Daecca's ham" or "Daecanhaam" – meaning the settlement or hamlet of Daecca. The first record dates from 687 AD when Hodelred gave "Lands called Daecanhaam" to the Abbess of Barking Abbey. Centuries later, sometime between 1180 and 1205 another Abbess of the Abbey gave land to build a church that "was intended to provide for the spiritual needs of the tenants of the Abbey lands, of the fishermen, woodmen, tillers of the soil and other dwellers of the district."

The dimensions of the land donated is not known.

The church was consecrated as a parish church in 1330 – the parish having the Thames, the river Beam and the Palace of Havering as its boundaries and covering 7,000 acres. It is not surprising that by 1508 there was a need to enlarge the churchyard. In that year there was a transaction about land involving the vicar, Richard Nicholson, Thomas Edolphe and Thomas Truelove (Churchwardens) in accordance with the Will of John Outrede. Other wills from medieval times express the wish to be buried in the churchyard.

Again, the dimensions of the enlargement are not known.

Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century any fugitive (unless charged with sacrilege or treason) could claim sanctuary on entering consecrated ground. Many churchyards had an air of peace and tranquility and were modelled on monastic gardens.

In 1565 the Archdeacon complained that "The gates of the churchyard are not sufficiently repaired at the charge of the parish." The earliest map shows the village in 1653 where the land surrounding the Church is accredited to the Parsonage. By this time, Churchwardens were

made local landowners and were responsible for keeping the churchyard boundary walls and fences in good repair.

By 1804 it was estimated that 11,000 burials had taken place in the churchyard over the preceding 600 years and it was necessary to make a further enlargement. Mr Cuff, who owned the adjoining land wanted £100 for 1 acre of land. In reply the Vestry lodged a complaint about the dilapidated state of Mr Cuff's fence. Afraid of legal costs and that to replace the fence, Mr Cuff agreed to give 11.5 rods of land (1 rod = 5.5 yards or approximately 5 metres) on condition that the parish properly fence the area and keep it in good repair for ever.

This offer was accepted and Mr Kittle instructed to make a stout fence made of oak, at a cost of not exceeding £1-11-6d per rod. Mr Ben Holgate, the village carpenter was ordered to make new gates.

The new extension was consecrated in 1805. Further enlargement was offered in 1832 by the Rev Thomas Fanshawe (vicar and local landowner). A plot adjoining the churchyard to the east, facing the Vicarage was offered, conditional that the parish enclose it with a brick wall. The Vestry declined the offer.

The churchyard was extended on the south side by half an acre in 1876. It was consecrated by the Bishop of Rochester. Since then the size of the churchyard has remained constant but the parish has diminished in area and increased in population.

For centuries the church has been a centre of worship for Dagenham and the surrounding churchyard a burial place for the local parishioners be they great and good, rich or poor, victor or victim. Thus the churchyard is visible and tangible evidence of the social and economic history of the parish and of the many and varied characters.

## Farmers and Landowners

The Seabrook, Gray, Yull, Moss, Hunsdon and Ford families all have large table tombs, reflecting their wealth and importance. These memorials were once adorned with decorative iron railings, popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but removed to help with the war effort in the early 1940s. The damage caused by their removal can still be seen.

Other farmers represented are the Boulton, Kittle and Bailes families. The tomb of Silena Copen states that she was the wife of a cattle salesman, further evidence of rural Dagenham.

There are approximately 24 "bottle tombs" – a large number for the size of the churchyard. Grave robbing was common in the Barking and Dagenham area in the 1820s and 30s and these tombs were designed to deter such activities!

The monument to PC George Clark is a reminder of Dagenham's most notorious unsolved mystery. Memorials to Thomas Cutler the first Head Teacher of William Ford's School, William Bennett, the drunken miller of Beacontree Heath who crossed the newly opened Liverpool Street to Southend railway line with fatal consequences, can be found. So too can that of James Palmer, sexton and clerk to the parish, who was buried alive by the grave he was digging falling in on top of him!

Several vicars of the parish are interred close to the church building, including the Rev Horace Siviter after whom Siviter Way is named.

Service graves from both World Wars are dotted throughout the area – one serviceman killed just days before the Armistice, another only 17 years old. Sadly there are several tombs of children and teenagers. Three very young children killed in a barn fire, just yards from the church, as a result of playing with matches is probably the most poignant. Disease, accident and murder being the cause of death of others.

The memorial to Mr and Mrs George Carey, ex churchwarden, members of the congregation and parents of the previous Archbishop of Canterbury is close to that of PC George Clark.

For many generations large quantities of flowers and greenery have been grown to decorate the church and to make garlands for festivals. The "greenery" is still used at Christmas, Mothering Sunday, Easter and Harvest and to supplement flower arrangements.

The avenue of lime trees (not including the interloping sycamore) was donated by the Seabrook family in 1876. It was quite usual to plant trees in 12s to represent the Apostles. Elms were grown for church repairs and to raise cash. The last remaining elm in Church Elm Lane fell prey to Dutch Elm disease in 1974.

Examples of the three main types of rock, ie igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary, from all over the country can be found amongst the tombstones in the older part of the churchyard. Weathering in varying degrees is evident and in some cases has exposed fossils.

The churchyard is a green oasis in the village area and is appreciated by resident and visitors alike but it is much, much more.