

A scheduled monument in our churchyard – the tomb of Edward Symes

Article extracted from a St Michael's Church Friends Newsletter in 2015. It was written by Dr Ged Keele.

There is a grade 2 scheduled monument which is situated to the south of the vestry. This is the tomb of Edward Symes and his wife Elizabeth. He died on 27th February 1781, but the inscription relating to the date of Elizabeth's death has been lost. He is named as Parish Surgeon. I thought it would be worth finding out something about the monument. What is a chest tomb? Who was Edward Symes and what was the role of a Parish Surgeon in the middle of the 18th century?



What is a chest tomb?

In the medieval period wealthy people were buried and had their memorials inside the parish church. Others were buried in unmarked graves in the churchyard. From the 17th century gravestones began to be erected over graves. If you were wealthy you could go one stage further and erect a chest tomb. These were also known as table tombs because of the flat surface on the top. This type of tomb became very fashionable amongst the wealthier classes in the 18th century. If you were very wealthy your tomb could be decorated with carvings and some very ornate examples can be found around Painswick in Gloucestershire.

What was the role of a Parish Surgeon in the 18th C and who was Edward Symes?

In order to answer the first question one needs to know something about the Elizabethan Poor Law and the state of medicine when Edward Symes was in practice. Around 1600 a number of Acts were passed that formalised a system for managing the problem of poverty. The poor were divided into three categories; the impotent poor, who couldn't work; the able-bodied poor, who could work; and the idle poor and vagrants. Taxes were to be levied locally within a parish and these supported the appointment of Overseers of the Poor. Those able to work were sent to a House of Industry and there were two types of relief for those who couldn't work. Indoor relief was provided in an alms house that was usually managed by a local benefactor or charity, and outdoor relief was provided to people living at home. The Overseers were appointed by a Vestry Committee. This consisted of local parishioners and was chaired by the parish vicar. Effectively this was the forerunner of the Parochial Church Council that we are familiar with today.

The general practitioners of the 18th C were apothecaries. The role of the apothecary had developed in the early 17th C as assistants to the physicians who prepared their medicines. The apothecaries had risen in popular esteem when they stayed in London during the plague of the 1660s, whereas the physicians accompanied the Royal Court which moved to Oxford. During the 18th century they gained the right to practice on their own and their numbers expanded. They acquired skills developed by the barber-surgeons in war to deal with injuries and took advantage of advances in midwifery which arose as a result of the introduction of obstetric forceps in France. As a result of these improvements in medical care it became common practice for Vestry Committees to use the services of a local apothecary who would be appointed as Parish Surgeon.

