

Holy Trinity Wingate

Graveyard Review and Recommendations

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1 Summary

This report seeks to investigate incidents surrounding the burial of Mrs Hilda Bell in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Wingate.

It also makes recommendations in the light of the circumstances which surrounded this case.

2 Definition of Purpose and Methodology

2.1.1 Definition of Purpose

- a) To review the incident(s) surrounding the burial of Mrs Bell in Wingate churchyard
- b) To see what lessons can be learned
- c) To make recommendations for the parish and wider afield

2.1.2 Methodology

- a) To interview The Rev'd Canon Jane Grieve and also former churchwardens of the parish
- b) To interview such members of the Bell family who wished to contribute
- c) To interview the gravedigger
- d) To interview the Registrar for the Diocese of Durham
- e) To review any documentary evidence which is presented to the reviewer
- f) To review any other information or people as the reviewer sees need to.

The interviews and review took place at Holy Trinity Wingate on 1/11/22

3 **Thanks**

- 3.1 I am grateful to all those whom I interviewed during this investigation. The general feel of all those interviewed was one of concern for the Bell family and wanting to make sure that this would not happen again to another family going forward.
- 3.1.2 The Bell family themselves have been exceedingly gracious in this whole situation and I wish to thank them for their forbearance and also offer my deepest sympathies to them at what was a hugely difficult time and one which was made all the more difficult by the situation.
- 3.1.3 The Rev'd Canon Jane Grieve dealt with the situation with grace, professionalism and care right from the outset. Canon Grieve was not part of the parish at the time of Mr Bell's burial in February 2005. Very soon after Mrs Bell's funeral Canon Grieve baptised the great-granddaughter of the late Mrs Bell which exemplifies this.
- 3.1.4 John Davies, gravedigger, performed heroic deeds in the solving of finding different places of burial. This was at great cost to him mentally and physically. Without his knowledge and expertise this situation could not have been resolved.
- 3.1.5 To Mr Grahame Morris MP for the way he supported and championed the family through phone calls, letters, meetings and also a question in Parliament to the Second Church Estates Commissioner.

4 **Interviews**

- 4.1 The first interview was with Canon Grieve. Canon Grieve was asked to give the story surrounding the incident and was able to report clearly and concisely the series of events. She clearly articulated the unfolding story in a way which was factual and at the same time with deep pastoral care.
- 4.1.2 Canon Grieve was then joined by former Churchwardens Doris Binks and Doris Brownless. Mrs Binks and Mrs Brownless were able to give helpful context to the time of Mr Bell's burial in 2005. This included comments on record keeping, a burglary/arson attack, the verger, the vicar at the

time (The Rev'd Martin Vaizey), various undertakers and stonemasons and local families.

- 4.1.3 After Mrs Binks and Mrs Brownless left, the reviewer then interviewed the Registrar (Legal Officer) of the Diocese of Durham, Mr Phillip Wills. Mr Wills spoke about Faculty Regulations (legal permissions for the Church of England) and also Interim Faculties (also known as emergency faculties). He answered questions on the speed and the process by which both could be issued with particular reference to this case but also wider too.
- 4.1.4 After Mr Wills the reviewer interviewed Mr Tom Bell (son of the late Mrs Hilda Bell) and Mrs Deborah Fulton (daughter of the late Mrs Hilda Bell). Both Mr Bell and Mrs Fulton were very gracious in the way in which they described the events concerning the burial of their mother and did so in a non-judgemental manner. Alongside their own family situation and wanting to know how this had occurred they also expressed a real desire for other families not to be in the same position. They spoke of how the churchyard had changed over the years and how unfamiliar it had become because of those changes. They spoke movingly about how Mrs Bell would come to visit her husband's grave each week and how that brought her and the family comfort. They spoke of the process by which the gravestone was put onto what they thought was Mr Bell's grave (2005) and their shock at discovering what had happened two days before the funeral. A constant theme throughout this interview was one of wanting clarity that others will not find themselves in this position in the future.
- 4.1.5 The final interview was with John Davies the gravedigger. As part of the interview Mr Davies was thanked by the reviewer for his assiduity in this case. Without his knowledge, hard work and expertise then this would not have been solved. Mr Davies explained the various processes which had been gone through in order to find the grave of Mr Bell. Mr Davies explained how he had discovered the initial mistake and then how through a series of further investigations managed to locate both the resting place of Mr Bell but also several other graves (known and unknown). Mr Davies also explained that the graves in this area were

unusual in their arrangement as they did not follow the same pattern as he does. He realised when looking at the dates of the burial for Mr Bell that this grave was dug at a time when he was on extended leave because of the terminal illness of his daughter and it was not him that dug it. The reviewer is grateful that Mr Davies, over the past few years has managed to produce a helpful grave plan where it is possible to do so.

4.1.6 This concluded the interviews on the 1/11/22.

4.1.7 The reviewer also conducted an interview with Mr Grahame Morris MP on 3/9/22. This was to ensure that the family were being cared for and that an investigation would be forthcoming.

5 Conclusions

5.1 It is clear that in all good faith the Bell family asked the stonemason in 2005 to fit the gravestone for the late Thomas Bell.

5.2 Because of insufficient process and also poor record keeping the headstone was placed on the wrong grave which only came to light in 2022 at the death of Mrs Bell.

5.2.1 There are five aspects to 5.2; namely a) the process; b) record keeping; c) the fire/burglary; d) changes of personnel; e) the changing nature of the graveyard

5.2.2 Process. Sometimes headstones are ordered directly through the stonemason and others to the stonemason via the funeral director. Because of the passage of time, it is unclear whether the family ordered the headstone via the funeral director or the stonemason, but it is usually safest to do this via the funeral director as this ensures someone who was at the funeral takes responsibility rather than a stonemason who would not in all likelihood have attended.

It is best practice that a grave marker is placed on the grave at the time of burial to identify the grave for when the gravestone is ready to be installed. This did not happen here.

Further to this, it is agreed best practice that someone from the church should attend the placing of the stone by the stonemason so that there is agreement of the correct position. This should also be cross-referenced with the grave records and also a grave marker. This did not happen here.

The faculty system of the Church of England, though complicated to those outside the system, worked well here. Interim faculties could not have been faster and if it was not for the swift responses by the Registrar and the Chancellor this process would have taken much longer.

- 5.2.3 At the time, in the early 2000s, there were two issues which now seem important. Towards the end of his ministry The Rev'd Martin Vaizey (retired 2007) did not keep records to the extent that would be considered best practice. Secondly, at this time the vergers kept records of all of the burials in a note book. This notebook was not handed over by her family at the time of her death (though it was requested) and consequently was lost. This has added to the confusion.

Further to this, the application forms which are needed to apply to the incumbent to install a gravestone are entirely missing. It is unclear whether this is because they were never asked for or because they have been lost.

- 5.2.4 In the late 1970s there was a burglary at Holy Trinity. Although nothing was stolen (though an attempt on the safe was made) paperwork was found in the vestry and placed upon the altar and burned. It is not known what was lost in the fire, therefore if relevant forms/paperwork was destroyed in the fire, but in any event, the lack of documentation relating to the church as a result of the fire, has undoubtedly compounded the situation.

- 5.2.5 Both the funeral directors at the time and the stonemasons no longer have personnel who were around in 2005. The funeral directors have been bought out by a national chain and the original funeral director has since died. The Rev'd Vaizey has also now died too. This has made it impossible to interview people involved at the time.

5.2.6 Due to the churchyard now being closed it is in the care of Durham County Council. Because of limited resources the way in which DCC look after the graveyard means that certain parts have become overgrown and the whole aspect of the graveyard changes year by year.

5.3 All of the above has led to the position in which the Bell family and others found themselves in July 2022. The term “a perfect storm” is used all too often in modern parlance, however on this occasion it seems particularly apt.

6 Recommendations from Lessons Learned

- 6.1 Some of these recommendations are for Holy Trinity and are indicated by **(HT)**. Some are for the wider diocese indicated by **(DD)**.
- 6.1.1 The parish work closely with DCC who work as best as they can within limited resources, as do a number of volunteers. However the reviewer recommends that because of the circumstances a request be made to DCC for an immediate course of work in the graveyard to have an overhaul and be brought back to a manageable state and kept there to facilitate families in identifying graves. This could be helped by being in partnership with Mr Morris MP **(HT)**
- 6.1.2 The parish rationalise their current grave records and try to update them as much as they are able to **(HT)**
- 6.1.3 The Diocesan Registrar facilitates a teaching session (or series of sessions) offered to all clergy on the legalities and practicalities of graveyards in order that clergy know their legal responsibilities around regulations, record keeping and procedures. This training would also include the following recommendations **(DD)**
- 6.1.4 In the light of this training, all parishes review their record keeping procedures and records to ensure they comply with the training given and this is followed up **(DD)**
- 6.1.5 That each parish has a written protocol passed by the PCC concerning the insertion of a gravestone. This would include the original application for, the manufacture of and placing of headstones **(DD)**
- 6.1.5a When a headstone is placed by a stone mason a representative from the parish attends with the grave records to ensure correct placements. No stonemason should be allowed to place a gravestone without an authorised member of the church present **(DD)**
- 6.1.6 That standard procedures include that all grave records are stored electronically thus avoiding the possibility of loss **(DD)**

6.1.7 A grave marker is placed on the grave immediately after a burial in order that the grave is clearly identifiable. Often it is 6-12 months before a gravestone is placed on a grave. Point to note - There is a danger that grave markers could be swapped by vandals (please see 6.1.7 below)

(DD)

6.1.8 A digital photograph is taken of a) the grave; b) the marker; c) the graves on both sides; and d) a general location one. These photographs should be held with the graveyard records. **(DD)**

7 Final word

This has been a case of great sadness and the reviewer notes the gracious way that all participants have entered into it. It cannot be guaranteed that historic cases like this will not reoccur because there will be gaps in the records (for many reasons) in parishes across the Diocese of Durham and further afield. However, going forward, the protocols and recommendations suggested in this report should ensure that from now onwards they do not happen again.

We read in the Book of Wisdom Chapter 3 verse 1 “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them”; the hope of Glory is with Hilda, may she rest in peace and rise in Glory. Amen

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