

## Tales from ...Sacred Places

On one never to be forgotten occasion I was convinced that I had been afforded a glimpse behind the proverbial veil. Two spectres were heading my way through the churchyard one summer's evening in 1979. White, diaphanous visitations slowly floating towards me as I wended my way home after a shift at the **Black Horse**. I had a part time job in the kitchen there you see, while studying for my O Levels and, about 10pm, I would saunter home up Church Street. Until the spectres that is. Well, not spectres as it turned out but rather two white afghan hounds being taken for their evening constitutional rather later than usual for some reason, but enough, at that time of the evening, to make my heart skip a beat. Too much revision of German verb declensions might have addled my wits briefly, or maybe too many episodes of *Scooby Doo* and *Rentaghost*, who can say, but it's an image that has stuck with me all these years. Odd really, as the churchyard has never struck me as a creepy place at all, quite the opposite in fact, with the spring daffodils and magnolia tree, not to mention our grand old church at its heart.

So just another quaint, peaceful churchyard then? No interesting stories to be told?

Yeah, right.

Rumours of subterranean tunnels to the Manor House for starters. Long forgotten graves and missing headstones and a few tragic tales on top of that. A wildlife haven to explore and a now silenced clock.

Well the churchyard is just one sacred place so why the plural of the title you may quibble? Because there are at least two others that I know about for sure, the cemetery that we share with Yarwell for one and the Saxon burial site up the Fotheringhay Road for two.

You knew about the Saxon cemetery of course or did you not? No, neither did I until a few months ago either. There certainly was one, I can assure you, no longer visible but uncovered in the 1940s. We have a booklet about it in the history archive so what else could I do but go a hunting, along with a trusty companion, to examine some of the artefacts unearthed there.

But let us begin at the beginning...

### Plotters, plague and the Resurrection Men

In the Domesday Book 1 from 1086 Nassington is described thus:

*Land for 16 ploughs. In lordship 2.  
24 villagers with a priest and 2 smallholders have 14 ploughs.*

So, a Christian priest was already in situ and whatever place of worship he oversaw is likely to have been built on a previous site of worship, one long familiar to and trusted by local people. The remains of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Saxon cross inside the church was found during church restoration work in the 1880s and had once stood outside. Originally it had reached a lofty ten feet in height. Given that the churchyard is on a high point, people would have been able to spot it with relative ease I would imagine, close as it was also to whatever Saxon hall had once occupied the spot on which Prebendal Farm now stands. There had been other work too, later on once the church itself was built. A new spire, for example, had been added in 1640, perhaps to replace a damaged one, and this in turn was struck by lightning on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1905 during a ferocious thunderstorm. Rather gallingly it had only just been renovated in 1900 but, there you go, these things are sent to try us. I am concerning myself here with the churchyard though, not the church itself, which I'll come back to at a later date, rest assured, for the churchyard has quite enough stories of its own to be getting on with.

Situated where it is hardly anyone living in the village can have failed to have walked through it, either past the main door or along the side path leading to St Mary's Close. Perhaps I'm a particularly unobservant person but, as a wise man once said, take the time to take a look around and smell the roses 2 (or the magnolia in this case), you'd be surprised what's right under your nose.

Hmm. The main door. Is it though? I was talking to Reverend Tailby a few weeks ago and she told me that the main door used to be the one leading in to the belfry, you know the one, painted blue now. The one in use these days is actually the south porch. Now, I wasn't chatting to the vicar about doors per se, oh no, something far more interesting I can assure you and, as mentioned last time, something that has given me pause for thought since I was a child. My brother Fran, you see, along with his buddy Richard Mould back in the day, claimed to know about the tunnel that, allegedly, leads from the church to the Manor House under the road. He told me that it had long since been filled in, for obvious safety reasons, but it had existed. He would go on to be a police sergeant, so a reliable source of information, right? If you ask around a bit among people who grew up in the village, trust me, not only do they know about Tyler's Pond and the infamous horse and cart, but that tunnel too, although some say it goes to Prebendal Farm rather than the Manor House, others that the entrance is below the pulpit, others by the side door. All those people can't be wrong surely?

Michael Evans, current incumbent of the Manor, even tried to find the entrance to said tunnel from his side, heading for the cellars to have a look at what he might find there. This was back in the late 1960s when he first moved in and he mentioned all this to Samuel 'Boy' Fenn. Sam's wife Enid was niece to a previous owner of the Manor House, Mr Preston so, for whatever reason, he'd been down into the cellar. He didn't like it there at all he told Michael, not one bit, the chains on the walls freaked him out big time...

Chains? Good grief. Why on earth might there be chains there? Hold that thought, I'll get back to it.

Now an odd thing about the Manor House is that the ground floor is level with the top of the churchyard. The lowest windows you see from outside give on to the sitting room and bathroom despite being pretty high up. Jane Baile had accompanied me to meet Michael Evans and we were talking about this outside on the pavement. Back in the dim and distant it seems, the road level would have been considerably higher, making sense of the apparent TARDIS 3 like disparity between interior reality and exterior appearance. Roadways were sometimes lowered to improve ease of access for carts and the like so whatever had been there might well have been shovelled away centuries ago. At some point then the churchyard and the Manor House ground floor were at an older, higher, ground level rather than four feet or so above it. More intriguing still is the brickwork in the churchyard wall. Now how many times over the years have I walked or driven by it and not seen something so glaringly obvious? Clear as day you can see the original entrance to the Manor House, now with a window in where once a grand door must have been. Dead opposite (pardon the expression) in the churchyard wall you can make out where some kind of gate or doorway has been filled in. Right in front of you, never noticed, not by me at least. I mentioned it to the vicar, hence the door conversation. Makes sense she said, it would have all lined up with the original entrance to the church, the now blue one, which faces east. Church altars, entrances and gravestones traditionally face east-west as...

*'For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man'*

**(Matthew 24:27)**

Curiouser and curiouser.

So might there have indeed been a pathway of some sort running from the Manor House to the churchyard and in through a long forgotten gate, making its way finally into the church, its

existence long since forgotten as the road was lowered, except for in village memory? All very Jungian 8.

But a walkway created through a long since lowered road does not a tunnel make and it's a village tale about a tunnel, not a path that has been passed on for generations so I thought I'd keep hunting...

Had there been an actual tunnel what might it have been for? Why the chains? The centuries between the building of the Manor House in the early 1500s and today were filled with intrigues, disasters and superstitions so maybe, just maybe, one of them has a bearing on our infamous tunnel story.

It was common, apparently, in days of yore to have a sunken walkway from a Manor House or important building into a church, for privacy perhaps, or to avoid mixing with the hoi polloi, especially in times of pestilence. Various ailments and agues afflicted the populace out of the blue, as they still do as we were all rather surprised to discover when covid struck, back then though not least the sweating sickness and bubonic plagues.

Now, the sweating sickness is an interesting one as it hasn't really been established exactly what it might have been 4. It first made its appearance in England, where it predominantly raged in rural areas, in the Tudor period around 1485 and disappeared in about 1551. In all there were five major outbreaks and, if you were struck by it, your sufferings began with an odd sense of doom and disaster which would develop into aches and pains, chills, vomiting, shortness of breath and, of course, a severe fever. Death could come quickly, often within a day or so. Needless to say, especially if you didn't know how it was caught, you kept your distance. Henry VII after his victory during the Battle of Bosworth, even postponed his coronation for fear of it and his son, Henry VIII, fled during an outbreak to the country to avoid it. Some caught it and survived, like Anne Boleyn, whereas others perished within hours. And then it vanished. Just like that. Gone. Perhaps corona virus might disappear into the ether too, we can but hope. Anyway, as for the sweats, we still don't know why, or what it might have been, but suffice to say it gave people a serious bout of the heebie jeebies, but enough to create a full-blown tunnel?

And then there's our old pal the Black Death. To be precise, the Black Death was actually the first wave of bubonic plague which hit Europe between 1347 and 1351. It would go on to decimate the population by up to two thirds. It struck England in 1348, carried over the Channel on Italian trading ships from the Crimea by rodents infested with infected fleas. The Italians, to protect their own populations, went on to impose a forty day quarantine (from the Italian *quaranta*, meaning forty) on all incoming vessels. Parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials did not begin until 1538 so it is hard to assess how many may have been affected locally but diocesan records note when a new incumbent appears in a diocese so a guesstimate is possible. East Anglia was quite badly affected so, suffice to say, taking a middling view of the whole nasty pustule bursting business, about 30% might well have perished nationally. Other illnesses might have been lumped in with the plague label but there were common symptoms, most notably the buboes (hence the name), swellings in the groin, neck and armpits which oozed blood and pus. Smashing. Then came the vomit and the fever, the whole gory mess lasting until you gave up the ghost and were unceremoniously dumped outside ready to be carried off to a plague pit 5. If you caught the disease you had, at best, a 40% chance of survival. A second wave of the disease occurred throughout Europe between 1600 and 1670.

The Manor House wasn't built until the early 1500s, so Wave No 1 might not have been an issue here but keeping away from the great unwashed might have been sufficient impetus to construct a sunken pathway in later years. It might have boasted something to protect you from the elements too, hence the tunnel idea.

But could it have been, if it existed at all, for something altogether less sickly but equally dangerous. An escape tunnel perchance?

Now we've all heard of priest holes but there also existed, in some places at least, priest tunnels. At a time when Catholics were persecuted by law, those not prepared to give up their faith contrived ways to worship without being detected. Henry VIII set the whole ball rolling when he chose to name himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England and break from the Roman Catholic church when it objected to him casting off his first wife Catherine of Aragon for not providing him with a male heir. It mattered a great deal you see. With no male heir at this point, the throne would have gone to his only daughter's husband in time, she variously betrothed to princes of France and her own cousin Charles, the Holy Roman Emperor. In turn England would have been subsumed under the control of one or other state and Henry couldn't have that now could he, so a boy and direct heir was needed. He, along with others, probably wasn't all that keen on shelling out boat loads of money to the Vatican either so, make a break with it all he reasoned. Upheaval ensued, much lamentation and gnashing of teeth alongside all of the theological claim and counterclaim about the 'real' meaning of passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy concerning marrying your brother's widow 13. For many, then, the need for hidey holes and tunnels was important if you wished to stick with the 'One True Faith' rather than get caught and be burned at the stake. This was regarded as a kindness rather than a punishment though, the flames intended to cleanse you of your Papish sinfulness after all. You could find yourself in a very uncomfortable position then, so making yourself scarce at the right moment was, literally, vital. One such place boasting a network of tunnels was Doveridge near Burton, where they once criss-crossed below ground towards Tutbury Castle and safety. The tunnels had one-way doors which would be locked behind those who got to them before the soldiers did hot on their trail. When Elizabeth I (her again) came to the throne in 1558 various Catholic plots sprang up to remove her and severe measures were taken against Jesuit spies from overseas and Catholic priests in particular 7. A hotbed for such shenanigans was the Collège anglais de Douai in France, set up in part to afford Catholic priests in exile the opportunity to continue their clerical studies outside a now Protestant England. So, in our neck of the woods, did those sticking to the 'Old Ways' worship in the church, safe in the knowledge that they could leg it down a tunnel and out under the roadway, into the Manor House, a door in the churchyard wall slamming reassuringly behind them? Unlikely. You see, around these parts the populace was quick to change allegiance to Henry's new church. That is one reason why it was deemed safe to incarcerate Mary Queen of Scots at Fotheringhay Castle. No Catholic plotters hereabouts, it seems, to upset Elizabeth's apple cart.

Or could the whole mystery be for something slightly more macabre? This is my favourite pet theory I must admit, and back we go to 'Boy' Fenn and the clinking, clanking of chains...

Up until 1882 Nassington Churchyard was still used for burials. The last actual burial was that of Mary Reeve on May 30<sup>th</sup>. Once the site grew too congested the cemetery that we share with Yarwell was built. Our churchyard may not look that 'busy' now yet it was, I can assure you but, again, more of that later. Now, prior to burial of course the body needs to be stored safely. Although this may have occurred in someone's home it might also have been the case that the cellar of the Manor House, being cool and private, was used for holding the bodies of those who could afford such luxury prior to the ceremony and subsequent burial in the churchyard. Perhaps, though, it wasn't all quite the solemn procedure that we might imagine. Grave robbing and body snatching were common crimes in the UK throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries you see. This is why, after all, the traditional depth of a grave sees you 'six feet under' to make digging up a corpse that much more obvious and difficult. Before the Anatomy Act of 1832, when bodies could be donated for medical use, the only legal supply of bodies for anatomical research were those condemned to death and dissection by the courts. Even with the harsh judicial system of the times that amounted to not very many, so fresh corpses were needed for medical men to examine and for surgeons to hone their skills on. Even after 1832 there simply weren't enough to go round. The most infamous 'Resurrection Men' as they came to be known, were Burke and Hare who took the whole process a step further 9. Rather than simply 'resurrecting', or stealing, a fresh body while everyone had their backs turned, they opted for murder, totting up sixteen victims

in all. So, chains. To keep everything secure and safe maybe? As for the tunnel, well, perhaps it would have been a way of bringing the body, now with a coffin, into the church ready for the service? Or were those chains simply, and innocently, for hanging joints of meat or pheasants for a week or so until they were 'high' 10? Who can say now for sure, and 'Boy' Fenn can't fill us in on any of the details but, there you have it. I did speak to his daughter, now Joy Jakins, in the hope that he might have mentioned the chain story to her. No, she was sorry to report, he hadn't. She was also sorry that she hadn't talked to him more about old villages stories 'while she still had the chance'.

Indeed, don't we all feel the same about our own family members.

There might be one final juicy theory mind, but certainly nothing that can be proved as far as I can tell as yet. Our Manor House, you see, being located as it is in a village of quite some importance long, long ago, might have been used for legal purposes. In previous centuries, after all, churchmen were expected to turn their hands to legal matters too. There were laws, of course, and the Lord of the Manor was nominally responsible for upholding them. Those laws were based fundamentally on the Ten Commandments as laid down in the Bible which, at the time, was written in Latin. And who would you turn to for an interpretation or translation of the Bible? Why, the clergy of course. Now the Manor House, being conveniently located right next to Prebendal Farm, allowed the secular and ecclesiastical incumbents to support one another if called upon to do so. Should a local fall foul of the law, by nicking a sheep say, is it not likely that he or she would be, at the very least, questioned about it by the residents of the Prebendary or the Manor? And might not some of the more serious miscreants find themselves spending time chained up in the cellars until the visiting magistrate arrived to give a more expert ruling on the case? This is mere speculation but maybe, just maybe...

I had a conversation a while ago with Gill Johnston who is currently involved with the Middle Nene Archaeological Group (MidNAG). She used to do others things though, and here, I'm afraid, now that I've built you up into a state of frenzy about Jesuits, pustules and grave robbers digging up coffins in dead of night, I'm going to bring you crashing right back down to reality. Sorry about that, I did my best to find a tunnel, honest I did. Gill used to do archaeological work for Northamptonshire Council's Archaeology Unit and, if somewhere is likely to have things of historical value that might be disturbed by building work, an investigation is done to be on the safe side. The church had a new kitchen built in 1998 and, as part of the plan, a disabled toilet was required, meaning that the floor needed to be dropped slightly. So, in April, along comes Gill to take a look. Two trenches were dug, the area was surveyed but nothing of archaeological or historical interest was found bar the odd bit of medieval glass. Otherwise zip. Nada. Nichts. Nothing.

Bugger.

If you look at the road between the old Manor House entrance and the filled in gateway you'll also notice that there have been road works there, to lay pipes or fix a leak weeks after it was first reported or some such. Had anything been found then, in the exact right place, alarms would have sounded and the Archaeological Unit would have headed back to take a closer look once more. So no, at best, there'd been a pathway dug through a dirt roadway at a time when the road level was a few feet higher but no subterranean tunnel for fleeing Catholics and no safe passageway to keep the Manor House residents from boil ridden, sweaty locals. Unless, of course, you can prove different?

**A grave state of affairs.**

You'll remember I said that the churchyard was once full of graves. Two hundred and eighty nine in fact according to a survey done in 1968. Doesn't look like it these days I know, more spring daffodils than burial places you might think but, again, how wrong can you be, especially if you've moved into Nassington since the 1970s or are too young to remember how the churchyard once looked. For it was full, on both sides, of gravestones marking burials of generations of village families but many of the headstones were relocated, removed and, sadly, destroyed over forty years ago. The entire tale, though, was captured in the form of correspondence all kept, yet again, in the village history archive. Drop by and take a look for yourself sometime, it makes for interesting reading. In the meantime though, here is the potted version, along with the story of one dear lady's determined fight to save one churchyard memorial in particular.

The vicar at the time was Reverend Foster. When he joined the parish in 1967 he was dismayed by the state of the churchyard as many headstones were overgrown with ivy and bramble and keeping the grounds tidy was a headache not to mention very hard work for groundsman Sam Broughton and his trusty mower. Keen to deal with the situation the vicar discussed the matter with both the Parish Council and the Parochial Parish Council and it was unanimously agreed that damaged and indecipherable gravestones could be taken away *'providing it was found possible to do so and if all objections could be overcome and a favourable scheme for the disposal of the gravestones could be worked out'*. The Diocesan Advisory Committee for the care of churches was consulted and they went a step further, suggesting that the best of the stones in the area be cleared and relocated on the church side, and the rest *'cleared, tree roots be removed, the ground levelled... and break up the others'*. Work, they suggested, should be done by *'local volunteers'*.

Now, this has interesting implications as far as I can see. First of all, the stones that still exist do not have, necessarily, a corresponding body below them. Secondly, no mention is made of removing any bodies from the far side of the churchyard so, I assume, they are all still there. And breaking up the stones rather than saving them? Maybe I'm rather oversensitive or impractical, but families paid for these stones, possibly at some expense in previous centuries, yet they were going to be unceremoniously smashed up? All a bit drastic don't you think?

Anyway, the Diocesan Registry sent a Citation to be posted on the church door so that parishioners could see what was afoot and express any objections. It was to be left there for ten days and was posted on June 27<sup>th</sup> 1968.

*Notice is hereby given that the Vicar and Parochial Church council of Nassington have applied for a faculty for permission to remove certain gravestones, clean the ground, and re-seed with grass, and re-set the best of the 18<sup>th</sup> century stones, break up the others, the stones retained would be re-set on the north side in staggered lines.... any objection to the proposals must be lodged with the registrar at the above address before Wednesday the 10<sup>th</sup> July 1968.*

*For and on behalf of the Parochial Church Council  
J.A. Foster, Vicar.*

Reverend Foster also placed a notice in the Peterborough Citizen and the Peterborough Advertiser and was keen to let people know that the annual cost of maintaining the churchyard in its current 'unruly' state was about £30, £550 in today's money. In a letter to Mr Channell at the Diocese on July 12<sup>th</sup> the Reverend Foster stated, rather like the closure of Nassington Station, that no objection had been raised.

But hang on a cotton picking minute. Mr Teall and his family arrived home from a holiday on the continent just outside the time limit and, once he discovered what was going on, he was certainly anxious to raise an objection to the work. Perhaps some of you remember Mr Teall? At the time he was the Principal of Priory College in Stamford and lived up the Woodnewton Road, so a gentleman of some education and, it would transpire, some determination. He was an historian too and extremely concerned about the loss of not just names and dates but architectural features

and stone working. Mrs Teall, according to her son David, was not pleased with the idea either, 'just to make it easier to cut the grass'.

Not only did Mr Teall send a written objection on July 24<sup>th</sup> but a reaffirmation by letter on September 16<sup>th</sup>. Clearly, from his correspondence, he was anxious to make it known that he was not willing to withdraw his objection and would be prepared to take matters further if the correct procedures were not followed. In his view, the churchyard as it was had '*an air of tranquillity with the headstones blending harmoniously with the church itself. The destruction of the stones would add nothing, merely detract from the scene*'. The only alternative seemed to be a hearing unless Mr Teall could be persuaded otherwise. A meeting in the churchyard, between Mr Channell of the Diocesan Registry and Mr Teall and his solicitor was suggested in the hope that he could be persuaded to '*be reasonable*' and '*save everyone a lot on inconvenience...*'.

Hmm.

Letters winged their way in either direction, some fairly heated it must be said. Should all stones be broken up or could some not be retained? If so where should they be placed, against the church wall or reset and straightened? A further meeting was held in the churchyard with various concerned individuals and a final list of which stones to remove was agreed upon. A committee was to be organised to mark the stones worthy of preservation with a red cross with Mr Teall at the helm. All going well then, a state of accord with a way forward satisfactory to all sides, no possibility of hiccups or problems?

Of course not.

The first bone of contention (sorry) was what to do with the removed stones. The Archbishop was even consulted about the matter and it was finally decided that the stones would not be good for the church walls against which they could be lent so they would not be saved but rather destroyed. Fortunately Jane Baile and Michael Evans rescued a few and preserved them, wheeling them off to their salvation in a child's pushchair to a place of safety in the garden and the cellar where they remain to this day.

Well, not ideal you may think, but at least settled. What else could possibly go wrong? But the powers that be do seem to have a way of letting us down though don't they? With experience comes the knowledge that this is likely to be so as Mr Teall noted himself. In March 1970 he was moved to write to Reverend Foster once more. It had been agreed, it seems, that only those stones duly marked in red by the committee should be removed but others had been taken before their details had been recorded. Indeed, an article appeared in The Evening Telegraph on April 1970 claiming that '*valuable stones were pulled up and broken with a sledgehammer*' by '*three agricultural workers*' '*without supervision of anyone skilled in the knowledge of which were valuable and which were not*'. In the interest of balance, the reporter spoke to the Reverend Foster too. From his perspective it was about the up-keep of the church yard and nothing to do with desecration of burial sites. So unreachable were many headstones due to ivy, bramble and waist high grass that the inscriptions were unreadable anyway. Church records detailed who had been buried and where going back to the 1600s so there was a source of archival material for anyone sufficiently interested, at least in terms of genealogical research.

Mr Teall was able to record the details as best he could from the aforementioned destroyed headstones before they were taken away but, as he stated, '*the fruits of a craft, that has taken the masons years to perfect, with its delicate and intricate carving, have been obliterated for ever*'. It would seem that his objections prompted a visit to Nassington by the Archdeacon himself which might well have been an awkward one for the vicar. The correspondence grew increasingly tetchy, the vicar stating that '*I have been mowing the churchyard with my own mower. Now I will make sure that I do no further work of any kind in the churchyard. Perhaps, as the Council is so concerned to appease Mr Teall, they can get him to do it?*' A bit of oil needed to be poured on

troubled waters so, by way of appeasement I suspect, the Parish Council sent the Reverend Foster a cheque for 12/6d to cover the cost of his fuel.

At this point I'm beginning to feel a little sorry for the Reverend Foster. Doubtless, in his mind, he was doing what he believed to be best for the churchyard and the community but he had come across a formidable opponent in the form of Mr Teall. To add insult to injury he then received a letter from a Mrs Elizabeth Turnbull asking to take rubbings of the headstones of her dearly departed relatives including her beloved grannie Lucy Walter before they all disappeared. In his reply the vicar had to tell her that her family's headstones had been some of the first to be taken away. She decided to visit the churchyard the very next day and was upset, and vocal about the whole thing to say the least. Fortunately some of her family gravestones were still in one piece and, at her insistence, were saved and repositioned on the church side of the churchyard.

Oh dear.

But all was not lost. A very detailed account of where the original headstones had been and who had been buried in the plot was eventually made. Guess what? I came across copies in, where else, the village archive and made and framed a copy for the Reverend Tailby. It's hanging in the church as we speak (well, read) so you can go and take a look for yourselves if you want to know if a long lost family member is still slumbering silently but unmarked below your feet in the churchyard. Obviously we have indeed lost the stones themselves and all they could have told us, but the names and locations of the dearly departed were saved for posterity fortunately should anyone care to seek them out.

So what did become of the headstones then you may ask? Here the correspondence ends and I am not able to tell you for sure, other than that Messrs Fenn and Hilderley had their men remove them. Not all were lost of course, some certainly remain in the churchyard itself just not, to paraphrase Eric Morecambe, necessarily in the right place 12.

You'll know about the Males family tombs from my last account perhaps but one final reference from the correspondence dated February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1969 glosses over a very tragic story:

*'It was decided that the tombs of the MALES family benefactors of the village...should be retained in situ. It was also decided the children's memorial cross on the east side near the vicarage wall should be retained in situ'.*

For you see Mr Teall was not the only villager concerned about the welfare of the headstones. There was another person, equally determined but on a smaller, more low key scale, wishing to preserve the memory of those buried in a shady corner of the churchyard and she in her quiet way was to be, arguably, far more successful.

As I go along it amazes me how things keep coming back in circles. In this case you may remember Alfred Blott Whitney, he of the clay pits in the Brickfield? Well, he, this time along with some of his ill-fated family, is joining us yet again.

Many of you will remember Anne Brace with great affection. I certainly do. We used to live opposite her in St Mary's Close for a short while when I was a child and from then on, whenever I bumped into her around and about the village we would have a good, long chat. I went to her funeral service last year which was, unsurprisingly, extremely well attended. Now, I was at school with her son Karl so we got chatting afterwards about her own involvement in churchyard matters as she was instrumental in having replaced a ruined and forlorn memorial to three children from the same family who all died of scarlet fever in the late 1800s 11. Three children from the one family, can you imagine? Anne went to the records office to do some research along with Susan Little and discovered that Marian Gertrude died, aged 11 months, in 1879 on Christmas Eve for goodness sake, Samuel Thomas, aged 5, in January 1880 and Mary Elizabeth, aged 6, in May



1880. A fourth child died too, Samuel Herbert, aged 8 months, in 1882 but he would be one of the very first to be buried in the new cemetery. And their surnames?

All Whitney.

Whitney. Anne was not able to establish whether they were the children of Alfred who had lived in Nassington House or a relative of his, but we have the benefit of the information revolution at our fingertips or, at least, Clive Reedman and Vicky Jones do. Couple this with a fair bit of expertise and patience and you can come up with the answers. They've managed to figure it all out so get set.

Alfred's mum was a Sarah Blott, hence the eventual double-barrel when she married Thomas Whitney. Their son, now Alfred Blott Whitney went on to marry Emma Tyler Pickett in Hampstead on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1873 though not in a church but rather by licence, suggesting that they followed a non-conformist religion. They were indeed the parents of the four children as Anne suspected. I'm sure, however. Clive found the birth certificate of one of them, bless the internet for some things at least, not to mention Clive's perseverance. Anyway, there is a slight silver lining to this whole tragic tale as the US census for 1900 has Alfred and Emma, as a family, with two other children, Nellie and Arthur, arriving in 1889, so just after the sell up in Marholm. Perhaps they felt they deserved a fresh start with no memories, or perhaps they felt the USA would be a healthier place to bring up their surviving children, we may never know, but there you have it. US Census details show them living variously in Oregon and Illinois over the years, with a final entry placing them, with Alfred now a grocer, in Huntington, West Virginia. His daughter Nellie had a good long life, living until 1964. It would seem that she, in turn, had four daughters of her own, namely Marion, Laura, Phyllis and her namesake Nellie. As to their offspring, well, the hunt continues. How nice would it be to find one of the family alive and well and contactable, just in case he or she might like to know a little of their family's backstory. Fingers crossed, I'll keep you all posted.

Had Anne not intervened the original headstone, which had survived the 1970s onslaught yet crumbled and fallen into disrepair, would have eventually been taken away and with it the memory of these children. Through the village magazine she let people know about the situation and successfully asked for contributions to have a new headstone made and engraved. She hosted coffee mornings too. Tracey Gilder remembers her mum Betty making cakes for one of them at least. A stonemason was asked to give a quote for the removal of the old memorial and to reinstate a new sandstone one in the original position at the cost of £142 and that is precisely what he did in 2005. It stands there today by the old church wall in a quiet, shady spot, the inscriptions still legible. A fitting memorial not only to these lost Whitney children but to Anne herself who would not sit quietly by and see them fade away into oblivion.

There is a further sad footnote to all this though. While at the record office Anne discovered the names of other children, fifteen in total, the youngest just two months old and the oldest ten years, who are buried somewhere in our churchyard but in unmarked graves. They had no headstones at all as, presumably, their families could not afford one unlike Mr and Mrs Whitney. This reminded Dr Little of a hand-written list of children's names she had in her papers, produced, it seems now, during this same visit to the Records Office. Yet more children who had died when very small children, victims of a period without the benefit of an NHS and modern medicine. As my Aunt Eileen used to say, we're lucky to live at a time when so much can be done about so many illnesses. I suppose though that if we have the one memorial to infant mortality from an age when it was so common, then those other children have not been totally forgotten now either. A list of them can be found in the village archive should you care to take a look. Oh, and by the way, you'll notice, as you pass by, that Anne's new churchyard memorial has four names on it, not just those of the three Whitney children who are buried beneath. Little Samuel's name is there too, reunited once more in stone at least with his brother and two sisters.

**Tick, tick, tock went the funny old clock...**

You may have noticed the mechanism of an old clock displayed in a glass case inside the church. Old photos show the position of the former clock's face, on the wall above the original entrance where there is now a quatrefoil looking like a four leaf clover. The clock, when in situ, kept time for very many years from 1695 until its removal and eventual restoration in 1982. So, them's the facts as they say but, as ever, there's far more to the tale than meets the eye. Let us begin with a newcomer to the village...

Mike Lee began visiting Nassington in his youth with a pal in 1948. Reasonably regularly they would cycle around the area, weather permitting, and developed a particular liking for Nassington. So far, so unsurprising, given the beauty of our village, but, being teenagers at the time, their stomachs had much to do with their positive impression. Now that rationing was less of an issue there was the pull of the hot dogs on sale in the **Three Mill Bills** pub near to the church, supplied none other than Jack Mould. Thirty years later Mike and his family moved in to Church Street. One summer's evening, while admiring the sunset from his kitchen window, he was so inspired by the sound of the church bells that he decided to take up bell ringing, a decision, he told me, that would change the course of his life forever. At this point he was an electrical contractor and amateur clock restorer who had tinkered with the odd clock to get it going but nothing too big nor too complex. Now, though, as a would-be bellringer, he found himself up in the bell tower during the annual clean up removing spiders webs, dust and pigeon poop. And then he spotted it. Unceremoniously dumped on the floor and covered in sacks was the frame and mechanism for the old church clock now that its timekeeping days had come to an end. Intrigued by what he had spotted he asked the then vicar Reverend Rumbles if it could be moved for a closer look and was given permission to take it into the light. An hour later, after manoeuvring it all through the trap door and onto the church floor below, various onlookers offering 'advice' along the way, the pile of timber and metal could be more closely examined. And there it stayed for a week or two, people doubtless tripping over it all and cursing under their breath lest a thunderbolt strike them dead, until, with the help of Dr Frank Little, the vicar was persuaded to allow it to go to Mike's workshop

After a bit of tentative poking and prodding it became apparent that, although the frame and much of the body was in reasonable shape, the escape wheel was missing various teeth with many others damaged. This had been caused by the manual winding of the clock over many decades to such a point that the wheel would 'slip', rendering the clock useless. And so, for Mike, a lifetime's passion began. For this turned out to be, you see, a John Watt clock.

John Watt came from a family of blacksmiths. Clocks, until 1631, were made by blacksmiths alone given their metal mechanisms, until the London Clockmakers set themselves apart from the Blacksmiths Company. John's father Robert before him had also made clocks and taught his son the art as John, in turn, would teach his own son Richard. The family came from Apethorpe originally and, trust me, you've been by their house and forge next to the bridge a thousand times. Now, John Watts created various clocks for local churches – Peterborough Cathedral no less in 1687, Clipsham in 1688 and All Saints in Stamford in 1705 and, of course, Apethorpe in 1704. To have so many clocks of this quality in such a small area is, to say the least, unusual. Anyway, once a clock had been commissioned and then constructed it would have been taken over to its new home in pieces, carried up into the belfry and reconstructed there meccano fashion by John, one of his sons or his apprentice Boniface Bywater. Hopefully, once assembled, it would enjoy a long life as the village or town timepiece. People wouldn't necessarily have had a clock in their homes let alone a wristwatch. Their days would be, to some extent, regulated by the ringing of the church bell. Indeed, Alec Jackson, in his memoir *Aspects of the History of Nassington*, mentions that it was a regular occurrence in later years for someone to open his grandma's front door when she lived at **The Thatch** in Station Road, calling out as they did so ' *it's only me Sarah, just checking the time*'. She had a grandfather clock situated right behind it you see. Far easier to do that, I suppose, than traipse up to check the time by the church clock.

Some mechanisms were attached to a clock face alone whereas others, like ours, were also attached to a bell in the belfry. Those au fait with bell ringing will know that, in some churches,

you have to take off the clock hammer before you can ring the bells, but in Nassington that is no longer necessary as the clock is no longer in the tower of course. It's in that glass case in the church, isn't it now.

So, the Nassington clock dates back to 1695 and the spire where the clock once lived to 1640 but these were not the first bells that the church boasted, no indeed. As you walk through the churchyard next time take a look up at the east end of the church and you'll spot the original bell-cot. It looks like a small, glass free window. Sometimes they are on schools too but, basically, a bell-cot is an external church feature that houses a bell, positioned for optimum sound distribution through the village. During England's Catholic past such a bell would be rung for various reasons such as to mark someone's death. John Donne 14 wrote a poem featuring this very thing in 1624, you know the one, the one that goes

*Therefore, send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee.*

The most important ring, the Angelus, was at midday when you would be expected to drop whatever you were doing to pray. There would be three sets of three rings, with a pause between each set, followed by a further nine rings, making eighteen in total. It is so named after the archangel Gabriel who you will remember was the one to announce to the Virgin Mary that she was pregnant. During the Angelus ring people would be expected to recite a Hail Mary in her honour, the ring being an audible rosary so to speak. I was talking to the vicar in Castor about all this, as you do, and he told me that their church clock, though mechanical, still chimes an angelus chime at noon each day just in case you'd like to take a trip over there to hear it for yourself. Reverend Tailby, meanwhile, drew my attention to a painting by Jean-Francois Millet, 'The Angelus', which depicts a scene of rural life, two peasants in a field stopping their work to make their devotions when they hear the distant church bell ringing 15.

Now, according to C. J. Gordon's book '**The Parish and Manor of Nassington-cum-Yarwell**', an 'Inventorie' was taken of Nassington church 'in the sixth year of the Reign of Kyng Edward the Sixt' in which it was noted that there existed four bells in Nassington church. Indeed, under the reign of the new, devoutly Protestant young King, Royal Commissioners were sent out from 1551 onwards to list and subsequently confiscate anything deemed 'Popish' from the churches and religious buildings throughout the land. Given that our church spire didn't exist until over one hundred years later and the clock is marked **1695 I. W.**, the supposition must be that the bells being described in the aforementioned 'Inventorie' were a main bell housed in the bell-cot along with some hand bells too perhaps. These would have been rung during the Catholic mass to mark the blessing of the bread and wine. Might these four bells have been removed from the church altogether, leaving Nassington a very silent place? More likely, after a series of Catholic priests, the now Protestant ministers took over the job of ringing the old church bell in the bell-cot until, exhausted, they were finally able to put their feet up in 1695 when the new spire became the proud home of a new clock linked to the new church bells within? It can only be wondered how the village celebrated such an event – a feast perhaps or a special ceremony to bless the clock? I bet a high old time was had by all whichever scenario is the correct one.

So, back to Mike. He found himself journeying on a steep learning curve which resulted in the restoration of the old clock to working order. Of course, in its heyday, it would have been wound on a regular basis up in the belfry, the winder negotiating a wooden ladder both in daylight and in darkness to complete his task. Mike found clear candle marks on the clock's frame to show where one was set down while the winder did his job. To have put the clock back in place, though, once restored in 1982, would have been an unwieldy and expensive business to say the least. Dr Little was willing to finance it but the constant attention the clock would have needed and the expense it all might have actually entailed made the whole undertaking unfeasible. Instead it was housed in

a glass display case to protect prying fingers from being caught in the wheels and there it stands still for all of us to admire. And, if you look closely, you'll spot the original, slightly gnarled looking escape wheel within.

I was delighted some months ago when a very charming lady came into the village hall to give me some items she had found at the back of a cupboard. Amongst them was a small black book entitled *Church Clock Subscriptions 1855*. Inside is a list of thirty one people prepared to contribute towards the repair of the clock. Sadly the book doesn't detail what repairs were needed nor the cost of whatever repairs might have been done, but over £4 was raised (£500 in today's money). Might the job have proved too difficult and it was at this point that the clock fell into permanent disrepair? For very many decades the church clock had probably been the only way to know the time for sure after all. But then came the railway in 1879. And with the railway came a regular service you could set your watch by (oh how times do change...), and a station clock to boot. This was, perhaps, the death knell, literally, for the church clock for the railways heralded the regulation of timekeeping across not just this country but the world. GMT was adopted by the Railway Clearing House in 1847 and by the mid 1850s nearly all public buildings were set to Greenwich Mean Time. By 1880 it had become the legal standard. So there you have it. With the railway clock the church clock was no longer needed. Although there was a willingness to repair the clock in 1855 perhaps it was unsuccessful or deemed an unnecessary luxury and so it fell silent.

So far so sad then, but what became of the clock face itself? Good question, I'm glad you asked. Now, old pictures of the church show it positioned above the original main entrance facing the Manor House. A logical place indeed, but might it have actually faced towards the homes of those who had paid for it? This was certainly the case for the clock face on St Leonard's church in Apethorpe which, if you look, is in an odd position. How so? Because the Westmorlands who had paid for it, owners of Apethorpe Hall, now Palace, at the time, insisted that it face them rather than the village high street. Fair enough I suppose but, while I'm on the subject of Apethorpe a little, but important, aside. There was a suggestion in 2020 that an automatic winder be incorporated into this John Watt clock which would destroy the integrity of the piece. So far it hasn't happened but let's just keep a weather eye on the situation shall we, we wouldn't want to lose the last, working John Watt church clock in our area after all, just to save someone going up the stairs each day to wind it?

Jean Wilson mentioned to me that she had a vague recollection of having seen the church clock face at the vicarage some years ago. What else could I do but go and see if it was still there? I was hoping to be told, by Dr and Mrs Lewis, current owners of what is now The Hall, that the clock face had pride of place on their kitchen wall or in the garden somewhere. Not so, I'm sorry to report, nor anywhere else in the grounds either. When they bought the place it had been stripped bare of everything church related. They were even required to block up the gate that once led from the churchyard onto their land and nor were they able to call their new property The Old Vicarage or some such. So, the mystery of the clock face remains. It was doubtless thrown away once removed, made of wood and all gnarled by the ravages of decades out in the open but at least we have, thanks to Mike, the clock's once ticking heart.

### **Take a walk on the wildside**

After all this talk of days of yore it's time to return to days of now. Walking through this morning I couldn't help but ask myself what Reverend Foster might have made of the churchyard in 2023, some fifty or so years after his time with us. No brambles, nor nettles, but the grass is certainly pretty tall albeit peppered with wildflowers. Priorities change of course and concern these days is not so much for tidiness and ease of mowing, but rather creating habitats for the wildlife to benefit from and thrive in at a time when so many are threatened by climate change and potential decimation, us included. Our churchyard boasts some interesting flora it seems, yarrow, mallow and autumn hawkbit for starters, and it provides a haven for butterflies such as the speckled wood and pipistrelle bats too. So there. Pretty impressive. For the churchyard isn't a mere museum

piece after all but a place full of life and activity if you take the time to look for it. Yet again, this was brought home to me when I came across a beautiful little illustrated booklet created by Sue Payne in the 1980s tucked away in the filing cabinet in the village hall.

It's a charming thing. It has, at its heart, a map of the churchyard as it was then, with all the flora and fauna marked out and, for one such as me who can only just about identify a weeping willow tree, something of real use. But it doesn't stop there, far from it. We have a burgeoning neighbourhood wildlife preservation group active in our community right now who aim to safeguard and improve the natural environment in various forms in our village. **Nassington Nature** is led by Frances Hurst who worked for many years for the *RSPB* and *BTO (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the British Trust for Ornithology)* and Charlotte Lemmon who is an ecologist for **Natural England**. They know what they're doing then. The Parish Council had set the whole ball rolling you see when they put something in the village newsletter asking if anyone was interested in helping with our local environment and, hey presto, they hooked up and got cracking. Over the past few months they've been mapping the fields and open spaces around the village that could be in need of protection or are of natural significance and their findings and suggestions have been passed to the Parish Council for them to consider. Not only is our Parish Council supporting their work but the **Caring for God's Acre** group has offered advice about further preservation of our churchyard. Along with Reverend Tailby, Alan Rodgers and Paul Tate, Frances and Charlotte have begun the '*Nature Recovery*' group which will preserve what we have already but, importantly, add to it too, not just in the churchyard but the village as a whole. You may have seen them at the Flower Show in August as they took over the Parish Council stall to offer advice about encouraging wildlife in your garden (just not moles, please, no more moles). Before too long they hope to have some notice boards around the village, updated on a seasonal basis to inform us all about what to watch out for and the like. We have bat detectors in the churchyard already and numerous events designed to help us 'get down and dirty' with the critters all around us. The *Bat Walk* in September for example, and the regular *Nature Walks* around the village and surrounding area. They've been up to Old Sulehay to learn about the nature conservation work going on there (giving the highland cattle a wide birth I bet) and to **Lyveden Farm** in June. As a business it is keen to promote regenerative farming and their work was featured in the October 1<sup>st</sup> edition of *Countryfile* (the *Harvest 2* edition) if you'd like to learn more. There's also been a new hedgerow planted at the bottom of Parkway to encourage wildlife diversity and, rest assured, I've drawn their attention to good old Tyler's Pond.

As for the churchyard itself we've been awarded a Bronze Level grading by the **Churchyard Conservation Award Scheme** so not bad for so short a time. For it's a special place you see, the churchyard. Churchyards tend to be left in peace after all, no pesticides or mucking about with them usually (well, except for you know who moving the you know what in the you know when). The primary school children enjoyed a butterfly themed *Activity Day* there which included a ramble through the area spotting all those wildflowers along with birds and trees. They made butterfly masks, sported butterfly tattoos and generally had a high old time. And of course there was the *Moth Talk* on September 28<sup>th</sup> when village local and moth expert Nick Smith drew attention to the many species of moth our churchyard attracts. Convolvulus Hawk moths no less, Large Ranunculus, Beaded Chestnut, I could go on but far wiser would be to watch out for the upcoming events.

If you want more information, and why on earth wouldn't you, either follow Frances on Facebook, email her on [francesmhurst@gmail.com](mailto:francesmhurst@gmail.com) or go to [enviro@nassington.co.uk](mailto:enviro@nassington.co.uk).

So, there you have it. The churchyard. Quite an interesting place then all things told. Time to turn our attention to the cemetery to see what we can unearth there.

## Sequoias, fumes and sandy, sandy soil.

Now, since childhood, I've visited the cemetery, initially along with my mum, and later on my own, to tend my dad's grave and that of my gran Elsie buried in the plot right next to him. Over time, sadly, my brother Fran and mum have had ashes buried there too, and, thanks to an unusual occurrence a short while ago, I've been looking after two more graves on top.

Let me take you back to November 2019...

Now, my gran was Elsie Black. Someone had clearly come looking for the Black family for, when I went to put some flowers on the grave to remember mum's birthday in November, what did I spot but a note put in with the flowers there. They were from a gentleman called Stephen Rayment who had journeyed from Canada with his son to look into his family tree. His mother had been a Black too and had lived in Nassington so, where better to look than the graveyard for relatives? Now fortunately I had an idea who to ask about all this. Wendy Tomalin. Wendy was one of Bill Black's daughters, so a second cousin and, when I mentioned it all to her she remembered that Stephen Rayment had been sent up to speak to her by Simon Mould in the butcher's shop. Mr Rayment had caught her at an awkward time so she didn't get to chat to him for long but it did jog her memory. 'I have got a family tree though somewhere' she said to me, 'I'll look it out for you'.

Perfect.

I meet a lot of people at **Elsie's Vintage Tea Room** as you may have noticed, often by choice but also often by accident. You just don't know who might come waltzing through the doors with a ring of that doorbell and, believe me, I've been down various memory lanes there over the past five years and this was one such occasion. Wendy, my brother Toni and I duly looked over what she had ferreted out over a cuppa and a scone and gradually we were able to piece it all together. I had assumed (here we go again) that my great granddad Richard had a brother and it was this off shoot that had led to the Canadian side of the family but oh no. Not just one brother, but seven of them and four sisters too, most of whom stayed in the village and one of whom was the descendant of the Canadian cousin. His mother Phyllis Black had married a Canadian servicemen at the end of WWII and ended up in Vancouver. We shared common great, great grandparents, making us third cousins. Lovely. So I copied the family tree, sent him a copy and... zip. Nada. Nichts.

That's gratitude for you.

But not all a dead end if you'll pardon the expression. By so doing I answered a few questions of my own, not least who various people were that my mum and Uncle Harold used to mention during his visits from Rushden for tea. Aunt Addie. Cousins Vera, Greta and Audrey. Uncle Chaz. Mum had also told me, rather vaguely and with the sweep of her arm sometimes when we were there, that her grandparents were buried in the cemetery too. And, thanks to that family tree, I was inspired to find them. They turned out not to be too far away, Richard and Adelaide Black by name, so I've tidied up their grave and the one behind it while I was at it, of my great, great grandparents John and Sarah Black. My cousin Sandra and I also bought and planted a cherry blossom tree for mum's sister Eileen which has a plaque and is planted in the new cemetery area, so quite a few generations all nearby. Far more family up there now than down here but that's life, or death, I suppose. The cemetery offers answers to genealogical questions so it might be worth your while having a wander about to see who you find one sunny day. I might also make a plea that, if you find a long lost great grandma or uncle, that you maybe tidy up the spot a tad? Think how grand it would be if the village families had a go at it, just a little at a time. For, you see, we've been slacking a bit, all of us if we have family members buried there. Richard Sardeson, who used to be in charge of cemetery matters for many years, gave me a booklet, the *Plan, Regulations and Table of Fees and Charges of the Nassington and Yarwell Burial Ground*. Point XVIII on page 3 states:

*'All Monuments, Gravestones or Memorials shall be kept in good order by the owners, or their representatives'.*

Representatives, eh? That would be us to some extent wouldn't it? I'm as guilty as the next person, or at least I was up until that chat with Wendy, just saying. But enough of my preaching, I'm clambering down off my soapbox.

The cemetery then, a place for genealogical research if you fancy it? Well yes, for sure, but a fair bit more besides. Why, for example, is the cemetery where it is? Why, for example, does it have at its heart an enormous Giant Redwood Tree? And what, for example, are the tragic stories of the two little boys who were both buried there in the 1940s?

So, Richard Sardeson was the last but one to be in charge of the cemetery and before him it was Eric Knight in the 1970s. It took over burials from both Nassington and Yarwell churchyards in 1882, the order being signed by Queen Victoria herself no less. And one of the first to be buried there? The little Whitney boy. He has plenty of company now of course, for the cemetery grew so full that an extension was called for and duly granted in 2010.

Now how often must I have walked past the date in the cemetery and not even noticed it? It's as plain as the nose on your face, painted on the entrance on the cemetery side, 1882. Mind you, I didn't notice an enormous giant redwood tree either but I'll get to that shortly.

Anyway, the new cemetery was paid for in the rates of the good folk of Nassington, who shouldered two thirds of the cost with Yarwell one third. The Yarwell boundary line is the bottom end of the cemetery on the Nassington side oddly, by the gate, not through the middle as you might expect, but there you go. And why there? Partly due to its central location between the two villages of course but also, and importantly for the grave diggers, because there is a lot of sandy soil up there, over ten feet of it luckily so, for a four person grave, you can dig down ten feet. That accounts for all the wonky gravestones too I shouldn't wonder. Anyway, a geologist friend of mine tells me that our bedrock is Grantham siltstone, sandstone and mudstone all of which are linked to deposition from the river Nene. If I understand him correctly, the swifter the flow of the river the larger the deposited material, and the gentler the flow the finer the material eg mudstone. The surface geology above the Grantham layers is alluvium clay, another river deposit. Thus we have clay for making bricks, a sandy layer that's easy to dig and limestone a little further afield. The nearer you get to Yarwell the closer to the surface are ironstone rocks. So quite a patchwork all in all.

Hang on a second. A four berth grave? Really? Yes, really. Apparently graves can be dug down to ten, eight, six or even four feet these days and people can be stacked one above the other. Family members of course but, I'm reliably told, not necessarily. And a grave is not always marked so, even though it looks like a plot is empty, it isn't. All spaces filled I'm afraid. No vacancies, hence the extension on the Yarwell side. In total there were over 800 vacant plots but, over time, some were lost due to tree root intrusion. Nonetheless, over 14,000 local souls have been buried in the main cemetery but no longer even though, once you pay to be buried the plot is only 'yours' for the next century. That explains Headstonegate in the 1970s then.

Anyway, back in the day 'Baffy' Spriggs had been the grave digger. By trade he was a boot and shoe repairer in the village but he also dug graves when called upon to do so. He was something of a character I'm guessing with, according to Lance Lock's memoir, his three wheeled bicycle and a wife 'of French origin'. Now, you'd assume Baffy's stories would be about the dearly departed rather than the living but not so. On one memorable occasion, for him at least, he found himself marooned in a ten foot grave...

Now, when digging a ten foot grave a bucket, rope and ladder were needed, along with a windlass to winch up the full buckets of soil ready to be emptied and lowered down again. A couple of lads would be paid a few bob to empty the soil and send the bucket down again for more. Quite a boring task you must admit. Plenty of reason to liven things up a bit perhaps. Indeed. Far more fun would be to throw the ladder into the hole leaving old Baffy stranded, then whip his unusual bicycle and take a jaunt down the road into the village. Great fun. And that's exactly what Alf Sharpe and Arthur Wass decided to do. Not such fun for Baffy though, marooned until someone heard his plaintive cries for help. You can only imagine what sort of trouble those two lads got into, they were given the cane by Mr Hoare for one thing, but I bet they dined out on it all for years. It's an interesting aside to note, though, that punishment was meted out by the headmaster of the time and not just by the parents. As a former teacher I can only lament how much the respect for the teaching profession has waned over the decades, although I wouldn't much have fancied caning anyone. No, not for this teacher. I did have a constant source of misery at my disposal after all. Extra German grammar exercises, on the accusative case or German word order, quite punishment enough thank you very kindly.

Graves are dug mechanically now of course in the new extension but they have to be hand dug in case of repair or amendment on the original side to help preserve the gravestones so the job of gravedigger is still alive and well (sorry, couldn't resist). And, of course, only a monumental mason is allowed to deal with a grave stone or its surroundings. Should you wish to add or remove anything the Burial Board should be consulted, including the scattering of ashes. The Reverend Tailby mentioned to me that it is still possible to have your ashes buried in the churchyard too, hence the various plaques and stones near the south porch door, but permission is needed there.

Why all the rules though, Health and Safety gone mad or what? Well, what actually. You see, three people die in graveyards on average every year it seems. Many of us kneel down by a graveside, to clear weeds or refresh flowers for example, and what easier way to get up again than by using a nearby headstone to lever yourself up with. Crash bang wallop as they say.

These days photographs are taken of all new stones, for cross checking and future reference. Details of who is buried where has all been digitised under the new head honcho Yvonne Bank, although she still has all of the original Burial Board Minute books. Yet more interesting documents, all handwritten in that glorious script so common in the Victorian period. In 1881 £400 (about £59,300 today) was borrowed to buy the land and a Burial Board Committee was set up comprising of Mr Whitney (who else), Mr Jelley (the secretary), Mr Lock and Mr Starsmore. The land at the time belonged to the Westmorland Estate and the initial meetings were held in Nassington School. An early point of discussion might well have been the refusal by the Bishop of Peterborough to consecrate the ground as it was not a churchyard as such but, on appeal, all was settled. For the new extension no such issue seems to have been raised for, according to the East Northamptonshire Council regulations, a burial ground is now for '*all religions and none*'. Times have certainly changed then.

The Burial Board still meets, of course, about three times a year, to discuss maintenance issues, the deer problem, plastic flowers and whether to allow them, renewal of the water tank and what to do about the theft of the Collyweston Slate tiles a year or so ago. They sell for a tenner a piece it seems. Maintenance must be something of a headache for those charged to do it as the graves are not in straight lines. All higgledy piggledy, not easy to get a mower through. As a child, and until quite recently, Sam Broughton kept the cemetery shipshape but this job has been taken over by Peter Riddington.

But back to the 1880s. Once agreed upon, the cemetery was planned out and various trees purchased, or perhaps donated, by kindly benefactors, to create a peaceful setting. Unfortunately there is no written record of who might have bought or donated any of the trees, but stakes for them were certainly ordered in 1881. Indeed, there are two copper beech trees, two spruce and



two lime, all of a similar age, so chances are they, and the Giant Redwood, came as a job lot from some mysterious source.

My initial thought (wrong of course) was that this must have been an unusual thing for such a small village as ours. A sequoia is a rare thing is it not? Well, no apparently, according to Ron Levy from **Redwood World**, although increasingly becoming so. Now that's a clue of course, if they have their own website there must be a few of them surely? Over half a million in the UK by current estimates actually, in forests or in the grounds of stately homes, planted as a status symbol by wealthy Victorian gents for they were an expensive luxury when first 'discovered'. And they are commonly to be spotted in churchyards too it seems. Some were given by rich benefactors and, with a new cemetery being developed, what better opportunity could you want to flaunt your munificence? We know at least one of the original committee members had the wherewithal and his baby son was one of the very first to be buried there, so perhaps Mr Whitney, yet again, has a place on our radar?

The sequoia and the Giant Redwood are the same tree (*sequoiadendron giganteum*). They had once been referred to also as a Wellingtonia in memory of Lord Wellington as he had died around the time that they first arrived in England 17. They are coniferous and the biggest trees and amongst the oldest living organisms on Earth. Naturally you will only find them on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. On a visit to San Francisco in 1852 William Lobb heard of the giant trees nearby and hurried to see for himself. Awed by the sight of the '*vegetable giants*' he collected seeds, shoots and seedlings and headed back to England in the autumn of 1853, giving rise to the craze that our humble churchyard is part of. According to the IUCN (**International Union for Conservation in Nature**) they are now an endangered species in their natural habitat. What isn't these days (except moles in my garden it seems)? The sequoia is named after the Cherokee Chief Sequoyah 16. It's a peculiar tree, I've only just really noticed it in the past few months. It feels like I've been staggering around the place like a half-wit for the past fifty odd years but better late than never I guess. Take a closer look at it. Really odd, spongy bark, seems almost hollow inside, weird. But beautiful too and yet another link with those wacky old Victorians.

So, as you might imagine, both Richard and Yvonne have the odd tale to tell about burials and requests. On one occasion a parcel was sent through the post by someone from Bristol, containing a wooden casket containing someone's ashes who wished to be buried in our cemetery. During the war years, when various children were evacuated to the area, a young man called Peter Jarvis arrived. He did not cover himself in glory as a pupil at the village school though I understand, making a general nuisance of himself, messing around in the stationery cupboard, back chatting. Hilarious to other pupils maybe but, trust me, not to a teacher. Pain in the proverbial probably but, it seems, he looked back on his high jinks with great affection for he willed his ashes be buried back here too.

Long lives well lived I trust but, sadly, it wasn't just little Samuel Whitney who was taken far too young.

Children were, obviously, evacuated to rural areas during WWII to keep them out of harm's way after all 18. No bombs round these parts you see. Mum mentioned she only knew of the one bomb dropping during the war and that fortunately only led to the demise of a poor old sheep in Elton. Doubtless, coming from the Big Smoke, the evacuees livened the area up a bit I don't doubt but one young man didn't make it home when the war ended. He is still here with us in plot E12 although with no headstone. Derek Wakefield died, aged 12, swimming in the river during the school summer holidays. Yvonne still has the Coroner's Order for any unusual death needs to be properly investigated. He died on July 14<sup>th</sup> 1941 and was buried four days later. We can only hope that members of his family were able to attend the service. Such a cruel irony that he died in a place where he was meant to be safe.

And then we come to Brian Gower. Now I first discovered this little boy's story when I was learning about the quarry at Old Sulehay for it was into this area you see that he ventured, with his pal Albert White, over a fence on Bank Holiday Monday, August 5<sup>th</sup> 1946. As boys are wont to do, they were doubtless seeking adventure on a sunny summer's day or just looking for a drink in what they took to be a well. They spotted a high parapet which, they discovered, protected access to an eighteen foot deep shaft. They had never been there before Albert would go on to say, but sadly it would be Brian's first and last sight of the place. Now, a sleeper had been dragged to the parapet by persons unknown, creating a platform which allowed the boys to clamber over to the shaft opening. Thinking, perhaps, that they could make a den or some such they began their descent, Brian leading the way. Albert recalled though how he saw his friend fall silently from the ladder and to the bottom of the shaft, an image that haunted him for the rest of his life for sure. Sensibly he ran for help and soon a group of adults came to try and retrieve young Brian from the bottom. Albert would have known where to find everyone after all, as it was Flower Show day, then held in the field owned by Mr Preston, he of the Manor House, up the Woodnewton Road. Villagers, along with some visitors for the Show, appeared on the scene ready to help. Meanwhile, people gathered outside the **Three Horseshoes** waiting for news, Brian's anxious mum Annie included.

The first gentleman to go down was not from Nassington. Albert Barrett was in Nassington visiting relatives and had recently been demobbed from the army. One can only assume that his recent military service had given him the confidence to try a rescue, so he tied a rope around his middle, donned a service respirator and descended into the shaft. Only later, once the correct breathing gear had arrived, was it found that Mr Barrett's respirator would not have offered sufficient protection against the strong carbon dioxide at the bottom of the shaft. He managed to reach Brian though and only succumbed himself as he was trying to secure the rope around the little boy's body. The other end of the rope fell into the shaft and he too perished. Others tried to get down to them, Brian's distraught father Bert included, but they were held back by PC Whalley as the danger was obviously too great. The eventual Coroner's Report concluded that Brian had actually drowned as he was lying face down in water, and that Albert Barrett had been overcome by the fumes and suffocated. Brian was just nine years old when he passed away and the brave Mr Barrett only forty one. Yet another cruel irony, to have survived the war only to die in a shaft full of gas on a lovely summer's day.

Brian is buried in plot F64 and Mr Barrett in his home town of Thatcham in Berkshire. I went for a walk to find his memorial in the cemetery the other day and there it still is, a small grave compared to all the others around him. But his mum and dad were buried right next to him, both in 1976 so, like the Whitney children, they were reunited once more. Another grave I'll add to my list of ones to keep a bit tidier than hitherto.

And so our attention turns to the last of our known burial sites. Why known? Glad you asked. The more I go on the more convinced I am that, surely, Nassington sits on top of various prior settlements. Saxon. Viking. Roman. Briton. All around us are clues to this. The broken crucifix shaft in the church. Cnut's would-be summer hideaway. The ongoing Roman farmstead excavation by MidNAG. The Roman villa under the site of Lyveden Farm. And the Roman graves found, allegedly, at Old Sulehay in the 1950s. To paraphrase Yoda this time, say no more about that one I shall.

Anyway, the Saxon cemetery. Marvelous. So, here we go. Let me take you back to 1942...

### **Our Saxon past.**

The particular field in question was owned by Mr Preston (him again) at the time. It is the one opposite the Black Horse, next to the one with the old blacksmith's forge in it, and the men working it had opened up an old gravel pit with a mechanical digger, scooping out the topsoil to a depth of two feet in old money. This was in June 1942 and gravel was much needed. If you're an

aficionado of **Time Time** you'll know that this is not the best tool for archaeological work unless under strict supervision but they didn't know anything was there so can be forgiven. By the time someone had spotted the bones some of the graves had been destroyed and it seems that there was some 'looting' too as the site was not secured until August 1st. Still there was evidence of sixty five burial sites although only fifty six were eventually able to be looked at, all of them, bar three, with grave goods. When the site was first discovered word was sent to Mr Preston who duly notified the authorities and he and George Wyman Abbott, an enthusiastic amateur antiquarian-cum-archaeologist, headed to the scene to undertake the initial search. Once the find was deemed of worth professional archaeologists were brought in - Mr R. J. Atkinson, Miss J.M. Morris and Miss B. De Cardi all from the London Museum as the British Museum was known then, along with some of the sixth form boys from Oundle Boys School with their master Mr. E. R. Martin. My heckles go up at this slightly. Why not use the local boys from the village school? Too young? Too ignorant? Anyway, clambering down off that old soapbox again...

And what did they find I hear you cry? Well, a mixture of cremations and burials for starters, three cremations for sure but the various broken pots, perhaps due to the digger, suggested that there might have been more, buried as they could be nearer to the surface than the bodies as there'd be no danger of animals digging them up. Most of the bodies lay flat rather than, as can be the case, in the foetal position for pre Christian burials, or just thrown in any old how, suggesting an actual burial rather than an execution or battle for example. One body might have been seven feet tall but destruction meant no accurate measurements could be taken. Now what might he have been called in his day? Lofty Bloodaxe perhaps? Wulfric the Long? Anyway, I digress. In modern times we're used to headstones being in straight lines on an east-west axis, for reasons explained above due to the influence of Christianity. Not so here, the bodies were buried at all angles, suggesting that they were, indeed, pre Christian. Although Christianity arrived in Britain officially with the mission sent by Pope Gregory in 597, it had taken root to some extent through the Romans a century before 19. The Roman Emperor Constantine 20, whether due to faith or political expediency, keen as he might have been to join the Christian 'club', converted and many followed in his wake, some in Roman Britain too. Indeed, the **Water Newton Treasure** unearthed in another field in 1975 dates back to at least the fourth century and is the oldest group of Christian silver discovered in the entire Roman Empire to date. Just up the road in Water Newton. Wow.

But back to our field. Another clue was the inclusion of grave goods, a particularly pre Christian habit and not usual in a Christian grave. Now modern thought is questioning whether the goods were the belongings of the dearly departed or were, in fact, gifts from his or her loved ones, for the journey to the other side as a kind of entry fee or currency to wherever you might end up. Anglo Saxon versions of Valhalla or Hel I suppose. The women's graves contained the usual fare: brooches, necklaces, keys, rings, sleeve clasps, belt fittings but not many beads as they doubtless rolled away in all the upheaval. With the men were found iron spearheads, shield bosses, knives and daggers but, surprisingly, no swords.

So, a farming community with richly furnished graves in need of protection from a warrior class, so wealthy it seems. They were well fed and long lived as some bones showed evidence of arthritis and rheumatism. Not an ideal, protected archaeological site, at least initially, but intriguing nonetheless, and certainly enough to tempt Lesley Fletcher and I to take a look at the finds they still have at Oundle School in the newly refurbished Cripps Library 21.

We didn't really know what to expect but the librarian there, Leigh Giurlando, had set everything out beautifully for us to view. And what a sight, far more than we expected. Looking at these items that had lain undiscovered for centuries gives you pause for thought. My mother had an interest in archaeology and would always wonder who such things had belonged to. The woman who had owned the necklaces and decorative items for example. Was she happy with her lot or saddened by the situation in which she found herself, happily married or enduring a political one with an old, crusty chieftain? Wulfric the Long maybe. How did she die, and the others too?

Conflict, illness or old age? As for the dagger was its owner a placid man who wore it just for show or an angry man, quick to take umbrage and threaten others with it? A cocky show off perhaps or a respected leader? The answers may have vanished into the ether, but the artefacts are there should you wish to see them. Leigh usually only gets them out when Year 7 'do the Saxons' once a year, so they don't get much of an airing unless someone comes to take a look. There were display cabinets too, with a beautiful Roman jug found in Yarwell. Should you wish to visit you can, simply go to the Cripps Library website and fill in the form, you'll doubtless have as informative and pleasant an experience as we both did. Not all of the finds are there, however, as they were divided up between the school and the professionals in the 1940s. Some of them, courtesy of Mr Wyman-Abbott, found a new home in Peterborough Museum in later years. There is a record of the entire excavation though, written in October 1944 by E. T. Leeds who was not directly involved with the dig but the one charged with documenting it all, and R. T. C. Atkinson, who was. As a parting gift Leigh gave me a copy of said article which appeared in Volume 24 of the *Antiquarian Journal* should you fancy reading it for yourself 23. I can lend you mine, of course. It's in the village hall archive, where else 22?

I won't leave you hanging though, of course not, here are some of the article's conclusions. In 1944 this was quite the find apparently, as '*the cemetery at Nassington therefore constitutes a most important addition to our knowledge of the archaeology of the period*'. Credit is given to Mr Wyman Abbott for saving and recording some fifty graves and to the professionals involved who took exhaustive notes and drew diagrams and illustrations of the finds in what was the biggest such cemetery in the county at this point. The various goods were sent to the **Ashmolean Museum** in Oxford no less for cleaning and analysis, so important were they deemed. Despite the destruction by diggers and pilfering of goods, three graves were discovered in almost perfect condition, making for some interesting finds.

Of course, there is no sign of the cemetery plot today as the area has reverted back to just another field. I used to assume (wrongly of course) that a field had always been a field surely? Oh no, look at what they found in the field in Ketton last summer, no less than a full Roman mosaic depicting scenes from the Trojan War. Who knows what else might be lurking below our very feet as you read this – something left by the many Romans who certainly occupied this area, or the Anglo-Saxons who would eventually be buried in this long forgotten cemetery? And the Danes? Them too of course. In an interesting aside, for me at least, I had something of a surprise when I had a DNA test done last year. I assumed a fair bit of Polish DNA, for obvious reasons, with some Jewish and Russian in the mix, and some Welsh from my maternal grandma, Elsie Black, and the rest all English.

Wrong!!

Polish, certainly, and Baltic and Western European constituted fifty percent, no Russian nor Jewish at all. And the other half? A fair bit of Welsh and Scottish as expected, but no English whatsoever. And something of a surprise too.

17% Scandinavian.

As a Black, and thus from an old village family, I can only assume that my mother's people had been marrying other village family members for centuries. Wendy's family tree certainly suggests that this was so back to the 1700s. As a Danelaw area 24 there were plenty of old Vikings lurking about in this neck of the woods, sharpening their axes and dreaming of pillage so, hey, get yourself tested too, who knows what you might uncover. Old Cnut and his men have a lot to answer for I reckon.

And that concludes my stories of our various sacred sites, at least those we know about for sure. Maybe, at some distant point, we'll uncover a site full of Romans up the Apethorpe Road, complete with rusty armour and Nene Valley Colour Coated Ware pots. Or some Viking hoards of

coin and gold amulets buried along with the local chieftain in the field behind my house. Many a time I've been tempted to get myself a metal detector but the clumps and nettles are discouraging to say the least. What I'm really hoping for is that one of those blasted moles in my garden might dig something up into the light of day one of these autumn mornings, a bejewelled ring perhaps, or a glorious Viking sword?

I can but hope and, rest assured, I'll let you know.

## Notes

1. *The Domesday Book of 1086 was a record of much of England and parts of Wales as required by King William I, William the Conqueror. Agents were sent to every shire in England to list all the holdings and taxes due to the new king.*
2. *The expression 'stop and smell the roses' came into use in the 1960s and is paraphrased from the autobiography of the golfer Walter Hagen who actually said 'Don't hurry. Don't worry. And be sure to smell the flowers along the way' (**The Walter Hagen Story**, 1956).*
3. *The TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimension in Space) is the vehicle used by Dr Who to travel through time and space, the name coined by his granddaughter Susan and the ship itself a Type 40 vehicle fashioned by the Time Lords, of which Dr Who is one. It can travel to any point in time and space due to trans-dimensional engineering. On the outside it looks like a simple 1950s police box but, within, it is a full sized ship of quite a different dimension. Dr Who first aired in 1963 and, since then, there have been fifteen doctors, including the new regeneration in the form of Ncuti Gatwa who will begin his adventures in 2023.*
4. *Sweating sickness outbreaks were documented in 1485 at the end of the War of the Roses, 1508, 1517, 1528 and 1551. After this it seems to have mysteriously vanished. Some suggest it may have been anthrax carried on contaminated wool, or hantavirus spread by rat faeces but the person-to-person contamination rules these out. Attempts to define the disease have been thwarted due to lack of DNA or RNA samples so it remains a mystery.*
5. *Plague pits were mass graves designed to accommodate the corpses of those who had died of a much feared disease. During an outbreak a churchyard would quickly be filled, hence the need for something else. The bodies left outside people's homes were collected on a cart, a bell being rung to alert people to the presence of the cart and infectious bodies, and the corpses thrown in, covered with lime to help kill any infection, and covered over with soil. The bacteria soon died in the ground and plague pits pose no threat to health today.*
6. *The Great Fire of London in 1666 lasted from Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> to Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> of September and gutted the majority of medieval London within the old Roman city walls. It began, shortly after midnight, in a baker's shop in Pudding Lane.*
7. *In total there were five significant plots against Elizabeth I, four of which involved Mary Queen of Scots in an attempt to usurp Elizabeth, a Protestant, and put Mary, a Catholic, on the throne instead. They were The Northern Rising, the Ridolfi Plot, the Throckmorton Plot, the Babington Plot and the Essex Rebellion. The 1570s and 1580s were, therefore, difficult decades for Elizabeth.*
8. *Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, postulated that racial memories, feelings and ideas can be inherited from our ancestors as part of a collective unconscious. Although it has been proven that specific memories cannot be passed down, other researchers have theorized that general associations formed by previous generations can pass down the line through the genome across cultural groups. This explains similarities in beliefs across disparate groups of people who otherwise have no contact with one another.*
9. *William Burke and William Hare committed a series of sixteen murders over a ten month period in 1828 in Edinburgh. Edinburgh at the time was at the forefront of*

medical research and cadavers were greatly sought after by the universities for both research and demonstrations to medical students. Robert Knox was the anatomist who bought the bodies from the duo. They began by killing people who were lodging in Hare's house, the idea coming to them after they had sold a body that had died of natural causes, to Knox. The police grew suspicious and Hare agreed to turn king's evidence in exchange for immunity from prosecution. After admitting to all the crimes, Burke was arrested, found guilty and executed by hanging. His own corpse was dissected and his skeleton is still on display at the Anatomical Museum of Edinburgh Medical School. Highly recommended is the 2010 film **Burke & Hare** starring Simon Pegg and Andy Serkis.

10. When game birds, such as pheasants, take off, their bodies emit a surge of adrenalin. If shot it is traditional to hang them somewhere cool by the neck, ungutted, to allow the tissues to rest and relax. In general twenty four hours is a good length of time.
11. Scarlet fever, or scarlatina is a contagious bacterial infection that causes flu-like symptoms and a rash. It mainly affects children. Complications can include kidney disease. These days it can be treated successfully with antibiotics but before the development of this treatment there were outbreaks which led to many deaths. Between 1820 and 1880 there was a worldwide pandemic. Death occurred in about 20% of cases but, with antibiotic treatment, this has dropped to a mere 1%.
12. During an episode of the **Morecambe and Wise Show** in the 1970s, the conductor André Previn, in a sketch, accuses Eric Morecambe of playing a tune on the piano incorrectly to which he, famously now, answers 'I'm playing all the right notes but not necessarily in the right order'.
13. During the **Great Matter** theological arguments raged concerning whether Henry VIII was truly married to Catherine of Aragon or not. Within the Bible books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy a contradiction was hotly debated. Leviticus 20:21 states;

**'If a man takes his brother's wife it is impurity; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness, they shall be childless'**

Deuteronomy 25:5 states, however;

**If brothers dwell together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be remarried outside of the family to a stranger; her husband's brother shall go into her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her'**

Catherine of Aragon had been married to Henry's older brother Arthur but claimed that the marriage had not been consummated. When married to Henry she bore him eight children but only one, Mary, survived. On the basis of all this Henry VIII would go on to sever links with the Roman Catholic Church, divorce Catherine, marry Anne Boleyn and proclaim himself Supreme Head of the Church of England.

14. John Donne (1571-1631) was an English metaphysical poet. His themes include love, death and sexuality and common Elizabeth topics.
15. Jean-François Millet (1814-75) was a French artist noted for his depictions of French rural life and the peasant class of the time.
16. Chief Sequoyah, or George Gist, was a Native American polymath and neographer of the Cherokee Nation. In 1829 he created the Cherokee syllabary which made reading and writing in Cherokee possible. This was one of the first times that a member of a pre-literate group created an effective writing system. His invention went on to inspire 21 other writing systems. The sequoia tree is named in his honour. Further information about the sequoia can be found in the **Nature** series on BBC iPlayer, Series 5, with James and the Giant Redwood Parts One and Two (14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> February 2012)
17. Arthur Wellesley, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Wellington, was an Anglo-Irish statesman, soldier, politician and leading military and political figure of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. He twice served

as Prime Minister and, as a commander, helped end the Napoleonic Wars by defeating Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Born 1769, died 1852, he is buried in St. Paul's Cathedral.

18. During WWII, fear that German bombing would lead to civilian deaths in towns in particular caused the government of the day to evacuate children, mothers with infants and the infirm to rural areas where it was deemed safer. This happened in several waves, the first in 1939. City children were sometimes amazed at rural life, having never seen farm animals before. Some loved it, others hated it. By 1940 almost half had gone back home. After the beginning of the Blitz on London, another wave of evacuees occurred, and again in 1944. If you had a home with enough space for an evacuee, you were obliged to take one so the scheme was not voluntary and not that popular in some households.
19. In 597 Pope Gregory the Great sent a Christian Mission to Britain to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Although many were already Christians, many were still not and many were more influenced by St. Columba's brand of Christianity from Ireland. Augustine, leader of the mission, was sent to Kent to the court of King Aethelbert of Mercia. Although a pagan himself he was married to Bertha, a Frankish princess, who was a practising Christian. The missionaries were allowed to preach in Canterbury and the king himself eventually converted also. Finally, at the Synod of Whitby in 664, the supremacy of the Roman church was decided upon over and above that of the Irish church based at Iona.
20. Prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, when the Roman Emperor Constantine battled his rival Maxentius, he claimed to have had a divine vision which led to his victory. From that point on he had his battle banners emblazoned with the Chi Rho Christian symbol. He banned the execution of Christians, began church-building projects and commissioned new copies of the Bible.
21. The website for Oundle School, including the Cripps Library, is [www.oundleschool.org.uk](http://www.oundleschool.org.uk)
22. Details of all village history materials mentioned can be found in the History Archive in Nassington Village Hall, **Ref: BLACK FOLDER, The Church of Saint Mary and All Saints: 1. The Building 2. Church Grounds 3. Artifacts and Murals 4. Other Cemeteries**
23. For the article about the Saxon Cemetery go the **Antiquaries Journal** as follows: **E. T. Leeds and R. J. C. Atkinson (1944). An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Nassington, Northants. The Antiquaries Journal, 24, pp 100-128 doi:10.1017/S0003581500016577.**
24. After the invasion of the Viking Great Heathen Army in 865, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, most notably Wessex led by Alfred the Great, struggled to keep the Vikings at bay. Eventually, after the Battle of Edington in 878, a treaty was agreed upon by Alfred and the Danish leader Guthrum. The Danes agreed to limit themselves to specific areas, including East Anglia, and their language and way of life became the norm. Danelaw continued until 954 when Eric Bloodaxe was finally driven out of Northumbria.

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