

Grave Matters: Death and the Sexton, 1615- 1870

‘It by no means follows that because a man is a sexton, he should be a morose and melancholy man; your undertakers are the merriest fellows in the world’ **Charles Dickens** (Dickens, *The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton*).

What is a Sexton?

A Sexton is part of the Church body, employed to help maintain the building and the adjoining graveyard.

Introduction:

The aim of my project was to highlight the remarkable source of history a gravestone can be, combined with the use of a unique and incredibly rare record, a Sextons’ notebook.

Gravestones are lasting monuments of our history, but are quickly eroding. As a result, my research was hindered simply by a lot of the stones of interest to me had disappeared from our landscape. Luckily, I came across fascinating documents orientated around the role of Sexton in the form of –

- Vestry Minutes
- Election Posters
- Letters of Complaint
- Court Cases

All of which have enabled me to begin socially constructing the history of death in the early modern period from an original and fresh approach.

Aims:

- To compare Sexton accounts from Yorkshire and Gloucestershire
- To consider the variation of iconography which appeared on gravestones
- Use of a Sexton’s account to gauge how death was socially constructed during the 1700s and 1800s, and how this effected the infamously lavish funeral customs of the Victorians
- Raise awareness of the usefulness Sexton’s accounts and notebooks can be to the family historian
- Raise awareness of the rapidly eroding of gravestones from our landscape
- To question the ethics of removing headstones from sites

Conclusion:

On completion, raising awareness of Sexton accounts as a source for academics and family historians alike, the role of a sexton, though diminished today, was very much a career and fiercely competed for. As such, one will find the role of a Sexton an accomplice to the early modern undertaker in playing on the parish’s fears of death. Indeed, in order to be elected as Sexton, some would design electoral posters threatening to bury certain townsfolk close to the surface, left to the mercy of the body snatchers.

Whilst leaving much research to be done, one can begin to explain how and why some of the notoriously lavish funeral customs of the Victorian period came to be from the actions of the Sexton in order to secure their position.

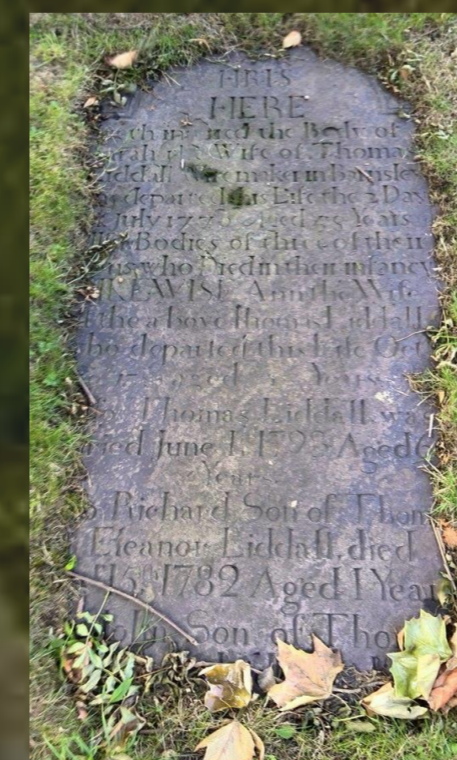
Progression of the gravestone:



Death’s Head, most popular in the 1700s.



The weeping willow, symbolising mourning and mortality, popular in the 1800s.



Graves at St Mary’s, Barnsley, fallen into disrepair. The graves shown here today have been moved for decorative purpose



What does social construction mean?

Social Construction theory refers to the agreed norms and values developed by society which have slowly developed and changed over time.