

CHAPTER 6

The Churchyard at Springthorpe

The churchyard we see today is not at all as it would once have been. In most places what we call the churchyard would have pre-dated the church. The ground would have been consecrated for holy burial and as a place of prayer. It would seem that in the Domesday Book it was an exception for a church to be mentioned in relation to a village, because the ancient Saxon custom had been for noblemen to erect an elaborate Cross rather than a church. Springthorpe, too, had an ancient cross, although we do not know how ancient. It was knocked down in 1563, according to an account in the parish register:¹

"1563. Rolland Chambers of Kirton and Mabel Wilson were married 22 Nov and on the same night the cross in the cemetery was overthrown"

† We learn a great deal about churchyards and their uses in earlier times from John Nicholson's account of 1898, "Concerning the Churchyard", from which the following information is taken.² The graveyard was not only a burial place, but also a place where disputes could be resolved and oaths taken before the clergy. As early as 1287 the ecclesiastical authorities discouraged the settling of secular disputes in church grounds, but it was still going on in the 15th century, as documentary evidence shows.

¹ Oxoniensis, p.?

- † In pre-Reformation England, annual fairs were often held in churchyards, and on Sundays and holidays “*the churchyard became a public playground*”. We have no specific evidence from Springthorpe, but that of many other churches suggest that the higher authorities struggled in vain to prevent churchyards being used for “*improper and prohibited sports*” such as “*wrestling, football and handball*” [Salton, Yorkshire 1472]. A fine of twopence was levied, but clearly had no effect, as in 1519 the same ecclesiastical authorities threatened excommunication!

- † Whitsuntide was a time of a special feast known as the Whitsun Ales or Church Ales, at which money was raised for church repairs. The churchwardens brewed the ale and the people came in from the surrounding countryside to join the festivities. There would be music, songs and dances; the baiting of bulls, bears and badgers; games of, balls, dice and cards, and general merry-making. All this went on among the graves in the churchyard, sometimes even with tents and booths erected.

- † The earliest documentary evidence relating to Springthorpe’s churchyard is an Archdeacon’s Visitation of about the year 1300. This tells not only of the dire state of the church building and its lack of required ‘furnishings’, but also states:

*“The Cemetery is badly enclosed and defiled by divers beasts.”*³

- † 19th century Visitations suggest that the churchyard continued to be much neglected. The following is from the Visitation of 1851:

² Nicholson, John: “Concerning the Churchyard” in Curious Church Customs (1898) pp147-160.

“Sir Thos. Becket has liberally contributed towards the repairs of the Church . . . and has promised to place a better fence round the Churchyard.”

It must be, then, that the sturdy stone wall that now surrounds the churchyard was not built until after 1851. It is perhaps most likely that it was built during the 1864 restoration of the church, when the ground surrounding the church itself was lowered and levelled.

Springthorpe Burials

But what of the actual burials at Springthorpe church?

The oldest surviving gravestone is of 1700, with but earlier burials can be found out from the Parish Registers, although they are difficult to read, and from other documentary information.

† A stone slab, 16 x 12 inches, is built into the exterior wall of the north vestry, to the left-hand side of the door. It dates back to the 15th century and is the oldest surviving burial marker at Springthorpe church. It is usually quite overlooked, because its inscription has now been completely eroded away by the weather. Fortunately, its Latin words were recorded in the Kelly’s Directory of 1885.

*“[Hic] Jacet Radulphus filius
Johannis cujus anime
Propicietur [Deus]. Amen”*

(Here lies Ralph son of John on whose soul may God have mercy. Amen)

The stone must have been placed in this position when the North Vestry was built during the 1865 restoration. It must have previously been inside the church in order that its inscription had survived for four centuries. Sadly, the placing of it outside on the north wall

³ Oxoniensis, p.16.

ensured that it would quickly deteriorate. Rev. Davies urged that it be quickly moved indoors back in the 1930s, but no action was taken.

Perhaps it should be surmounted now by an engraved plaque reminding of the words of the inscription.

- † We have no record of how many people of the parish died during the Black Death in the 14th century, but the parish register of 1549 tells us:

*“Between 3 Aug and 12 Oct 1549,
eleven persons died here of the plague”.*

This is a reminder that there were recurrent outbreaks of plague in the centuries following the Black Death.

- † Four of the Rectors of the parish are recorded in the Burial Registers of Springthorpe.⁴ They are:

Boniface Martin: October 8th 1586
John Hallifax: March 8th 1676
Thomas Mason: September 17th 1704
Robert Althorpe: January 18th 1743

None of their grave markers have survived, but it is very likely that they were interred inside the church, probably beneath the chancel floor. In one case specific evidence of this survives. A document in Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds branch, from around 1780, was brought to our attention by a family history researcher descended from the Springthorpe Hallifax family. It states that there were then some monuments to the Hallifax clergy in Springthorpe church. It also refers to a Rev. Robt. Waterhouse Hallifax, Vicar of Springthorpe, 24 June 1633, about whom we have, as yet, no further information.

- † The earliest surviving gravestones in the churchyard are from the 18th century:

⁴ Davies, Appendix 3

1700: Mary, daughter of Samuel and Jane Hill aged 14 years &
 1776: Samuel Hill aged 71 years (on the same gravestone.)
 1708 1731: Robert Wilkinson
 1755: John Lacy aged 77 years
 1762: Mary, wife of Joseph Smith of Sturgate, aged 27 years
 1781: Mary, wife of William Smith aged 50 years
 1789: John Webster aged 81, as well as his wife Mary (1784)
 These are all situated close to one another, in the area to the east of the path leading to the church's south door. The inscription on that of John Lacy is still clear:

*Observe my friends as you pass by
 As you are now so once was I
 As I am now so you must be . . .*
 [the last line is below the ground level]

† The position of the ancient cross that once stood in the graveyard was probably to the west of the path, not far from the church door. A new cross was erected, allegedly on the ancient stone base, in 1892. It is inscribed with the words:

“in affectionate remembrance of twenty eight [years] faithful service rendered by the Rector – the Rev. E. L. Blenkinsopp”⁵

This was reported by Rev. Benjamin Davies, who further tells of the inscription on the base:

*“Ancient Cross thrown down
 Feb.26.1564. Restored 1892
 In Memory of the Rev. E. L. Blenkinsopp
 Rector 1863-1891.”*

He further notes that the date inscribed on the present cross does not correspond to that in the registers (November 22nd 1563) – someone didn't do their research carefully, which always seems to have dismayed Rev. Davies.

1910 - The Addition to the Church Graveyard

⁵ See Appendix 3 for the full account

† When the old churchyard had little or no more room for burials, a section of adjoining land, owned by Sir Hickman Bacon, was given to the church to increase the capacity of the graveyard. This is the area to the west of the old churchyard, down at a lower level and reached by a set of steps. A document in Lincolnshire Archives shows the petition for consecration of this land, addressed to the Bishop of Lincoln, the Right Reverend Edward Lee. It was signed by Rev. Benjamin Davies, Churchwardens (George William Stephenson and Charles Joseph Kell) and a number of Parishioners (Robert Winter, John Warner Green, Fred Lidgett, Fred Taylor and Ernest Barwick).⁶

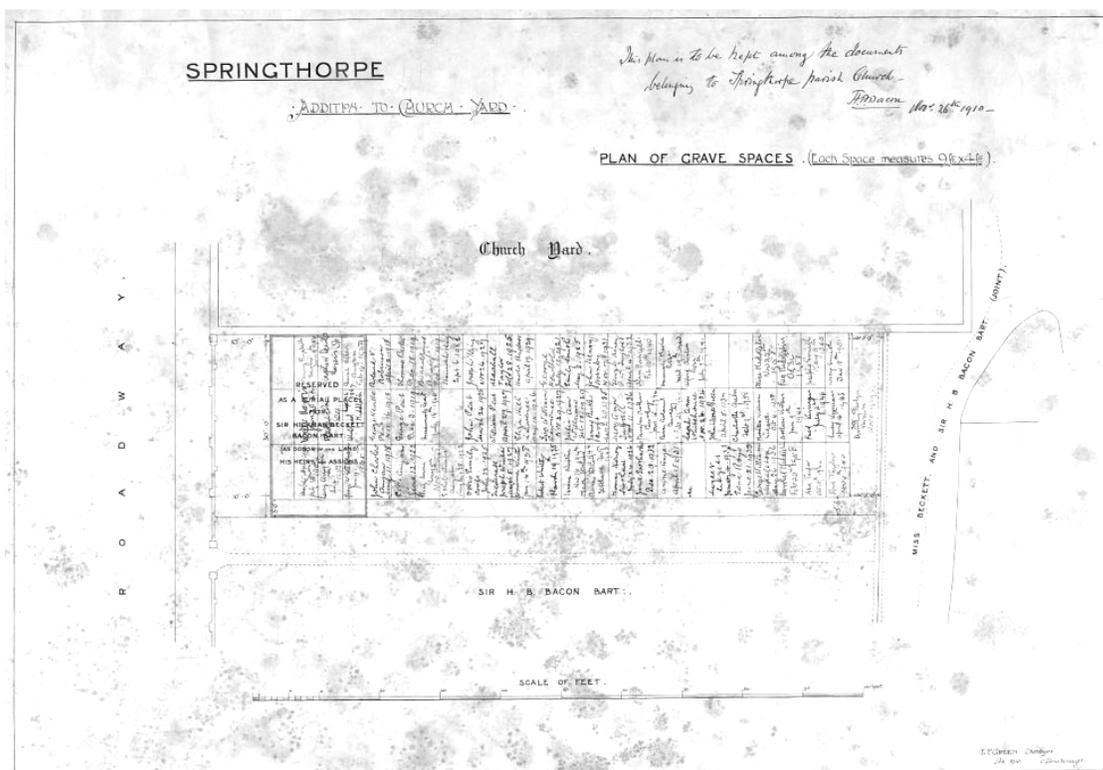


Fig. : Plan of the Addition to the Church Yard at Springthorpe

From the detail of the plan of the churchyard extension (fig.) it can be seen that there were 60 plots proposed, set in 3 rows of 20, for the

⁶ Linc.Archives Doc. CONSEC 284H/17 (1911)

interment of local villagers. In addition, the area closest to the road was set aside: “*Reserved as a burial place for Sir Hickman Beckett Bacon Bart: (as donor of the land) his heirs and assigns.*” It was the size of 12 plots. Sir Hickman Bacon, however, never married and had no children of his own. The Bacon family never used the plots, and eventually the spaces were used for local graves. As burials took place during the twentieth century each section of the chart has been filled in with the name and date of burial of the deceased whose grave corresponds to each plot.

- † Thanks to the work of as yet unidentified persons, a map of the entire graveyard was produced around 1975, with a key to the graves. All the Monumental Inscriptions were recorded and the record is held in Lincolnshire Archives.⁷ Not only did they transcribe all the headstones that were legible, but they also recorded a number of what they thought were small headstones bearing only initials. These, in fact, are not headstones but footstones that mark the lower end of certain graves. They can often be matched to their appropriate headstone by the initials and, in some cases, dates.

⁷ Appendix 9 is a transcription of the original document made by Richard Ille-Smith in 2008-09, which can also be seen online at www.springthorpe-village.org.uk. See also “Lincolnshire monumental inscriptions, vol. 4” [Typescript] in Lincolnshire monumental inscriptions, vol. 4 (1981).