

pulpit: the joys of a country church and churchyard

Having moved from the 'smoke' to the 'sticks' three years ago, and as a total townie, I have really been delighted to discover both the farmland which now surrounds us and the beautiful and ancient churches with their churchyards packed with local history.



At Felsted, near Chelmsford, we meet an illustrious gentleman born Richard Rich in 1496 or 1497. His monument (left) is in Holy Cross Church in Felsted and as you may surmise from its grandeur, he lived and died a very rich man.

His wealth was greatly increased in 1536 when he was appointed Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations, a body which dealt with the huge amount of money coming in from the dissolution of the monasteries. Nice job! In the same year he also became Speaker of the House of Commons and in 1547 he was appointed Lord Chancellor of England. Now known as The Lord Rich (sometimes Riche) he founded a dynasty with sons assuming their father's title in due course.

Rich was well-known for cruelty when dealing with religious opponents and was a participant in the torture of Anne Askew (1521-July 16, 1546), one of the earliest female English poets known to have composed in the English language and a Protestant condemned as a heretic by the English government. The only woman recorded to have been tortured at the Tower of London, Rich turned the wheels of the rack to torture her himself. She was later burned at the stake at Smithfields in London.

Best remembered in Felsted as the Founder of Felsted School in 1564, which is now a very popular private school, Rich was given nearby Leez Priory and he took up residence there. (The Priory was the first country house in England to be granted a licence to conduct civil marriages in 1995.)

After his death Rich's remains were eventually provided with a built-on extension chapel with a canopied memorial repository, right. Quite a major declaration of his prominence and wealth.

Out in the churchyard there are, of course, many graves from various centuries including a large number of former staff at Felsted School who have died over the years. The collection of graves below is of members of the Skill family who lived over many years in a Manor House called The Bury. This house is now part of Felsted School. The burial plot is now overgrown and looking rather unattended. I imagine that the Skill family have now petered out or moved on.



I was quite shocked to see how this red brick meeting room had been tacked on to the end of the ancient church. It really looks a mess and I can't believe that the church authorities gave permission (a Faculty) for such an eyesore. It really deprives the churchyard of a proper uninterrupted view and in my opinion, the churchyard has been robbed of its sense of dignity.





One of the features of country churchyards today is the growing numbers of a Garden of Remembrance, or Columbarium, where cremated human remains may be buried. Despite some of the churchyards being very large and not in the least full, the trend towards cremation is visible and perhaps growing in what were traditionally burial places.

This example is to be found at Felsted Churchyard. I approached a man who was mowing the grass to enquire about the situation and he turned out to be the Vicar! He informed me the churchyard is full and about to be closed so the Garden of Remembrance will be used more and more in the future. Unlike some, this place has no facility for memorials in the grass and that leaves a lasting impression of dignified peacefulness. A list of interments is kept in the church and is available for inspection.

Next we visit the village of Great Leighs and a church at the far end of the village. There I found a thoughtful design for the headstone of young David Coard who in 1940 earned his pilot's wings only to be killed in action some five months later on the eve of his 20th birthday. Such moments bring back the sense of shock which war produces. It certainly stopped me in my tracks and I couldn't hold back my emotions when I read the full inscription.



The central part of the memorial reads: "Entirely selfless and unspoiled by Man's greed."



Of course, being so close to farms and farmland, places like Great Leighs produce lovely sights and sounds. As we searched among the gravestones we heard the sound of horses and one of them came as close to the fence as possible, probably in hope of some food! It was a delight to stroke his nose and see him moving so elegantly in the field next door. And the charming little bridge over this stream makes a lovely sight as does the headstone gently reclining on a helpful tree.



Here in Great Leighs there is another substantial Garden of Remembrance (left) for the burial of cremated remains, despite the churchyard being very large and not close to being closed. Like the Garden in Felsted, this also presents a very calm and dignified presence which is very pleasing. Names, inscribed on large plaques, are visible at the far end of the garden.

Another strand of interest was how many former clergy are buried in what was once their own churchyard. In one churchyard we found the graves of two former rectors.

My interest was further aroused by the strange symbol (right) which marks another grave. Despite research I cannot find out what it is, or may represent. If you can help solve the mystery please let me know via the editor at rncoates@aol.com



After Great Leighs, we crossed over the ugly six-lane artery known as the A131 and along to Little Leighs and found an even deeper sense of the natural world as graveyard and a field came together in a dramatic manner, and not even a tiny fence in sight. The sense of continuity presented by this sight was very moving and inspiring. Little Leighs is a lovely village with a long history – but not always so idyllic! – as this extract from *The Times* January, 1824 reveals:



"A gruesome story of body snatching at Little Leighs.

"Samuel Clark appeared before the local Magistrates charged with theft of woman's clothing following disinterring a woman's body from Little Leighs' churchyard on Friday 26th December 1824. He had been arrested shortly after her body had been found in a nearby field. The Times noted that "the prisoner's pallid [sic] and otherways unhealthy appearance [...] would alone lead us to suspect that his avocations called him abroad at an hour 'when churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead'. It was suspected that the metropolis burial grounds were so well guarded that this had driven those who committed this crime to the country areas.

"The court heard that a passer by, C.Rogers of Felsted, discovered an abandoned horse and cart near the turnpike at Little Leighs. He discussed the find with Mr Redwood, the turnpikeman, and they decided to lodge the horse and cart at the Castle Public House. A short while later Clark approached the licensee, Mr Crisp, and stated he owned the cart. He explained he had drunk too much the night before and had decided to tie up the horse and sleep off the drink in a nearby field. By confirming the contents of the cart he persuaded Crisp that it indeed belonged to him. Clark then went off, but remained in the area, obviously, it was later realised, with intent to recover the body.

"Clark's actions had aroused some suspicions and Robert Broomfield, the local blacksmith, looked in the fields near to where the cart was found and discovered a shovel and then, much to his alarm, a brace of loaded pistols in a sack. He sought the assistance of the field owner, Mr Simmons. Together they resumed searching and it was then that they found a most gruesome discovery: a female's body. Naturally alarmed by this, he went to find help. His route took him through the churchyard where he noticed a disturbed grave and clothes spread about. The truth was then realised: that the body of Joanna Chennery (Chenery or Chinner), wife of James, who had been buried the previous Sunday, was the body on the field. The whereabouts of Clark was immediately sought and he was found in nearby Broomfield drinking in the Kings Arms public house. Other graves were checked at Little Leighs and two were found to have been disturbed. The bodies of Abraham Leeder and female named Knight were found to be missing from their coffins. Clark appeared at the Essex Assizes and was found guilty. He was sentenced to be transported for seven years."

Even in this tiny village the demand for a Garden of Remembrance has been heard. You see it right, perhaps in a more natural state than Felsted and Great Leighs. Here memorials are allowed and there are names on the stone at the end of the garden.

Not many young people opt to live in villages, preferring the lure of towns and cities, where the jobs are of course. With ageing villagers and congregations it is often quite difficult to find people fit and active enough to mow grass or prune trees and bushes. However, they seem to manage quite well given what I witnessed here.





Also at Little Leighs, as in many other churches, a Second World War memorial has been built into the churchyard entrance gate. Every time one walks in or out, one is reminded of the grim reality of our history in warfare. War memorials always hit me in the gut as I think of those men, mostly young of course, whose short lives ended in painful and shocking circumstances.

Long may such memorials keep us mindful of what we owe to the dead and also serve to prevent us from another world war for ever.

One of the features at Little Leighs is a life-size monument set in a 14th century recess by the sanctuary. The Church Guide speaks of this as "the glory of our church" and of "startling and moving simplicity." Although it may appear to be made of stone, it is in fact made of oak. The 13th century figure shows a priest wearing Mass vestments and he is buried beneath. More than 100 such effigies survive but this is the only example of a priest's monument known in England. Originally painted, it now looks pale and grey. There are still traces of the various colours used originally. The reason for being made of wood is likely to be that the recess was used for the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies as a sepulchre. On Maundy Thursday, the sacrament was laid in the sepulchre, being seen as the Body of Christ in a tomb. In England it was the custom for such sepulchres to be built into the wall of the church for this purpose.



The churchyard at the Parish Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Black Notley, left, has one particularly noteworthy monument – that of The Revd. John Ray about whom I have written in *The Journal* previously [Autumn 2015] and who is remembered as the founding father of Natural Sciences. The rest of the churchyard is remarkably ordinary by some standards.

The position of the church is, however, quite interesting. It is built on private farmland and the land owner lives "next door" to the church in Black Notley Hall – the white building visible centre right below – and is a member of the congregation.

As may be seen from the photograph this is a truly rural church, enjoying a very special quality of environment. It feels to me like no other church I have visited and the sense of rural detachment is very much present.



And despite the churchyard being large and not at all full, there is again a Garden of Remembrance which is well used and overlooks farmland in what is a very pleasing junction as churchyard and farmland meet.

After a 'hard day at the office' the tranquility, untempered beauty – and the historical memorials and their inscriptions – within our rural churchyards are a joy to behold and relish.

Prebendary Neil Richardson