

DEATH IN THE ARCHIVES

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One thing you can be sure of in the Archives is that most people mentioned in the records are dead. This will be a brief, sometimes melancholy investigation of how people prepared for death; what caused them to die; their funeral preparations; the memories and examples they left to us, the enquirers, so many years later.

The causes of death are, as we know, many, and one burial register from the church of St Peter and St Paul, Aston, for the years 1793-1812, gives us a glimpse into the health of the parishioners by recording the supposed cause of death. Common causes given are inflammation, fever, mortification, decline, and old age. Epidemics like smallpox, 'meazels' and whooping cough illustrate a high infant mortality. Women died in childbirth and of cancer of the breast; there were strokes, convulsions, consumption and 'astma'. On 15 December 1797, Benjamin, son of Joseph and Martha Hurley was buried, aged six. He had been 'drowned in the Navigation'. This was, perhaps, not so surprising when we see that the family's address was the Lockhouse, Aston. Elizabeth Lewis was buried on 10 February 1809, 'wore out with disease'. She was only 17, from Erdington workhouse. Children died from the unusual: for example, Edward Lakins in December 1793, aged eight, from the 'King Evle'; or from the commonplace: 'Teeth' was the entry for twelve-month-old Ann Steadman in 1811. Accidents were not infrequent: in 1812 James and Rebecca Roberts buried their eighteen-month-old son Elisha 'who was accidentally burned to death by his clothes catching fire' in Green Street, Deritend.¹

A good place to look for accidental or unexpected deaths is amongst the inquest records from the Coroner's court where a verdict on the cause of death was pronounced. Birmingham's survive from 1875 (though they are patchy up to 1878) and there are a vast number of them, in chronological sequence, although they lack a name index. The papers usually include statements by witnesses and the doctor called to the case, depending on the circumstances. An unexpected bonus is that they can provide interesting information on living conditions, medical care, lack of safety standards in the workplace and in the home, housing, poverty, crime; even street hazards and immigration. A dip into April 1889 when ten-year-old Ada Wiseman died of meningitis also gave an unexpected account of punishment at school. From Friday night, when she came back from the park to her home in Brearley Street, Ada suffered pain in the ear, toothache and vomiting. The doctor was sent for on Sunday, but she was by then unconscious. Several schoolfriends, however, described how she had been punished at St George's School, Great Russell Street, on the Friday before:

'I saw a monitress named Ada Keey take the dec[eased] Ada Wiseman from her class and box her ears two or three times with her hand, she cried, Miss Keey then made her kneel down and then she struck her with a pointer on her back. Miss Blair Head Mistress was in the class room at the time. Dec[eased] did not complain of being hurt.'²

Not long before this case, an inquest had been conducted on an 'unknown man' who died at Clarke's Common Lodging House, 26 New Canal Street.

'The deceased slept Wednesday night at Shaw's Lodging House, Bartholomew Street. He was too ill to get up Thursday morning and Shaw told him he should send to the parish for a note, deceased then got up and went away. At 10.30 same evening the landlord of the Hope & Anchor in New Canal Street took him to Clarke's Lodging House, he slept there. Friday this morning he got up late and about 1.30 he said to Mrs Clarke that he felt ill and should like some tea: she remarked he was blue about the face and suggested he should have some brandy, and was taking him across to the road to the Hope & Anchor when he staggered and fell and was carried back.'³

Ten minutes later he was dead. The Coroner's court recorded 'Visitation by God'.

Those with money and a higher position in the class structure could arrange to go out with more style. The Gough family papers include a wonderful series of receipts for money spent on everything from beer to building, shoes to servants. Among these are the bills for the funeral of Ann Gough in 1731/2. Throughout the winter of 1731 she was treated with medicines which cost £1 16s 6d: purging pills, 'an oily draught', sal volatile, expectorating mixtures, 'shaveings of hartshorn', tamarinds, chamomile flowers etc. Unfortunately these were of no avail. In January a coffin was bought from Bob Allen:

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Jan ye 25 A Bill for a cufing [sic]
for Mad[am] Ann gough

for nails dowls screws to fasten ye cofin together & glew	02 05
for tasels to carry it	00 02 08
for work	00 08 00
	00 13 01

Richard Cartwright provided most of the materials: fine woollen crepe, 'black shalloone', 'dimmothy', loops and buttons, mohair, silk, druggeit, 'shammy skin'. Black flannel was bought for the horses, £1 paid for the pall. The servants were provided with cloaks, scarves, hatbands and ribbons. Mourners were given gloves: in lamb, kid or mock chamois, depending on who and which sex they were. Near the end of the bill for £35 0s 3 1/2d comes 7s for 'makeing ye Scroud' [sic]. The tombstone cost 15s 6d.

Sir the dyall cost mee	0 8 0
the cutting comes	0 1 6
the stone	0 1 6
the drawing of the stone	0 1 0
the mason	0 1 4
given in ale for helping it up	0 1 0
for my own time	0 1 2
	0 15 6

Finally, there were the eight silk escutcheons, twenty more of fine buckram and '3 Doz and 4 Streamours at 18s per Doz', for which the bill was £9 10s; the hearse, at £2; and the wine:

1 Doz and a halfe red port	22d pt	1 13 0
To halfe a Doz of Mountains	20d pt	0 10 0
To 2 Doz of Bottles		0 3 0

Total expenditure for the occasion came to over £50.⁴⁻¹¹ Compare this with the £8 3s spent on the death and burial of Daniel Zachary in 1705 at Exeter. Included in the total here were the cost of nursing, fee to the 'pothygarry', looking after his horse, postage, and the carrier's fee for transporting his possessions home.

to his bureing fflaninge	0 7 0
to his coffinge and brand	1 9 3
to 6 quartes of Connary [canary wine]	0 15 0
to 17 gallons of Sider mulled with Suggester sinimoth [cinnamon] cloves ginger etc in all	1 3 9
to diginge his grave	0 2 6
to ye Queenes tax for his death	0 4 0
to ye women yt strached him out & put him in his coffinge	0 7 6

Daniel Zachary, according to the account given by James Goodridge to Thomas Zachary, his brother, 'so dyed a way like an inosent Lamb, without any sighth or groone'.¹²

This was also the case with Elizabeth Bradford, wife of Henry Bradford of Camp Hill (after whom Bradford Street is named), who wrote a testimonial to his dead wife in the minutes of the quarterly meetings of the Warwickshire Friends in 1750. It was a custom among Quakers to mark the passing of one of their group with an appreciation of their character and an acknowledgment of the contribution made by them to the spread of Christian teaching and Quaker work. The amount of biographical information given

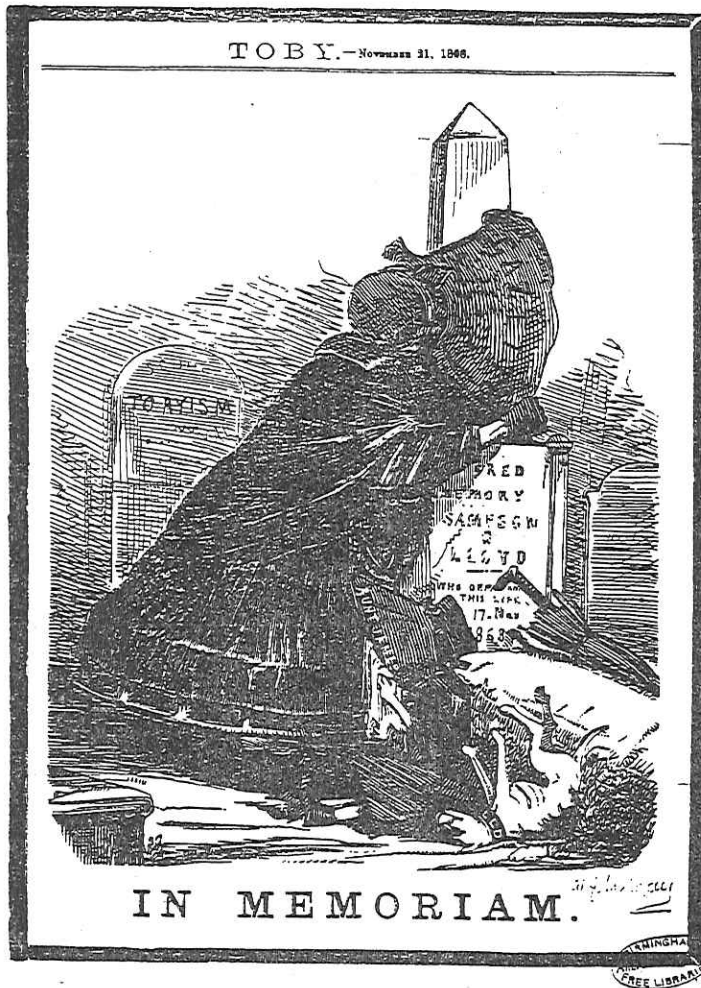


Fig 1: A tongue-in-cheek lament for a Conservative electoral set-back in 1868

In Remembrance of
THE SUFFERERS
BY THE
EXPLOSION AT MESSRS. LUDLOW'S CARTRIDGE MANUFACTORY, WITTON,
ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1870,
 By which 17 were instantly Killed, viz:—

Amelia Woodman, Sen., 39; Amelia Woodman, daughter; Maria Brown, 23; Catherine Brown, 16; Harriet Smith, 16; Margaret Owen, 19; Jane Ward, 14; Selina Bullivant, 27; Catherine Cassiby, 28; Sophia Dolman, 18; Mary Butler; Emily Morris; Eliza Harris; M. Watson; Ann Jones, and two unknown.

And 56 injured, of whom 36 Died in the General Hospital, viz:—

Elizabeth Taylor, 40; Mary Ann Smith; Louisa Hateley; Mary Ann Cannon; Margaret Burns, 16; Mary Ann Welch; Elizabeth Clarke, 18; Jane Hickman; Mary Ann Bradley; Jane Johnson, 17; Sarah McKenna; Louisa Jones; Mary Burkitt, 40; Elizabeth Allcock, 45; Elizabeth Noakes, 25; Maria Shelley, 16; Ann Bragg, 40; Emma Williams, 18; Selina Green, 24; Lacey Hillard, 34; Anne White, 20; Emily Williams, 18; Ann Brookes, 33; Mary Kingston, 17; Eliza Froggat, 16; Annie Conway, 18; Annie McGowan, 18; Fanny Clarke, 18; Sarah Ann Williams, 19; Sarah Henson, 28; Rose Ward, 16; Mary Ann Bennett; Ann Eades.

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sudden and solemn was their call,<br>A warning voice, it speaks to all— | Delay no more, to Jesus fly,<br>For grace to live, for grace to die. |
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“ In the midst of Life we are in Death.”

Fig 2: Funeral cards were frequently printed as memorials (MS 559)

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about the deceased varies, of course, with the writer: when Henry Bradford died, his testimonial was short and uninformative! The one he wrote for his wife was longer and more detailed. He tells us that Elizabeth was born in Kendal, Westmorland, in 1696, the daughter of Christopher and Ruth Fisher. She was quick, discerning and of solid judgment and grew swiftly in grace and spiritual knowledge. Her first appearance as a Minister was at Kendal in 1718 and thereafter she travelled widely through England and Ireland, with two visits to Scotland, visiting Friends and preaching. She married Henry Bradford in 1724 at Kendal.

'She was a Sober Virtuous Woman Exemplary in Plainness, Modest and Chast, rather reserved than over free, a Loving Wife and tender Mother. She gladly received Strangers who were abroad in the Work of the Ministry and knowing what it was to be called to preach the Gospel freely gave me Liberty when I had a concern to visit Friends . . . Her last illness was a paraletick Disorder with weakness of the Limbs which confined her to her Room.'

This she suffered for more than a year.

'Towards the Conclusion the Disorder so Affected her Speech that she was almost unintelligible.'

She died at the age of 54 and was buried at Wigginshill, Sutton Coldfield.

'And I doubt not but she is gone to rest, may the Lord raise up and send more faithful Labourers unto his Harvest for the Harvest is Great and the Labourers but Few.'<sup>13</sup>

The funeral oration also provides an opportunity for the dead to serve as an example for the living. In 1710 the Reverend James Hassall, domestic chaplain to the Right Honourable Thomas, Lord Leigh, Baron of Stoneleigh, preached at his Lordship's funeral on 16 November. His oratory was based on 1 Corinthians 15, 55-57 (O Death, where is thy sting?). Leigh was held up as an example to all, particularly for his charity to the poor.

'He was a peaceable Neighbour, a loveinge Husband a good and tender father to his dear & honourable Children, a son of ye best Constituted Church in ye world, ye Church of England & charitable to his poor and needy neighbours, helping ym in their Distress, & supplying their wants dayly at his Gates.'<sup>14</sup>

The public farewell to the dead might also be rendered in verse, and a few such poems can be found in the Archives. The following is part of one on the death of Daniel Bowly in the eighteenth century:

'A youth, indeed, the Day rejoic'd to see!  
Creation seem'd his virtues to admire!  
His bounty like his conversation, free,  
And general union, seem'd his sole desire.

Who while at Table, wonderful to tell!  
The Ghastly king, conceal'd from human eyes,  
Forth rush'd and stabb'd him to the heart. He fell,  
(O mournful truth!) never again to rise.'<sup>15</sup>

Alternatively, a memorial card might tell the story. In a Victorian miscellany we find one marking the death of nine people and the injury of forty in an explosion at Walker's Percussion Cap Manufactory in Graham Street in 1862. All were aged forty or under, most female and the youngest to die was only ten years old. The same card recalls two other explosions: one in Legge Street in August 1859 when three were killed, and one in Whittall Street in September 1859, when twenty died. Another card, printed after an explosion at Ludlow's cartridge manufactory at Witton in 1870, shows that fifty-three were killed; again, the workers were nearly all young women (see previous page).<sup>16</sup>

Had such a fire been visited on the dead and not the living, Barrow Cadbury might have approved. In an essay from his student days, preserved in the Cadbury family papers, he puts forward the arguments for a modern practice of cremation. He lists the benefits to public health and the need for proper planning of land use, given a rapidly increasing population. On the spiritual side, he addresses the arguments concerning resurrection and the transformation of matter.

'Those who have carefully watched the whole process describe it as the very opposite to revolting; they say it is the most beautiful transformation possible. Instead of the revolting decomposition and decay of the grave, the body is seen to depart in translucent brightness, only a few ashes remaining . . .'<sup>17</sup>

In other Cadbury papers, we find the death of George Cadbury recorded by his wife, Dame Elizabeth, in her personal diary on Tuesday, 24 October 1922:

'Go early to see my darling - breathing difficult all day - unconscious - no pain - sit by him nearly all day - family circle round at tea time - go up again 10 to 5 - very quiet - at 5 just as B[ournville] bull sounded, one sigh and he too "went home after work" - such desolation . . .

Wednesday 25 October

My darling looking so peaceful - Telegrams flooding in all day - newspapers full of his praises - why could they not say it earlier?'<sup>18</sup>

Another diary which records the death of a beloved partner is that of James Watt, when he was away from home, at Fort Augustus, in 1773, surveying the area intended for the Caledonian Canal. He received a letter on 26 September advising him that Mrs Watt (Margaret Miller, his first wife) was

'dangerously ill & her life despaired of & desiring me to come home with all speed - I immediately set out with a very sad heart."

Two days of travel on horseback in heavy rain brought him to Dumbarton,

'where the certainty of my loss bore so strong upon me that I could come no further - sent the express for a chaise and a friend to meet me in the morning.

29th. About ten o'clock I saw a chaise arrive and Mr Hamilton in it, by his black cloak and his countenance I saw I had nothing to hope - we met without speaking . . . he informed me I had lost my dear friend on Friday morning.'

Peggy Watt had died after being delivered of a stillborn child.

'In her I lost the comfort of my life a dear friend and faithful wife, may she enjoy that happiness in another state she wanted in this life of sorrow. We were married upon the 16th of July in 1764 & she died the 24th of September 1773 - She bore me 4 living children 2 sons and 2 daughters and died of the son who was buried with her. Of these children a son and a daughter are left me whom God long preserve.'<sup>19</sup>

Infant mortality was, of course, much more frequent than it is today. Isabella Strutt preserved some curls of her son Charles' hair when he died:

'The Hair of my lovely and beloved babe Charles who was born at 12 o'clock at noon on Thursday the 14th of April 1796 & died on Saturday the 25th of March 1797 at 1/2 past ten in the morning.'<sup>20</sup>

Children were, naturally, often the beneficiaries of a will. Richard Parrott of Coventry, coal master, left money for a school for fifteen poor children at Foleshill, and his will, proved on 3 June 1774, expands on the teaching of scripture and good morals. He also gives an interesting description of the funeral rings he wished relatives and friends to be given after his death. Fifteen were to have the motto 'Love one another' inscribed on them; others were to have 'Vivite felices' [live happily] or 'Munus morientis habeto' [receive the gift of a dying man], and one was to be engraved 'Gratia fama valetudo' [grace, good reputation, health]. He finishes the will with instructions for his burial at the feet of his father and quotes a few lines from the Roman poet, Terence, to serve for his inscription.<sup>21</sup>

It can be disconcerting to find physical remains, like Charles Strutt's hair, among the papers in a collection, but perhaps it is appropriate that we should be preserving a piece of John Baskerville's shroud. As well as being a printer of high reputation, Baskerville was an atheist with strong anti-Catholic sentiments. The arrangements for his burial, expressed in his will which was proved on 9 November 1775, illustrate his unusual beliefs:

'My further will and pleasure is, and I do hereby declare that the devise of my goods and chattels as above, is upon this express condition, that my wife [Sarah Ruston] in concert with

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my executors, do cause my body to be buried in a Conical building in my own premises [at Easy Hill, where Baskerville House now stands], heretofore used as a mill which I have lately raised higher and painted, and in a vault which I have prepared for it. This doubtless, to many, will appear as a Whim . . . but it is a Whim for many years resolved upon, as I have a hearty contempt of all Superstition, the Farce of a consecrated ground, the Irish barbarism of "sure and certain hopes" etc.<sup>22</sup>

Baskerville stayed in his conical resting place until 1827. When a wharf off the Birmingham Canal was constructed at Easy Hill, he was exhumed. So good was the embalming that he was put on display for a while in a nearby shop, until contact with the air induced decay and caused complaints about the smell. His remains had to be buried secretly in a vault at Christ Church, New Street. When that church was demolished in 1897, he was rediscovered, removed and taken (minus our piece of shroud, I suppose!) to the catacombs at Warstone Lane cemetery.

Baskerville was not the only person to have their remains moved as a result of Birmingham's building programmes. A series of notebooks from the Council's Public Works Department record the gravestones, inscriptions and vault numbers of those whose bones were moved from the burial grounds in the city centre - Park Street, Whittall Street, the Old Meeting House - out to Witton Cemetery.<sup>23</sup>

There are also records of monuments built, large and small. A font was provided for Aston church in memory of Mrs Shyrte, retired head of Witton Hall School, and her late sister, Miss Bodington, also a teacher there. J A Chatwin designed it in 1880.<sup>24</sup> A memorial chapel was added to St Mary's, Handsworth for James Watt and a statue by Sir Francis Chantrey was erected there in 1824, at a cost of £2,000.<sup>25</sup> Watt joined his business partner, Matthew Boulton, at Handsworth church. When Boulton had been buried there in 1809, his funeral was the cause for a prolonged and acrimonious dispute over the cost, between George Lauder, who had undertaken the arrangements, and Matthew Robinson Boulton, who questioned the bill. Lauder was, eventually, paid. The sextons at both St Martin's and St Philip's tolled their Minute bells for twelve hours in Boulton's memory and the formality of the occasion is illustrated by a paper giving 'Directions for the Carriages', with detailed instructions as to who should be where, when and following whom!<sup>26</sup>

And for something more modern? The place of the death of the individual in modern society was a subject tackled, with music, poetry and actuality, in a radio programme by BBC producer Charles Parker in 1965. The programme was called 'Business as Usual'. Particularly important for discussion in the programme were the changes in our attitudes to death and grieving and the effects of the huge loss of life incurred by wars.

' . . . and it seems to lose its significance, you know, it's just a - you take a body out of the ward and you bring in a dinner for the rest of them. You know, it's just part of the daily round, it occurs, it happens.'<sup>27</sup>

We shall finish our perusal of death in the archives on a more gentle note, with the epitaph on Clorinda Haywood, at St Bartholomew's, Edgbaston:

Warm summer sun shine kindly here:  
Warm summer wind blow softly here;  
Green sod above lie light, lie light:  
Good-night, Dear Heart, good-night, good-night.<sup>28</sup>

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