

Origins of the churchyard

The churchyard is at least as old as the church and probably older. There was a church on the site before the Norman Conquest of 1066 and there is substantial surviving Anglo Saxon work within the building. It seems likely, therefore, that burials took place here for at least 900 years.

Unusually, the churchyard is ovate (egg-shaped) in plan, a shape that pre-dates the arrival of the Anglo Saxons, and this suggests an origin that could be as early as 600AD. If you find yourself looking at a circular or ovate shaped churchyard you are probably in a very old place indeed. Later yards tend to be square or rectilinear and the shape of Compton's is exceptional in this part of the country.



Around 4000 burials in the tiny churchyard at Compton have caused the ground surface to rise well above the level of the path and the church.

A raised churchyard is also a sign of antiquity as repeated burials significantly increases the ground level. That is certainly the case at Compton where, on the south side, it is many feet above the level of the church and of the surrounding land. This was the favoured side of the church for burials with the north being considered unlucky and which was used last.

The missing piece of churchyard

The basic shape of the churchyard is ovate, aligned west to east. However, there appears to have been changes to this shape on the north west section where a glance at the churchyard survey plan shows that the Eastbury Manor garden appears to have encroached onto the yard. A piece has been taken from it and, perhaps as compensation, a smaller section appears to have been added, creating a sharp corner by the Best family plot (nos. 45 & 46 on the churchyard plan).

It is significant that the wall of this part of the churchyard is built of brick rather than the stone that has been used for the rest of the boundary. It is also considerably higher, presumably to protect the manor house from prying eyes.

The western end of the churchyard retains the ovate shape, more or less, except that the retaining wall separating the churchyard from Eastbury Manor garden is made up of several straight sections, again a change to the basic shape, albeit a fairly minor one. The tithe map shows that these changes had been made by 1839.



An extract from the Compton tithe map of 1839 showing the bite out of the north west side of the church yard. The map suggests that the change was made to accommodate the driveway to the old manor house.

Who made the changes? The finger points firmly at the Fulham family who owned and lived at Eastbury from 1685 to 1833. During

that period, they had very considerable influence and were able to make significant changes to the village.

However, altering the village layout is one thing but a change to an ancient churchyard is another and would take a particular kind of power. That the Fulhams had sufficient clout is in no doubt; successive generations were lords of the manor of Eastbury, as well as being patrons of the living of St Nicholas from 1685 until 1777 and holders of other ecclesiastical positions. In 1722, John Fulham appointed his son, John, as rector and he was to hold that position for 55 years. When the elder man died in 1725, his son became both rector and patron and so had complete control over the church, the churchyard, the glebe lands and a considerable part of the parish.



Edward Fulham's Greek Revival styled extension to Eastbury House was built in the late eighteenth century and painted by John Hassell in 1824.

Whilst this makes it tempting to assign the encroachment to John, it is more likely to have been his son, the Rev Edward Fulham, who did the deed. He was rector of St Nicholas in Guildford but Eastbury was his home. After he inherited Eastbury in 1777, he began to acquire pieces of land as they became available in order to create the landscaped park with its lake that we see today. In 1802, he bought a house, garden and barn that stood to the north of the

churchyard in what is now the north east lawn of the manor house. He had them removed to create his private enclave. He also built a Greek Revival style extension to his house in the late eighteenth century, which was very close to the wall of the churchyard.¹ How tempting it must have been to push the boundary away, just a little, to accommodate the new wing and his grand, new driveway that still sweeps up to the house from the village street.

Burials

Christian burials are traditionally aligned with the head to the west and feet to the east with a headstone, if any, at the west end. This is the case for nearly all the burials marked with memorials at

Compton. Many of the graves had footstones as well as headstones but these were laid flat in the mid twentieth century to make mowing the churchyard easier.

We can only estimate the number of people who have been buried here. The Compton burial registers begin in 1639 and, from then until the churchyard was closed in 1896, there were around 1600 bodies interred.



*The headstone for Henry Mills, aged three years, who died in 1723.
This is the oldest memorial in the churchyard.*

There has been a church on the site for at least 1000 years and we can only estimate how many were buried in the six-plus centuries before the start of the record. Working on the assumption that there were four burials per year (which is about half the average annual total during the mid-seventeenth century) there could be a further 2500 or more bodies, making a total of over 4000 buried in this tiny area between 1000 and 1896. And if the site is indeed several hundred years older, the number could be even higher.

With so many burials in such a tiny area, it is scarcely surprising that the south side of the churchyard is so high.

Memorials

There are currently around 90 memorials in the graveyard and, even though some of them remember more than one person, this represents a tiny fraction of the estimated 4000+ Compton burials.

For most of the history of churchyards, there were no memorials to the dead. They started to be used during the second half of the seventeenth century and became increasingly common through the eighteenth.

The oldest stone in Compton churchyard remembers little Henry Mills who died in 1723 aged three years (no. 60 on the churchyard plan). Ironically, this is one of the better-preserved memorials as the lettering is deeply cut and has survived the years well. When the sunlight slants across it in the morning, it is far easier to read, despite the lichen, than are the more delicately carved inscriptions of later decades. As well as recording the plain facts of Henry's parentage, age and death, it has an inscription that shows that people at that time regarded infant mortality as a sad fact of life. They accepted, in their grief, that it was God's will:

*Farewell dear child since God will have it so
Tis sin to murmur at his will we know.
Grieve not for me for why my race is run
It is the Lord and let his will be done.*

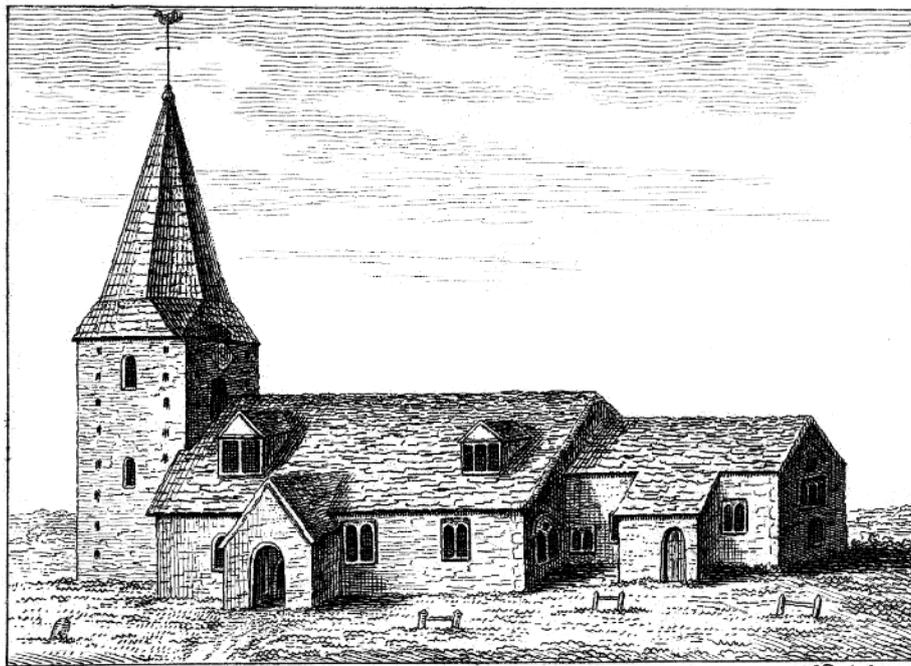
As memorials became more popular, families used them to bag their space: once a headstone and footstone were there to define a grave, it was difficult for others to get their foot in the door. People began to view certain areas of the churchyard as their territory and it is common to find numerous memorials to one family grouped together. In Compton churchyard one can find members of the Hooker, Mills, Keen and Charrott families clustered together in what they saw as their sections of the yard.

Memorials give us an indication of the status of the people they commemorate. The great and the good of local society were buried inside the church and that is where the grandest memorials are usually found. The eighteenth century Fulham family memorial, which is now in the church porch, is the largest of these and it remembers the various members of the family and their positions within the Church of England. They were men who held lucrative appointments and at least one of them probably had some

influence on the national stage. John Fulham (1697-1777), the father of Edward, was Chaplain to the House of Commons and doubtless had the ear of Speaker Onslow, who lived not far away at West Clandon, and other well-connected and powerful people.

Down the social scale, well-to-do Georgian tenant farmers had their burials and memorials outside in the churchyard. Three members of the Charrott family, who farmed on the Loseley estate, lie side by side next to the south wall of the church beneath large, nicely carved headstones with footstones marking the extent of their plots. The Keens, another prominent local farming family, have similarly good quality headstones just to the north of the tower wall.

The Smallpeice family, who lived at Field Place during the early nineteenth century, are commemorated by a very large chest tomb that advertises their wealth and position within village and wider society. By that time, burials in churches were far less common and, despite the negative connotations associated with the north side of the church, their tomb is to be found there; perhaps they preferred not to be bundled in with the mass of departed humanity on the south side. In earlier centuries, when burials took place more frequently within the church, people of their standing would



Compton.

This eighteenth century view of the church by John Hill shows a number of wooden bedhead memorials in the graveyard.

have been buried there and be commemorated with a ledger stone in the floor or with a grand wall memorial.

In death, as in life, poorer folk fared less well. They sometimes had wooden bedhead grave makers that ran the length of the grave, as shown on John Hill's eighteenth century etching of the church, but these rotted away in a generation or two and none now survives at Compton. The vast majority of people, however, were given no memorial, simply because their family were unable to afford one.

Most Surrey memorials are not made of local stone and many appear to be some kind of limestone imported from elsewhere in the country. There is no stone nearby capable of being carved into a durable monument: bargate stone is too rough and chalk, even the harder clunch variety that has been used within the structure of the church, is too soft for an inscription to survive outside in the weather. Despite their choice of a more durable stone, however, the years have not been kind to many of these memorials, particularly the flat ledgers, and reading the inscriptions is something of a challenge.

A big change to the style of memorials occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century when machine-cut stones with inset lead lettering began to replace the hand-carved headstone produced by skilled craftsmen. Typically, these were crosses on top of two or three plinths and there are examples of these at Compton, although some of the crosses have been removed for safety reasons. Even the better-off members of the community opted for the new over the old and the family of the rector, George More Molyneux, are commemorated with these mass-produced memorials, as are John and Eliza King of Field Place.

The churchyard was closed for burials in 1896 when the Watts Cemetery was opened in Down Lane and, apart from a few interred there in reserved plots over the next few years, that was the end of at least 900 years of burials.

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Extract of the Compton tithe map and John Hassell's painting of Eastbury house are reproduced by permission of the Surrey History Centre.

¹ E W Brayley, History of Surrey, vol 4, 1850.