

## St Andrews Churchyard

On the east side of the A1(M) motorway, next to the gates of St Andrews cemetery, an old churchyard littered with ageing headstones can be seen through the hedgerow.

These are the remains of St Andrews churchyard - and I emphasize the word *churchyard* rather than cemetery, as this was once the site of St Andrews church.

Sawtry was initially divided into three parishes; St Andrews, St Judith's and All Saints - and each parish had its own church, thus at one time Sawtry had three separate churches.

St Andrews stood here, Sawtry Judith was served by the church of St Mary's (which was part of Sawtry Abbey) and All Saints church remains to this day, albeit not in its original form.

St Andrews church was constructed from rubble with rendered walls. The basic layout consisted of a tower, a nave and a chancel. There was a porch entrance on the south wall and unusually, the church also had dormer windows. Only one photograph of the church is known to exist, but there is also a sketch depicting the church which was drawn around 1780.

The parish of Sawtry St Andrews was amalgamated with the parish of Sawtry All Saints in 1873 and in 1878 a report into the condition of the two churches was commissioned by the Bishop of Ely. It emerged that both churches required extensive work and repairs, so the decision was made to demolish both of the existing churches and replace them with one new church. Thus in 1880, the all Saints church we know today was completed.

To reduce the cost of this exercise, it was decided that materials from both former churches would be reused in the construction of the new church. Today we call this recycling! Subsequently, there are parts from the old St Andrews church which can still be seen to this day at All Saints church if you know where to look.

Although the church itself was demolished in 1879 - and in spite of the merger with All Saints - St Andrews churchyard remained in use and burials were still taking place into the 1940's.

Today, now closed for burials, over 100 headstones remain within the old churchyard dating back to the early 1700's.

There are some impressive examples of stonemasonry still to be seen within the churchyard, with numerous headstones bearing interesting and elaborate designs.

In fact, some of these headstones are now protected monuments and are categorised as listed buildings.

Likewise many of the headstones bear detailed inscriptions, often personal, giving a glimpse into the lives - and deaths - of the people who lived locally centuries ago.

Inscriptions tell of the man and his three children who all died within days of each other from Smallpox, the woman who lost her eyesight and remained blind for the final 25 years of her life, the man who held the position of Parish Clerk for 58 years and the couple who tragically lost ten children.

The most infamous inscription of all details a gentleman from Leicestershire who lost his life in a duel in 1756. Written in old English, the slate headstone, although damaged is remarkably well preserved. The duel is believed to have taken place at nearby Tort Hill.

As burials moved to All Saints churchyard, the decades that followed saw St Andrews largely abandoned and forgotten - particularly once it became separated from the village with the arrival of the A1. It wasn't until the early 1980's that the overgrown churchyard was cleared by a group of volunteers. After the construction of the Sawtry flyover (actually, officially named "St Andrews Bridge") and the subsequent restructuring of the local road system in 1986, the site finally became reconnected with the village. Further road changes followed when the A1 was upgraded to a motorway during the 1990's resulting in the once relatively tranquil setting now facing a constant flow of passing traffic.

Things came full circle when it was announced that a new cemetery was to be opened alongside the old churchyard. In 2002 the Bishop of Ely consecrated the new cemetery and today, St Andrews is once again the final resting place of many local residents.

Kevin Ruff - January 2021