

## Who lived in my village?

### A Research Project into the graveyard of St Peter's Church, Little Barrington By Henry Ingram

I live in a village called Little Barrington, which is in Gloucestershire, three miles west of Burford. Our house was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and I have been wondering who else lived in the house in the past.



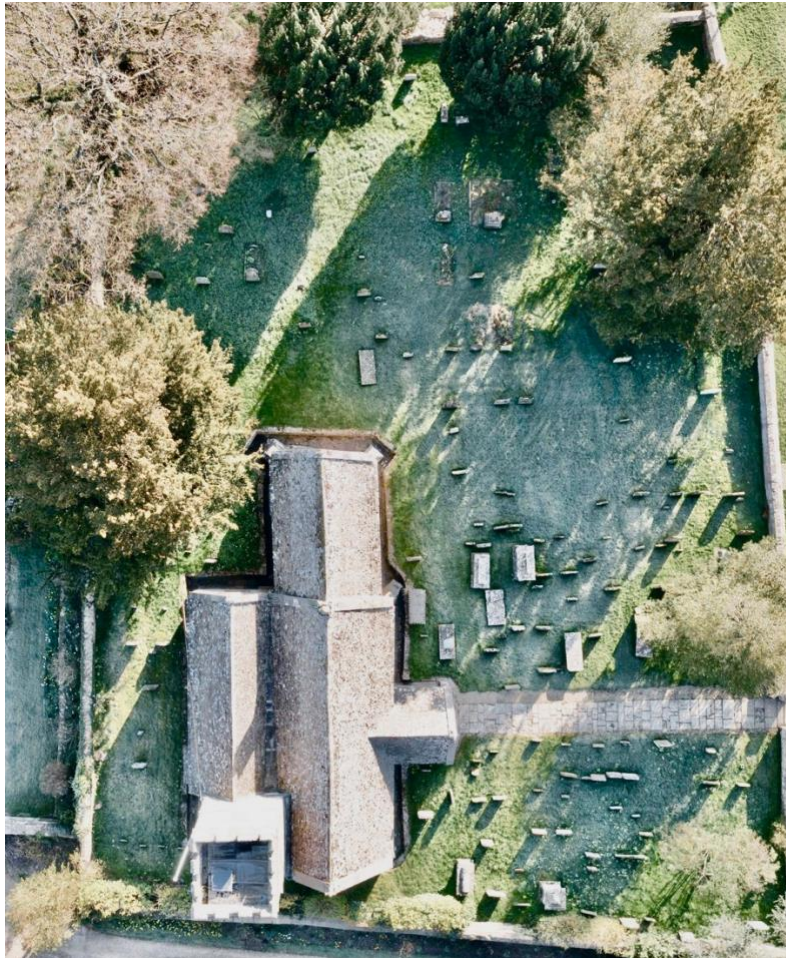
The church in the village is dedicated to St Peter. The church doorway is from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the rest of the building is from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The church used to have a book which had a record of everyone in the village who had been baptized, married or buried in the church yard. The book was hand written and lasted for many centuries: the earliest records start in 1538 and the last ones recorded were in 1913. It was in two parts, from 1538 until 1813, then from 1813 until 1913. I don't know whether it stopped in 1913 because the First World War started in 1914? Or because the book had covered one century.

All English parish churches have kept record books like this since 1538. They were introduced on 5<sup>th</sup> Sept 1538 by Thomas Cromwell, the advisor to King Henry VIII after he took a trip around Europe and realised that other countries did this. This was one of the things Cromwell did when he helped Henry VIII to establish the Church of England after the King broke away from the Catholic Church.

The decision to make parishes to keep these registers was not popular as people thought that it would create a new way for the King to tax his people, however no taxes were linked to these records.

Unfortunately both parts of the Little Barrington book were stolen about ten years ago. The thieves also took a valuable chalice. The church is always open but now they lock everything away.

A photo of the church from above, taken by a drone, shows the seven chest tombs that are close to the church entrance. The upright gravestones can also be seen.



We can see the visible gravestones but there are layers and layers of graves underneath. Even some of the decaying gravestones we can see are extremely difficult to read. Then we had a stroke of luck. One of our neighbours was on the website [Ancestry.co.uk](http://Ancestry.co.uk), which is used to research your family history, and she discovered that the Little Barrington church records were all on this website, as hundreds of pages of photographs.

At first, I had a theory that the thief sold the book to [Ancestry.co.uk](http://Ancestry.co.uk), however there is no evidence and my research has changed my mind.

What changed my mind was the first tomb inscription I looked up on the Ancestry website. This had the word 'transcript' at the top of the page. It made me think that this is a copy of the book that lived in the church, so I looked up Gloucestershire church transcripts. I found a page called Bishop's Transcripts, which says, "The Bishop's Transcripts are copies of the

entries in a parish register and were made by the churchwarden or minister.” They were sent to the bishop every year.

The Bishop’s Transcripts only go back to the time of Elizabeth I, when there was a new law passed in 1597. Church wardens had to make a copy of all the entries of the past year and send those to the bishops within a month of Easter.

This new law was to stop fraud. Sometimes before this people had tampered with the records, for example:

- changing the date of a child’s baptism to after the parents’ marriage date to legitimise it,
- destroying a baptism record so that they could inherit rather than an older brother etc.

It says there are some gaps, that the records are incomplete during the Civil War and that no transcripts at all were kept between 1649 and 1660 during the Commonwealth, when England was a republic. Luckily none of the gravestones I chose are that old. But it also says that the transcripts don’t include everything from the original book and often leave out ‘occupations, ages and places of abode’. So I don’t think I am going to find out who lived in our house.

I decided to choose four gravestones and see if I could connect these to the records of births, marriages and burials on the internet. I wanted to find legible stones, but I found that any from before the 19th century were quite difficult to read. This is because they are sometimes covered in moss, ivy, lichen and sometimes bird poo. You are not allowed to interfere with the stones in any way, so you can’t scratch off the dirt. Snow, ice and rainstorms also wear away the lettering. If the stone gets very wet and then there is a frost, the frost can shatter the stone.

The first gravestone I chose is one of the seven chest tombs which are close to the church entrance. These have recently been restored and the work was finished in August. They were originally expensive to make, with detailed carvings, and were made for some of the richer people in the village.

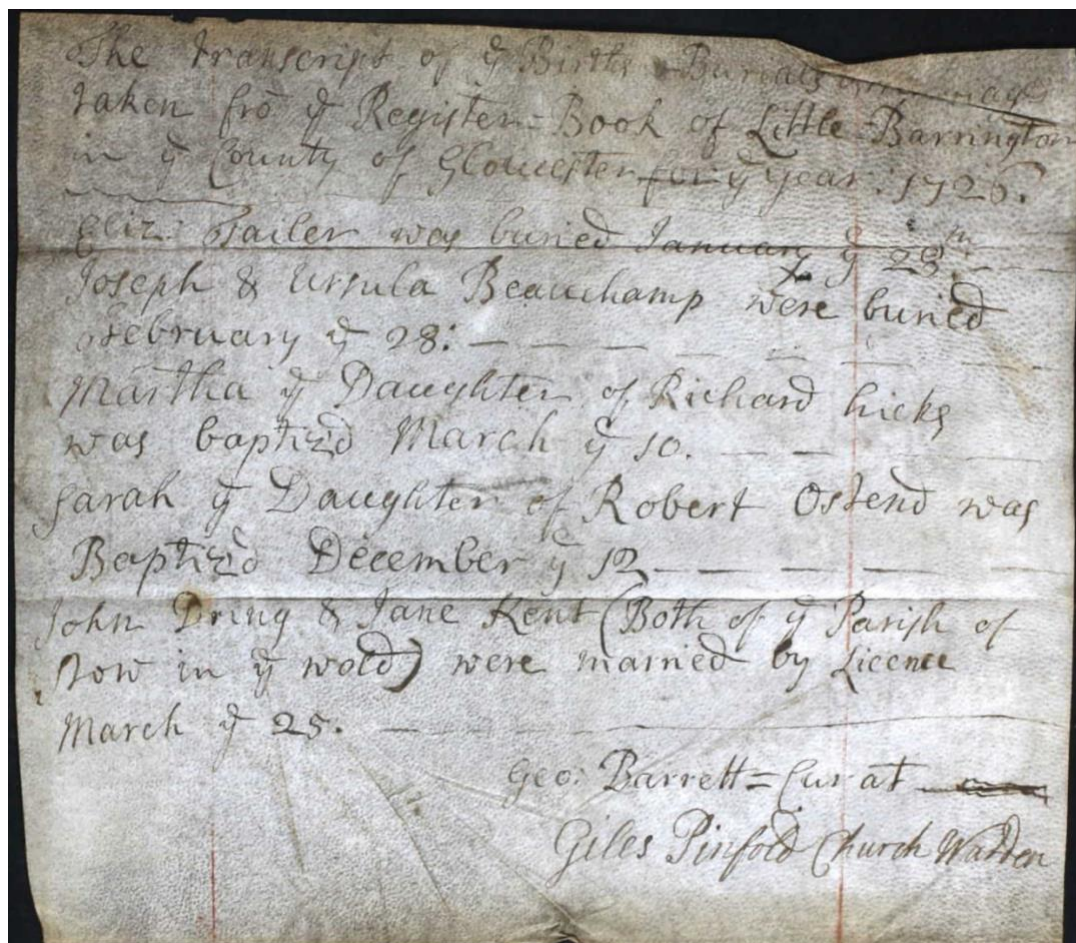


This tomb is made of local limestone. There is a carved lid to this tomb and on the side is an angel's head with wings. The carved lettering says:

JOSEPH BEAUCHAMP and URSULY his Wife. They were buried Feb. 28, 1726. He aged 71; and she 73 Years.

The conservator who worked to restore this tomb did some research into Joseph Beauchamp and his family. Joseph and Ursuly's son Edward was a stone mason, and the conservator thinks that Edward probably made this tomb.

In the Ancestry record for 1726, the handwritten record says "Joseph & Ursula Beauchamp were buried February 28".



It is on a short page that includes some baptisms and a marriage. At the top it says, "The transcript of Births, Burials and Marriages taken from the Register Book of Little Barrington in the county of Gloucestershire year 1726". The list is signed at the bottom by Geo Barrett (short for George) the Curate and Giles Pinfold the Church Warden.

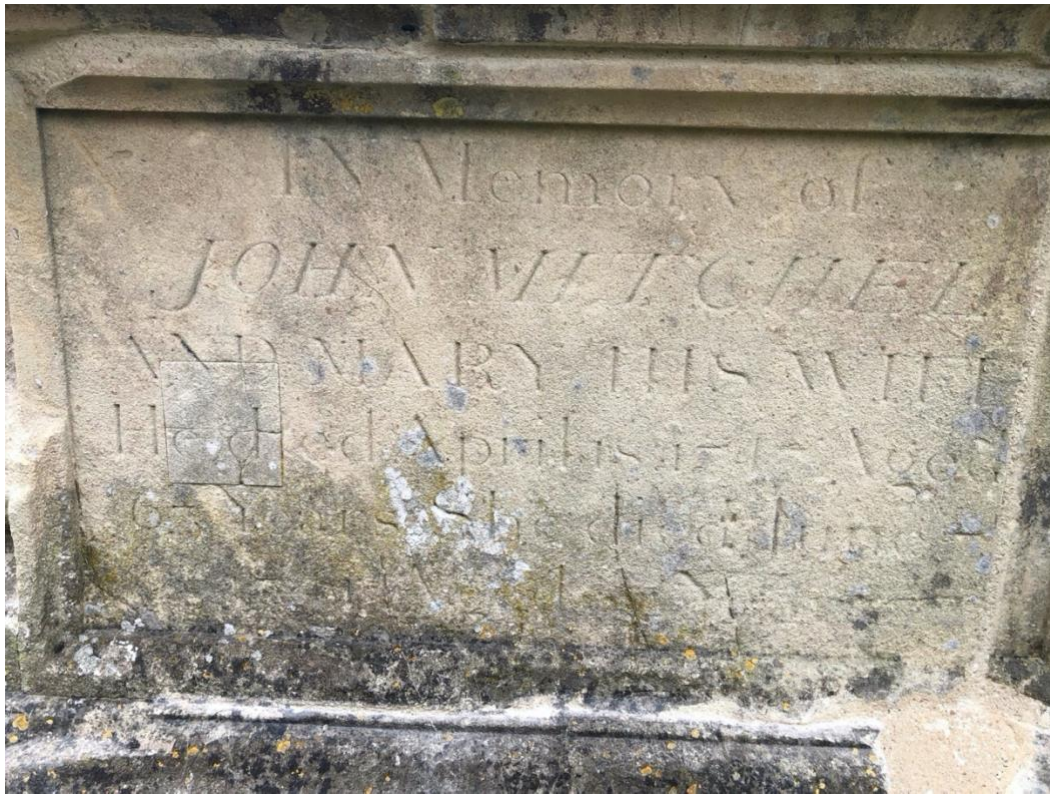
On the tomb the woman's name is spelt Ursuly, but in the handwritten record it says Ursula. Maybe the stone carver made a mistake but couldn't afford to get a new stone and start again. Or maybe the curate made a mistake copying the original record. Or perhaps Ursuly was a nickname.

We know that churchwardens would make a note of the baptism, marriage or burial on a scrap of paper or in a separate 'day' book, and then sometimes forget to record it in the register or make a mistake in copying the details.

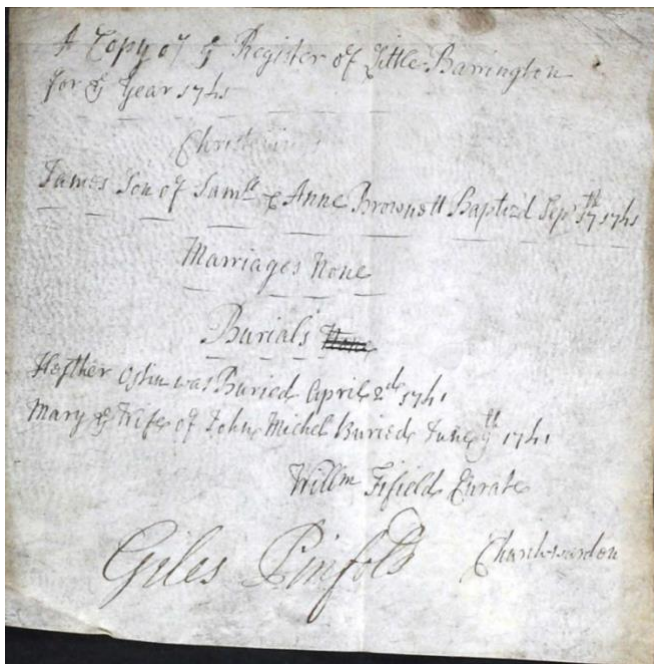
In chronological order, the next tomb I looked at is a smart-looking tomb. On the side is carved:

JOHN MITCHELL and MARY his Wife. She died June 7, 1741, aged 52. He died April 18, 1747, aged 63.

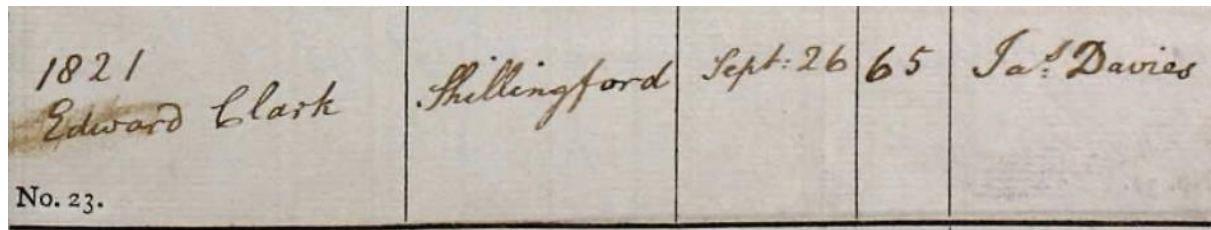
Here lieth the Body of JOHN AND THOMAS MITCHEL who both died in a good old Age. Also here lieth MARY and JOHN the Children of JOHN and Mary MITCHEL, who died in their Infancy



I can't work out if John Mitchel is the same person as John Mitchell. Maybe John and Thomas were brothers, sons of John and Mary. I found the Ancestry page for Mary being buried in 1741 although her surname is spelt Michel. But John Mitchell is not on the list for 1747.



What makes the detective work difficult is sometimes you think you have read a date correctly on the side of a gravestone but the record book says something different. On one tomb, for Edward and Elizabeth Clark, I thought it said Edward Clark died in 1827, aged 69 years. But the Ancestry page says that a man called Edward Clark died in 1821 aged 65. However when he died he was living in Shillingford, which is south of Oxford. I think this could be the same person. But I can't prove it. Edward and Elizabeth Clark's tomb is a different shape to the others, it is basically square but it is taller than it is wide. This kind is sometimes called a "tea caddy".



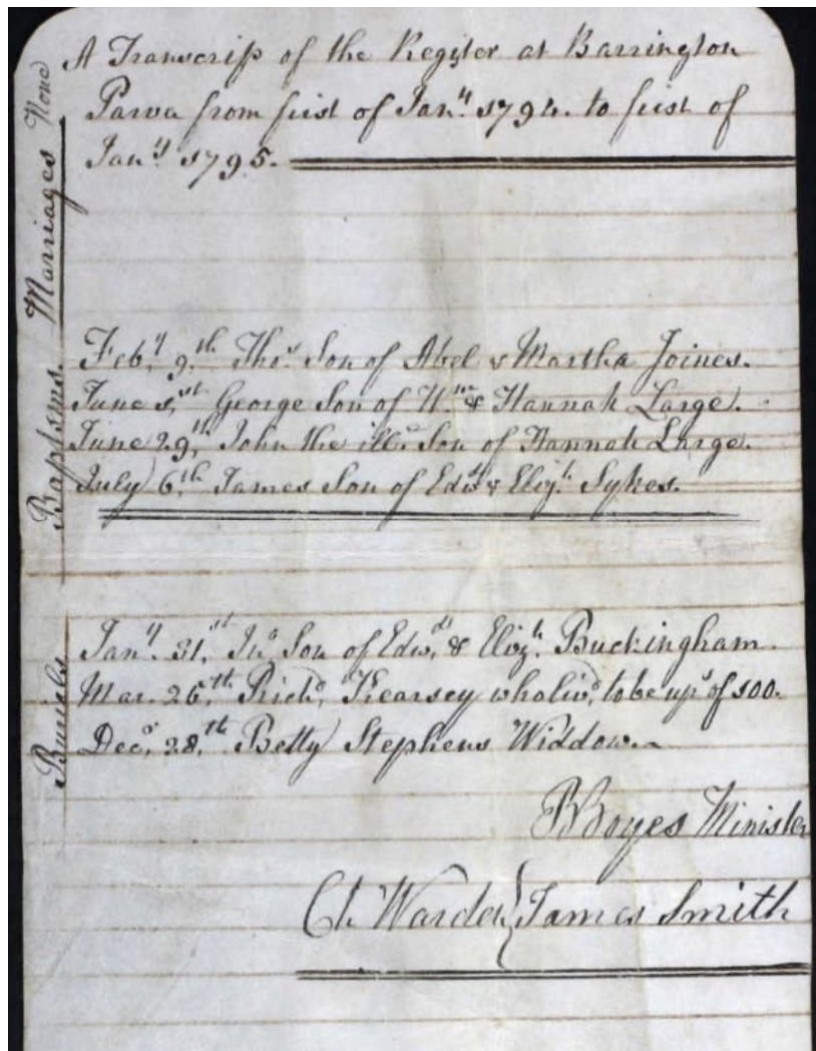
The final gravestone I chose was not a chest tomb but I liked it because the carving was done in a circular shape, with complicated carving around it. I thought maybe it was a wealthy villager who had commissioned this.



Unfortunately all I could read on the gravestone was the name, Richard Kersey. So I had to guess what date to start looking in the record book, I started looking in the 1813 to 1913 book, but he wasn't there, so I went back to the earlier book and went backwards from 1813.

Going through the pages, lots of names come up over and over again. Families didn't move around so much then and you can see generations of the same families appearing in the records. The name Kersey appears a lot, also names like Strafford, Pinfold and Stephens.





I found Richard Kersey in 1795, luckily one of the neatest pages in the book. It says that Richard Kersey died on 26<sup>th</sup> March and 'Lived to be up of 100'. So I think this is why his gravestone is beautiful and expensive looking, because maybe he was the oldest person ever to be buried in the churchyard.

I had really hoped to find out the jobs that people did in my village and what house they lived in. Unfortunately I couldn't find it using the church records but the Census might have this information. However I still enjoyed the detective work and I feel like I have made a connection with some of the people who lived in Little Barrington in the past.