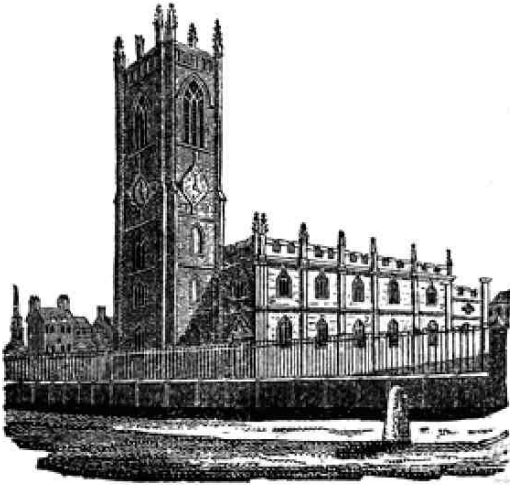


St. John, Deansgate



St. John, Deansgate

The church of St. John was founded by Edward Byrom as a memorial to his father John. Edward obtained an Act of Parliament in 1768 to build a new church on land between Higher and Lower Byrom Streets off Quay Street to *'provide for the spiritual wants of the genteel residents who had migrated to the south sides of the town'*. The foundation stone was laid on 28 April that same year by the Bishop of Chester and the finished church was consecrated on 7 June 1769.¹⁰ In 1815 St. John's was described glowingly:

*'This church is very well attended and its congregation is comprised of persons of the first respectability in the town and neighbourhood.'*¹¹

Joseph Aston wrote in 1816 that :

'The church yard is very extensive and offering a strong lesson in mortality by being entirely covered in grave-stones, in so short a period as hath elapsed since it was opened for the reception of the first corpse'.

There were also several burial vaults beneath the church. These were owned by the Peel, Bazley and Byrom families amongst others.

St. John's was described as *'...the principal burying place of Manchester'* around the end of the eighteenth century. We may take it that the word *'principal'* relates more to its appeal to the middle classes than to the number of burials, which, although numerous, barely exceeded in any year one third the number at the Collegiate Church.

A PETERLOO VETERAN

The burials in St. John's churchyard include many locally notable names. Thomas Ashworth, who was buried on 20 August 1819, was sabred and trampled to death during the Peterloo massacre. He was the proprietor of the Bull's Head tavern on Market Street. Thirty-five year old Ashworth was serving as a special constable on the day and so was, nominally at least, on the same side of the law as the yeomanry who carried out the massacre.

THE FOUNDER OF OWENS COLLEGE

John Owens (not to be confused with the antiquary John Owen), a successful cotton merchant but also a modest and retiring man, died on 29 July 1846 and was buried at St. John's three days later. Owens, a bachelor, left £96,654 in his will for the founding of a college which would not place any religious requirement upon the admission of students (universities at this time required their students to adhere to the Anglican faith). Owens' College opened in 1851 and in 1880 received a royal charter to become Victoria University of Manchester. It merged with the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) in 2004 and the whole is now known simply as the University of Manchester.

THE MANCHESTER OPHELIA

Twenty year old Lavinia, the daughter of a wire-worker, William Robinson was engaged to a surgeon named Holroyd (or Oldroyd), a man-midwife at the Lying-in Hospital. On the night of 16 December 1813 Lavinia disappeared following a rumoured 'lover's tiff' with her fiancé. Despite extensive searches no trace of her could be found. A month later, she was still missing and rewards to the value of £100 were offered for information concerning her whereabouts but none was forthcoming.

The winter of 1813 was particularly severe. The River Irwell had frozen over and remained frozen until on 7 February the next year Lavinia's body was found by a Mr. Goodier of Eccles, who owned a mill near Mode Wheel. The frozen river had thawed and had revealed Lavinia's body, which had been perfectly preserved in the ice.

Because of the nature of her reappearance, Lavinia soon acquired the soubriquet '*The Manchester Ophelia*'. She was buried in her family's grave at St. John's on 8 February 1814. Hundreds of people attended the funeral.¹²

Some of the witnesses at the subsequent inquest said that they had seen a couple, believed to be Holroyd and Lavinia, arguing violently. Some claimed to have seen the man strike the woman but there was insufficient evidence for the coroner to record anything other than an open verdict. While there were suspicions of foul play, there is a more plausible argument that Lavinia took her own life.

The family's advertisements offering the reward mention the discovery of a note in her handwriting '*...from which*' says the advertisement '*there is reason to fear she is not living*'. The note strongly suggests that Lavinia committed suicide. It read: '*With my dying breath I attest myself innocent of the crime laid to my charge! Adieu! God bless you all! I cannot outlive his suspicion!*'

There have been a number of interpretations of the 'crime' to which she refers but these

generally centre on rumours that she had been unfaithful to Holroyd. A somewhat dramatised account, which appears in '*The Dark River*' by Cyril Bracegirdle, suggests that she had been accused by Holroyd of a continued association with a former boyfriend.

Although no charges were laid against Holroyd, there were many who thought him guilty either of her murder or of making unfounded allegations concerning her chastity, which had driven her to take her own life. Holroyd's house in Bridge Street was attacked by mobs on a number of occasions until the continuing demonstrations finally forced him to leave town. One newspaper account suggested that he had committed suicide at Wolverhampton some months later,¹³ but there were also reports that he had subsequently established a practice as a surgeon in his native village of Middlestown near Wakefield in Yorkshire.¹⁴

THE WILY FRENCHMAN

One final burial which is deserving of mention is that of sixty-seven year old Thomas Raspo of Withington, who was, buried at St. John's on 23 January 1824. Raspo (possibly an anglicisation of Raspeau) was a Frenchman of whom it was said, '*... [he] was clever enough to keep a wife and a concubine in the same house*'.¹⁵ Unfortunately, I have been unable to discover any further details of his unusual domestic arrangements. His (presumably long-suffering) wife, Alice, joined him in his grave three years later. Raspo had clearly lived in Manchester for some time since his name appears as a Juror in the Court Leet records for 1798.

FAILING FORTUNES

The fortunes of the area surrounding St. John's declined. The 'genteel' population gradually moved away to be replaced by one of a more working class character.

In 1827 a correspondent, who used the pen name '*Orthodox*', wrote to the Manchester



The St. John's Memorial Cross

Courier to express concern about the state of the churchyard, which he said was *'desecrated by the rude and wanton sports of heedless children' and 'in the dark shadows of the night ... [was] the resort of vagabonds and idle dissolute persons'*.

Eventually, even the working class drifted away. The area became increasingly dominated by commercial premises and the church was left with a much reduced congregation.

AFTER THE BURIAL ACTS

St. John's was one of the few city burial grounds which were not closed under the Burial Acts in 1854. Restrictions were imposed on future interments but in the case of St. John's these were not particularly severe. Bodies could still be buried in existing family graves and it was permitted to open new graves, provided no more than a single body was buried in in each.

Since the orders issued under the Burial Acts had required most of the city burial grounds to discontinue burials completely, St. John's experienced an upsurge in popularity as a burial place. The number of burials doubled from just over one hundred in 1856 to over two hundred in 1857. Numbers exceeded three hundred in each of the next ten years, reaching a peak of five hundred in 1865. Following the opening of Philips Park municipal cemetery in 1867, numbers began to decline once again and after Southern Cemetery opened in 1879 they fell to well under ten a year. The fifty-two people buried in the last two decades were possibly the few surviving grave owners or their relatives. Very few of them had local addresses and some came from as far afield as Wilmslow and Oldham. One gave an address in Gloucestershire and another Boulogne in France.

The last person to be interred at St. John's was sixty-five year old Ellen Holt, who was buried on 10 March 1900. Shortly after Ellen's burial, The Secretary of State issued an Order in Council which prohibited any further burials. St. John's church was by now little used and eventually, in 1928, the church was closed. The building was demolished in 1931 but the graves and vaults were left *in situ*. The site is now a public garden. At the centre of the garden is a memorial stone which commemorates the former church and bears the words *'...around lie the remains of more than 22,000 people.'* This number is somewhat shy of the mark since the burial registers record in excess of 24,000 burials.

It is unclear whether, when the gardens were created, the memorials were simply covered over with soil or whether they were removed entirely. Only the gravestone of John Owens remains visible in one corner of the former graveyard.