

The Vault Under the Porch

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At the start of July 2020 workmen laying a new waste pipe for the kitchen and toilets in St Andrew's church, Shrivenham, stumbled on a step-way down from the churchyard leading to blocked in brick wall just to the North of the church porch. The digging also damaged this wall and it was possible for the first time in over 100 years to enter the family burial vault of the Barringtons. The examination was done with minimal disturbance and nothing was moved.

The full report is with the church and Shrivenham Heritage Centre together with a video and a photographic archive.

The Barringtons

There are some excellent resources about this family on the Shrivenham Heritage Society website (<http://www.shrivenhamheritagesociety.co.uk/>), which I will not try to reproduce.

The Barringtons were lords of the manor of Shrivenham and lived at Beckett Hall, now part of the Defence Academy. John Shute Barrington inherited the estate at the end of the 17th century and also became the first Viscount Barrington. He had a large family including John who was a Major General and captured Guadaloupe during the Annus Mirabilis of 1759; Samuel who became an Admiral, Daines, a prominent lawyer, and Shute who became Bishop of Durham. He was succeeded by his eldest son William Wildman who was at one time Chancellor of the Exchequer and if you have

read Longitude, the book about John Harrison's chronometer, sat on the Board of Longitude. In other words a family at the heart of the 18th century establishment.

When the 2nd viscount, William Wildman, died the viscountcy passed to his nephew who was Major-General John's son William, and then John's next son Richard. Both of these two were deemed bad lots by their uncle and were disinherited from the estate (but not the viscountcy). The next Barrington to hold the estate at Shrivvenham, was Major-General John's youngest son George, a clergyman, who became the 5th Viscount. He died in 1829 in Rome, and was succeeded by his eldest son William Keppel Barrington (6th Viscount) who died in 1867. The next (7th) Viscount was his eldest son another George who died in 1886, followed by his second son Percy (8th Viscount) died 1901. I hope that you are following this! The viscountcy then continued until it died out in 1990.

Burial in the Church

Enter almost any church and you will find a plethora of memorials and floor slabs covering graves. It looks as if burial inside the church has been going on since the start of churches. This is, however, only partly true. Right through the medieval period church burial was reserved for the clergy and the more important laity. Everyone else went outside in the churchyard. It is only after the Reformation in England that the practice of burying inside became more prevalent. Sometimes a straightforward grave-pit was dug within the church. As time went on, these disturbed earlier inhumations. Alternatively, richer families would have excavated a vault capable of holding several members of the family. Many of these are simple pits that could be opened to lower in a new coffin when needed. Others might be quite elaborate, as will be seen was the case here. With increasing prosperity in an area many more families could afford the luxury of a vault, or at least burial inside the church.

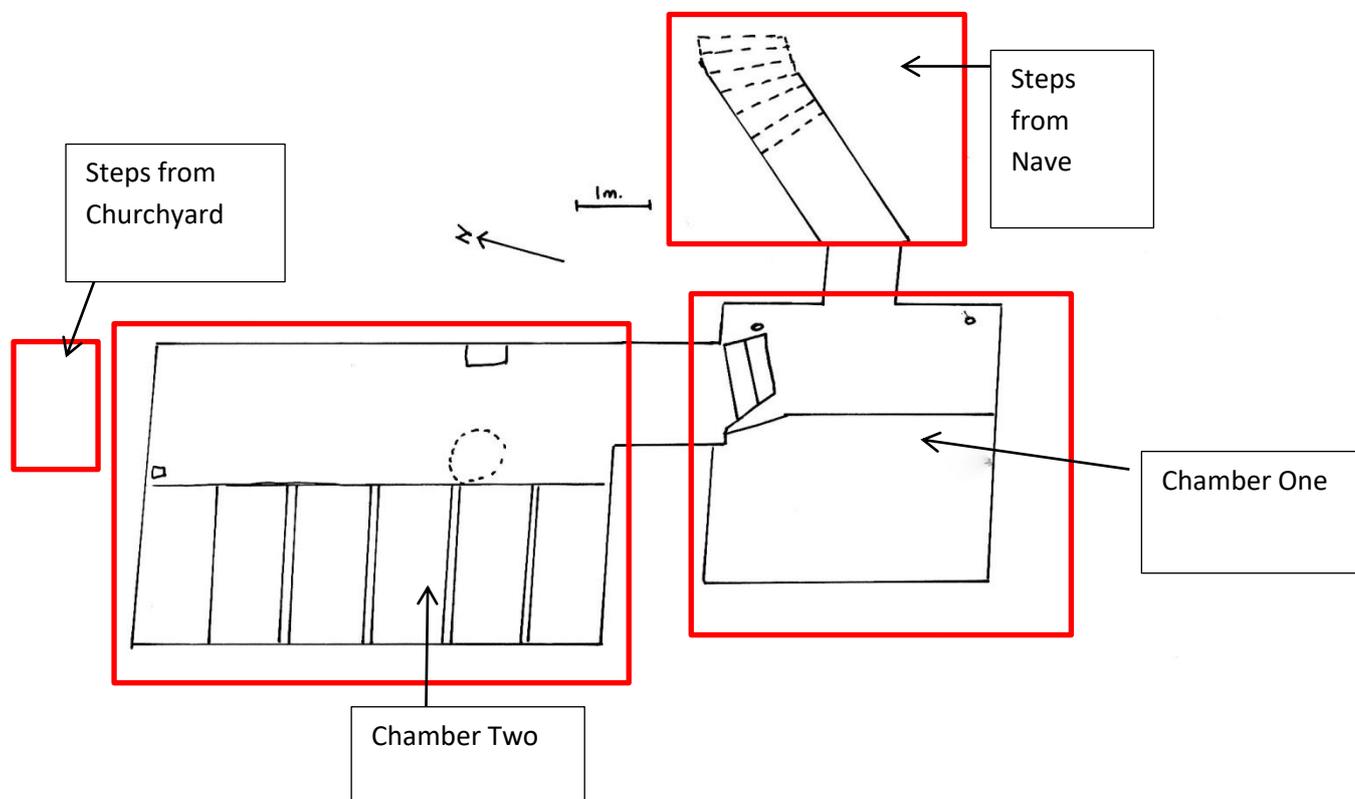
An epitaph from Kingsbridge Devon reads:

Here lie I by the Chancel door,
Here lie I because I'm poor
The further in, the more you'll pay
Here lie I, as warm as they.

By the late Victorian period this had become quite a problem, in London the floor might be forever being disturbed for a new interment. Also where coffins were not properly sealed there could be quite a stench in the church! The result was that burial in church was generally forbidden in the late 19thC by Act of Parliament.

A little aside, as you will notice the term "vault" is used throughout rather than "crypt" which is what this is often described as. This is purely a matter of semantics, and the two terms are interchangeable. However "crypts" were often part of ancient churches and while they may have been used for burial also came to be used for other church purposes. Burial vaults as discussed are the features that came into frequent use after the Reformation.

The Burial Vault under the Porch



So back to the burial vault. This consisted of two brick built vaulted chambers.

The first chamber appears to lie directly under the porch, which was confirmed by measurement. (see plan below). This was accessed via six steps down from inside the church and a short corridor.



The steps up to the Nave with the corridor blocked by coffin one (Francis Lyon Barrington)

The church access is now closed by what appears to be a stone slab or slabs. It was impossible to get to the steps from within the vault because a coffin had been placed in the corridor. This is coffin one and we will return to it shortly. It is possible to deduce that the entrance in the Nave is to the left (North) of the West door, opposite the font, and in the vicinity of the shelf where the hymn books are stored. At present this area is obstructed by the shelving and carpeting so it is not possible to see where the entrance is exactly.

At the archway into chamber one there were iron U bolts fixed into either side. These look as if they were for a grill or gate into the vault proper. This seems to live on in the rumour that there was a gate with a padlock but the key is missing (observation in NADFAS report).

How the Nave entrance looks when it was in use is unknown. Perhaps the steps remained open and the vault was closed off with the grill or gate. This would have implied some structure in the Nave to stop people falling down. Alternatively it was always covered perhaps with wooden shutters, or perhaps with stone slabs that would have had to be lifted when a new burial occurred. We do know that a balcony was removed from the West end of the Nave in the late Victorian period so this may have provided a protection for the vault entrance.

The corridor archway opens into chamber one which lies under the porch. Chamber one itself is built of brick with a vaulted ceiling. Two vents could be seen arcing up and out at the East end. There are also three probable vents on the West wall. While these were not investigated they appear to correspond to vents on base of the porch outside.



Chamber one – facing the West wall and platform for the coffins (back to the corridor from the Nave steps (coffins 2-5 visible left to right). See the mud streaks from the vent openings on the back (West) wall.



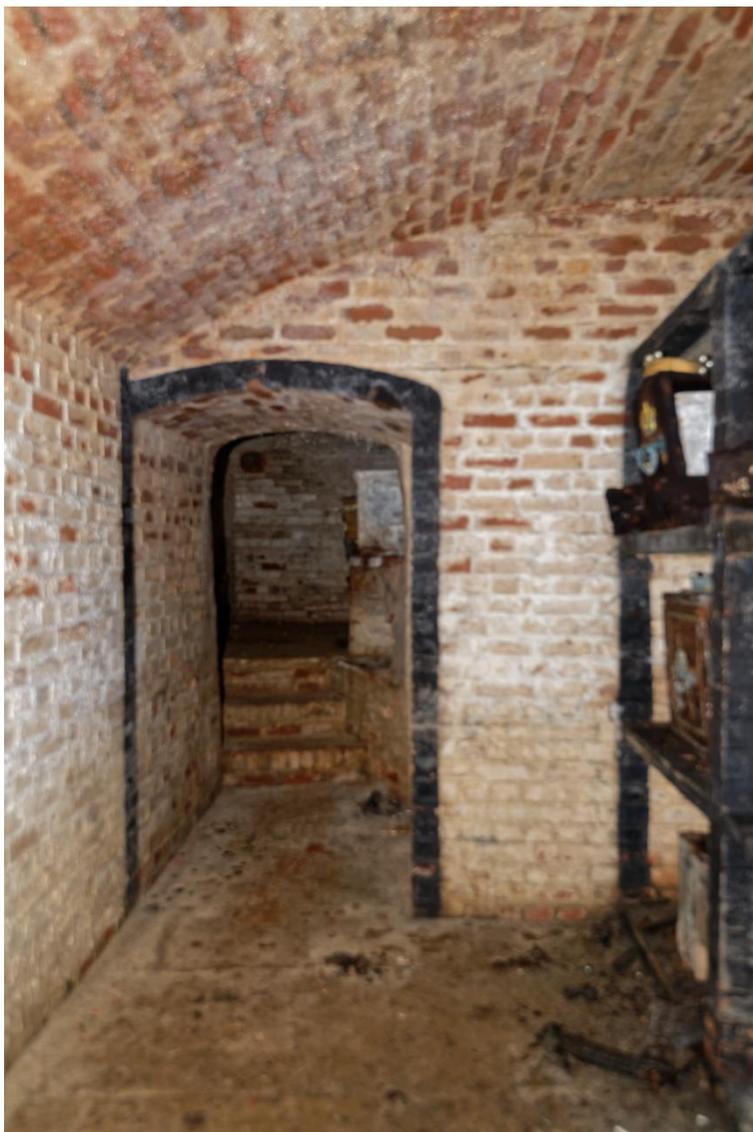
Chamber one from the archway in to chamber two. On left coffin 1 lying in the corridor from the Nave. On the right the platform on its arches with coffin 5 (nearest) and coffin 4 (furthest) visible. Ahead is the vent in the ceiling. This is the one that comes out just to the right of the main porch door.

The West side of chamber one is taken up with a low platform on three brick arches. On the platform are five coffins (coffins 2-6) and underneath in two of the arches are two more (coffins 7 and 8). Again we will come to these in a moment.

At some point the North wall of chamber one was breached, steps were inserted and chamber two was built. This new part of the vault was built outside the North wall of the porch, essentially under where the railing is now. Rather than burrowing down this is most likely to have been dug as a deep hole in the ground, the vault created and then covered over.



From chamber one looking through the arch to chamber two. Coffin 5 is on the left, ahead in the roof of chamber one is the vent that probably appears in the wall to the left of the closed off door on the North side of the porch. The steps lead down from chamber one through the arch into chamber two where faintly on the left can vbe seen the bank of coffin niches with their black surrounds.



From within chamber two looking back to chamber one. Notice the black door surround and the black edges for the coffin niches (on the right) The coffins in the niches that can be seen in chamber two are 9 at the top, 10 middle and 11 bottom.



Chamber two looking North. The bank of niches on the left this time with the breach in the North wall and the churchyard steps with the modern stepladder beyond.

This second chamber was also brick built and organised with three rows of shelving along the West wall, divided into six columns, giving 18 potential individual coffin places. Only four of these had been used (coffins 9-12).

In chamber two the doorway from the first chamber was rimmed in black, each of the coffin niches was rimmed in black and a black line was painted on the side of the stairway from the churchyard. This certainly gives chamber two a "Victorian" feel and there is a small stone slab in the floor dated 1841.



The remains of a stump of candle was seen in one of the chamber two coffin niches and in chamber one a nail had been driven into the wall, possibly to hang a light.

The existence of the vault has almost passed into local folklore, with no-one really sure that it existed. One persistent part of that folklore was that it flooded. This is undoubtedly the case. Mud could be seen streaking down the West wall of chamber one from the vents (see the photo above), and the coffin at the bottom of the Nave steps had water damage along the bottom. The lowermost chamber two coffin (coffin 11) had water lying in puddles on the top suggesting that the water table rises. In chamber two numerous stalactites were held on the ceiling, from water leaching through from above. Overall things were quite wet even after a long dry few months.

The Coffins

There were twelve coffins altogether, eight in chamber one and four in chamber two. Four had name plaques that were readable. It is possible to make some deductions about the identity of most of the others.

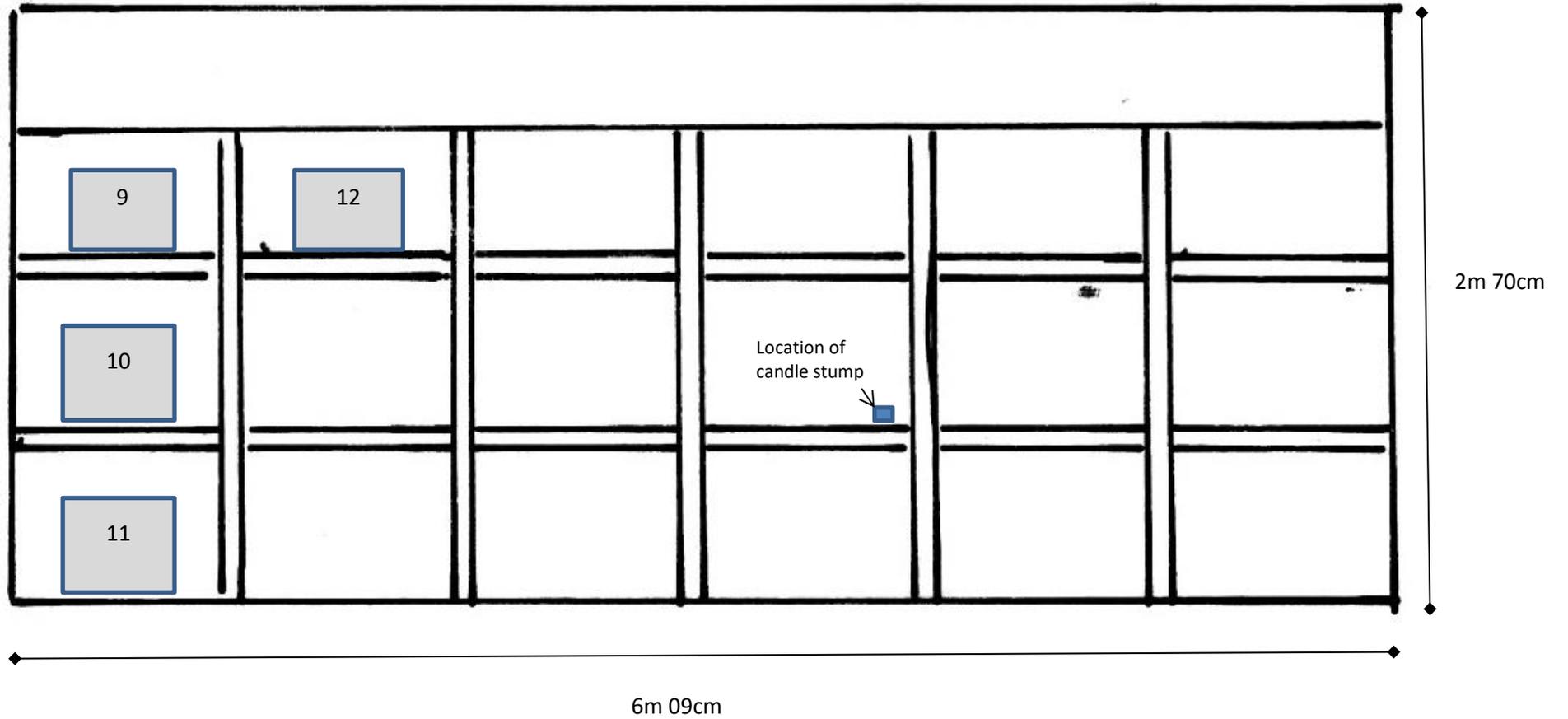
Starting with chamber two, with its Victorian ambiance and four coffins, three of which had viscounts (or viscountesses) coronets.

The memoirs of Augusta MacLagan (nee Barrington), "Aunt Augusta", daughter of the 6th Viscount together with the local newspapers (Faringdon Advertiser and Berkshire Chronicle) mean that we can make a good estimate of these four. "Aunt Augusta" says that the second chamber was built when her grandmother the 5th viscountess came to be buried in 1841. Her description almost certainly identifies this lady with coffin 11, while her parents (the 6th viscount and his wife are just above in coffins 9 and 10 (although we cannot be sure which way round). That leaves coffin 12 which we can deduce is the 7th viscount.

The Berkshire Chronicle (1883) and Faringdon Advertiser (1886) describe in detail the funerals of the 6th Viscountess and the 7th Viscount respectively. In the case of the 7th Viscount it seems that the mourners actually came down into the vault!

According to the newspapers the 6th viscountess (1883) was buried in a heavy oak coffin with gilt coffin furniture covered with red velvet. The 7th viscount also had a heavy oak outer coffin with gilt coffin furniture.

Sketch Section of West Part of Chamber Two Showing Location of Coffins 9-12



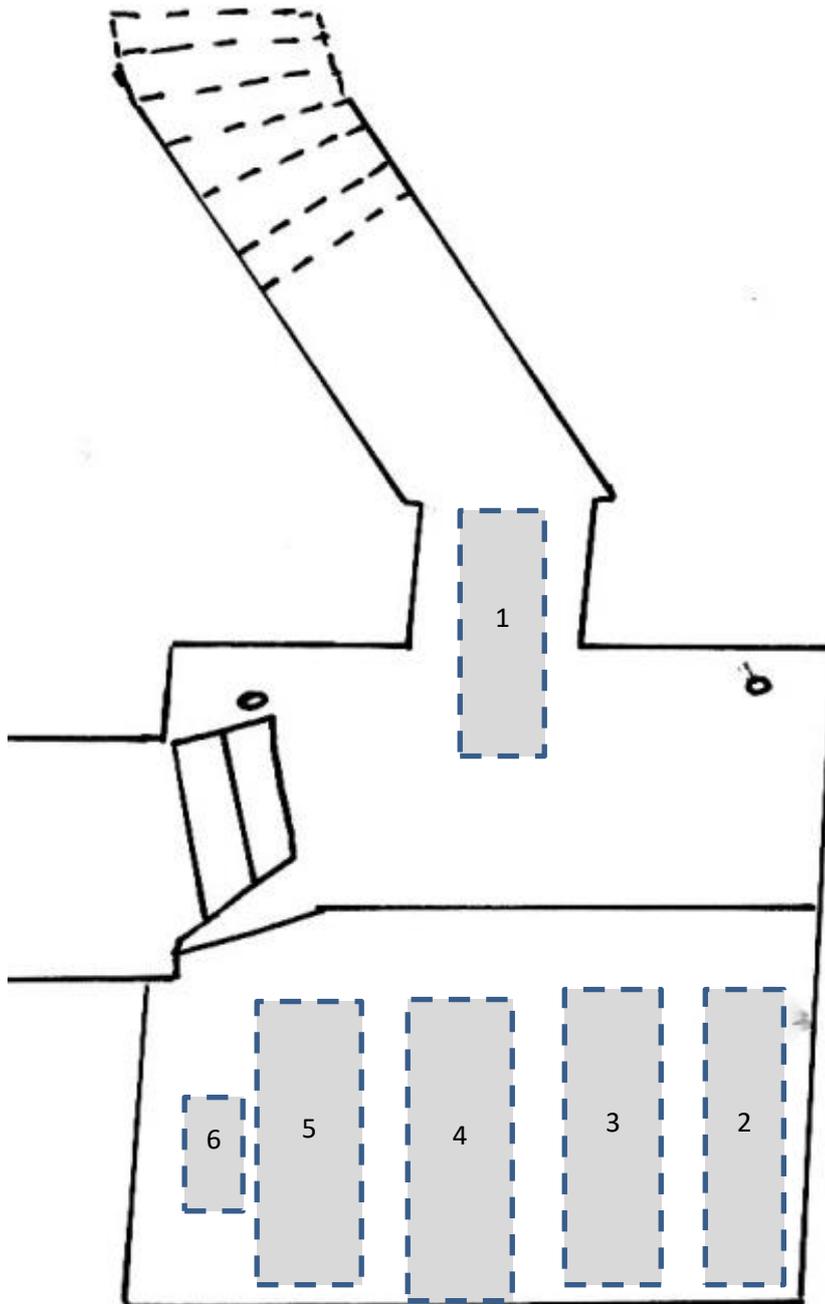
East Facing Sketch Section Through the Mouths of Bank of Coffin Niches, Chamber Two



Chamber two – in the left column coffin 9 at the top, 10 in the middle and 11 at the bottom. Coffin 12 in the top niche of the next column. Note the coronets on three of the coffins

Chamber one requires a little more detective-work.

Plan of Chamber One to Show Location of Coffins 1-6



(Coffin 7 lies under coffin 2, and coffin 8 lies in the arch under coffin 4)

There are the four labelled coffins. Maria Jane Barrington (coffin 4) and Francis Lyon Barrington (coffin 1) were the wife and son respectively of the 5th son of the 5th Viscount.

Admiral Samuel Barrington (coffin 2) has the memorial in the North West corner of the church. He was active in the American Wars of the mid 18thC; so in the era before Nelson. Doubtless life in his Navy was similar to that in Nelson's Navy.

And Hon. William Hill Barrington died aged 4 hours 1743.



Chamber one with coffin 2 (Admiral Samuel Barrington) on the platform on the left and coffin 3 (unknown) beside him. Coffin 3 has incised diamond patterning in the lead and you can see wood has fallen away from these two coffins. Underneath, under the arch is coffin 7 (unknown). The plaque giving the name is on top but unreadable. Interestingly it has been clearly moved and this coffin in clear of wood debris. Although the plaque clearly has the screw holes to attach the it. This suggests that there has been a bit of tidying up at some point down here.



Chamber one platform with coffin 2 (Admiral Samuel) on the extreme left, then coffin 3 (unknown) coffin 4 (Maria Jane Barrington) and finally coffin 5 (unknown). The archway visible is the middle one where coffin 8 is lodged.



Coffin 6 on the extreme right of the platform in chamber one. This is marked Hon. William Hill Barrington age 4 hours. He was the son of the 2nd Viscount William Wildman Barrington



Coffin 7 (unknown) You can just see the diamond decoration of the lead similar to coffin 3. Notice how tidy this coffins surrounds are, and the following one.



Coffin 8 (unknown but maybe Rothesia Ann).

William Hill (died 1743) is not mentioned in the burial register but is present on a memorial in the church. This states that he was a son of the 2nd Viscount (William Wildman), and that he was buried with his sister Rothesia Ann who died in 1745 aged 4 years and his mother Mary the second Viscountess. Thus two more residents of chamber one can be identified. It is impossible to tell which coffins they are. Tentatively, given the size of the coffin one could suggest that coffin 8 could be Rothesia. It is tempting to see the coffin next to baby William (coffin 5) as that of his mother; but this is complete conjecture. Interestingly most reports state that the 2nd Viscount died without issue but it is important to remember that does not mean that there were no children, just that they did not survive him.

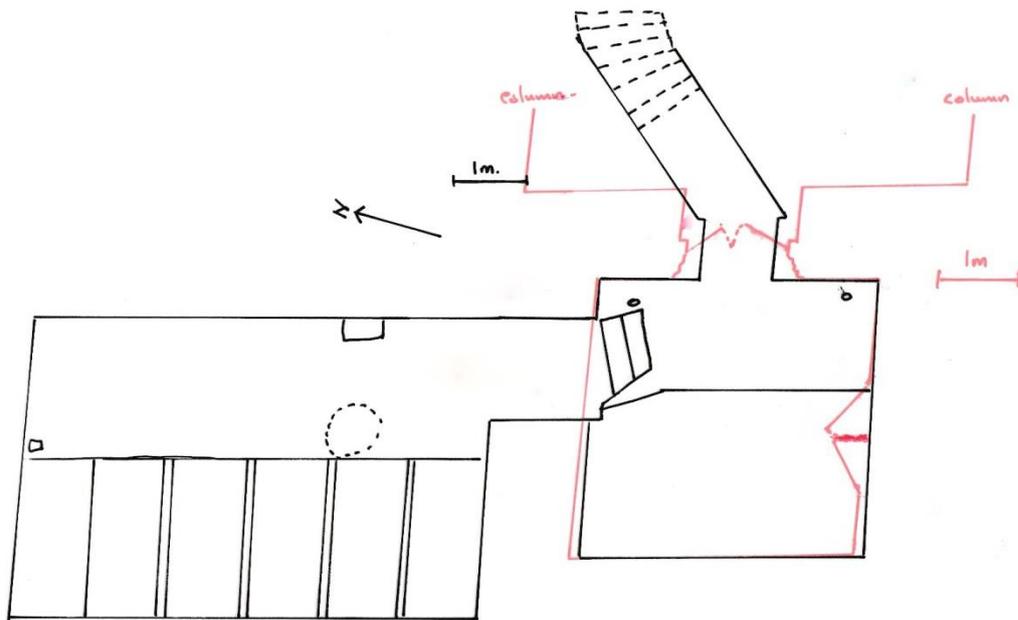
This leaves two unidentified coffins. The burial register also mentions an Hon. Francis Barrington Esq buried in 1736. This is likely to be a son of the 1st Viscount and brother to the second who died as a young man. Little is known of him and he may well be a candidate for burial in chamber one.

That leaves a final coffin. One possibility is Hon. Arthur Decimus Barrington (died 1825), who was the 10th son of the 5th Viscount. He is recorded in the burial register and would have been 19 or 20 years old.

Dating

As noted above the vault appears to be in two phases. This first with its stairway down from the nave is likely to be of the early 18th C. The brickwork is of varying size with some flatter bricks suggesting that they were made before the brick tax of 1784. The earliest datable interment is the baby William Hill in 1743, but it could possibly be earlier still with Francis in 1736. However, it must be remembered that these may have been moved here at a later date.

It seems most likely that chamber one was built at the same time as the porch which is generally said to be early 18th century. This is practically confirmed by superimposing the plan of the vault with that of the porch and West entrance at ground level (see below). The fit was remarkable and shows that the archway from the chamber to the Nave steps corridor lies directly under the West door. It is from this that it is possible to deduce the position of the entrance to the vault.



Plan showing the vault (in black) with the ground level plan of the interior walls of the porch and West entrance to the Nave.

By the Victorian period the Chancel looked full with no evident room for the Viscounts, while chamber one was filling up with junior members of the family. "Aunt Augusta" (1886) also mentions a problem of flooding in chamber one. The solution seems to have been to build chamber two. The black line decoration of the walls, the consistent size of bricks, and finally the slab incised 1841 suggest that this vault dates from that period, and again we have "Aunt Augusta" to thank for the observation that it was built when her grandmother who died in 1841 could not easily be fitted in to chamber one.

Chamber two then continued in use for the senior members of the family, with the more junior members (coffins 1 and 4) being squeezed into the first chamber. The churchyard steps were added in or after 1867. "Aunt Augusta" MacLagan (1886) describes the burial of her father the 6th Viscount in a low key ceremony in 1867. She also mentions the difficulty that they had in getting the heavy coffin down the steps in the West end of the Nave. This spurred her brother the new (7th) Viscount to build the churchyard steps.

The vault was closed at some time between 1886 when the 7th Viscount was buried and 1898 when his wife was buried in the churchyard.

Conclusion

The porch vault is that of the Barrington family. A first phase was built probably at the same time as the porch in the early 18th century. Then in the 19th century a new second chamber was built outside the porch footprint. Because of difficulty of access from the Nave steps were cut down from the churchyard. How these were marked is unknown. Possibly there was a shutter covering their entrance or perhaps it was more elaborate.

By the 19th century there is a definite hierarchy in the vault. The senior members of the family going to chamber two and junior ones to the older chamber one, even if it meant they needed to be squeezed in or left on the floor.

NOTE: In the plans it will be noticed that the church looks slightly “wonky”. This is because when measuring all North-South walls at this West end their were in fact 345°/165° True and East- West walls lay 260°/80°True.

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