

Chinnor Churchyard's 'Plague Pit' - a possible link to the English Civil War?

By Nigel Peters

Introduction

The South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group (SOAG) were invited in February 2021 by Chinnor local historian Dr Fiona Mantle and Churchwarden Mrs Pat Haywood to conduct a non-intrusive geophysical survey of an area by the south entrance to St Andrews Church, Chinnor. This area is devoid of any gravestones/markers and is known as the 'plague pit'. The area by the main entrance to a church is always the most sought-after location for a grave, so it is strange that this area is seemingly unoccupied. SOAG have conducted magnetometry and resistivity surveys, which point to an area roughly 7m EW by 8m NS showing a level of disturbance in the centre of the 'plague pit' - areas coloured pink, yellow and blue, excluding blue to the south west (burial associated with a gravestone) and yellow to the southern border (path), see illustration 1 below.



Illustration 1: Geophysical surveys 2021/22 (magnetometry in red, resistivity in yellow, blue and grey)

A further geophysical technique, ground-penetrating radar (GPR), will hopefully be conducted over the area in summer 2023 by students from Reading University supervised by Dr Robert Fry.

The initial historical background was believed to be that 'plague' referred to the 'Great Plague' pandemic of 1665/6, however Dr Mantle's research failed to find any evidence of Chinnor being adversely affected during this period. This led to a further theory that the area might be for paupers from the local workhouse buried between c.1790-1848. This now seems unlikely given the prime position in the graveyard and the lack, so far, of any clear grave cuts.

The aim of this short essay is to propose another historical theory, which may help those conducting further survey work.

Chinnor in the English Civil War, 1642-46

For most of its known history, Chinnor has not featured to any great extent in national historical events, with one big exception, the English Civil War. It is well documented (Stevenson & Carter, 1972; Eddershaw, 1995) that in the late afternoon of 17 June 1643, Prince Rupert led a force of 1,700 troops out of Oxford, possibly initially to intercept a Parliamentarian supply train in the Chiltern Hills, but having narrowly missed that, to attack a detachment of the parliamentarian Sir Samuel Luke's Bedfordshire Dragoons who were billeted over the night of 17-18 June in Chinnor.

The Bedfordshire Dragoons were raw recruits, who were exhausted from a raid on Islip the previous day. At 4am Prince Rupert's men 'placed a circle around the sleeping village...victims, who scrambled and fell out of their beds in cottages, sheds and barns, waking only to die as they were helplessly shot down in the street or trying to flee across the fields. A group of officers who managed to get into a house and shoot at their attackers from the windows were mercilessly driven out by setting the thatch alight, and picked off by the waiting Cavaliers as they ran out of the back door. About fifty were killed and about a hundred more fortunate ones were taken prisoner' (Eddershaw, 1995). The leading parliamentarian from Thame, John Hampden, was sleeping that night at Watlington. On hearing of the raid, he gathered troops from Thame and the surrounding area, and fought Prince Rupert at the Battle of Chalgrove later that day (where he was fatally wounded). Sir Samuel Luke was not present in Chinnor with his dragoons, but the later the same day he fought alongside John Hampden at Chalgrove.

The raid on Chinnor was documented at the time by both the Parliamentarians and the Royalists, and whilst each side would naturally present the raid from their own perspective, their pamphlets are the source materials for the later accounts of the raid. Copies of both pamphlets are held in Chinnor Library (Heritage Box 2, on loan from Colin Flack).

It was an horrific massacre, sadly not uncommon in the Civil War, and all too reminiscent of the current war in Ukraine. What does a community do when a massacre takes place? As in Ukraine, there is not time for a proper burial. The answer would be a very quick mass burial in a pit without individual grave cuts. 'Burial registers contain very few entries which can be identified as soldiers, as the large numbers killed in battle were buried in mass graves, unrecorded in the registers' (Eddershaw, 1995). The Chinnor parish register for 1643 contains no burial entry between 2 June and 18 July. 'Overall, the evidence is very patchy: certainly some of the dead were buried in churches following a battle, while others seem to have been buried on the battlefield (Taylor, 2019).

At the time, the troops from both sides were widely accepted to be spreading infectious diseases. 'Plague is a general term used to describe a range of illnesses in the seventeenth century, and while it is probable that bubonic plague was one of the causes of mortality during the war, other diseases were also present. The main one was probably a form of typhus...referred to as the "new disease"...in 1643 Thomas Wyatt wrote...that there were very many in Oxford and in the shire sick of a new disease'. (Eddershaw, 1995).

The Plague Pit in Chinnor Churchyard

The 50 or so Bedfordshire dragoons killed in Chinnor, would have been (or thought to have been) carrying the 'new disease' (known colloquially as the plague). The need to bury them quickly to stop the spread of the disease meant there was no time for individual burials, so a mass grave would have been dug. Where? Certainly somewhere close by.

When I first postulated the theory that the 'plague pit' in the churchyard was linked to the Civil War I was referred to a 'History of Chinnor or Chenore', typewritten, with no author or date (though some someone has written '1929?', held in Chinnor Library. The key paragraph is: 'When the churchyard was extended in 1927 a number of skeletons and military accoutrements were found buried close to the churchyard wall, and were taken to be the remains of Roundhead soldiers who were not allowed to be buried in the sanctified ground of the Royalists, and yet were placed nearby, possibly in the hope that they would one day be included.'

It would be very useful if the Church records could be searched for any corroborating evidence of this theory. At the very least I would have expected some marking of these graves?

It is also worth noting that the rector of Chinnor in 1643 was the well known Nathaniel Giles. Appointed in 1628, he was son of the organist at Windsor Chapel and a Canon of Windsor. A well connected wealthy man, he built a new rectory, 'with the help of his friend the parliamentarian John Hampden' (Lobel, 1964). Even though later that year he joined the Royalists, and lost his living in Chinnor, would he really have refused to have the soldiers fighting for his friend John Hampden interred in the churchyard? Likewise, it is reasonable to assume that the residents of Chinnor, as with most of England, were divided in their loyalties. Later in 1643 a royal emissary was sent to Chinnor to collect taxes. According to Sir Samuel Luke he took the 'clothes and linen of those who did not contribute' (Lobel, 1964), confirming a level of parliamentary support in the village.

Summary

My theory therefore is that the most likely cause of the 'plague pit' in Chinnor churchyard is the mass burial of the 50 or so members of the Bedfordshire dragoons slain by Prince Rupert's forces in the early hours of 18 June 1643. If they are not in this area, and the 1927 churchyard extension did discover their burial place, then there is a further project to locate this area. However, to date the geophysical surveys undertaken by SOAG point to an area of roughly 7m by 8m that does not show grave cuts, but is of 'disturbed' ground, which would be expected from a mass grave.

I feel that in any case it would be good if further research could be undertaken of where in Bedfordshire the slain dragoons came from. Sir Samuel Luke was born in Southill, Bedfordshire on 21 March 1603, and baptised 6 days later in All Saints Church. Would it not be nice if a plaque could be erected in Chinnor churchyard commemorating these men, at a joint service with the rector of Southill?

Nigel Peters
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