

Puritans

I believe we have all heard Puritans, but who were they. Well, they were a group of English Protestants who came to prominence in the late 1500s and early 1600s, culminating in the 1650s under Oliver Cromwell. They worked tirelessly towards religious, moral and social reforms and therefore became particular unhappy with the speed of reformation of the Church of England under Elizabeth I and the tolerance the established Church was showing towards the Catholic Church.

They attempted to simplify and regulate forms of worship but were severely restricted by laws controlling the practice of religion. In many cases persecution led to many emigrating permanently or for short periods to the Netherlands. Then in the 1620/40s many started to emigrate to the Americas in particular the new province known as New England; it became known as the 'Great Migration' with the individuals being referred to as 'The Pilgrim Fathers.'

Puritan Symbols

The old Church of Langdon Hills – 'St Mary and All Saints' laid in a deteriorated state for many years until sold privately in 1973 and became converted into a private residence in 1975.

The change of residential use did not affect the churchyard and its upkeep is still the responsibility of the Langdon Hills Rector and his congregation. However, the current owner of the old Church has also helped in keeping the churchyard in good condition.

In so doing he has uncovered a 1712 Grave which had been covered by a bush for many years. It appears to be the oldest grave in the churchyard, whereby the inscription can still be read.

What is interesting and fascinating is the symbol on the head stone. The question that arises is what is the symbol depicting. After considerable amount of research, it is believed to be one of many types of Puritan symbols that have appeared on headstones from the early 1600s into the 1700s.



Grave of Thomas Benton 171

These symbols of a death head or winged skull, reflect the strict orthodox puritan values. The death head with hollow eyes and grinning mouth depicts the soul's voyage through death.

The occupant is Thomas Benton, unfortunately we have not been able to find out any information on him other than we assume he was a puritan.

Essex and Suffolk during this time was a hot bed of Puritanism and our area seems to have been very active in challenging the established church. We have Christopher Martin of Great Burstead and the Mayflower story sailing to the New World in 1620.

Then we have Hugo Peters, though a Cornish man, resided in Laindon for a time, possibly becoming the first school teacher at St Nicholas Church (Puckles School) and later its curate in the early 1620s. Along with his family including his step-daughters Elizabeth Winthrop (nee Reade) and Margaret Lake (nee Reade) and her daughters Hannah and Martha from Wickford and North Benfleet area sailed to New England in 1635.

Wickford in Rhode Island is named after Elizabeth and Hannah Lake is the 7th/8th Great-grandmother of president George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush.

So, it is not surprising to find Grave stones in the area depicting Puritan symbols, for example there appears to be several in Great Burstead Churchyard, although they need to be cleaned so that we can read their inscriptions



Great Burstead



Great Burstead

It would be interesting if we can find more in the tother churchyards of the Basildon Borough.

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