

The Ring

Fr Howard Stoker writes:

"It was inevitable that when work began excavating the foundations for our new development, we should disturb some human remains. However, little did we know that the opening of a brick lined tomb would lead us to discover a story of romance, wealth and pirates.

It all begins with a Francis Blyford who died in November 1708, just seven months after the great fire of Holt. He was no doubt a wealthy man in Holt and put in a claim for £180 for losses incurred in the fire. After his death he was buried on the south side of the church.

His tomb was covered with a grave slab which must weigh over one ton and on lifting it was discovered that his was not the only body in the tomb. Research has led us to conclude that his son Matthew, a woollen draper and one time Churchwarden of the Parish who died in 1731, and his daughter-in-law Rebecca who died in 1734 were also laid to rest with him. Among Rebecca's remains a gold ring was discovered with the inscription

'June 10th 66 Sr C M'



The Ring

Initially we took this to be a wedding ring but following a visit to the records office in Norwich the story took an incredible and exciting turn. I am indebted to Sue Smart, a local historian who has spent many hours in the Norfolk Records Office and who now takes up Rebecca's story:

"In the Holt Parish Registers she appears only as 'Widow Blyford' but Rebecca's will reveals her to be unique among the women of the town in the early 18th century. Few, if any, rode around in a chaise (light carriage) or possessed a 'pair of diamond pendants with two Pearls hanging at the bottom of them'. In her will she also bequeaths to her relations a diamond ring, a pearl necklace, a cornelian ring, a locket set round in gold with emeralds, a picture of her late husband set in gold together with a number of properties, shops, stables and land on Fish Hill.

How did she find herself living in Holt married to a woollen draper? Rebecca's wealth, her social standing and her family relationship with one of the most charismatic and swashbuckling naval heroes of the Restoration period all set her apart. But now we have a unique connection to her: a gold ring.

Rebecca was the daughter of Sir Christopher Myngs of Salthouse, Vice-Admiral and sometime pirate in the

Caribbean, a larger-than-life national hero of the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-7). Samuel Pepys wrote in admiration about him and went to his funeral; his men loved him and longed to avenge his death.

Rebecca's will describes 'my Mourning Ring which I had at S. Christopher Myngs Buryal'. It is that ring, engraved with his initials and death date and not bequeathed to a relative as she intended, that was found among her finger bones nearly three hundred years later."

Rebecca's story wonderfully connects us to the past and reveals something of life in Holt during the 17th and 18th centuries. The fact that her father was a pirate of the Caribbean who had grown up in Salthouse is a wonderful twist to the tale. One cannot help think, albeit fancifully, that her jewellery may have been Spanish loot given to her by her father from his successful raids against the Spanish Fleet. Rebecca's story is one that I think should be told as it helps to bring the past into the present and bring to life the history of Holt.

Our churches, churchyards, parish records and wills are so important because we are discovering they often

tell a wonderful and exciting story of the past. I for one can't wait to know more.

Fr Howard Stoker





On 8th June 2012 Rebecca's bones were laid to rest during a short service. The inscriptions on the inner surface of the ring can be clearly seen.

A spring-time view of the old Sacristy and boiler house, captured on 12th May 2012 just prior to the start of the project.
Inset - the same view but a year later.