

Burials in vaults within the church

Until the middle of the 19th century, it was common practice for priests and wealthy patrons of churches to be buried in vaults beneath the church. Following a series of Burial Acts in the 1850s which regulated burials in churchyards and churches it was forbidden to bury under churches except in exceptional circumstances. This was primarily as a health measure as, however well the body was protected in its coffin and vault, signs of decay could be detected. Apart from being unpleasant, this was still a time when it was thought that disease could be spread through 'miasma' in the air.

A burial place in a church could not have a headstone but would be marked by inscriptions on the vault lid, by nearby monuments or by pew plaques. In many churches this is evident and easily seen. In our case because the old St. Matthew's Church had to be demolished, we have no such direct evidence.

From the parish burial records, which only began in 1704, we can be fairly certain of some of the individuals who were buried in the church but not where. There may well be other such burials, but the burial records are indecipherable and / or not detailed enough.

In the 1960s some photographs of the interior of the church were taken and, just prior to its demolition in 1971 when it was in a sad vandalised state, a few more. These give an indication of what memorials there might have been in the church. Having been replaced by the present parish church in 1875, the 1775 built old St. Matthew's Church was only used as a mortuary chapel apart from an annual service. It suffered storm damage and was vandalised. Several monuments having been damaged were beyond saving. A difficult decision was made to demolish most of the church with an organisation, the Friends of Friendless Churches, agreeing to save the tower. They managed to save some of the memorials which were either placed in the tower or taken up to the new church. Similarly, the parish rescued several pew markers, and these are still available to view at West Yorkshire Archives, Wakefield.



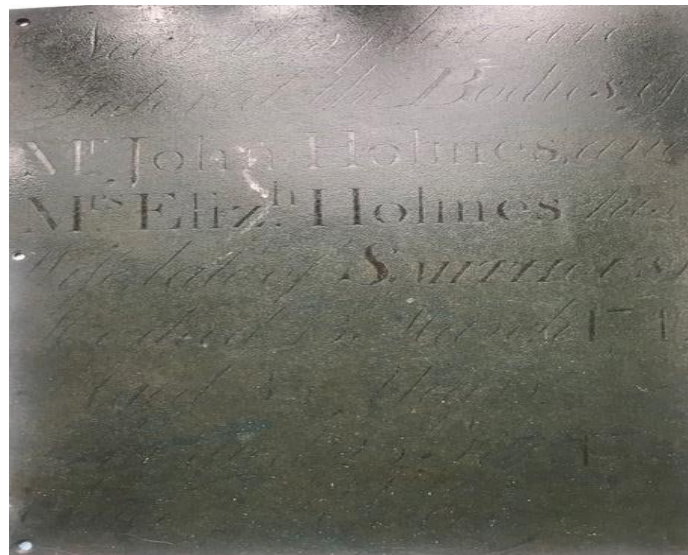
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SOURCE: Historic England Archive

But the story of burials within the church predates this now demolished building. Standing on virtually the same site was Eastfield Chapel which was built in 1529. It was here where the first burials were recorded in the parish registers that start in 1704 although we know of burials around the Chapel before then. Read **Very early pre 1704 burials**

And thanks to some memorial plaques we know of three burials within Eastfield Chapel before it was succeeded by the old St. Matthew's Church in 1775. There may have been more, possibly burials of incumbents.

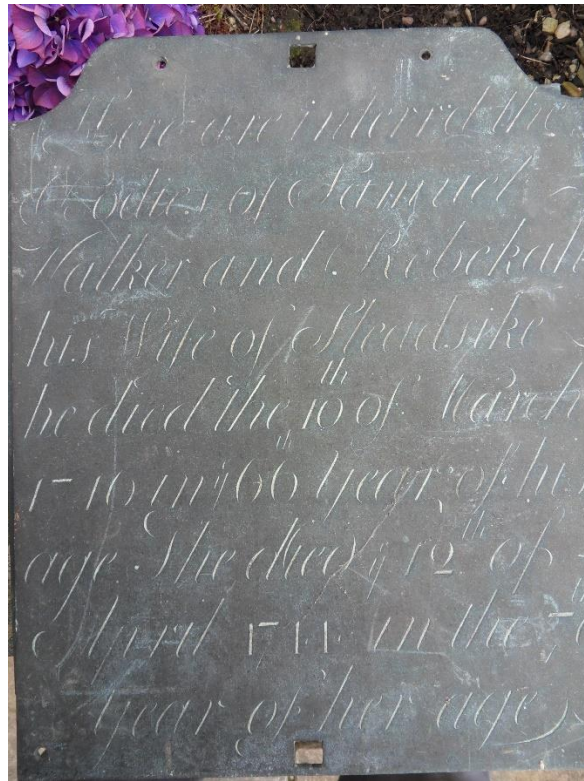
Thirty-four-year-old John Holmes of Smith House, Lightcliffe was buried in a vault in the Eastfield Chapel on 16th March 1741. He was the son of Joseph Holmes, a Non-Conformist, who moved to Smith House in 1699 from Yew Trees. The plaque pictured below commemorates John and his wife Elizabeth, who he married on 7th December 1734. It was probably installed in the newly built old St. Matthew's Church after her death. It was John Holmes who initially welcomed the Moravians to Lightcliffe. His wife then favoured the Wesleyans over the Moravians, famously welcoming John Wesley to Smith House. She was a widow for over forty years dying aged 73 years in 1785. She was buried in the newly built St. Matthew's Church, Lightcliffe churchyard on 2nd March 1785.



Near this place are
Interred the Bodies of
M^R John Holmes
M^{RS} Eliz^H Holmes his
wife late of SMITHOUSE
He died 13th March 1742
Aged 34 years
She died 25th Feb^y 1785
Aged 73 years

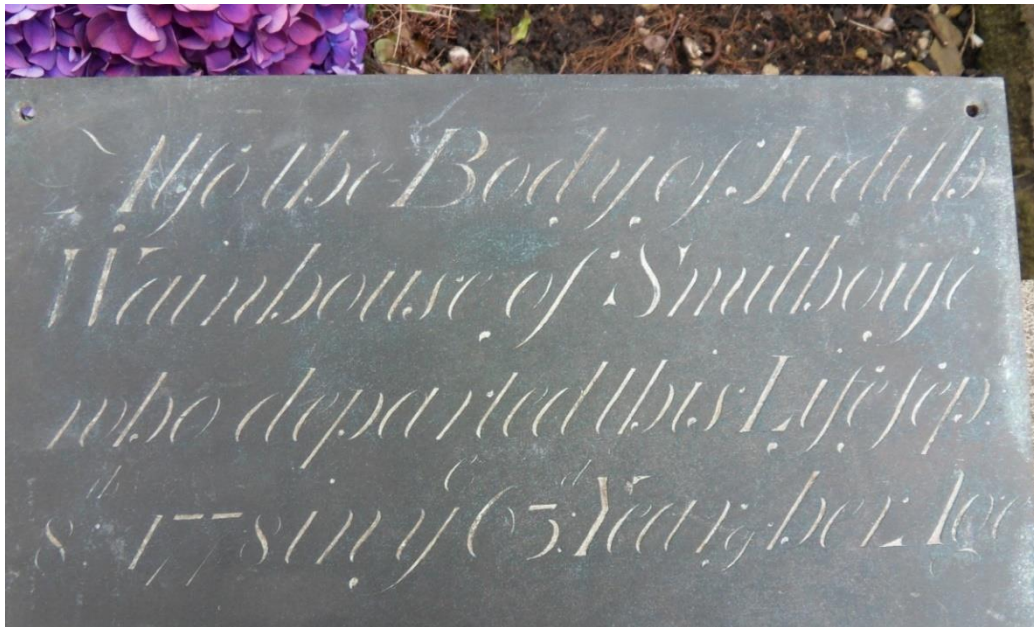
Elizabeth Holmes was the daughter of Samuel Walker and his wife Rebecca née Longbottom. They had married on 8th February 1709 in Northowram / Coley. It is not clear just where, but it was probably in a Non-conformist Chapel. They had two daughters, that we know of, the aforementioned, Elizabeth Walker born about 1712 who married John Holmes, and Judith Walker born about 1717 who married Edward Wainhouse.

When Rebecca/ Rebekah Walker of Sleadsike [sic] died on 1744/5 she was buried in Eastfield Chapel followed a year later by her husband Samuel. Again, this commemorative plaque was probably installed in the newly built old St. Matthew's Church sometime later.



*Here are interred the
bodies of Samuel
Walker and Rebekah
his wife of Sleadsike
He died the 10th of
March 1746 in y^e 66th
year of his age. She
died 12th April 1744 in
the 70th year of her age*

When their daughter, the widow Judith Wainhouse née Walker died at Smith House in 1778 she too was buried in a vault in the newly built church on 12th September 1778. Although in a new building it was quite possibly the same vault as her parents. The commemorative plaque is certainly similar and appears to continue the dedication on her parents' plaque.



*Also the Body of Judith
Wainhouse of Smithhouse
who departed this Life Sep 8th
1778 in y^e 63rd Year of her Age*

The Reverend Richard Sutcliffe was the Lightcliffe curate at the time St. Matthew's Church was built in 1775. Both he and his wife Martha were buried within the church, in 1782 and 1786, and have this commemorative memorial which is written in a mixture of ecclesiastical terms and Latin.



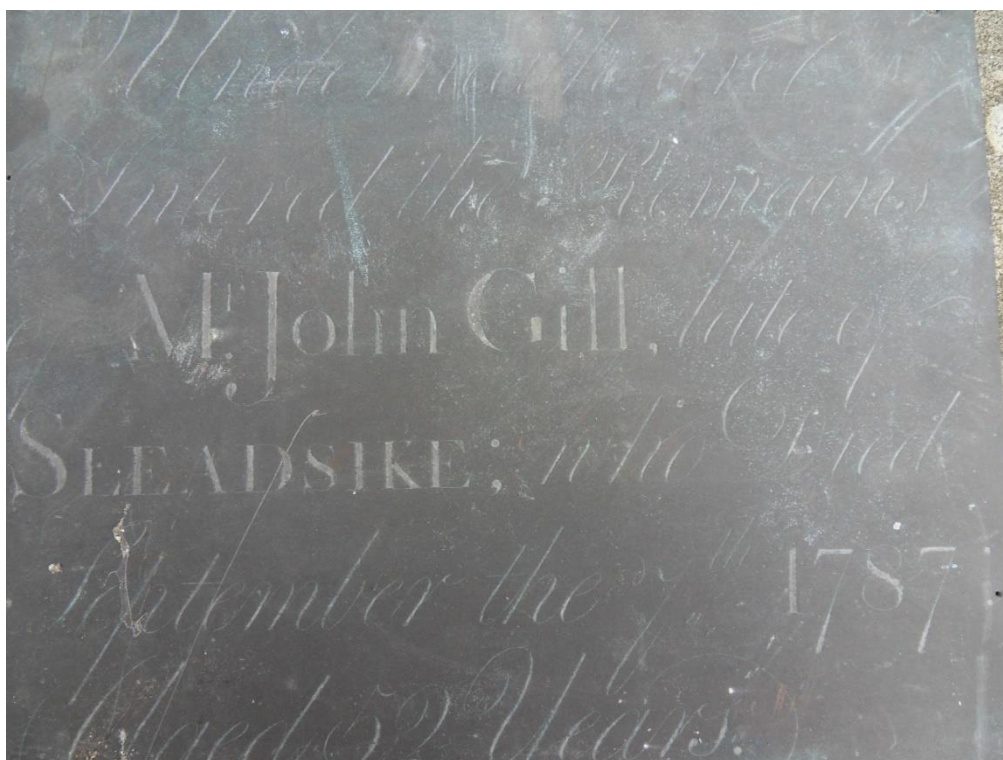
The translation is:

Near this place lies the body of Rev^d Rich^d Sutcliffe A. M.
 who died at the age of 59
 on 17th March 1782
 For 20 years, Headmaster of Hipperholme School
 Always careful.
 For 30 years, Minister of Lightcliffe.
 never unfaithful.
 As assertive in village matters
 as in his private life.
 He was a loving husband, a true friend.
 Kind to the poor.
 In short, a true Christian.

His sorrowful widow
 She raised this monument for herself and her descendants

In the same place are buried the
 ashes of his widow Martha Sutcliffe
 who amply took care of many things
 and did not neglect any duty
 28th February 1786, aged 66.

There is then this plaque to Mr. John Gill who was also buried in a vault in old St. Matthew's Church after a fatal fall from a horse. Some of the similar lettering and the spelling of Slead Syke suggest that he was related to the Holmes or Walker family.



*Underneath were
interred the remains
Mr John Gill late of
SLEADSIKE who Died
September the 7th 1787
Aged 52 years*

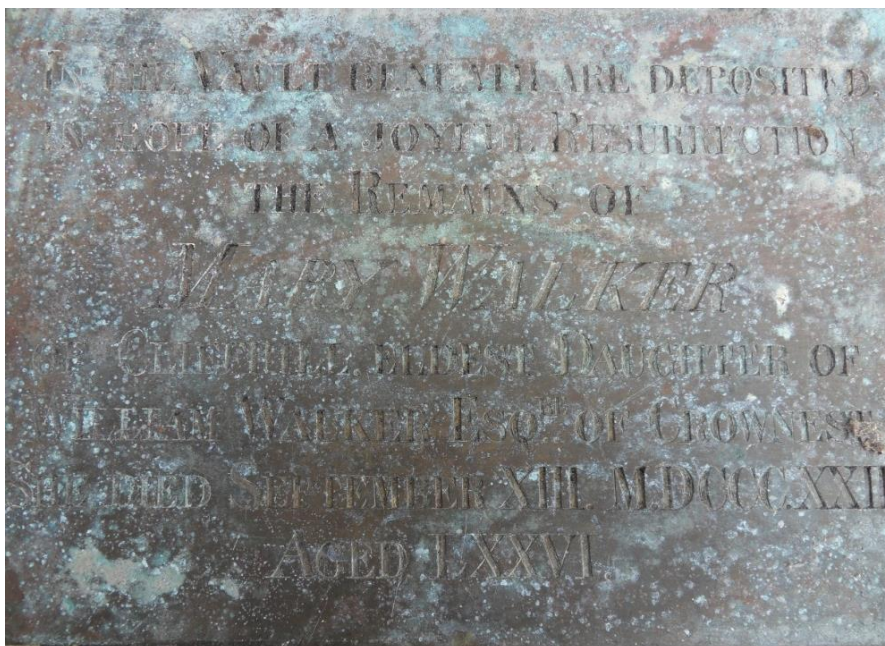
He was a relation, but it is a bit complicated! The maltster John Gill married a widow Martha Radcliffe née Morrell on 6th February 1781. She had previously married William Radcliffe the eldest son of Abraham Radcliffe and Betty Holmes, the sister of John Holmes, on 3rd March 1767. Both Abraham Radcliffe and William Radcliffe were buried at Lightcliffe on 23rd November 1759 and 25th November 1778 respectively followed by Elizabeth (Betty) Radcliffe on 19th November 1790 and then the widow Martha Gill on 28th March 1799.

No ledger stone or tombstone exists for this Radcliffe family. But there is an elaborate tombstone for William's brother, Charles Radcliffe and his family, to the left of the Wakefield Road entrance by the wall there. It is interesting to speculate as to whether Abraham, William and Elizabeth Radcliffe and even Martha Gill were buried within a vault in the church, with now-missing and long-forgotten memorial plaques

The Reverent John Phillips was visiting the area from Berstead in Sussex, now part of Bognor Regis when he died in December 1821. The Lightcliffe incumbent the Reverend Robert Wilkinson took the funeral service as recorded below. As a fellow clergyman Rev. John Phillips is reputed to have been buried in a vault within the church.

Rev ^d John Phillips D. D. No. 464	Berstead Regnor Sussex	1821 Dec ^r 13	68 years	R. Wilkinin Min ^r
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A year later, the spinster Mary Walker was buried within the church her father had built. This commemorative plaque was placed nearby.



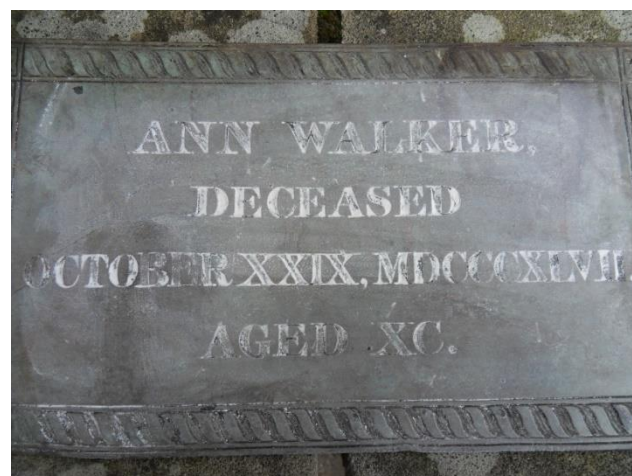
IN THE VAULT
BENEATH ARE
DEPOSITED IN HOPE
OF JOYFUL
RESURRECTION THE
REMAINS OF
MARY WALKER OF
CLIFF HILL ELDEST
DAUGHTER OF
WILLIAM WALKER
ESQ OF CROW NEST
SHE DIED SEPTEMBER
13TH 1822 AGED 76

Sarah Wilkinson, the wife of the Lightcliffe incumbent, was the next known individual to be buried within the church, on 28th June 1833. Then her husband the long serving curate Rev. Robert Wilkinson was buried with her on 7th January 1840. There is a grand memorial tablet to them both in Halifax Minster – formerly known as St. John's Church. This indicates that they were buried other than in Halifax and our burial records show that they were buried at Lightcliffe.



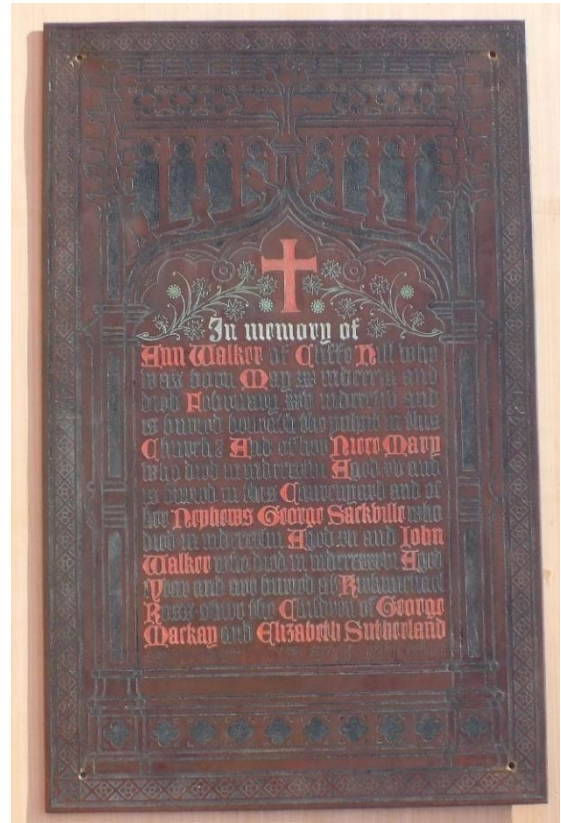
On 5th November 1847, ninety-year-old Ann Walker senior joined her sister in the (Walker?) vault. The memorial inscription on her brass plaque is much briefer but still uses Roman numerals.

ANN WALKER
DECEASED
29TH OCTOBER 1847
AGED 90



During the 1850s various Burial Acts were passed forbidding burials within churches as previously explained. At first this was just for churches in London but eventually it was country wide.

The last burial within St. Matthew's Church was on 5th March 1854 when Ann Walker, the niece of the Walker sisters was buried with her spinster aunts. There may have been a brass plaque similar to those of her aunts placed nearby but this has not survived. But when her nephew and heir had the church refurbished in the 1860s, he put up a larger brass plaque remembering his aunt and some of his siblings. When the church was demolished in 1971 the plaque was placed in the tower where over the years its condition deteriorated. A fund-raising appeal paid for its restoration by Skillingtons of Grantham in 2022.



IN MEMORY OF ANN WALKER OF CLIFFE HILL
 WHO WAS BORN MAY 20TH 1803
 AND DIED FEBRUARY 25TH 1854
 AND IS BURIED BENEATH THE PULPIT IN THIS CHURCH
 AND OF HER NIECE MARY WHO DIED JUNE 6TH 1845
 AND IS BURIED IN THIS CHURCHYARD
 AND OF HER NEPHEWS GEORGE SACKVILLE
 WHO DIED IN 1843 AGED 12,
 JOHN WALKER WHO DIED IN 1836 AGED 1 YEAR
 AND ARE BURIED IN KIRKMICHAEL ROSSHIRE

The wording on this plaque gives a clue as to the position of the vault that Ann Walker and her aunts were buried in. “Beneath the pulpit” are the key words. When the church was first built in 1775 there was just one pulpit on the right-hand side. Then in the 1860s Evan Charles Sutherland Walker added a reading pulpit on the left. It seems that this pulpit was placed above the Walker vault hence the wording on the brass plaque that was installed at the same time.



Further evidence comes from the images of the damaged and vandalised church. In the window closest to where the reading pulpit was – marked in blue – there appears to be a memorial – marked in red – in a window recess. And from the outside you can see a window which appears to be blocked up, almost certainly by this memorial.



Images courtesy of History England Archives via Friends of Friendless Churches

Early in 2024 a faculty was obtained to lay a new ledger stone above where the Walker ladies were buried. The funds to purchase the Yorkshire stone and get it carved by a local master stone mason were raised very quickly.

By May 2024 the final resting place of the last individuals buried within old St. Matthew's Church was marked with this stone. It lies within the footprint of the demolished building over the spot where the three Walker ladies were buried in a vault within the church.



There is a degree of irony in all of this. When these individuals were buried in this place of honour within the church, they had their permanent memorial. Now, with the church gone, they are largely lost. Others, buried outside in the churchyard, still have their memorials.

The contract for the demolition of the church specified that all vault coverings had to be protected, and this seems to have been done by covering the floor of the church with sand and earth to a significant depth. An archaeological survey shows the floor to be uniform and without features to a depth of 18" or more.

Dorothy Barker

Ian Philp

April 2026

For further information about some of these individuals, go to the [People of Interest](#) section on our website [Lightcliffe Churchyard](#) and then scroll down.

Look for **Incumbents**, **The History of Smith House** and the many articles in the **Ann Walker, family and friends** section including an article about **Reverend Robert Wilkinson**.