FACT SHEET
SS Mary & John Churchyard

East Oxford started to become a suburb of Oxford City in the mid-nineteenth century when the area was being developed by a number of new landowners. Previously the area had been orchards and fields. People were moving to live in cities, as generally, more opportunities for work existed in urban, rather than rural areas. Father Benson had been appointed as the vicar of St James in Cowley in 1850 and took an interest in the developing east Oxford area. Some residents from East Oxford had been buried in his churchyard. He saw the need to develop services for this increasing local population. One of his first projects was to establish the "Iron Church" in Stockmore Street in October 1859. In 1869 he became the first vicar of the newly established Cowley St John parish.

Father Benson purchased the land for the churchyard and a new church in the late 1860s. *He was aware of the need for a graveyard for local people in the developing suburb. In the 1840s there had been problems in the city getting new graveyards established. (See Fact Sheet on Public Health for more details).* Surrounding the churchyard are a number of buildings that are associated with Father Benson. The first building on this ground was a school room in 1868, then St John's Hospital was built in 1873. The churchyard was constructed before SS Mary & John Church, the foundation stone was laid in 1875 and the parish rooms were completed in 1893. Later, in 1901, the Vicarage designed by Ninian Comper, a famous architect in the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was built.

Due to improved social and medical conditions the population increased and people lived for longer. However, at the time that the east Oxford suburb was developing there were limited sanitation facilities in the area. People had to get their water from pumps at the end of the street. Cholera was a major killer disease then and associated with poor water supply and inadequate sanitation and hygiene. There were three serious outbreaks of the disease in 1832, 1849 and 1854, when St Clements and Cowley Road were affected. As well as cholera, there were other diseases such as diphtheria, that affected the neighbourhood. Bartlemas Chapel was used as a convalescent hospital at the time of cholera outbreak.

The first person to be buried in the churchyard was Sister Julia Mary from Holyrood, on the 18 November 1876. Special permission had to be given by the Bishop as the land had not been consecrated. The Burial ground was consecrated on 1 October 1878 and the chancel of the church was opened for the service on the same day. A celebratory tea for 300 was held at Princes Street School, for which parishioners paid a shilling each to attend. After tea Father Benson gave a speech and made an appeal for funds for the new church. Following this Messrs Hodgson, Churms, Knowles Bowden sang accompanied by Mr Illife on the piano.

In October 1879, the Home Secretary had given approval for the churchyard. By 1883 there were 200 burials at the churchyard. In 1947 there was no more room for any graves, but some people had booked their grave, or were going to be buried with their family members who were already buried in the churchyard. Some people who were cremated have had their remains buried. *Today there is evidence that over 2000 people were buried in the churchyard. The Family History Society have identified*

those with memorials, but there are many people buried in the churchyard who have no memorials. For example, people who could not afford a memorial, children, those who died in the workhouse and other institutions such as Littlemore Asylum and the Industrial School (The Poplars).

Who is buried in the churchyard?
Although the churchyard is primarily for local residents, there are people buried in the churchyard come from different parts of the city. When the Iron Church was first established in the area, people from across the city would attend the services. Father Benson was associated with the Oxford Movement. John Henry Newman, was one of the founders of this Movement. Oxford University members were part of the congregation at the Iron Church and were active in fund-raising for different projects in the area.

Local people were buried in the churchyard from the onset. There are groups of families who are buried together and some clusters of family graves. Children have a special part of the churchyard, but some are buried with other members of their families. There is an un-consecrated section that has been used for non-conformist burials. The graves in the churchyard reflect the lives, professions and occupations of people in the community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was a mixed community with professional and trades people living and working together on different levels.

Soldiers who fought in the First and Second World Wars have Commonwealth graves. The church is paid to maintain these graves. Not all the soldiers who were killed in the war are buried in Commonwealth Graves, they were buried with their family.

Gravestones had a particular significance in the nineteenth century. During the Victorian era the population increased due to improved medical and social conditions, therefore more people died needing burial ground. After Queen Victoria's husband Albert died in 1861, the Queen spent a long time mourning his death. During these Victorian Times death became more public. Families were keen for their relatives to have elaborate monuments to be remembered by. Usually the more elaborate gravestones reflect a more affluent family. Victorian churchyards have gravestones designed by local stonemasons and using local products.

From the early eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century there was an active trade of 'body snatching' from graves and morgues in operation. The corpses were used for dissection by medical students to learn about anatomy. The Anatomy Act of 1832 outlawed this practice, but if bodies not claimed by relatives they were allowed to be used by the medical schools. These were usually poor people and could not afford a funeral, and those who lived in public institutions such as the workhouse and asylums. Many people were scared of a pauper funeral as they were worried what would happen to their body after they had died.

All sorts of different people from different backgrounds who contributed to east Oxford life are buried in the churchyard. Amongst these are teaching Sisters, nursing Sisters, the founder of the Society of St John the Evangelist and other priests, the first headteacher of SS Mary & John School in Hertford Street, the workhouse master and

matron, the architect who designed the church, blacksmiths, whitesmiths, inspector of nuisances, butchers, builders, cooks, college servants, grocers, tailors and many others too. Within SS Mary & John churchyard there are many stories to tell about life and people in east Oxford.

References:

Oxfordshire Family History Society, Monumental Inscription Transcript, The Parish Church of SS Mary & John CD
Cowley St John Parish Magazines
Victoria History of the County of Oxfordshire Volume IV.
Census of Great Britain 1891
Kelly's Street Directories

Websites:

www.familysearch.org
www.british-history.ac.uk
www.workhouses.org.uk

Further reading

Bourdillon, A. A Survey of the Social Services in the Oxford District II Local Administration in a Changing Area , OUP, Oxford, (1940).
VA Butler, Social Conditions in Oxford, Sidgewick &Jackson, London, (1912).

MA Crowther, The Workhouse System – the history of an English social institution, Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd, London, (1981).

Christopher Hibbert (ed), The Encyclopaedia of Oxford, Macmillan, London, (1988).
Malcolm Graham & Laurence Waters, Cowley & East Oxford, Past & Present, Sutton Publishing, Stroud, (2002).
Malcolm Graham, Images of Victorian Britain, Alan Sutton, Stroud, (1992).
Malcolm Graham, On Foot in Oxford, no 12 East Oxford, Oxfordshire County Council Libraries Service (1987)
Peter Mayhew, All Saints: Birth and Growth of a Community, Society of All Saints, Oxford, (1987).
Kathryn Morrison, The Workhouse, A study of poor-law buildings in England, English Heritage, Swindon, (1999).

Jessie Parfitt, The Health of a City, The Amate Press, Oxford, (1987).

Susanne Shatford and Trevor Williams, The Changing Faces of St Clements and East Oxford, Book One, Robert Boyd Publications, Witney, (1997).

Annie Skinner, Cowley Road, A History, Signal, Oxford, (2005).
M V Woodgate, Father Benson, Founder of the Cowley Fathers, Geoffrey Bles, London, (1953).