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THE INSIDE STORY: TOMB REPAIR AND CONSERVATION AT EAST COKER

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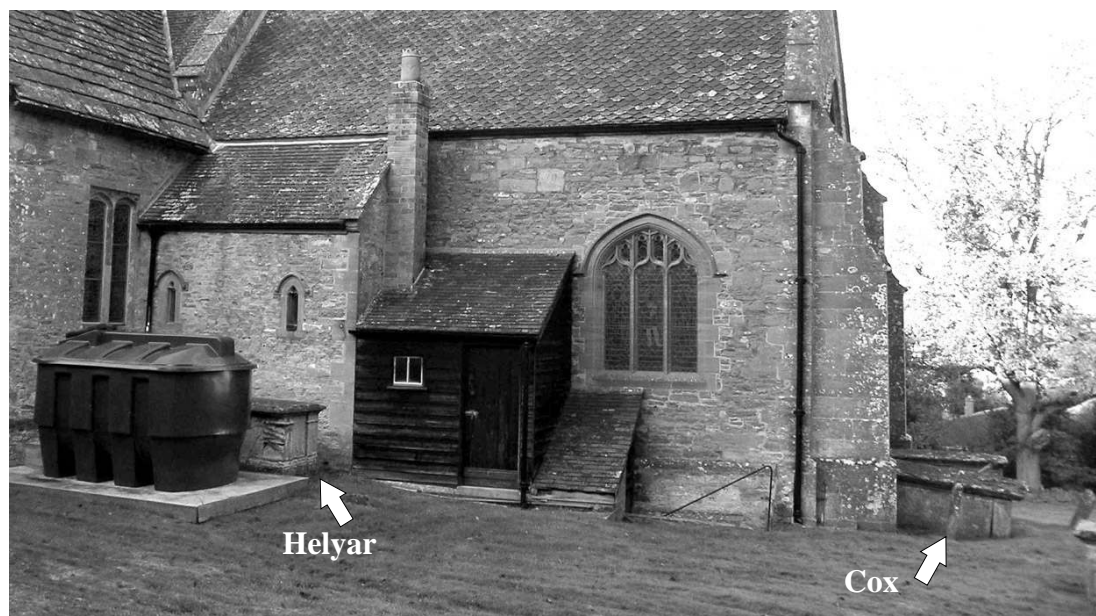
A number of tomb chests in East Coker churchyard have been repaired in recent years, including one to Joanna Helyar, who died in 1769 (Plate 12a). In April 2004, this was found to include a re-used piece of Ham Hill stone, which was a section of gothic blind arcading, possibly from a late medieval tomb chest and it is now displayed inside the church (Plate 12b). Recently, conservators Sue and Lawrence Kelland were tasked with conserving the more northerly of the two tomb chests immediately outside the east wall of the chancel. It had tilted towards the south east and was in danger of collapsing (Plate 12c). In early October, the Kellands advised the authors that work was in progress and it was agreed that we should make a visit to see the tomb in its dismantled state.

The eighteenth-century tomb chest was entirely constructed from Ham Hill stone. The heavy coped lid, with under moulded edges, was supported by two side and two end panels, that at the east being particularly thick. The base was in separate pieces, also with moulded edges and the whole chest stood above a rectangular, stone-walled chamber. Large slabs of Ham Hill stone covered each end of the chamber, to bear the weight of the chest, with smaller pieces corbelled out over the gap between them. That at the east end had delaminated and broken in the middle: this was the cause of the subsidence. One of the smaller supporting pieces on the north side, was found to be a reused L section resembling a plinth with a moulded edge and integral side wall. It was highly unusual and, locally, badly decayed.

The chamber below (Plate 13a) measured 4 feet (1.23m) wide x 8'10" (2.25m) long. It was partly filled with earth which sloped up towards the east end, so that the original depth was unclear. The side walls and east end wall were of roughly coursed but quite regular dry stone construction, mostly of local limestone but with some pieces of reused Ham Hill stone. The character of the west wall (Plate 13c) was entirely different and appeared to be the footings of the chancel east wall. Both side walls met the west wall at straight joints, with no bonding. The west wall appeared to be of two phases, with the lower part a tumble of loose stone but with a few pitched at an acute angle. The upper phase appeared to have some mortar and was randomly coursed. It was also slightly offset with respect to the lower phase, which was proud by about three inches (7cm). As far as could be judged, the upper part of the west wall was about four inches (10cm) forward of the chancel wall, suggesting a stepped plinth. In the chamber side walls, towards the west end, there were two recesses facing one another that resembled put log holes. That on the south side was capped with a finely worked piece of Ham Hill stone which appeared to be one corner of an opening (Plate 13b). It had a hollow chamfer (including a corner) and another prominent moulding that had been roughly flushed off. There appeared to have been a second pair of holes towards the east end. Higher up the south wall, directly over the worked piece of stone, was another square block of the same material. In the centre of the chamber, was a fallen piece of Ham Hill stone which had a moulded edge exactly matching that of the tomb chest. It had some thick lime mortar on its upper surface.

At the west end of the chamber, and at the lowest point of the soil fill, were two skulls lying on their sides, a detached jaw bone with a full set of teeth, a rib, a vertebra and a large femur (see Plate 13c). The latter were randomly located, in the north west corner and may have been pushed into the tomb at a later date. It is uncertain whether the two skulls were in situ. None of these remains were disturbed. It was not intended to carry out any excavation, which would have been the only way to establish a context for the bones. There was no evidence of coffins in the chamber, however decayed, although an iron coffin handle was found at ground level (at the south west end of the chamber, beside the intact western supporting slab). The Kellands had also found a few coffin nails. Some extraneous items had clearly entered the chamber, for example, a length of moulded plastic trunking, the neck of a beer bottle and a lump of pitch. There was also some cement on the north side wall which may have run down from above and was possibly related to the installation of a flood light between this and the neighbouring tomb.

12a



12b

Plate 12

Churchyard tombs at East Coker showing: the location of the Helyar and Cox tomb chests (a); a carved stone panel found in the Helyar tomb (b) and the state of the Cox tomb before conservation (c).

All photos © B & M Gittos

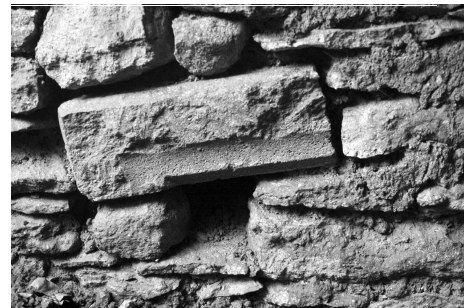
12c





13a

Plate 13 Conservation of the Cox tomb in progress showing the cavity beneath the tomb chest (a); a putlog hole in the south wall and the foundations of the east wall of the chancel glimpsed at the end of the cavity (c). All photos © B & M Gittos



13b



13c

The tomb chest bears an inscription on the south side panel. This was recorded in a manuscript by Miss E. Troyte-Bullock of Naish Priory and copied in typescript by Rev. Maurice R. Bailey in 1923, for the church records. It was number 59 in her list of inscriptions and ran as follows:

Here lyeth the Body of John Cox who died February 15th 1777 aged 52 years

“Farewell my loving tender wife

My Children and my Friends

I hope in God to see you all

When all things have an end”.

The underlined letters were no longer decipherable by the time a fuller record was made in 1985. This was part of a churchyard survey undertaken by a group of children from Class 7F of East Coker Primary School under the guidance of Moira Gittos.¹

This table tomb is one of a pair outside the east end of the chancel and that to the north also has inscriptions commemorating the Cox family. The inscriptions are more badly decayed than that of John but the Troyte-Bullock record includes the dates 1760 and 1779. Two of the inscriptions open with the words ‘In a vault beneath this tomb lies ...’ and so it is highly likely that a similar chamber exists beneath the adjacent tomb.

The chancel was reconstructed in the eighteenth-century and it is not known what its relationship is to its predecessor. What was visible inside the tomb appeared to be footings that relate to the present east wall but the hint of pitched stones could imply that this stands on earlier footings. If so, the earlier wall was not apsidal. The Anglo-Saxon west end of the nave still stands² but the location of its eastern counterpart is unknown. The features resembling put log holes in the sides of the chamber probably relate to the way in which the burial ceremony was carried out, providing a temporary resting place for the coffin.



Plate 14 The Cox tombs following completion of the conservation work, October 2011.

The newly conserved tomb chest is shown in Plate 14 and thanks are due to Sue and Lawrence Kelland for alerting us to their work on the tomb, for enabling us to conduct an examination and report on the findings.

- 1 Gittos, M. ‘A Survey of East Coker Churchyard, Somerset’, *Chronicle*, 3.3, (October 1985), 54-57.
- 2 Gittos Brian and Moira, ‘The Surviving Anglo-Saxon Fabric of East Coker Church’, in Mayberry T (ed.) *The Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, (Vol. 135, 1991), pp107-111.