

Dr Caius' Grave

Michael Wood (1959) interviewed by James Howell (2009)

Michael Wood (1959) often takes college visitors around the old courts using his experience as a Cambridge Blue Badge Guide as well as the knowledge gained from 50 years as a Fellow. In the chapel he shows guests Dr Caius' monument high up on the wall and explains that the sarcophagus does not contain the body but that the actual grave is beneath the seating against the north wall. 'But where, precisely?' is the usual question. This enquiry leads to great embarrassment because Michael discovered that no one knew exactly where the grave actually was. Even Professor Christopher Brooke (1945), our college historian, was unable to provide an answer. He directed Michael to Venn's article in the Biographical History (Vol. III, p.159) which stated that the grave was in the north east corner of the chapel as it was in 1573. That merely changes the question since no one knew with certainty the position of the east wall of the medieval chapel before the building was extended in 1637.

Venn's article, published in 1901 probably drew on the findings of J. B. Lock (1874), the College Bursar, who opened the grave in 1891

and presented an account of his findings in the *Caian* of that year (Vol. I, pp104-106). Lock makes the statement that the grave was in the north east corner of the medieval chapel, quoting articles by John Lamb, Bursar 1860-1876, and by William Warren of Trinity Hall, who saw the grave opened in 1719. Another source of information is the card which is kept with the plaster cast of Dr Caius' skull. The card is unsigned but it describes the grave opening of 1891 and says that the vault is 'below the window now filled in with stained glass to the memory of Professor Romanes'. This window is the first to the west of Dr Caius' monument but the statement is too vague to locate the grave accurately.

The next stage of the investigation was to ask James Cox, the college archivist, to search the Lock papers and other records to see whether even a simple sketch had been left in 1891 to show the precise grave location. There was nothing, but an interesting entry was found in the *Gesta* of 7th October 1891. It recorded a College Council decision to 'place a brass plate on the wall of the chapel recording the position of the tomb of Dr Caius'. Council never rushes important matters of this kind and the task has yet to



Michael Wood (1959)

be completed. We were thus unable to say (last summer) precisely where Dr Caius was buried – an unfortunate situation in relation to our founder of whom we are so proud.

Michael learned of the plan for electrical rewiring of the chapel during the long vacation of 2009 and arranged for two floor boards between the Romanes window and Dr Caius' monument to be lifted. Due notice of the operation was given and it was attended by the President, the Dean, Professor Brooke, Dr Joanna Appleby – our Archaeology Fellow and several others who were interested. The boards were kept up for three days so that everyone had an opportunity to inspect the opening.

Michael reports that the first glimpse through the exposed gap showed a chaotic muddle. The brick vault grave was more or less where expected but it was criss-cross with seat support joints, central heating pipes and an electric cable. It could be seen by the light of torches and lamps that the vault was built with very pale yellow bricks, probably made from local gault. The bricks were so pale that they almost matched the loose white mortar which had been used to seal the slightly domed top of the vault. It is known that this local brick is sometimes called 'white brick'. The two central heating pipes fed a heater beneath the front row of the adjacent seating. A fragment of newspaper of 1931 was found possibly indicating a date for the installation of the heater and pipes.

The 1891 closure tablet was clearly seen. On a point of detail, the inscription starts IOH. CAIUS. (IOH. presumably for Iohannes) rather than the JOH CAIUS recorded by Lock in the *Caian* article. The grave dimensions corresponded with those given by Lock, except that it was not possible to check the depth of 4 feet. The side of the grave touching the north chapel wall appeared to have been extended upwards by several brick courses, possibly as part of the substructure supporting the heavy monument, which was originally positioned over the grave. This single leaf of brickwork had been extended continuously to the east and now forms the support for each of the under-floor joists carrying the present seating. The extended brickwork has a single course of red brick and must be of a later date than the grave. It might possibly have been built in 1637 to support the seating of the time or in 1719 for the present seating.

There was no other obvious discontinuity in the brickwork or ground adjacent to it which might have given an indication of the position of the east wall of the medieval chapel. The ground to the east of the grave appeared to have been consolidated with a top dressing of fine gravel beaten in to the surface. College accounts suggest that the chapel was extended in 1637 by 28 feet. It is interesting that measuring 28



Left: Monument to John Caius on North Wall of Chapel.



Below: Michael Wood and Christopher Brooke (1945) examining the grave when first uncovered.

feet westwards from the inner wall of the present east end of the chapel (excluding the apse) brings you to a line which is 2 inches outside the east end of the grave. It seems more than probable that this line identifies the (internal) east end of the medieval chapel.

Arrangements are in hand to place a discreet plaque on a stair riser above the grave to mark the burial location. Michael is now able to answer questions from college guests with complete confidence.



The closure tablet put in position by Lock (1874) in 1891, seen beneath two central heating pipes that run above and along the grave.

Plan showing the location of Dr Caius' grave (from a sketch by Michael Wood).

