
Research note

Burial location in the parish of Earls Colne, 1550–1830

Ross McDermott

Introduction

'My body to be buried in the churchyard of Earls Colne' states the will of Roger Spysyer, in 1558.¹ This is just one of many requests for a particular burial location recorded in wills during the early modern period. The aim of this article is to evaluate and gain an understanding of the reasons why people chose particular burial locations by using the requests made by the population of Earls Colne, an Essex village. The period under review, 1550–1830, has been chosen because it follows on from the changes to burial practices brought about by the Reformation, but before the developments instigated by the Victorians.

Death and dying in early modern England is a well understood subject, with the study of burial location a key part of this scholarship. Urban churches and churchyards have been well researched, in particular by Harding in her work on London.² Other individual communities have been studied, with Coster's study of Holy Trinity in Chester particularly important as it is based on a remarkably complete burial register.³ This work has given us an understanding of the reasons behind burial location in urban locations but it has neglected the study of rural areas. Few authors have studied rural communities. The main exception is Tarlow's study of burial in the Orkney Islands, although this is focused on commemoration of the dead, not burial location.⁴ Snell has studied burial in rural churches and churchyards, but his article concentrates on changing notions of belonging,

1 Essex Record Office, Chelmsford (hereafter ERO) D/ABW33/351. All the archival material used in this article is also available online at <http://linux02.lib.cam.ac.uk/earlscolne/>.

2 V. Harding, "'And one more may be laid there": the location of burials in early modern London', *London Journal*, 14 (1989), 112–29; V. Harding, 'Burial choice and burial location in later medieval London', in S. Bassett ed., *Death in towns: Urban responses to the dying and the dead, 100–1600* (Leicester, 1992), 119–27.

3 W. Coster, 'A microcosm of a community: Burial, space and society in Chester, 1598 to 1633' in W. Coster and A. Spicer eds, *Sacred space in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), 124–43.

4 S. Tarlow, *Bereavement and commemoration: an archaeology of mortality* (Oxford, 1999).

not where people were buried.⁵ This essay attempts to fill that gap by studying burial in a rural community.

Earls Colne is a small settlement with a population that fluctuated between 500 to 1,000 people during the period under study.⁶ It was the subject of a long-running project at the University of Cambridge headed by Alan Macfarlane that has meant most of the records from the area are available for study online.⁷ This is the reason why Earls Colne was chosen for this study; no other English community has its records as easily available and in digital form.

To understand the reasoning behind burial location the most common methodology undertaken by scholars is to study the preferences for burial location that are recorded in many early modern wills.⁸ This is the approach undertaken here. This study has analysed all the wills of the parish of Earls Colne, from 1550–1830, a total of 428 documents, for references to burial location. There are limitations to using wills in this way. Only a minority produced wills and the records that survive are strongly biased by age, gender and social class.⁹ To help combat this problem other sources have been utilised, in particular the detailed diaries of Ralph Josselin, the vicar of Earls Colne from 1641 to 1683.

Initially this article will describe the differing popularity of separate burial locations. It will go on to identify the reasons why these particular burial locations were chosen. Finally the article will explore the predicament of those who did not have a choice regarding their final resting place.

Burial location in Earls Colne

Of the 428 wills studied, 126 made a reference to burial location.

Looking first at intramural burial, that is burial within the body of the church, it seems that in Earls Colne this was an option chosen by few. Only 3 per cent specified intramural burial, which is less than the 17.9 per cent calculated by Gittings in her analysis of 764 wills

5 K. Snell, 'Gravestones, belonging and local attachment in England, 1700–2000', *Past and Present*, 179 (2003), 97–134.

6 T. Mills and S. Harrison, 'Introduction' in *The records of Earls Colne: Introduction*. [<http://linux02.lib.cam.ac.uk/earlscolne/intro/index.htm>, accessed 12 May 2011].

7 T. Mills and S. Harrison, 'Introduction: brief history of the project' in *The records of Earls Colne: Introduction* [<http://linux02.lib.cam.ac.uk/earlscolne/intro/project.htm>, accessed 12 May 2011].

8 For example D. Cressy, 'Death and the social order: the funerary preferences of Elizabethan gentlemen', *Continuity and Change*, 5 (1989), 99–119; C. Gittings, *Death, burial and the individual in early modern England* (London, 1984); R. Houlbrooke, *Death, religion and the family in England: 1480–1750* (Oxford, 1998), 125–36.

9 N. Goose and N. Evans, 'Wills as an historical source' in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose eds, *When death do us part: understanding and interpreting the probate records of early modern England* (Oxford, 2000), 38–71. Here at 38.

Table 1 Burial location requests in the Earls Colne Wills, 1550–1830

Requested burial in a specific Churchyard	76
Requested burial in a specific Church	14
Requested burial in a specific Church or Churchyard	7
Requested burial at the place of death	21
Decision left to the executor	5
Burial requested by a specific person only	3

Table 2 Probate record of churchyard burial requests in Earls Colne, 1550–1830

	1550– 1599	1600– 1649	1650– 1699	1700– 1749	1750– 1799	1800– 1830
Number of requests to be buried within a specific churchyard	47	21	6	1	1	0

from Kent, a neighbouring county to Essex.¹⁰ A methodological explanation is that Gittings studied detailed testaments, not all wills. A wealthier person would have had more possessions and a grander funeral to organise, resulting in a longer, more detailed, will. Intramural burial was expensive, meaning that the wealthy, who would have compiled detailed wills, would be more likely to request intramural burial than the average testator. This makes the analysis of the Earls Colne wills more reflective of the whole population than Gittings' calculations. It is also important to note that there were probably many more burials in Earls Colne church than were recorded in the wills. It would only be through archaeological excavation of the church that we could come to an accurate estimation of the number of intramural burials in Earls Colne church.

It is clear that more people requested burial in the churchyards of Earls Colne than in the church, but the 76 who requested burial in a specific churchyard in their wills are an under-representation of the number who would have received a churchyard burial in the period under study. The burial records are incomplete, but for the period 1560–1699 MacFarlane has calculated that there were 2,605 burials in Earls Colne, the vast majority of which would have been in the churchyard.¹¹

The data shows a steep drop in requests to be buried in a specific churchyard during the period under study. This is not proof of a fall in churchyard burials; rather it is reflective of a change in the format of the will, with an increasing number of people not stating a burial location at all (72 mention burial location in 1550–99 compared to just 13 in 1650–99).¹²

10 Gittings, *Death and the individual*, 244.

11 A. MacFarlane, S. Harrison and C. Jardine, *Reconstructing historical communities* (London, 1977), 169.

12 This trend has also been noted by Harding, 'Burial choice and burial location', 122.

The reasons for burial in particular locations

Using the evidence from Earls Colne four separate but linked factors have been identified that influenced the people of Earls Colne in choosing their burial location. They are: 1) The importance of returning to the parish of birth; 2) Family; 3) Religion; 4) Cementing social position.

Burial in the parish in which the deceased was resident was a right due to all English citizens, a right that many in Earls Colne exercised.¹³ Of the 97 testators who cited a specific church or churchyard in which they wanted to be buried, 67 expressed a desire that they should be buried in Earls Colne. The life of the average resident of Earls Colne would be focused upon the village and therefore it is understandable that they would want to be buried where they had spent the majority of their time. Another reason is the issue of burial fees. It was standard practice to charge extra to bury those who were not originally from the parish.¹⁴ This made burial in one's own parish normally the cheapest option available.

A significant proportion of the testators who chose to be buried away from Earls Colne. 30 of the 97 (30.9 per cent), requested to be buried elsewhere. These 30 were all inhabitants of Earls Colne at the time their wills were made. They all wanted to be buried within 20 miles of Earls Colne, with the exception of one person who requested burial in Bulphan, 37 miles away.¹⁵

Studying the wills of these 30 people, it seems that a wish to return to their original parish was the driving force behind their decision to be buried away from Earls Colne. At the beginning of each will it was recorded where the testator was from and this location matches the location where the testator wanted to be buried in 27 out of the 30 cases.

It seems that the proportion of burials occurring outside Earls Colne, 30 per cent, matches figures calculated by others. Schofield used an unusually detailed burial register from Barming in Kent to show that 28 per cent of those buried over a short period, 1788–1812, were imported corpses. Most of these imported corpses were originally from the parish of Barming, again showing the desire to be buried in the parish of birth.¹⁶ This is a significantly higher figure than that calculated by Razzell in his analysis of burial registration in Bedfordshire, but his study takes a different approach to calculate the movement of corpses.¹⁷

13 D. Cressy, *Birth, marriage, and death: Ritual, religion, and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), 456.

14 V. Harding, 'Burial on the Margin' in M. Cox ed., *Grave concerns: Death and burial in England, 1700–1850* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 1998), 54–64. Here at 57.

15 ERO D/ABR11/16.

16 R. Schofield, 'Traffic in corpses: Some evidence from Barming, Kent (1788–1812)', *Local Population Studies*, 33 (1984), 49–53.

17 P. Razzell, 'An evaluation of the reliability of the Anglican adult burial register', *Local Population Studies*, 77 (2006), 42–57. Here at 46.

Burial in family groups was, and still is, an important aspect of burial location.¹⁸ This could be in family vaults, in a particular location within the church or a specific position in the churchyard. Examples of all of these can be found in the evidence from Earls Colne.

One family that owned a vault were the Cressener family. They were a rich family who had been landowners in Earls Colne for 400 years and were referred to as gentry.¹⁹ Their lineage was important to them, as shown by their handing down of various heirlooms through the generations.²⁰ Another way in which they showed the importance they attached to lineage and ancestry was through their burial vault. Edward Cressener died in 1650 and Ralph Josselin discusses his interment writing, 'Mr Cressener buried, many people present, I preacht his funeral, he was layd in the sepulchr of his fathers in a good old age.'²¹ The will of George Cressener, his son, survives, and in it he expresses his desire 'to be buried near to my dear father and children in Earls Colne church.'²² A monument remains to the Cressener family within the church.²³

Another example of the importance of tradition in deciding burial location in Earls Colne is in the burial of the medieval Earls of Oxford in Colne Priory. This was a priory in Earls Colne that played an important part in the life of the medieval village until its dissolution in the early sixteenth century. Although this is before the period being studied, the burial of Earls in the village was an important part of its identity, with John Weever in his *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, published 1631, writing that Earls Colne was 'so called of the Sepulture of the Earles of Oxford.'²⁴ All but two of the medieval Earls were buried in the priory, showing the importance they placed on being buried with their ancestors.

Most of the testators who requested burial near family had an intramural burial. Only one of the testators who requested burial near specific people mentions the churchyard. The evidence from Earls Colne seems to support Houlbrooke's assertion that burial in family groups was particularly popular among the rich, as it was this group that could afford intramural burial.²⁵ However, it is probable that many poorer families had specific areas within the churchyard where their family was buried and they did not feel the need to state this request in their wills.²⁶

18 Coster, 'Microcosm of a community', 124.

19 H. French and R. W. Hoyle, *The character of English rural society: Earls Colne, 1550–1750* (Manchester, 2007), 228–9.

20 French and Hoyle, *The character of English rural society*, 229.

21 R. Josselin, *The diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616–1813*, ed. A. MacFarlane (London, 1976), 156.

22 Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter PROB) 11/354/83

23 W.R. Powell, *The Victoria history of the county of Essex*, Vol. 10 (Oxford, 2001), 102.

24 J. Weever, *Ancient funerall monuments within the vnited monarchie of Great Britaine, Ireland, and the islands adjacent with the dissolved monasteries therein contained* (London, 1631), 613.

25 Houlbrooke, *Death, religion and the family*, 135–6.

26 R. Cowie, J. Bekvalac and T. Kausmally, *Late 17th- to 19th-century burial and earlier occupation at All Saints, Chelsea Old Church, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea* (London, 2008), 22–4.

The Cressener family vault highlights the importance of tradition, but emotional ties were equally important. Of the 13 people who requested burial near specific people, six wanted to be buried near their parents. Five testators sought burial near a spouse. This second group represents the importance of emotional bonds formed during a lifetime, rather than the linear bond represented by burial beside parents. This is slightly different to findings by other authors, in particular Dinn and Houlbrooke, who state that burial by a spouse was much more popular than burial by parents or ancestors.²⁷

Religion also influenced burial location. In pre-Reformation times the chancel was considered the holiest part of the church and this was reflected in its popularity as a burial location.²⁸ This preference for the chancel was carried on into post-Reformation times and in Earls Colne the chancel was the most requested position for an intramural burial. It has been argued by scholars looking at other churches that this was due less to religion post-Reformation and more to social reasons.²⁹ This was true in Earls Colne. Two requests for burial in the chancel expressed a desire to be buried near family and a third was from a prominent member of the community who would have wanted prime position in the church to display his wealth and status.

If religion did not influence intramural burial post-Reformation it certainly had an effect on burial in the churchyard, as demonstrated by the Quakers. They made converts in Earls Colne from 1655 and their numbers were increasing in the 1660s and 1670s.³⁰ By the 1680s they had opened their own burial ground.³¹

Many scholars writing about burial location have identified pre-existing social networks as being at the heart of burial location. Coster, in his reconstruction of burial location in Chester, stated that ‘the same divisions of hierarchy, sex and age that dominated in life can be seen in the utilisation of space for burial.’³² Cressy goes further, arguing that burial location was to do with the ‘lineage and status of the living’ rather than with glorifying the dead.³³ John Donne spoke disparagingly about the practice of using burial location to cement social position, noting in a sermon in 1625 that ‘ambitious men never made more shift for places in court, than dead men for graves in churches’.³⁴

27 Houlbrooke, *Death, religion and the family*, 135–136; R. Dinn, ‘Death and rebirth in medieval Bury St Edmunds’ in S. Bassett ed., *Death in towns: urban responses to the dying and the dead, 100–1600* (Leicester, 1992), 151–169. Here at 252.

28 Dinn, ‘Death and rebirth in medieval Bury St Edmunds’, 248.

29 Coster, ‘Microcosm of a community’, 133.

30 Powell, *Victoria county history of Essex*, Vol. 10, 102.

31 ERO D/P209/1/3.

32 Coster, ‘Microcosm of a community’, 124. See also D. Beaver, ‘“Sown in dishonour, raised in glory”: death, ritual and social organisation in Northern Gloucestershire, 1590–1690’, *Social History*, 17 (1992), 389–419. Here at 408. Harding, ‘And one more’, 120.

33 Cressy, *Birth, marriage and death*, 460.

34 J. Donne, *The works of John Donne: Dean of Saint Paul's, 1621–1631*, Vol. 6, ed. H. Alford (London, 1839), 68.

The importance of social rank within the church can be seen in the many conflicts over church pews that occurred in early modern England.³⁵ The pew position was important as it was linked to social rank and people would often choose to be buried beside their particular pew.³⁶ For example, in Earls Colne Geoffrey Toller requested burial 'in the parish church of Earls Colne aforesaid as near to my pew as conveniently may be'.³⁷

It is difficult to come to firm conclusions about the relative importance of social rank in determining burial location in Earls Colne. It is probable that for the majority, especially those in the churchyard, burial near family members or near the place of birth was more important than simply making clear one's status in the community in choosing one's final resting place. However, there were some for whom burial location could be used to make a clear, unambiguous, point about the position of the deceased within the community. A good example of this is the burial location of Roger Harlakenden.

Born between 1540 and 1545, Roger Harlakenden was the third son of John Harlakenden, a member of the gentry in Kent.³⁸ He became a lawyer and was part of the Earl of Oxford's circle. This Earl, who owned two manor houses in Earls Colne, as his family had done for generations, got into severe financial difficulties and was forced to sell both manors to Harlakenden; the first, the manor of Earls Colne, in 1584 and the second, the manor of Colne Priory, in 1592. This made Roger Harlakenden the most important person in Earls Colne after centuries in which the Earls of Oxford had dominated the village. This change was not accepted without conflict within the village, as is shown by the many legal cases brought against the Harlakendens in the first 20 years in which they possessed the manors.³⁹

On his death in 1602 Roger Harlakenden requested in his will 'that my body be decently buried in the high chancel of Earls Cole aforesaid and that a convenient tomb to be made for me there in the wall at the right hand of the door coming into the said chancel'.⁴⁰ This is the most detailed request for burial location present in the wills and an impressive monument was built that remains today. The reason for this prominent burial location must have been linked to the preceding years of conflict with the Earl of Oxford and his supporters. The Earls had been buried within the Priory for centuries and were inextricably linked to the village. The new lords of the manor, the Harlakendens, did not have this ancestry. By placing his body in a prime position within the parish church, and including a large monument to mark the place, Roger Harlakenden was establishing

35 C. Marsh, "'Common prayer" in England 1560-1640: the view from the pew', *Past and Present*, 171 (2001), 66-94.

36 Coster, 'Microcosm of a community', 132.

37 ERO D/ACW24/94.

38 French and Hoyle, *The character of English rural society*, 84.

39 French and Hoyle, *The character of English rural society*, 89.

40 PROB 11/101/302-303v.

himself as the most important person in the village. It is probable that he believed that this would make it easier for the residents of Earls Colne to go on to accept his descendants as their lords, and for them to move on from their ancient links to the Earls of Oxford.

The burial location of Rodger Harlakenden is unusual: he was attempting to start a dynasty, and so was free to choose his resting place based on factors other than family and place of origin, a freedom that most did not have when deciding upon burial location.

The burial location of those who could not choose

Not everyone could choose their burial location. For many who lived in Earls Colne the decision on their final resting place was made by others. Children comprise part of this group. Although evidence for the burial location of children cannot be found in the wills of Earls Colne, the diaries of Ralph Josselin can help fill this gap. He had the sad task of burying two of his children, the first his 'deare sonne whom layed in the chancel on the North side of the great Tombe.'⁴¹ This refers to his son Ralph who was only ten days old at his death. His daughter, 'my deare Mary', who was eight years old when she died, 'was buried in Earles Colne church by the 2 uppermost seats.'⁴² Ralph Josselin clearly believed that his children should be treated as adults regarding burial location, with his son getting a prime position within the church. It is interesting to note that the age of the child appears not to have had a bearing on burial location, although the sex of the child does, with Ralph being buried in the chancel, in a superior position to his sister Mary down in the body of the church.

Another group who were unable to decide upon their own burial location were those outside, to use Harding's phrase, the 'moral community', such as suicides, traitors and the excommunicated.⁴³ There has been much work on the treatment of suicide victims in early modern England, with the general consensus that although there was much variation in the treatment, and some did suffer the unusual punishment of being buried at a crossroads, many were buried quietly in the parish churchyard.⁴⁴ Josselin refers to suicide victims in his diaries and seems to treat them sympathetically, for example writing that he had 'heard of the sad end of one Rust who drowned him selfe'.⁴⁵ As found elsewhere, there is nothing to suggest that they were buried in particularly shameful locations to make a point to the rest of the people of Earls Colne.

The poorest in society typically had little choice as to where they were buried. Unfortunately evidence could not be found during the course of this research on the burial

41 Josselin, *Diary*, 114.

42 Josselin, *Diary*, 203.

43 Harding, 'Burial on the Margin', 60–2.

44 R.A. Houston, *Punishing the dead? Suicide, lordship and community in Britain, 1500–1830* (Oxford, 2010), 189–222.

45 Josselin, *Diary*, 60. For other reference to suicides see 424, 520, 539, 363.

of paupers in Earls Colne so we can only surmise their probable burial location using evidence from elsewhere. In urban areas where churchyards and churches were often overcrowded, the poorest were sometimes buried extra-parochially, as these burial grounds charged lower fees than to parish churchyards.⁴⁶ The rural nature of Earls Colne meant that their churchyard would not have suffered the same space constraints, and there is no indication that even the poorest were buried away from Earls Colne churchyard.

Conclusion

The large number of wills available from early modern England allows quantitative research such as this to be undertaken and probate evidence is a resource that still has much to offer historians. Further analysis of these wills, correlating gender and occupation to burial location, would be an interesting avenue of research. On a wider scale, more studies should be done on rural areas, as the evidence clearly exists, rather than continuing with the focus on urban burial grounds. The limitations of using testamentary material as a historical source are well established. With regard to understanding burial location preferences, only a minority made wills and of those that did it is difficult to know if their final wishes were carried out. The diaries of Ralph Josselin are an invaluable resource in helping us understand the burial of those who could not chose, but they are unique to Earls Colne.

The main difference between the conclusions drawn here and those of other historians studying burial location in an urban context is that the emphasis in Earls Colne is not on money and social status, but on returning home and on family ties. Perhaps this is a reflection of the rural nature of Earls Colne, in which the sense of community would have been more clearly defined than in closely packed urban parishes. It suggests that in Earls Colne being part of the community in death was more important than social status within the community.

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⁴⁶ Harding, 'And one more', 125.