



## News and events

- **Our next meeting** is on **15 February** when Patrick McNeill and Kris Schug will bring us up to date with their research into 'The Rise and Fall of Wheathampstead School 1965 to 1988'.
- **Combined Hertfordshire Archaeological Societies** will continue their programme of free online talks in 2023. For details, go to <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/combined-hertfordshire-archaeological-societies-31507824621>

## The 'missing' legend?

Many churchyards in Hertfordshire have 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century table tombs surrounded by iron railings. The railings were intended to protect the tomb but have on occasion led to their destruction when seeds from nearby trees (usually ash or sycamore) have germinated within the railings and proved difficult to remove. In four Hertfordshire churchyards where this has happened (Aldenham, Cheshunt, Tewin and Watford), it has given rise to a local legend.



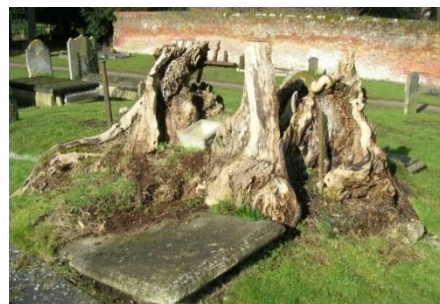
Tomb with trees in Aldenham churchyard

Each legend varies in detail but the story is always roughly the same, namely that the individual buried there was an atheist who declared before decease that if there was an afterlife a tree would grow out of their tomb. Indeed, Ben Wangford of Watford is said to have requested that something be buried with him that might germinate as confirmation. In the course of time a fig tree emerged and became a

celebrated tourist attraction. At Tewin, Lady Anne Grimston made no such provision but nevertheless seven trees sprang up.

I've mentioned four locations, but there could have been a fifth. When I first came to Wheathampstead in the mid-seventies, there stood on the north side of St Helen's Church, not far from the nave north door, a magnificent tall ash tree which had demolished a table tomb, smashed its top slab and actually devoured portions of its railings.

In the course of time the tree became diseased (possibly because churchyard waste was burned at intervals within the remaining railings) and it had to be felled. Today the spot is marked by smashed grave slabs and, in the autumn, a large clump of toadstools.



The remains of the tree and a broken slab

I have not discovered any legend associated with this tree. But who knows? There may yet be village folk who remember their parents telling them the story of how the tree came to grow out of the tomb, and the moral it underlined.

Mike Martin