

## Hidden Gravestone in Public View



In autumn 2013, a bonfire in the churchyard at St Mary's church, North Marston accidentally set fire to a tree. When the ashes were removed, it revealed a cluster of grave-stones that had been hidden for decades.



One of the graves uncovered was that of John Bett Ward who died in 1887 at the age of 76, having served the parish as both clerk and sexton for over 25 years. Later in life, he appears to have fallen on hard times. Writing in the parish magazine, the vicar Rev Samuel James said:

*"He would wile away the hours in perfect solitude in the church performing on the harmonium, and no doubt dreaming of the old times before he was driven to parish allowance and almost destitution."*

The reason that Ward's headstone had remained hidden for so many years was because of its location, on the extreme eastern edge of the churchyard; by the time of his burial the churchyard had become seriously overcrowded after centuries of internments, a situation of which, as sexton, Ward would have been all too aware. As a remedy, in 1871 Rev Samuel James persuaded people to sell the adjoining land cheaply so as to enable the churchyard to be extended to the north. Ward the sexton must have been pleased with this news and quietly anticipated that when his time came, there would be a space available for his plot in the "new" churchyard. *But then, in 1876, Rev James built his private boys school (Schorne College) on the purchased land, so denying its access for burials for over sixty years.* Perhaps feeling somewhat guilty, Rev James took the unusual step of paying for Ward's memorial stone.

And now John Bett Ward's headstone has been moved to a more prominent position adjacent to the west door of the church tower. No longer hidden in the wilderness of the distant churchyard boundary, he enjoys a more public location, fitting to his years of service to the parish, 132 years after his death.

