

A place for memories

The Columbarium at St Clement's churchyard, by Cathy Le Feuvre

At the top end of St Clement's churchyard there is what looks like a small white stone classical temple, complete with three front pillars, two angel statues and between them a family crest.

This is the parish's new 'columbarium', a resting place for the ashes of loved ones, but that coat of arms is a clue to its history.

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It's the emblem of a branch of the local Labey family. The sepulchre was commissioned in the 1800s by one Marie Labey as a family mausoleum, and specifically to commemorate her husband Thomas Labey (1810-68).

'Originally the family were going to give bags of grain to the poor every year and we believe that's how they got permission for it to be built in the most dramatic position in the churchyard,' said Canon David Shaw, the present-day Rector of St Clement.

However, although the burial vault, which extends about eight feet beneath the building, was used for many years, the links with the Labey name disappeared. In fact, for years it was known as the 'Pixley Sepulchre', named after the stonemason who built it.

At the start of the Occupation, coffins that were in place on several levels within the vault were removed and the sepulchre fell into disrepair. A couple of decades later there was talk of demolition.

The building was dangerous, and had become a dumping ground, as Canon Shaw explained:

'The door and window were blocked up in the 1960s, there was no roof on it, it was full of ivy, two trees were growing through it, one on the edge and one in the middle of the building. When we started to restore it a few years ago we dug out about 16 tons of rubble - lawnmowers, fences, all sorts!'

Today, the vault is restored to its former glory, thanks to a series of grants and donations which have covered the cost of renovation - around £10,000.

Inside the small white building, thought to be constructed of Portland Stone, the interior walls are now lime mortared, the new door and window are made from sustainably sourced hardwood and Welsh slates on the roof were reclaimed from other local building projects. New railings encircle the building.

The next phase of the restoration will see the installation of white marble walling containing niches for up to two urns. Some families may choose instead to have ashes interred in the vault below and others may be scattered in a general resting place within the building. There are also plans for memorial stones, which will be part of the paving around the vault.

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'In Jersey, a lot of us will have relatives who have been buried elsewhere and there's nowhere in memory of them, so this is a place where families will be able to have a granite plaque to remember their loved ones,' Canon Shaw said.

It is Jersey's only columbarium and now the connections to the original Labey family are also restored.

For parish resident Diana Mossop it's a very special place. Her mother was a Labey and her grandfather, Captain George Thomas Labey, lived at St Clement's Farm, a place closely connected to the original family members who commissioned the vault.

As a member of the St Clement's congregation, Diana has taken a keen interest in the restoration of the sepulchre, and she's intending for it to be her final resting place. Although, in common with columbaria across the world, most spaces in the vault will be 'rented', Diana is one of a just a handful who has been granted the privilege of a place in perpetuity.

'I love it so much,' Diana said, 'It's very special to me and I think being there will be fitting, because of its origins. It's wonderful - and rather beautiful!'

