

## The Search for the Remains of George Vason

By Richard Gosling



'A Chieftain of Tongataboo' - frontispiece to *Life of the late George Vason of Nottingham* by James Orange (1840)

George Vason was born in 1773 and is said to have come from North Muskham, a village situated to the north of Newark-on-Trent, between the Great North Road (mostly replaced by the A1 these days) and the River Trent. The village is still rural in character, notwithstanding the presence of a nearby Travelodge.

Vason moved to Nottingham, where, at some point, he was 'induced by a pious acquaintance, to attend a place of worship.' The end result of this was that, in 1796, a bricklayer by trade, he went out to the Tonga archipelago (known as the Friendly Islands due to the cordial welcome that Captain James Cook had received on his visit

there in 1773) with a party of missionaries – an endeavour organised by the London Missionary Society.

Once established there, and after befriending one of the chiefs, he seems to have gradually adopted the native customs, dressing accordingly, becoming heavily tattooed, taking at least two wives, acquiring land and becoming an important personage.

The situation was to deteriorate, however. After several years' residence, and following fighting between different factions and a plot to kill him, Vason was fortunate to be rescued by the Royal Admiral, a ship originally owned by the East India Company (and possibly still under contract to them) that had called on the islands. Arriving back in England in 1802, he finally returned, after considering other plans, to Nottingham, marrying Mary Leever at St Mary's Church on 15 October 1804 and eventually becoming Town Gaoler - a position that he held from 1820 until his death.

Vason died on 23 July 1838, his wife having died less than a year earlier. They do not appear to have had any children, though there are people alive today who can trace their lineage back to George's siblings.

One obituary, printed in the *Perthshire Courier* on 23 August 1838, read as follows: 'Deaths...On Monday week, aged sixty-five, Mr George Vason, for eighteen years governor of the Nottingham Town Jail. In 1794, he sailed in the missionary ship Duff to the South Sea Islands, being engaged as a mechanic [manual labourer] to the expedition. He was left, with others, in the island of Tongataboo, where he was induced to join the natives, and lived with them in a state of savage life for several years; with great difficulty he escaped, and, when taken on board an English vessel, could scarcely recollect enough of the language to make himself known.'

Vason 'wrote' about his experiences in his book, *An Authentic Narrative of Four Years' Residence at Tongataboo: One of the Friendly Islands, in the South-Sea*, which was published in 1810. According to Southey, 'The book was not written by George, but taken down in short hand from his conversation, and then composed by a member of the established church...Parts of the history have been slurred over, which, if George had indited in the true spirit of one confessing his sins, would have been more clearly detailed.' The Royal Collection Trust names the ghostwriter as Solomon Piggott.

Following Vason's death in 1838, the book was reissued (in 1840) with additional content by the Rev. James Orange, who states in a preface that, 'though by some means a *part* of the present work was published thirty years ago, it was crowded with gross mistakes, &c., and in many respects incomplete.'

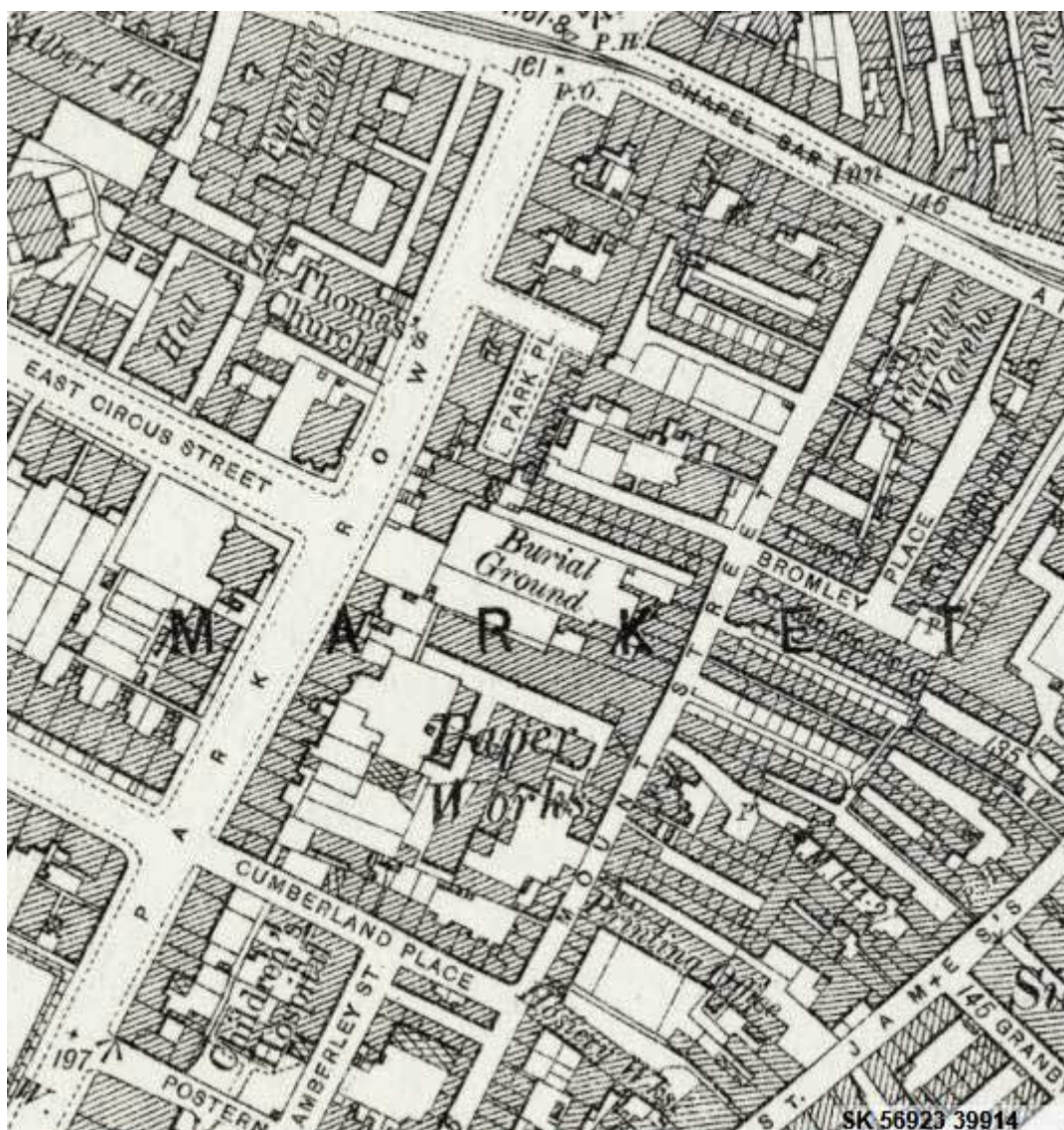
The content of the 1840 edition is itself called into question by John T Godfrey and James Ward's *The History of Friar Lane Baptist Church, Nottingham*, which points out some inaccuracies in Orange's 'biographical notice' and says that he, 'omitted certain portions of the [1810] text of a moralising nature, and footnotes, with the result that Vason is made to appear a worse character than, under the circumstances, he really was.'

Orange comments of Vason in later life that, 'In his office, he was remarkable for the strictness of his discipline; and was a man of very active life. Unhappily he was subject to a nervous irritability, by which he was at times betrayed into unbecoming bursts of passion; this however was only a *momentary* ebullition, but his philanthropy was an abiding principle. His countenance was marked with an habitual gravity; approximating to a melancholy thoughtfulness, and he was seldom seen to smile.' His death is described as 'awful and sudden...He was seized with *erysipelas* [a skin infection] in his face, attended with the most agonizing pain, which so fearfully affected his brain, that it overthrew and laid prostrate his reason; his manner was then the violence of madness, till exhausted nature resigned her functions, and in dreadful agonies he expired...'

In a review in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 18 November 1864, of a pamphlet by 'our respected townsman' Reuben Young called "Recollections of Some Leading events and Extraordinary Characters" (based on two lectures given at The People's Hall on Heathcoat Street), Mr Young is quoted as recalling the 'doubt and ridicule' of others 'at the extraordinary adventures of George Vason, a man with whom I was personally acquainted; and a more truthful man I never knew.'

The truth of the matter for the historian of today is that we will probably never know if any of George's tales grew in the telling.

George and his wife were interred at Mount Street Burial Ground, which was originally known as Bearward Lane Burying Ground, Bearward Lane having been the former name for Mount Street.



Detail from a late nineteenth/early twentieth century OS map showing the location of the Mount Street Burial Ground

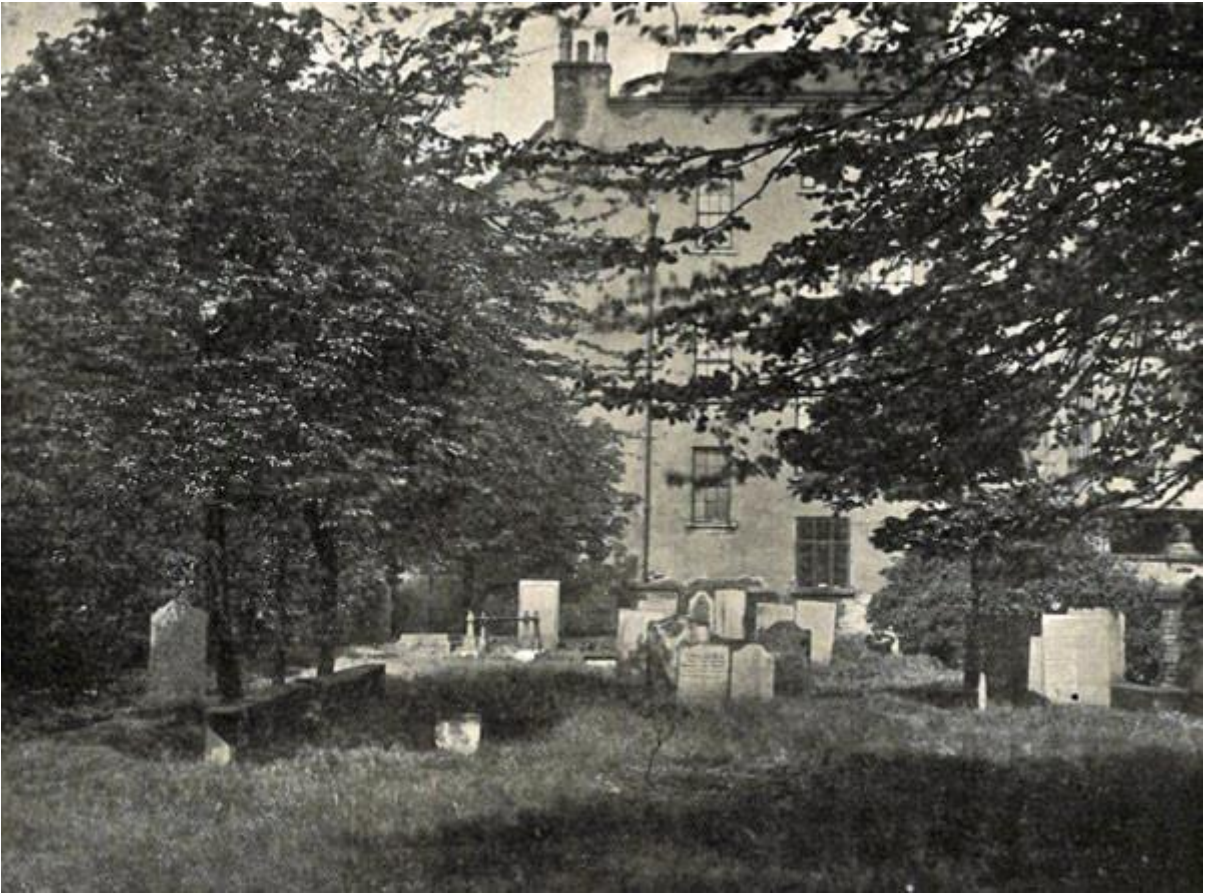
Godfrey and Ward's *The History of Friar Lane Baptist Church, Nottingham* gives the year of the earliest known reference to the burial ground as 1724, though it seems to have been in use by Baptists for some years prior to this. It was primarily associated with the Friar Lane Baptist Chapel, which was located just to the south of where the eastern side of Maid Marian Way has its junction with Friar Lane, and, from 1815 onwards, its successor, the George Street Particular Baptist Church. The latter building survives today as the Nottingham Arts Theatre. There seems to be some debate over the extent of George Vason's involvement with both organisations.

An article in the *Nottingham Review* dated 12 July 1850 described the Mount Street Burial Ground as having 'a most inconvenient and unpleasant entrance, through a confined alley', noting that, 'since the opening of the new [General] cemetery, it is fast falling into disuetude.' On a visit to the burial ground, the author(s) note the

presence of 'several very ancient gravestones', with the oldest found on the visit having a date of 1710 (in his 1911 *Nottingham Graveyard Guide*, Alfred Stapleton gives the year of the earliest surviving memorial at that time as 1732, while a 1937 *Nottingham Evening Post* article informed its readers that the 'earliest legible inscription when the tombstones were scrutinised some years ago' related to someone who died in 1757).



Entrance leading to the burial ground, 1902; Hamel & Co.



View of burial ground looking west, 1902; George Pendry



Undated view of burial ground looking west



View of burial ground looking east, 1902; Hamel & Co.; note the grave with railings on the right, mentioned in the text of this article



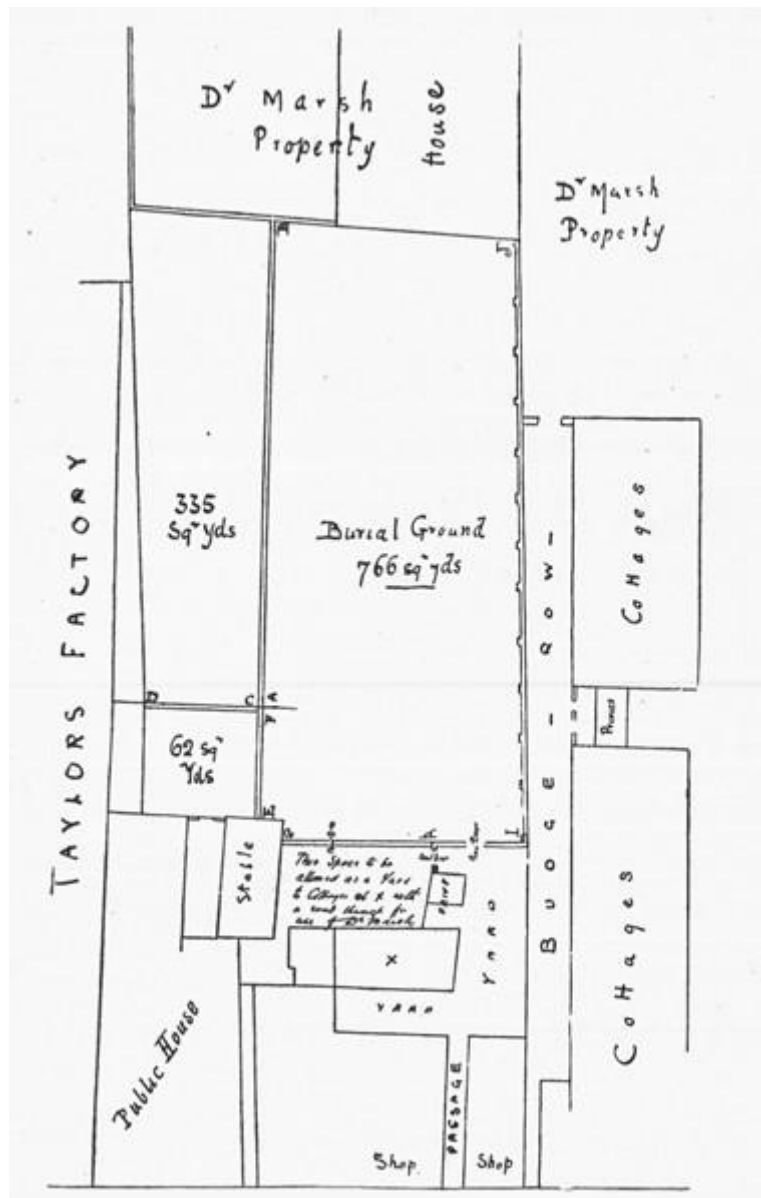
View of burial ground looking east, 1889 or 1903; Thomas William Hammond

After debates about public health issues relating to burial grounds, and following the series of Burial Acts from 1852 onwards, interments in traditional inner-city burial places began to be restricted. The Mount Street Burial Ground was closed in 1856, other than for burials in 'family vaults and walled graves which can be opened without the disturbance of soil which has been buried in, and in which each coffin shall be embedded in powdered charcoal and separately entombed in an airtight manner.' The last interment was in 1876.

In May 1862, an agreement relating to land, property and other structures in the vicinity of the burial ground was entered into between 'John Charles Lory Marsh Doctor of Medicine Nottingham' and the Trustees of the Mount Street Burial Ground (though it was later discovered that no new Trustees had, in fact, been properly appointed since 1791). Among the terms and conditions of the agreement was the following:

'The burial ground...to be levelled and planted with Trees and Shrubs and such of the headstones arranged along the wall as the Trustees or the representatives of those interred may give permission to be so removed.'

The lease of one particular 'piece of ground' was 'subject to the burial ground being kept during the entire period of the said [999 year] lease in good repair by Dr Marsh or the occupier of the land for the time being.'



Facsimile of plan of burial ground and adjoining-property, 1862

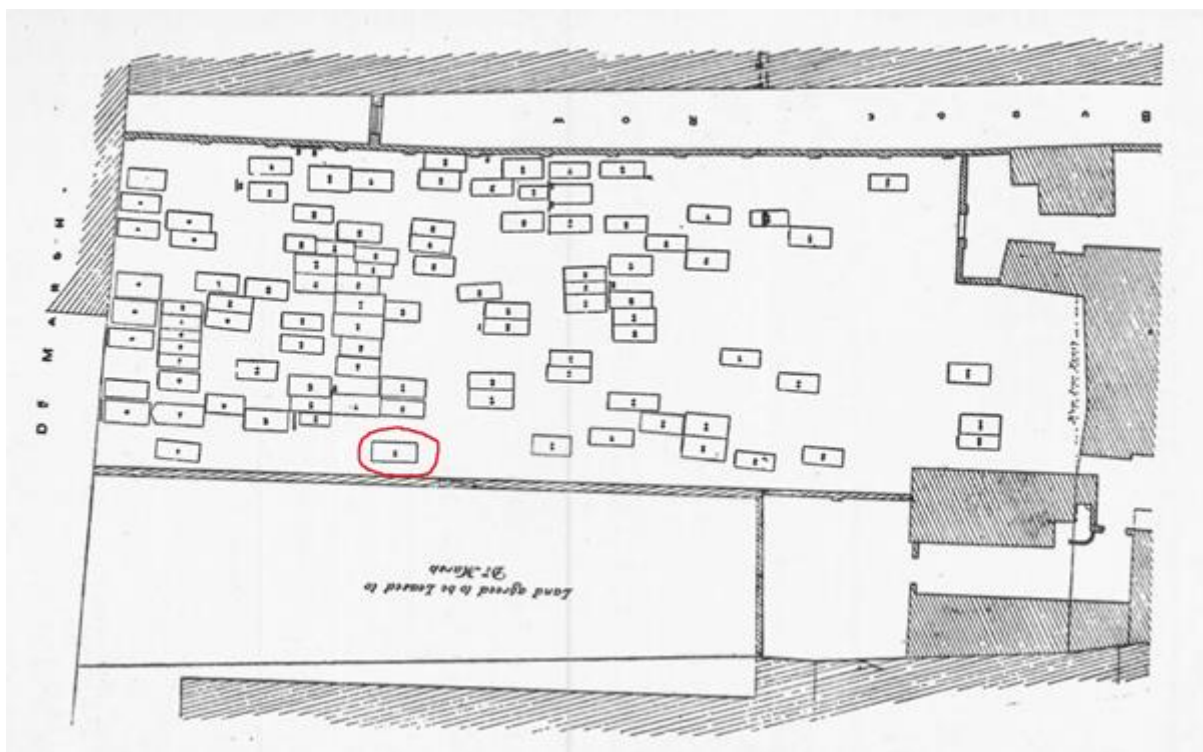
At a church meeting in the same month, it had been resolved that 'the offer made by Dr Marsh...be accepted...with the understanding that for all future time the burying Ground shall not be appropriated to any other purpose than that to which it has hitherto been devoted.'

All well and good, but the condition concerning the relocation of headstones was to cause the church no small amount of trouble.

In late 1862, a survey of the burial ground was made by Francis Williamson. This work was itemised on a subsequent bill to the trustees of the burial ground as, 'To making a careful and minute survey of Mount Street Burial Ground and the Land and Premises connected with and abutting thereon including dimensions and particulars

for determining and fixing the various tombs, memorial stones and graves and preparing a Plan and Reference'.

Writing some forty years later in reference to the survey, the authors of *The History of Friar Lane Baptist Church* noted that, 'Since this plan was made the greater part of the headstones have been moved and arranged along the north, south and west walls.' As well as a reproduction of the plan and reference, the authors also included transcriptions of the eighty memorial inscriptions that were legible at that time. These transcriptions had previously been published in 1899 in the book *Monumental Inscriptions in the Baptist Burial Ground Mount Street Nottingham* by James Ward, with the notable exception of the inscription on the gravestone of George and Mary Vason.



The 1862 Williamson plan; the site of the grave of George and Mary Vason (according to the numerical key that goes with the plan) is circled in red (author's addition)

In an article entitled "The Weekday Cross at Nottingham, and its associations", published in 1917, J Potter Briscoe claimed that 'no stone marks the spot where he [Vason] was buried.' However, in the listing of inscriptions in *The History of Friar Lane Baptist Church, Nottingham* (1903), the entry for Mary and George Vason records a memorial that was present at the time, with the description 'Flat, moss-grown, stone near South wall'. Elsewhere in that book, it is stated that the stone was 'only recently found' (borne out by the fact that it is not included in Ward's 1899 publication).

Perhaps it was moved sometime between 1903 and 1917. *The History of Friar Lane Baptist Church, Nottingham* gives the inscription as follows:

As a testimony of Conjugal  
Affection this last pledge  
of respect is paid to  
MARY the wife of  
GEORGE VASON  
who died the 25th Day of  
November 1837,  
Aged 60 years  
[Three illegible lines.]  
The above  
GEORGE VASON  
on the 23rd of July 1838  
departed this life  
in the 66 Year of his Age.

Photos in several publications show the Vasons' grave as being surrounded by railings and ornate pillars. This seems odd given the descriptions previously referred to. Comparison of photos of the burial ground in which the grave with railings can be seen with the 1862 Williamson plan showing the location of the monuments recorded at that time (including Vason's) only serves to add to the confusion over the exact location of the grave within the burial ground and the nature of its ornamentation and furniture.

The grave with railings and posts seems more likely to be that of Elizabeth and Richard Beresford, which is described in the inscription listing in the Godfrey and Ward book as being a 'Large flat stone within railings.' The book also contains a footnote describing the arms and crests on the pillars supporting the railings, which appears to link in to the detail that can be seen on the clearest photograph of the grave in question.

The agreement that the burial ground's trustees had made with Dr Marsh did not appear to involve any change in ownership with regard to the burial ground itself, but ensuing works seem to have resulted in confusion and controversy. A correspondent to *The Nottingham and Midland Counties Daily Express* in 1863, signing him or herself, 'One who has a dear friend buried there', wrote, in the edition dated 16 March, '...alas! the minister and trustees, without submitting it to a number

of the relatives of those whose remains are buried there have taken to themselves the right and power to let the burying ground, by lease, or indenture, to a certain medical gentleman of this town for a term of 999 years, at an annual rent of £1, with the right to that gentleman to turn the same from a burying ground to a garden of recreation or a bed of flowers, which I am sorry to say he has done, and removed nearly all the grave-stones from the heads of the graves, covered up all the graves, and converted it to a pleasure ground. May I ask, sir, if this is the work of Christian men!'

The same newspaper printed a letter from JAS. Edwards and W. C. Lock just over a week later, in its edition of 24 March, in which those individuals stated, 'Allow us through the medium of your paper to state that the Mount-street burial ground has not been let, nor disposed of in any way whatever, and that the trustees of the property, some of whom have their own family vaults in the ground, will take ample care that it shall be kept sacred to the purposes to which it has hitherto been devoted. They may also add that as soon as the improvements now in progress under the supervision of Mr F. Williamson, architect, are sufficiently advanced, all persons interested will be consulted as to the way in which the memorial stones shall be finally arranged.'

In April 1863, a church meeting took place to consider the condition of the burial ground, and in December of the same year, Dr Marsh informed the church that he was 'willing to replace in their original position any or all of the Memorial Stones at the above Burial Ground if called upon by you so to do and will pay all expenses attendant thereon.'

Finally, in July 1865, Dr Marsh, with the agreement of the church (with whom disputes had arisen), assigned the interest he had acquired in 1862 to the Nottingham Corporation, the assignment taking place on condition that the Corporation keep the burial ground 'with the boundary walls thereof in good and complete repair and condition, and properly levelled and planted with trees and shrubs, and cultivate the same in a proper manner.'

A Mount Street resident, Charles Hinton, wrote to the *Nottingham Daily Express* in July 1886 to say, 'In reading the report of the last meeting of the Nottingham Town Council, I noticed the Public Parks and Recreation Committee had obtained Mount-street burial ground, to open it for the benefit of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood.' Noting its then limited opening hours, he goes on to say, 'Surely if it is to be opened at all, I think it should be under the same regulations as the other

recreation grounds in the borough, and not for an hour or two a day. The children in this locality are greatly in need of a play-ground. Perhaps some one in authority will kindly let us know when we are to have it open regularly.'

In March 1888, a number of trustees were appointed to ensure that the conditions of the lease were fulfilled, and at around this time, the Kyrle Society seems to have become involved in the management of the burial ground. Founded in 1875 by Miranda Hill, a social reformer, the Kyrle Society's aim was to provide the working class poor with access to art, books and open spaces - in its own words, to 'Bring Beauty Home to the People'. As part of this, it sought to encourage the use of disused burial grounds as public recreation grounds.

This appears, at least initially, not to have gone too smoothly. Reporting on a Town Council meeting, the *Nottingham Evening Post* of 1 September 1890 noted, 'Ald. Barber [who had relatives buried there] said that some time ago he was passing along Park-row and heard a great commotion of shouting, the playing of an inferior band, and other disturbances. Looking over the palisades he saw all this sort of thing going on upon this burial ground in Mount-street, and he went round to the place. He found an enormous number of people kicking up a tremendous row, and there was great disorder...It was one thing to make a burial ground open for persons to quietly walk about there, or to sit down and rest, as was the case in Barker-gate for instance, but it was quite another thing to throw a place of that kind open to all sorts of disorder.'

In its 11 July 1889 edition, the *Nottingham Daily Express* gives us a fuller idea of the burial ground and its condition at that time:

'To reach the ground, the visitor has to enter Cranmers-place, Mount Street, through a low archway, and at the end of the yard he is confronted with a brick wall, and a substantial weather-beaten door. Entrance effected the eye falls on a small heap of tins and other refuse which have apparently rested there for some time, and then turns to the more congenial and refreshing aspect of this secluded burial ground. A plot of green turf, dotted here and there with plain stone or slate slabs, some upright – the silent sentinels of the centuries – others recumbent, with here and there a few trees and a rickety seat or two, a fringe of bushes all around, and above on three of its sides the windows of three houses which closely hem it in – such is the scene. On the west side the wall referred to is backed by the plain regularity of factory architecture, and no glimpse of any thoroughfare is visible.'

An entry in the Nottingham Corporation accounts for the year ending 31 March 1902 confirms that the Kyrle Society was still theoretically managing the burial ground at that time. The record for the payment made to them reads, 'Keeping in order the Barker Gate, Mount Street, and Walnut Tree Lane Burial Grounds, one year, £60,' though the authors of *The History of Friar Lane Baptist Church, Nottingham* state, 'we can aver that during the past two years [c. 1900-02], judging from our own periodical visits and enquiries made in the neighbourhood, that nothing, or next to nothing, has been done in the way of keeping the ground in order.'

A story in the 24 September 1918 edition of the *Nottingham Journal* described the Mount Street Burial Ground as being 'dilapidated and uncared-for'. A decade later, in 1928, J Holland Walker called it 'a dreary enough place' and 'little more than a cat run'. George Vason's story, however, he viewed as being, 'as romantic as anything that even Defoe conceived', and he states that Vason was buried 'with much sorrow and honour'.

What was the story of Mount Street Burial Ground in its final years of existence? I knew that it had been built over - it lay where the entrance to Grosvenor Casinos towards the top of Maid Marian Way is today - but what had happened to the remains of the people who had been interred there, and the associated memorials?



Image showing the footprint of the Mount Street Burial Ground superimposed on a modern-day street plan



View towards the former site of the Mount Street Burial Ground, 2024 (author's photo)

It was a 1938 edition of a publication called *The Baptist Quarterly* that gave me my first clue as to the whereabouts of the remains. After noting that the burial ground was 'now to disappear, as the new street from Park Row to Friar Lane [essentially an extension of Granby Street, which itself no longer exists] will pass over its site', the editorial piece went on to say that 'The remains contained in the graves are to be removed by the Nottingham Corporation to the Nottingham General Cemetery'.



Detail from an OS map c. 1940s/1950s showing the section of Granby Street that was built over the burial ground

Most of Nottingham City Council's historic records for its cemeteries and crematoria are available at the website Deceased Online, but records for individuals who I knew had been buried at the Mount Street Burial Ground, and whose remains, it appeared, must have been removed to the General Cemetery, were conspicuous by their absence. Several people at the Council who I corresponded with were unable to explain why this might be the case and were unable or unwilling to assist further.

The National Archives held a number of records relating to the recording of the removal of graves and tombstones from disused and closed burial grounds, but the Mount Street Burial Ground didn't seem to be represented in those records either (though the Broad Marsh and Holy Trinity burial grounds were). This even though the Town Clerk had, at the time, mentioned this requirement in newspaper notices announcing the intention to remove the remains.

It was newspapers, accessed via the British Newspaper Archive, that were to prove a significant source of information.

The *Nottingham Evening Post* of 28 August 1937 alluded to the fact that the burial ground was to disappear and described its location thus: 'The old burial ground lies between Mount-street and Park-row, but extends to neither. The approach is through an archway leading to Grammers-place, from which a door in the end wall gives access to the burial ground. On the Ordnance map of 1882 this appears as Cranmers-place. About 1899 the old name plate indicating Grammers-place was re-fixed.' We are also told that the burial ground's 'peculiarly secluded situation denies a view of it except from the rear upper windows of premises in Park-row.'

Florence M Hinton, a correspondent in the 20 September 1937 edition of the *Post*, offered some interesting reminiscences about the 'old Baptist Cemetery': '...I was born at 47, Mount-street. When I was a child the old cemetery was opened as a recreation ground on Sundays only for the people of the immediate neighbourhood, the Castle grounds at that time being closed on the Sabbath...It would be interesting to know by whose permission it was opened, and why it was so suddenly closed...My brother often went to play with the boy whose father kept the Sir Francis Burdett Inn [on Mount Street], and they used to climb over the wall into the cemetery and play there.'

This correspondence, in turn, prompted a letter from a Mrs Agnes Millwood of 2, Grammers-place, in which she recalled, '...it is 52 years since I came to live in Mount-street, and I well remember the cemetery being open on Sundays as a recreation ground. It was always kept nice in those days, with a large flower bed in the centre, but it was not opened many times. Mount-street was much different then with quite a lot of shops, factories and business places. It was almost like Stoney-street at dinner time. There were nice houses with flower gardens in front. It was one of the nicest streets in the town. I have lived by the side of the cemetery 36 years and brought up 11 children in this house and I am very sorry it has got to come down to make way for a new street. But it will not be a forgotten corner for many years by my children and myself for we have spent many happy days in it.'

A *Nottingham Evening Post* article of 8 December 1937, under the headline 'Big Nottm. Re-Interment Plan', noted that, 'Nottingham Corporation have to-day given notice of the acquisition of the old Baptist burial ground in Mount-street, and of the intention to remove the remains of all bodies buried there, such bodies to be reinterred in another burial ground or cemetery.'

The article proceeded to give a history of the burial ground, mentioning several of the more notable individuals interred therein, including Vason, Alderman John Houseman Barber (a three-time Mayor of Nottingham, present at (and injured in) the Reform Bill riots of 1831, who had been the subject of an assassination attempt in 1820) and 'George Caunt, a hairdresser, who shot a constable at Malin Hill in August, 1800, while attempting to evade arrest...He poisoned himself, and was buried in a suicide's grave in Lenton Sands, but his friends removed his body by night to the old Mount-street burial ground.'

The article went on to say that 'When the notice expires [after 2 months], work on removal from the 96 graves will be started immediately...A hoarding is to be erected around the burial ground, and each of the graves will be opened in turn, the remains, where necessary, being placed in rough coffins for reinterment probably at the General Cemetery. The work is to be conducted in the day time, and it is expected that a month will suffice to clear the site.'

Further confirmation, then, that the remains were to be reinterred at the General Cemetery, and an approximate indication of when this might be expected to take place.

The Corporation's official notice gave 'any person who is an heir, executor, administrator or relative of any deceased person' the opportunity to inform the Corporation of their intention to have the relevant remains removed to another graveyard or cemetery.

Interestingly, in light of discoveries that I was to make further down the line, the notice also stated that 'Every monument or tombstone relating to the remains of any deceased person...is required to be removed and re-erected at the expense of the Corporation at the place of re-interment of such remains or at such place as the Nottingham County Court may direct on the application (if any) of such heir executor administrator or relative as aforesaid, or failing such application on the application of the Corporation and the Corporation are required to cause to be made a record of such monuments and tombstones *and of their situation when re-erected* [my italics] shewing the particulars respecting each monument or tombstone as a separate entry and such record is required to be deposited at the General Register Office, Somerset House, London.'

The *Nottingham Journal* of 9 December 1937 also reported the two months' notice given by the Corporation, noting that 'the actual date on which the gruesome task of removing the remains will begin is not known' and describing the burial ground as an 'obscure, dreary looking Garden of Rest'. Like the *Evening Post*, the *Journal* listed Vason, Barber and Caunt as well-known interments. It added that Alderman Barber 'read the Riot Act on the day that the Castle was burned down'.

Another article about the impending reinterments appeared in the *Nottingham Journal* of 11 February 1938, with the headline, 'Old City Burial Ground to be Disturbed'. This revealed that, following expiration of the notice of 8 December, '...in no case has advantage been taken of the opportunity given to heirs, executors, administrators or relatives of any dead person...to notify the Corporation of their intention to undertake the removal of such remains to another burial ground or cemetery.' The *Journal* was also given to understand that 'the arrangement of the new resting place in the General Cemetery has not been decided upon.' To the previous list of well-known interments, it added the name of Alderman Octavius Thomas Oldknow - another former (twice) Mayor of Nottingham.

The *Nottingham Journal* of 10 March 1938 carried a report on the commencement of the reinterment proceedings: 'Active preparations are being made at the old Baptist burial ground in Mount-street, Nottingham, for the removal of the remains contained in 90 [as opposed to the figure of 96 mentioned in the *Evening Post* article of 8 December 1937] graves for re-interment in the Nottingham General Cemetery. During this week Corporation workmen have been engaged in digging down for remains, and to their surprise they have found little trace of coffins, age having destroyed virtually everything but the bones of the dead. The workmen are wearing special boots and gloves, but there is little to trouble them. The bones are being placed in wooden receptacles ready for reinterment in a huge grave ten feet deep, which has been specially reserved in the General Cemetery. Progress necessarily is slow and it is expected that reinterments will take place gradually. The first receptacles will be ready in a day or two.'

There was a further report on the relocation of the bodies in the *Nottingham Journal* of 11 July 1938, which revealed that, 'Accounts connected with the removal of 713 bodies from the old Mount-street Baptist Cemetery to the Nottingham General Cemetery have been approved by the Works and Ways Committee of the Nottingham City Council.' This mention of the Works and Ways Committee was to prove useful in seeking out further information about the reinterments.

At this point, I realised that I was reaching the limits of my own research skills. Keen to finally discover the specific location of the reburials and to see if there were any physical memorials marking the spot, I turned to Nottinghamshire Archives and availed myself of their paid research service.

Along with some background information, I submitted the following request:

*'I would like you to consult the following records to see if you can find any evidence of the [Mount Street] reinterments generally, and, in particular, to find out where George Vason was reinterred:*

*The General Cemetery records for March to August 1938 (or to the end of 1938 if you think that would be useful) [and] The City Council Committee minutes for a) Works and Ways and b) Parks, for whatever time period you think would potentially be most fruitful given the initial research time constraints.*

*It is my hope that you will be able to help me to locate the remains of the people who were reinterred in the General Cemetery - in particular, the grave of George Vason - including their tombstones, if they still exist.'*

The response provided some impressive detail, particularly given that I had only paid for a limited amount of research time.

The General Cemetery indexes were searched for mentions of George Vason, but without success. Similarly, no mention of the Baptist Burial Ground or the General Cemetery could be found in the Nottingham Corporation Parks Committee minutes for 1937-1938. The Corporation Works and Ways Committee minutes, however, bore fruit. The research report elaborated as follows:

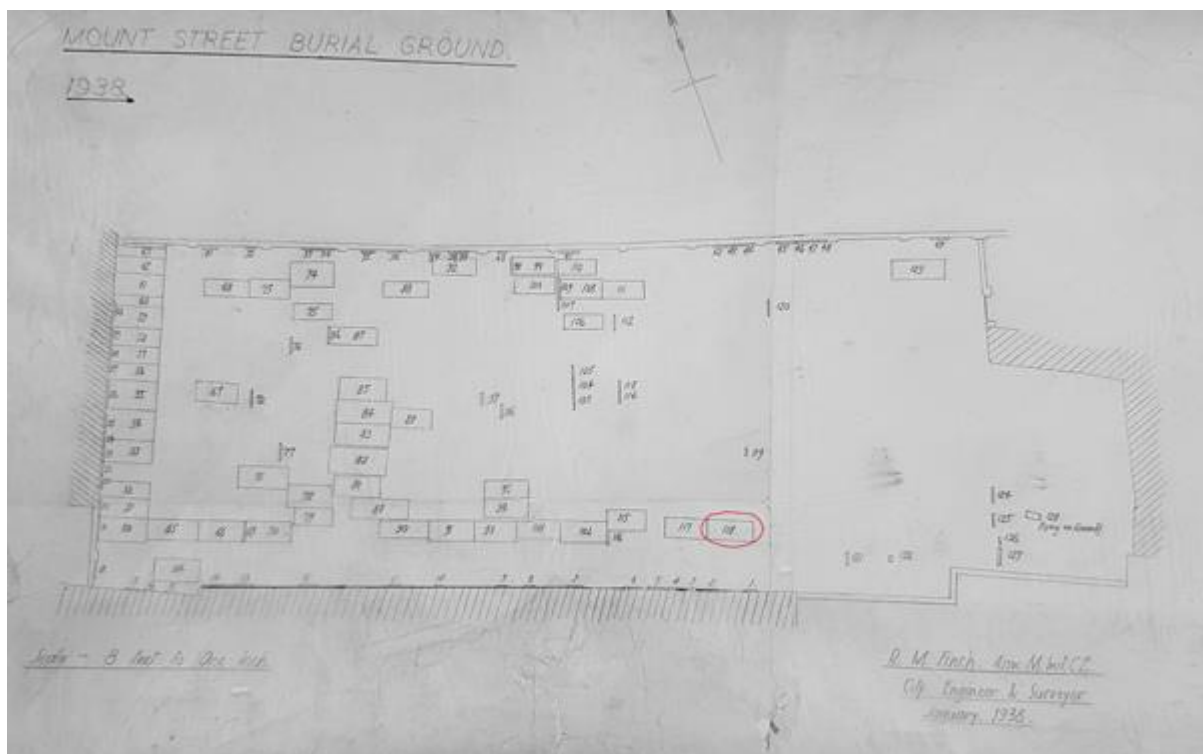
*'They recorded under a meeting of the Claims Sub-Committee on 30th April 1937 that, as part of the Nottingham Corporation Act 1935 work to construct a new street from Mount Street to Park Row, the Corporation would purchase land in the General Cemetery and re-inter the bodies from the Baptist Burial Ground. They also agreed, under the same minute, that "a flat stone is to be laid stating that the remains of the bodies removed from the Mount Street Baptist Burial Ground were reinterred here in 1937 [as we already know, the reinterments actually took place in 1938]".'*

Particularly exciting was the mention of the stone that the Works and Ways Committee had noted was to be laid. I now knew that, assuming that the plans

weren't subsequently deviated from, there would be at least one physical memorial for me to find, assuming that the exact location of the reinterments could be identified.

The Works and Ways minutes '*further recorded, under a meeting of the Claims Sub-Committee on 8th July 1938, that...the City Engineer had moved 713 bodies and agreed the sum of £188 for re-interment in the General Cemetery*'.

The researcher also consulted a list of the Baptist Burial Ground headstones surviving at the time of the reinterments (including descriptions) and an accompanying plan, both dated 1938 and prepared by R M Finch, the City Engineer. The documents confirmed that the Vason stone (described simply as a 'stone slab', as opposed to the Beresford grave mentioned earlier, which is referred to as a 'Stone vault with Cast-iron Pillars and Rails') was one of those still present. It was shown as being complete and in '*an existing row, although many other headstones were shown as having been removed to the edges of the cemetery*', but in a different location to that shown on the Williamson plan.



The 1938 plan by R M Finch; the location of the Vason grave as determined at the time of this survey (circled in red - author's addition) differs from that given in the earlier Williamson plan

Interestingly, whoever transcribed the inscription this time around succeeded in interpreting the lines relating to George's wife, Mary, that had been marked as illegible when originally published in 1899:

Favour is deceitful and beauty  
is vain but a Woman that feareth  
The Lord shall be praised  
Proverbs 13. 30.

As a final action, and in following the trail of the £188 sum agreed for the re-interments, the archives researcher consulted the General Cemetery Order Books, noting the following information:

*'The payment was receipted on the 5th September 1938 and included the cost of the land as well as the expenses of re-interment. The entry also cross-referenced an earlier entry in the same Order Book for Friday, April 1st 1938 which indicated the removal of the bodies took place between March 11th and April 1st 1938.'*

Crucially, the earlier entry also gave grave number and plot details. This meant that a further round of research could be used to check the General Cemetery Grave Registers to see if separate interment numbers had been allocated to each reinterment, which could then be used to find burial certificates. In the absence of interment numbers, it was still likely that it would be possible, using the General Cemetery plans, to locate the site of the reburials.

The end was in sight. I duly commissioned the final piece of research and awaited the results.

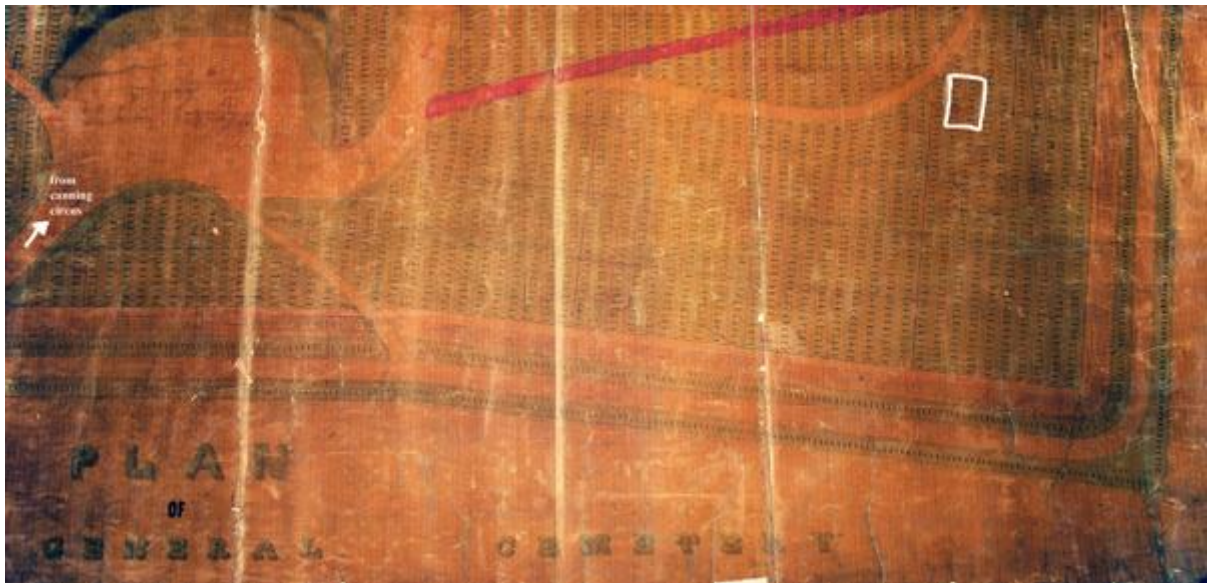
The ensuing report, when I received it, was bittersweet.

The grave registers, it transpired, did not list individual interments for those whose remains had been relocated to the General Cemetery. The wording under each grave number referred only to 'Mount Street Burials'. The researcher concluded, *'We must therefore assume that there is no single marked plot for any one person and there was no attempt, at the point of reburial, to identify or distinguish any one individual.'* This was disappointing, to say the least.

The good news was that the sixteen purchased graves had been located using the relevant site plans, which showed, *'...all sixteen purchased graves adjacent to each other in a rectangular shape'*, suggesting, the researcher concluded, *'that the bodies were buried in a single space, probably simultaneously.'* In other words, a communal grave containing the remains of the 713 individuals originally interred at the Mount

Street Burial Ground - the 'huge grave ten feet deep' that the *Nottingham Journal* had mentioned.

Along with some other material, the researcher provided an annotated extract from a huge General Cemetery plan. This extract showed where the communal grave lay in relation to other features of the cemetery and thus provided a means for me to visit and track down the exact location - no mean feat in a cemetery said to contain the remains of at least 150,000 individuals.



An extract from the General Cemetery plans; the location of the grave plots purchased for the Mount Street reinterments is marked by a white rectangle



An extract from a modern-day map of the General Cemetery with the approximate site of the Mount Street reinterments marked with a red dot (author's addition)

I made plans to visit the cemetery at the earliest opportunity, hoping that there would be a surviving, identifiable memorial marking the site of the reinterments.

So it was that, on an early Spring morning in 2021, I entered the grounds of the General Cemetery armed with a printout of a satellite view from Google Maps on which I had marked the spot where I thought the Mount Street reburials were located.

It was not the most scientific of methods, and I had noticed that the location and alignment of paths in the cemetery shown on historic records did not always correspond to the situation in the present day, so I was by no means entirely confident that I would be able to bring my quest to a definitive conclusion.

All I can say is that there must have been hidden forces at work, because when I left the path I'd been following, climbed a gentle slope, and arrived at what I thought was the spot that I had marked on the printout, I was stunned to stumble across the grave marker within seconds. The impressive stone lay on the ground within a large expanse of cut grass that very clearly corresponded to the space shown on the cemetery plans.



The site of the Mount Street reinterments (looking north) in 2021; a nearby path can be seen in the background (author's photo)

Though some of the raised lead letters and numbers were missing, the inscription was still clearly legible. It read as follows:

*SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF PERSONS, WHOSE REMAINS ORIGINALLY INTERRED IN THE MOUNT STREET BURIAL GROUND, NOTTINGHAM BETWEEN THE YEARS 1720 AND 1876 WERE REMOVED THENCE IN 1938, AND NOW REST BENEATH THIS SPOT*



The 1938 memorial marking the site of the Mount Street reinterments (author's photo, 2021)

It was an emotional moment - the culmination of many hours of research accompanied by the sensation of having somehow reclaimed a small piece of history.

I felt a sense of outrage, though. Even setting aside the fact that this mass interment contained the mortal remains of several people who had played a significant role in the story of our city, it seemed to me abhorrent that anyone hoping to track down the final resting place of any of these 713 individuals - perhaps for the purposes of commemoration or family history research - would face a formidable set of obstacles before realising that, at the last, the individual in question was not deemed important enough to receive the dignity of a specific, marked burial spot.

After gazing at the marker stone for a while, I began to examine other nearby gravestones. Had any of the memorials at the Mount Street Burial Ground been moved here? Godfrey and Ward's 1903 book lists 106 memorial stones of one type or another, while one of the documents prepared at the time of R M Finch's survey in 1938 lists 128.

I identified just three surviving Mount Street gravestones – all slate, and memorials, respectively, to '*Lucy the Wife of John Houseman Barber*' and '*LUCY, Daughter of the above*'; '*ELIZABETH CRANE, THE BELOVED WIFE OF JOHN BARBER*' and '*ELIZABETH FELKIN, INFANT DAUGHTER OF THE ABOVE*'; and '*JOHN BARBER*', '*Jane Barber Daughter of John & Isabella Barber*', '*Edward Barber, Son of John & Isabella Barber*', '*ISABELLA, Relict of JOHN BARBER*', '*James Barber Son of John & Isabella Barber*' and '*George Barber Son of John & Isabella Barber.*'



The three slate headstones that were relocated from the Mount Street Burial Ground can be seen on the left of this photo, close to the stone marking the site of the reinterments (author's photo, 2024)

The Barbers were an important family in (and beyond) the Nottingham Baptist community and the three surviving stones had been located close together in the Mount Street Burial Ground at the time of both the Williamson and Finch surveys

(albeit having been moved to the perimeter of the burial ground at the time of the latter).

There was no evidence, though, of any surviving memorial to George Vason and his wife, even though the Vason tomb had once been the most celebrated of all those in the Mount Street Burial Ground, being featured, for example (albeit with the inclusion of a photograph of the potentially incorrect grave referred to earlier), in the second edition of *Links With Old Nottingham*, a book by renowned local historian J Holland Walker published in 1935 - a mere three years before the removal of Vason's remains to the General Cemetery.

No mass exhumation of human remains from a burial ground is likely to be completely successful in terms of the recovery of bones, coffin fittings and the like, and so, I was to learn in subsequent research, it had proved with the Mount Street site.

On 27 May 1967, the *Guardian Journal* reported on some excavations then taking place in an area that included the former burial ground site, prior to redevelopment. In a short front-page piece with the headline 'City 'dig' unearths human bones,' the reporter quotes an archaeology lecturer at the University of Nottingham, Maurice Barley, as saying, in reference to the 1938 disinterments, 'The Corporation did a thorough job on that occasion, but left a few bones behind, though not a complete skeleton.'

The 1967 excavations are discussed at some length in an article by M W Ponsford, who had led them, in Volume 75 of the *Transactions of the Thoroton Society*, which was published in 1971.

We can infer from Ponsford's article that Mr Barley was being somewhat circumspect when making his comments to the *Guardian Journal*. While the burial ground was not the main focus of the six-week long excavations, which uncovered 'substantial traces' of Nottingham's town wall and other defensive structures, some significant material associated with the burial ground was discovered.

In the article, Ponsford notes that, prior to the commencement of the excavations, which were 'carried out by the writer on behalf the University of Nottingham and the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works...' ('...with the aid of a party of boys and a master from Lowdham Grange Borstal Institution'), 'Some burials had already been encountered in the construction of the pedestrian subway to the north.'

The details of the excavation given in the article reveal that the area of the burial ground that was investigated was 'an extremely disturbed area, with the remains of brick burial vaults with four coffin-tiers frequently encountered, in addition to the remains of burials left in 1938.' The 'human material' was found to have 'survived quite well.'

The Nottingham City Museums and Galleries collection includes a number of items – coffin plates in the main - that were recovered from the former location of the burial ground prior to or during the redevelopment referred to above, several of which are labelled as being 'from excavations for public conveniences, Granby Street'. A final indignity.

Holland Walker's *Links With Old Nottingham* paid homage to various surviving features and locations in and around the city that provided a physical link to earlier periods in its history. It contains a foreword written by Edmund Huntsman, Lord Mayor of Nottingham at around the time of the publication of the first edition in 1928.

Perhaps presciently, given that two of his predecessors were about to have their remains, along with those of 711 others, moved from individual graves to a communal one, he noted a 'dull indifference' to 'things which have grown too old for material uses' and expressed the hope that, in identifying, investigating and appreciating surviving physical reminders of times before our own, 'we shall become intimate with the life men lived in our district in days long past.'

Amen to that.