

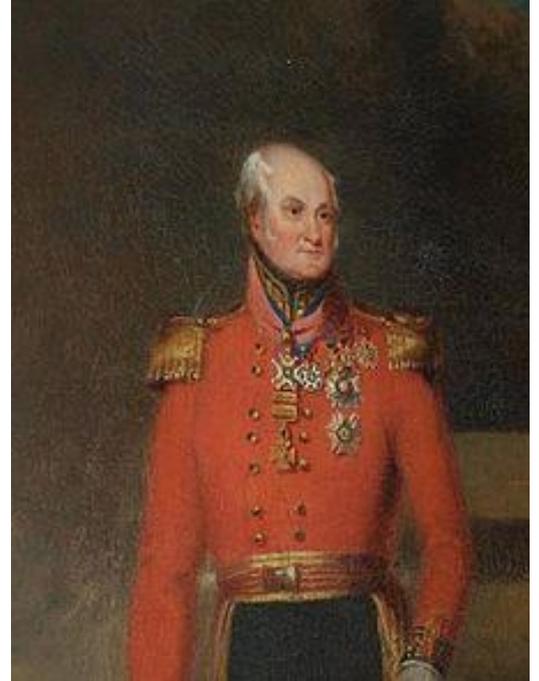


Buried in Bonchurch: Lieutenant General Sir Robert Arbuthnot

Among the many gravestones in St Boniface churchyard in Bonchurch there is one for Lieutenant General Sir Robert Arbuthnot KCB, KTS, whose portrait is shown here and who died in 1853. One of the church members contacted us to ask if we could solve the mystery of why such a distinguished and much decorated British Army officer, whose home was in London, should be buried here.

Described as a soldier of conspicuous gallantry, few officers have taken part in so many conflicts. Born in Ireland, he joined the 23rd Light Dragoons in 1797 when he was 24, and subsequently served in South Africa and in South America, where he was aide-de-camp to General (later Lord) Beresford. He accompanied Beresford through most of the Peninsular war against Napoleon's troops in Spain and Portugal from 1808-1814, and was present at the battles of Corunna, Busaco and Albuera amongst many others. Promoted to Major General and then Lieutenant General he commanded troops in Ceylon and Bengal, and from 1843 to 1853 he was Colonel of 76th Foot Regiment.

He was apparently remarkable for his quick reactions and resourcefulness. In South America, when he and General Beresford were prisoners in the hands of the Spanish and about to be searched, he managed to hide a vital document in an orchard to prevent its discovery. At the battle of Albuera he distinguished himself by galloping between two regiments, the British 57th and a Spanish regiment, stopping the gunfire which, by mistake, they were exchanging – a feat he performed without receiving a single wound.



So why is his grave in Bonchurch? The answer, as so often, lies with his family. Sir Robert and his wife Susan had a son George who became a distinguished civil servant working in the Treasury for Sir Robert Peel, and a daughter Phoebe who married a clergyman, Randle Henry Feilden. In the 1840s Phoebe's husband became the Rector of St Lawrence and Bonchurch, and they moved with their seven children to live at Thornclyff in The Pits where they settled happily into Bonchurch society, and added two more children to their family. Charles Dickens, during his stay at Winterbourne in 1849, noted that: *On Friday we had a grand, and, what is better, a very good dinner at 'parson' Feilden's (the new curate), with some choice port.*

Sir Robert must have been staying with his daughter and her family when he died. The inscription on his tombstone is hard to decipher, but there is a memorial to him in the church, which reads: *In memory of Lieutenant General Sir Robert Arbuthnot KCB and KTS who after an active life spent in the service of his country in the four quarters of the globe, died in peace at Bonchurch on the 6th May 1853 in the 80th year of his age. Sincerely regretted.*

Phoebe and Henry Feilden remained in Bonchurch all their lives, as did several of their children. The unmarried daughters were known as 'The Misses Feilden' and two of them, Marcia and Cecilia, were still living in Thornclyff in the 1930s, very old ladies, remembered fondly by H De Vere Stacpoole, to whom they were a gentle reminder of a vanished era.

The photograph here shows Sir Robert Arbuthnot's flat tombstone under a tree, the stones on the left of the picture marking the graves of some of his grandchildren.



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With thanks to Jonny Fitzgerald-Bond who asked the original question.