Gulielma Penn’s Grave

In 1671, shortly before William Penn and Gulielma Maria Springett were married and had settled at Rickmansworth, William Russell gave to the Friends of Old Jordans a tract of land which became the well-known Quaker burial ground at nearby Jordans, Buckinghamshire. Among the early burials at Jordans were the Penns’ infant children; ultimately Penn and most of his family were interred there. It is possible that stones were erected to mark these graves, but if so, the later objection to such markers among the Quakers occasioned their removal. A hundred years ago the place could well be described in Wordsworth’s phrase,

In our church-yard
Is neither epitaph nor monument,
Tombstone nor name. . . . ¹

Later in the nineteenth century, however, the attitude toward gravestones changed among British Friends, and a proposal to erect some stones at Jordans was discussed in the summer of 1862.² In 1867 Maria Webb in her Penns and Peningtons wrote of the change: “It is between twenty and thirty years since a question was raised amongst Friends, as to the propriety of reversing a rule against the admission of tombstones into their burial grounds. . . . Ultimately it was decided in the Yearly Meeting that any who desired to have small memorial stones, simply inscribed with names and dates to mark the graves of their friends, should be at liberty to do so, under the supervision of their respective monthly meetings. Shortly afterwards the Friends of the meeting to which Jordans belongs had tombstones erected to mark such graves as could be identified from

¹ A Visit to the Grave of William Penn (London, 1853), titlepage. This pamphlet was probably written by Sarah Littleboy. It has been also attributed to Charles Smith of Coggeshall, presumably because a poem at the end is signed with the initials C. S.

² See the report of a visitor to the Monthly Meeting writing in The Friend, II (London, 1862), 175.

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Although information about the early burials at Jordans, including names and dates, was available at that time, the registers of the Monthly Meeting did not include all the burials, and gave no indication of location. In addition to the registers was a plan of the graveyard which gave the names of some of those interred and the locations of their graves. This plan was reproduced at least in part as the frontispiece for the pamphlet of 1853 already mentioned. Since this plan contained names but no dates, those who set up the markers apparently had recourse to the registers or to some other record for the dates included on the stones. The stones erected in 1862–1863 agree in name and in location with the eighteen graves listed on the chart, except that the five infant children of William Penn have a single stone and on the other stones the year of death is given. That the plan was used for this purpose was definitely stated in July, 1881, by Richard Littleboy speaking on behalf of the Monthly Meeting and the Trustees of Jordans Estate: "For more than a century a rough plan of the graveyard was the only available clue to the spot where the remains of William Penn and his family were laid. Guided by this plan, about twenty years ago small head-stones bearing the names of the interred and the date of burial were placed over the existing mounds, but it is more than doubtful whether they indicate in each case the exact spot of interment."

The grave of Gulielma Maria Penn was shown on the chart between that of Mary Penington, her mother, who predeceased her, and that of William Penn, her husband. At least, it seems natural to suppose that it is Penn’s first wife who is intended by that name. So most visitors would assume who see the stones in that order, and so many writers have assumed. “He lies by the side of his first wife,” wrote Sarah Littleboy in 1853. Biographers like Webb, Stoughton, and Graham, and guidebooks like Graveson’s *The Chalfont Country,* all speak of the graves of William Penn and his first wife as

3 (London, 1867), 429-430.
being side by side. But the date on the stone was given as 1689; Gulielma, however, died on the 23rd of 12th month, 1693 (modern style, February, 1694). The discrepancy was perfectly apparent in 1947 when L. V. Hodgkin’s *Gulielma, Wife of William Penn* was published in London. In the text, page 195, the date of death is given as 1693/4, and the illustration opposite page 47 shows the date 1689 on the stone. Curiously enough, the discrepancy was corrected without comment in Webb’s book, where in the illustration opposite page 428, “engraved from a photograph,” the date on the stone is actually engraved to read 1693.

The cause of this confusion is easily understood. According to the registers of the Monthly Meeting, in addition to Penn’s wife Gulielma Maria (1644–1693/4), two of their infant children buried at Jordans were also named Gulielma Maria. One was buried in 1673, the other in 1689. It might be argued that the stone marked 1689 was for this last child, and for a time that theory sufficed to justify the date. But would an infant not be buried with the others? And if the stone beside her father is hers, whose is the fifth child’s grave? And why is there no marker for the mother? More likely, as I have already suggested, the infant Gulielmas are included in the infant graves, and the separate stone is that of the mother, the middle date of the three having been wrongly chosen for it.

Such error or accident would not be unique. Over fifty years ago the date on another stone of the same row, that for Joseph Rule, the “White Quaker,” was altered, in the light of definite evidence not earlier known, from 1765 to 1770. And in the row behind, for three of the four stones either new stones or new inscriptions have been substituted for those of an earlier time.

In 1951 the considerations set forth above finally persuaded the authorities in charge of Jordans Burial Ground to allow the grave-

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8 See *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, II (London, 1905), 68. W. H. Summers was the person who suggested the change. He also noted other errors in the early stones in his *Memories of Jordans and the Chalfonts*, 247, 250, and 269.

9 Photographs taken prior to the change give the former (erroneous) inscriptions. Photographs taken soon after the change show the contrast between the white, corrected surfaces and the old, weathered, unaltered stones.
stone of William Penn's first wife to be corrected. For 1689 the date 1694 has now been substituted, and in such a way that the newness of the incision is hardly noticeable. Thus many of the Americans who visited this shrine in connection with the Festival of Britain in 1951, or who will visit it during the Friends World Conference in 1952, will never know that only after some ninety years the grave of Guli Penn carries the right year of her death. For the benefit of those who are more curious or who may study photographs of the past, this article explains the apparent discrepancy and records the recent change.

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