

## The Branch Memorial in Compton Dando Church

Unlike many parish churches, Compton Dando possesses very few memorials since almost all the landowners who could afford expensive commemoration were non-resident. A solitary memorial on the south wall of the nave is a plaque to two members of the Branch family, the lettering badly faded and almost illegible. It commemorates Benjamin Branch of Belluton, who died 8 April 1731 and his son, Parry Branch, who died 20 October 1766. Belluton is in the parish of Stanton Drew, and it is not clear why the two men were buried and given a memorial in Compton Dando church, although Parry Branch was briefly a Feoffee of the Church Estate.

Research at Somerset Record Office and among the genealogical records held by the church of Latter Day Saints at Whitchurch has revealed some details of the family. Three members were burgesses of Bristol during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Benjamin Branch became an attorney, representing the Smyths of Ashton Court over various property dealings. He married Mary Hicks of Chew Magna in 1688, and thereafter began to buy property in Stanton Drew and Pensford. When the scholar and philosopher, John Locke, died in 1704 Benjamin Branch purchased his estate at Belluton. His son, Parry Branch lived at Belluton, enjoying greatly increased rental income from coal production on his land. He married Judith, the daughter of Richard Lansdown, yeoman, of Whitchurch. Parry Branch was invited to become a Feoffee of Compton Dando Church Estate in 1764. This was the result of a reorganisation of the Trust. For several years there had been only two or three trustees, and by a Deed of Feoffment on 10 February 1764 nine new names were added. These were gentlemen from all over the surrounding district, including Parry Branch. At the time the Trust was said to consist of eight messuages, 60 acres of (arable) land, 20 acres of meadow and pasture, 30 acres of wood, and pasture rights on the extensive commons. The purpose of the Trust was stated as:

*For the repairing and amending of the Church of Compton Dando, with the Bells, Belfrye and other Ornaments and Necessaries belonging to the said Church when and as often as Need should require, and to Sustain and Maintain the Lands according to the form and effect thereupon first had and used.*

Parry Branch died on 20 October 1766 and the Compton Dando Parish Register records that on 24 October 1766 'was buried Mr Parry Branch of Belluton'. No reference as to when the memorial was erected has been found, and it is not mentioned in Edmund Rack's description of the church in 1780. The almost illegible inscription reads:

Near this Place lieth  
ye body of BENJAMIN  
BRANCH of Beluton, Who  
died April ye 8<sup>th</sup> 1731:

Aged 53 y<sup>s</sup>

Also

Mr PARRY BRANCH  
his Son Died October  
20<sup>th</sup> 1766  
Aged 49 y<sup>s</sup>.

Having inspected the memorial, the conservator, Katherine Woodgate-Jones, recommended that the water stains should be removed and that the gilt lettering be restored before it totally disappears. She suggested that the St Andrew's Conservation Trust might advise on a suitable person, and might provide a grant. A possible alternative might be to invite a local artist to undertake the work. It would greatly improve the drab appearance of the memorial and provide a focus of interest on the south wall of the church if the lettering was re-painted and this fragment of local history prevented from being lost forever.

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### Trees in Compton Dando Churchyard

Occasional notes inserted in the parish registers by various incumbents reveal the dates when trees were planted.

Fifteen limes were planted on the left-hand side of the path to the church on 13 December 1748.

A yew tree was planted on the east side of the church on 3 January 1748/49.

A yew tree was planted on the south side of the tower on 6 December 1850.

On 27 April 1853 the Revd Wilson Pedder recorded that his son, John Wilson Pedder, 'planted a Cedar of Lebanon on the north side of the Tower and the west side of the north chapel'.

Joe Bettey