

Burial Practices in Early Modern England.

In 1664 Samuel Pepys described the burial of his brother in a local church:

So to my brother's, and to the church and with the grave maker chose a place for my brother to lie in, just under my mother's pew. But to see how a man's tombs are at the mercy of such a fellow, that for 6d he would (as his own words were) "I will just juttle them together but I will make room for him" – speaking of the fullness of the middle Isle where he was to lie. And that he would for my father's sake do my brother that is dead all the civility he can; which was to disturb other corps that are not quite rotten to make room for him. And me thought his manner of speaking it was very remarkable – as of a thing that now was in his power to do a man a courtesy or not.¹

It is unknown whether this resulted in a decay of the corpse, resulting in offensive smells, or whether there was protective covering of floor tiles. Many buildings in England at this time had earth floors, and at an earlier date in 1517 Erasmus gave his well-known account of English buildings:

The floors are generally spread with clay and rushed from some marsh, which are renewed from time to time but so as to leave a basic layer, sometimes for twenty years, under which fester spittle, vomit, dog's urine and men's too, dregs of beer and cast-off bits of fish, and other unspeakable kinds of filth.²

These earth floors were present in the following century and later, evidenced by the presence of saltpetre in earth dug from churches and other buildings. Saltpetre was created by the presence of urine in earth. In order to maximise the availability of it (used in the manufacture of gunpowder), the government attempted to prevent the paving 'with stone, or bricke, or Floore with board ... any Cellar or Vault ... or do lay the same with lime, sand, gravell, or other thing, whereby the growth and encrease of the Mine of Saltpeter may be hindered or impaired.'³

In 1638 'saltpetre men' had sought permission to extend their activities to the floors of churches, 'because women pisse in their seats which causes excellent saltpetre.'⁴ Two saltpetre men, Stephens and Hilliard, were accused of digging 'in churches, hallowed chapels and churchyards, tearing men's bones and ashes out of their graves to make gunpowder of.'⁵

¹ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (edited by R.C. Latham and W. Mathews), Volume 5, 1664, p. 90.

² Quoted in Peter Razzell, *Essays in English Population History*, p. 24.

³ J.F. Larkin and P.L. Hughes, *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, 1973, p. 455.

⁴ Michael Miner, Early Gunpowder was Made from the 'Pisse' of Church Ladies'. *Reader Blogs Online*, January 29, 2016.

⁵ *Ibid*,

Women at this time did not wear underwear which was only introduced in the early twentieth century.⁶ Sermons were long and this would have caused problems for many women who would relieve themselves on these earth floors, providing the basis for the growth of saltpetre

Church floors must have had very strong and offensive smells, which may have been acceptable at a time when hygiene was not a priority for many people, including Samuel Pepys.⁷

⁶ 'Women Without Underwear', *Wikipedia*.

⁷ See 'A Case Study of Sanitary Conditions: The Diaries of Samuel Pepys' in Peter Razzell, *Population and Disease: Transforming English Society, 1550-1850*, 2007.