

The Booker family and Over Kellet Septimus Booker rediscovered

An unexpected discovery tidying up the churchyard was to find a previously unknown tombstone of a very distinguished former resident of Over Kellet with links to an internationally famous literary prize.

Some locals living in the village are aware that the Booker family, associated with the 'Booker prize' had links with Over Kellet.

Adjacent to a stone cross, 8-10 cms under the ground, was the previously unknown tombstone of Septimus Booker.



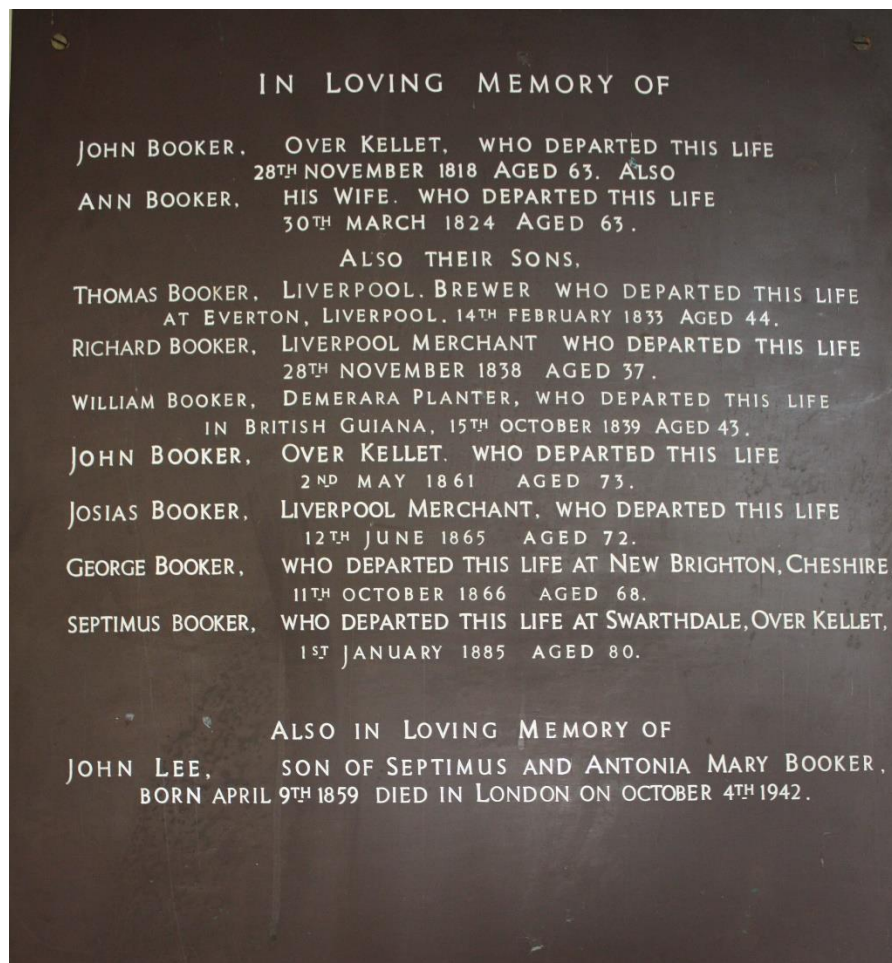
Discovering some information about Septimus, has been possible with the invaluable help of some knowledgeable local and national experts.



Septimus (photo) was the seventh son of John (1755-1818) and Ann Booker. He was born in 1804 and baptised at St Cuthbert's on 4th March 1804. John was a yeoman farmer and lived with Ann in

a farmhouse in Addington in the parish of Over Kellet. The family claimed descent from the Bookers or Bowkers, some of whom had been apothecaries, physicians and gentlemen in the north of England since the sixteenth century.

His brothers were John (1787-1861), Thomas (1790-1835), Josias (1793-1839), William (1796-1839), George (1799-1866) and Richard (1801-1838). They are commemorated by a brass memorial in St Cuthbert's.



He and his brothers were educated privately by Rev James Stainbank who was the perpetual curate of Over Kellet and Rector of Halton. Rev. James was probably educated at Lancaster Grammar and licensed as a school master in Over Kellet in 1772. He started the building of Swarthdale Hall in the early 1800's which would have been where Septimus and his brothers were educated. James died in 1825 and was buried in St Cuthbert's churchyard where his tombstone can be found.

Five of the seven sons had interests in the original Booker business in Demerara (now Guyana) and Liverpool, where Septimus was the solicitor to the family businesses.

The Booker Group was founded in 1835 by George and Richard who bought their first ship and founded the Booker Line. A wholesale food distribution group was subsequently formed and in 2018 Tesco's merged with the Booker Group for £3.7 billion. All from humble beginnings of the Booker family from Over Kellet and education from a former St Cuthbert's Vicar!

The Booker Prize for Fiction is the leading literary award in the English-speaking world and is awarded each year for the best original novel written in the English language. It was formerly known as the Booker-McConnell Prize and the Man Booker Prize, which was first awarded in 1969.

When William, the fourth in line of the brothers died in 1839, Septimus inherited a half share of most of William's Demerara estates together with a half share of Shenstone in Over Kellet.

Septimus became a major local landowner as in 1845-6 he and brother George bought Birkland Barrow and on George's death in 1866 Septimus became the sole owner. The other properties he bought were Old Farm in 1848, Swarthdale Farm in 1855, Kirkdale House in 1865, Well House Farm in 1871 which became the Wesleyan Chapel. In 1872 he bought Swarthdale House where he lived

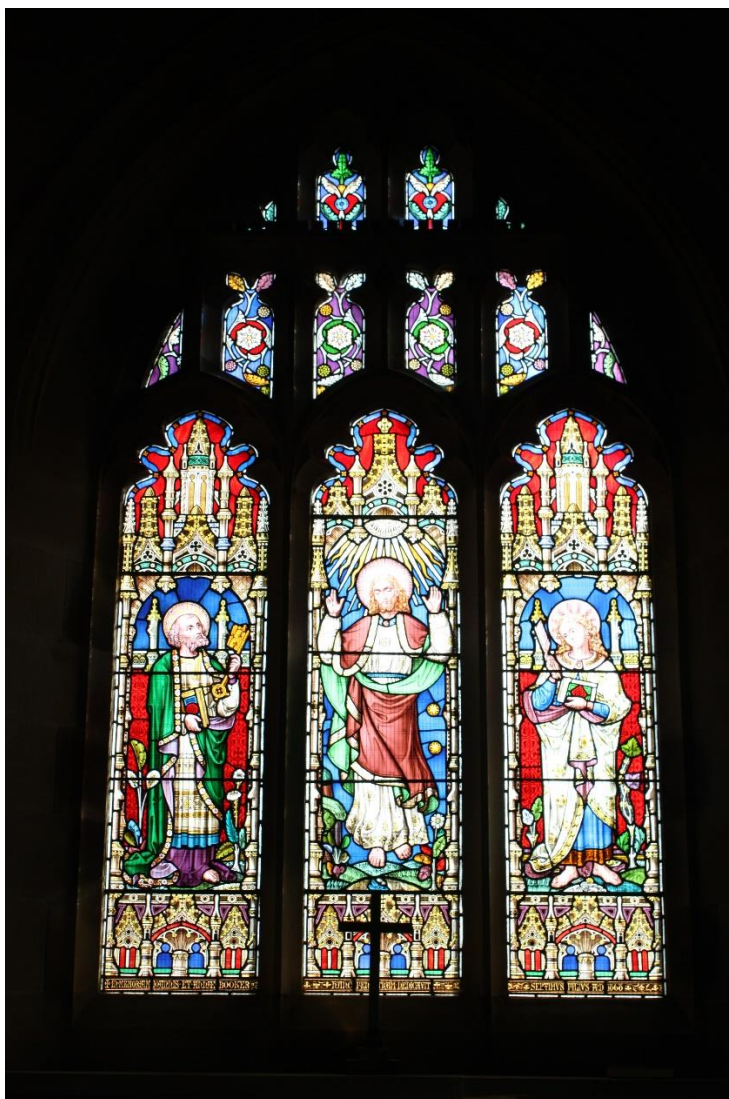
until his death in 1885. His coffin was carried across the fields from Swarthdale to St Cuthbert's on the 'coffin road' which is now a public footpath.

The gross value of his estate was £111,000 which would have been in excess of £13m today. His sons John Lee and Charles Edward were the principal beneficiaries and his three daughters Antonia Mary, Constance Isabel and Ada Margaret (unnamed in his will) received £8000 each. John Lee, the elder son received all the above-named properties bought by his father and farms at Nether Kellet, Addington and Halton.

He was not buried in the Booker family vault in the churchyard, but next to his son Colin Septimus who died in 1870. The writing of the inscription of the stone cross marking Colin's grave only became legible after a power wash. The translation of the Latin inscription is 'You redeemed us to God through your blood. In memory of Colin Septimus Booker. 1 January 1870. He has reached the safe harbour of heaven.' The second part of the inscription is a quote from the Roman comic poet Plautus, indicating that the originator (Septimus) had a good classical education, this states 'mine (my son) is dear to me, his own is dear to everyone.'

The translation of the Latin inscription of the gravestone of Septimus reads

'What limit should there be to longing for so dear a person' which is a quote from the poet Horace. Septimus was actively involved in the life of St Cuthbert's as in 1859 he became patron of St Cuthbert's by buying the advowson which gave him the right to recommend a member of the clergy to the Bishop when the benefice became vacant. He bought an organ for the church and the east stained glass window, in memory of his parents.



The Latin inscription at the base of the windows reads 'In memoriam Ioannis et Anne Booker hanc fenestram dedicavit Septimus filius 1868'

He also bore part of the cost of building the new vicarage on the village green, now Merefell. This summary of some of these recorded events in the life of Septimus and the Booker family all arose following the discovery of a tombstone in the churchyard.

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the invaluable help from John McCormick's classical knowledge and translations skills, Bob Escolme for his encyclopaedic knowledge of local history and Barry Newton former MD of Booker Tate for information about the foundation of the Booker group, the Booker family history and print of Septimus.

John Halsey
2020