

No. 20: 'A melancholy and fatal accident' leads to the growth of the modern town.

The photo to the right, taken from the Huddersfield Examiner, rather embarrassingly shows me leading a tour of the church crypt at the Heritage Open Day in 2016. [1]

We focussed the Open Day on the crypt to mark the laying of the foundation stones of the church which happened in December 2016.



Holy Trinity was designed and built with deep burial chambers (catacombs) which could have accommodated over 800 burials.

The Open Day hosted a display held by the Huddersfield & District Family History Society (H&DFHS). They researched the 18 people actually interred in the crypt and published a booklet, referenced below [5]. I am indebted to Ian Stevenson and the society for the information used in this month's blog and copies are still available.

The main entrance to the crypt is currently hidden in the undergrowth (allowed to grow to discourage anti-social behaviour!). It is beneath the church's east window and I can imagine it was once a graceful and grand entrance into a sombre and serene space. Beneath the chancel is the chamber photographed above, which I believe to have been designed for use by mourners to gather and perhaps for the opening part of the funeral service to be held, prior to the deceased being interred in one of the recesses shown in the photo below.



One of the stories I found particularly fascinating was of the un-locally sounding Sigismund Schwann. Research by the H&DFHS discovered his role in the life of Huddersfield was a significant one, despite an untimely death.

Sigismund arrived in Huddersfield from Germany aged 22. His family traded in textiles and exported them across Europe.

On the evening of 30 August 1828, Sigismund was riding back from Halifax to his home on Spring Grove Terrace, Huddersfield, when he was thrown from his horse and killed.

The local newspaper, the Leeds Intelligencer published a very descriptive article on September 4th 1828:

“MELANCHOLY AND FATAL ACCIDENT – As Mr S Schwann, stuff and fancy merchant of Huddersfield, was returning home from Halifax, on Saturday evening, his horse took fright at a post covered with hand-bills, at the Edgerton turnpike gate, became unmanageable and galloped back with Mr Schwann up a lane, near the toll bar, called Blacker Lane.

“The animal then turned round with him several times, and shortly afterwards passed through the turnpike, towards Huddersfield at a very swift rate. When opposite Moorhouse’s Chapel (near New House), [the former Highfield Chapel, on Highfields Road], Mr S lost his seat and clung with his hands around the horse’s neck. He was observed by a man who was only a short distance from him (20 or 30 yards), in this situation, for a short time, when at last both the animal and his rider fell, and the former rolled over the latter two or three times, and before the man who saw him could get up to the spot to assist the unfortunate gentleman, he was a corpse.

“Mr Schwann was a very pleasant gentlemanly man; he was a German, about 29 years old, of small stature, has been established in Huddersfield for about five years, and was doing a considerable trade in fancy waistcoatings, stuffs, &c. principally to Germany and Italy, in which latter place his brother is now travelling for him.

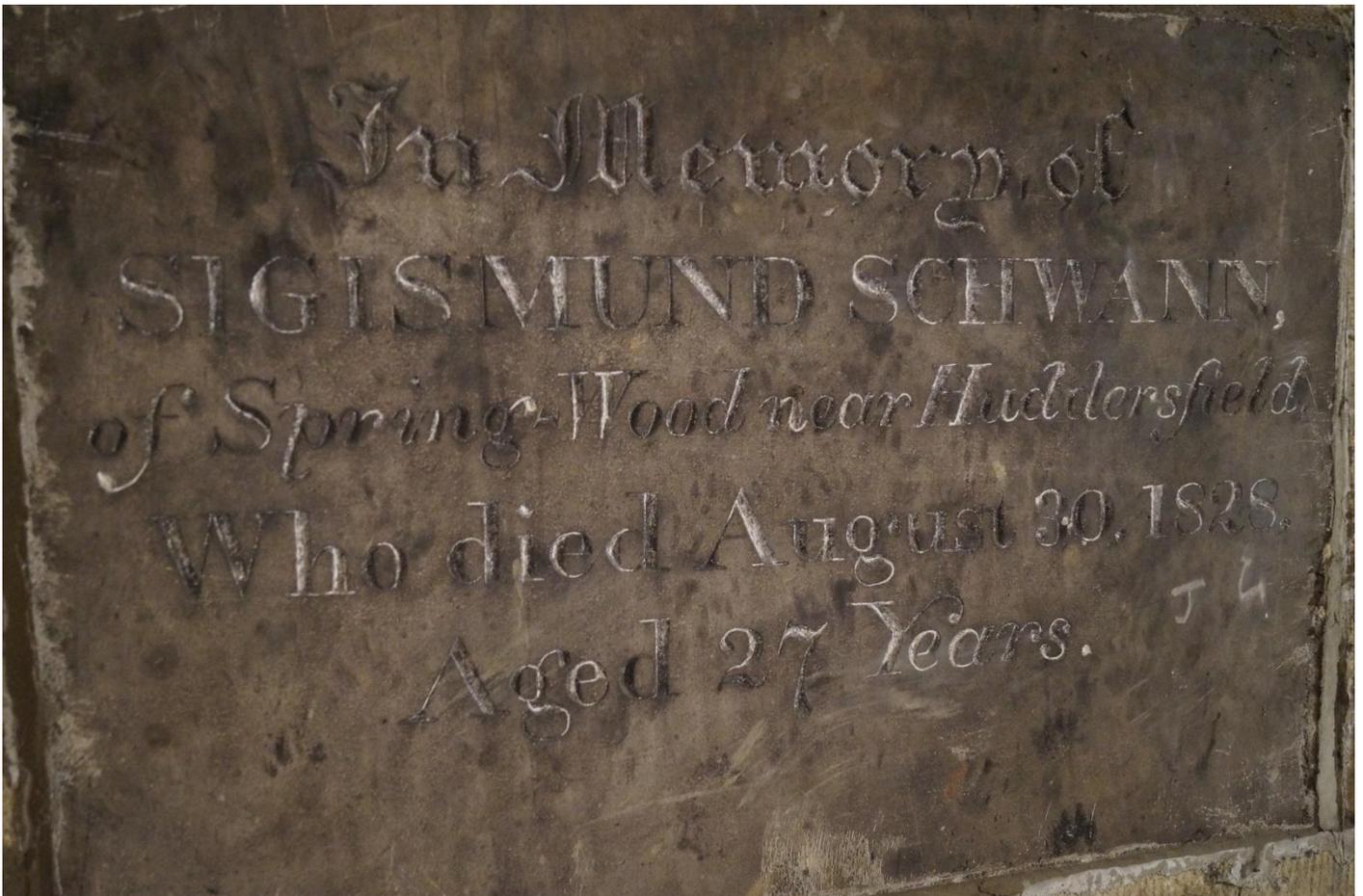
“He had no relations whatever here, nor we believe in this kingdom. Mr. Thos. Starkey, Mr. Jas. Brook, and some other friends, have taken the management of his affairs into their hands until his brother shall arrive from the Continent. An inquest was held upon the body on Tuesday, at the George Inn, before Mr. Stocks, and a verdict of Accidental Death and a deodand [] on the horse. The remains of Mr. S, are to be interred in a vault in Trinity Church, Huddersfield, this morning.*

“His body was conveyed, after the accident, in a chaise to his house at Spring Grove Terrace, but was, before the inquest so shockingly disfigured, that his most intimate friends could not recognize him, being much bruised all over, the cartilage of his nose broken, and also the bones between the eyebrows, his head swelled double its ordinary state, and his whole body as black as ink.

“His death is said to have been caused by his chest being crushed in when the mare fell upon him. It is extraordinary that blood, for some days after his death, almost continually gushed from his wounds, so much so that two men were constantly in the room with him, employed in staunching with cloths.

“Mr S. was riding a hired mare, belonging to a man of the name Roebuck; she is completely knocked to pieces and good for nothing; he always rode very fast, was bold, but sat very loosely, and very short.” [2]

[* deodand – a thing forfeited or given to God, specifically, in law, an object or instrument which becomes forfeit because it has caused a person’s death. The English common law of deodands traces back to the 11th century and was applied, on and off, until finally abolished by Parliament in 1846.]



As was suggested in the article, Sigismund's older brother (John) Frederic Schwann, travelled to England to take over the running of the family export business, despite being "unacquainted with the language." However, his "indomitable perseverance enabled him speedily to acquire a competent knowledge of the English language, and likewise to grasp and retain all the necessary details of manufacturing and mercantile transactions. [3]

Frederic married Henrietta Kell, daughter of the Rev. Robert Kell, on 13 November 1834 at Edgbaston.

In May 1841, Schwann founded the Huddersfield Young Men's Mental Improvement Society, later to become the Huddersfield Mechanics' Institution and eventually the University of Huddersfield.

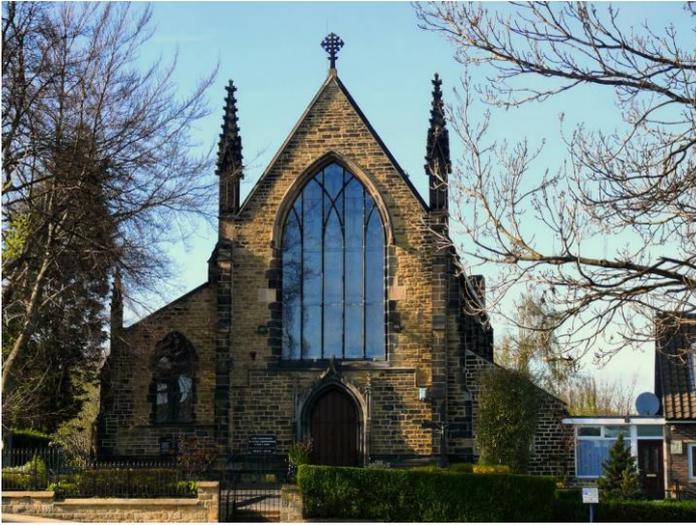
The 1841 Census records the family residing at Priestroyd House, off Commercial Street, along with four servants and Henrietta's sister Caroline. By strange coincidence, Priestroyd House was on the site of the University's new Barbara Hepworth building which is currently under construction for the departments of art, design and architecture. Frederic and Henrietta had six children, one of whom, Charles Ernest later became a first Baronet. Charles went to University in Manchester and London; like his father, became a merchant and in 1885 was elected MP for the Manchester North constituency, a position he held until 1918. Most family members changed their surname to the anglicised version, Swann in the lead-up to World War 1.



Frederic Schwann [4]

Henrietta was instrumental in the founding of the Huddersfield Female Educational Institute in 1846.

Frederic taught some geography, natural history and reading classes at the Mechanic's Institute and was the treasurer for many years. This was especially impressive given that he had to learn English from scratch upon his unplanned arrival into the country. Frederic was also President of the Huddersfield Temperance Society for thirty years and helped establish the Unitarian Church on Fitzwilliam Street, the building of which is now the Polish Church.



Former Unitarian Church - Fitzwilliam St



Mechanics Institute

In 2016 the University renamed its main Central Services building the Schwann building in recognition of Frederic's contribution to the formation of the University.

Had it not been that Sigismund Schwann travelled to Huddersfield as a young man, nearly two centuries ago; and had it not been for his tragic accident, within just a stones-throw of Holy Trinity where he was laid to rest; it might well be that Huddersfield would not have the successful University that attracts so many young people to the town in our day. So at least some good came out of his untimely death all those years ago.

The Building Development Team are investigating ways of improving access to the burial chambers in the crypt at Holy Trinity, perhaps part of the next HLF bid. So hopefully one day the tomb to Sigismund Schwann may be more frequently on show and returned to its grand and graceful state.

Andy Barber
July '18

References:

[1] <https://www.examiner.co.uk/incoming/gallery/heritage-open-days-2016-11872473>

[2] Leeds Intelligencer 4.9.1828

[3] [https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/John_Frederic_Schwann_\(c.1799-1882\)](https://huddersfield.exposed/wiki/John_Frederic_Schwann_(c.1799-1882)), (quoting the Huddersfield Daily Chronicle 24.4.1882)

[4] <https://www.hud.ac.uk/non-cms/175-Years/timeline/timeline.html>

[5] Holy Trinity Church Huddersfield Crypt Burials, published by Huddersfield & District Family History Society, research - Ian Stevenson, edited – Susan Hutson, photography – Karen Lightfoot. For more information see www.hdfhs.org.uk