

THE BYNG VAULT, ALL SAINTS CHURCH, SOUTHILL, BEDFORDSHIRE

We are asked to investigate the Byng family burial vault in the north-east corner of this parish church, which has been brought to our attention by David Baker, former county conservation officer and member of the DAC. Proposals for the creation of a parish room in the upper part of the chamber are being considered and our views as to the special character of the vault are sought. Just how unusual is it?

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1 **Outline history of church**

All Saints' church possesses elements of c1300 fabric and some 15th century work, but dates principally from 1814-16 when a comprehensive repair of the fabric was undertaken; the obscure George Cloake (c1761-1812) was the original architect of this phase, which was in part paid for by Samuel Whitbread of Southill, who owned the living. The interior still retains a notable Regency character provided by those fixtures -in particular the western organ gallery and Whitbread pew- which have been allowed to remain. The only other intervention of particular interest has been the 20th century work of Sir Albert Richardson, who repaired the tower in 1951 and removed the box pews in 1958-9.

2 **The Byng Vault: origin**

According to notes prepared by Chris Pickford (formerly of the County Record Office), Viscount Torrington petitioned the Bishop of Lincoln in May 1733 for assent to construct a dormitory or burying place for the interment of his father and his family on the north side of the church adjoining to it of 30 feet in length from west to east and twenty in breadth from south to north, abutting south and west upon the church and chancel and east and north on the churchyard containing one vault and one room over it or the dementions aforesaid, with a door or passage from the chancel or church into the said room (Bedfordshire Record Office, P69/2/2/4).

Assent was duly given. The vault was required following the death of George, 1st Viscount Torrington in 1732: the Byng family's elevation to the peerage made the provision of a dynastic burial place of status highly desirable.

3 **The Byng Vault: configuration**

The reference in the faculty cited above mentions a room over a vault: whether this means a distinct chamber rather than a double-height space is unclear. It is possible that Lord Torrington wished a family chapel, lined with monuments and standing over a lower burial chamber (such as the nearby De Grey chapel or mausoleum at Flitton), and that it was

subsequently decided to proceed only with the lower element. This seems unlikely, given the low height of the basement and the lavish marble tablets contained within. The imposing cartouche on the north wall also serves to unify the tall chamber by introducing an item of heraldic prominence into the upper void. The vault seems to have been entered originally from the chancel, with a pair of viewing platforms on either side of the stair.

4 The Byng Vault: exterior

A crude copy of the only pre-1814 view of the church to show the vault (by Thomas Fisher) suggests that its exterior was in a matching Gothic that harmonised with the chancel. The vault consists of a double-height space entered through an arched doorway on the east wall. Its exterior is of red brick, like much of the upper sections of the chancel, but of a different build and incorporating a considerable number of burnt headers, randomly laid (a feature not found elsewhere). There are clear signs that the vault's exterior was rendered at some point, which would have concealed this motley brickwork: the *Victoria County History* of 1912 specifically states that the Byng vault is of plastered brick. George Byng (of Wrotham Park, Middlesex) is known to have written to the church as the time its restoration was being discussed in 1811, saying that he did not want the vault enlarged since no more members of his family were to be buried there (one was, nonetheless, two years later), but that he would instruct his surveyor to visit and put the vault in order in the following year. The exterior and upper part of the vault thus almost certainly underwent alteration at around the same time as the 1814-16 restoration of the rest of the church.

The door opening contains double doors of a fairly recent date, placed beneath the slatted over door; above is a thin label which is missing its stops, comparable to that over the east window. This is almost certainly the adaption of an earlier window into a door, created when the internal door linking the vault with the chancel was sealed; disturbed brickwork at the lower levels of the door supports this thesis. The narrow section of wall on the north elevation, to the west of the vault and east of the medieval nave wall containing a four-centred arch window, houses the vestry and clearly dates from the 1814-16 phase. The parapet has been rebuilt, probably at the time of extensive roof repairs in 1892.

5 The Byng Vault: interior

The double-height chamber is now entered from the east, but the partial survival of broad steps leading down to floor level from the sealed door connecting with the chancel shows how the chamber was originally reached. An inserted wooden platform now runs from the door across to the south-eastern corner which, like the south-western corner, has a square structure (flagged with chequered marble squares) which contains coffin loculi. The raised sections were possibly intended to provide vantage points for the contemplation of the vaults below: they were lavishly paved, and the south-western one retains a balustrade of turned vase-and-column balusters (albeit altered, and not shown in the 1811 engraving of the interior of the vault. Could this be a re-use of some altar rails, banished during the Regency rebuilding?). There is a sealed doorway leading from the vestry onto the south-west platform: could this have been created when the door off the chancel was blocked up, perhaps at the time of the 1814-1816 rebuilding? There is also a reference in the parish papers (date not given, but perhaps c1905-6) to proposals to brick up the vault, which may have referred to the blocking of the west door. The tall internal walls are whitewashed and plain, save for an auricular cartouche with the Torrington arms set below a viscount's coronet. This is shown in exactly this position in the only known early view of the interior of the vault: the 1811

engraving by Thomas Fisher in his *Collections Historical Genealogical and Topographical for Bedfordshire* (1812), which describes it as the 'columbarium of the Byngs'. There is also a tablet to the south of the blocked west door to the memory of Col. Francis Byng (d.1734) which is also shown in the engraving.

The lower part of the vault is much less altered and is far more architectural in effect than the upper part. Indeed, it is constructed of very carefully executed ashlar and constitutes masons' work of a high order. The principal, north wall is divided into three bays: each consists of a large arched opening above two lesser loculi. This same rhythm is repeated on the east and west walls, which contain empty receptacles. Between each bay run platbands at dado and impost level. Each of the upper openings sports an aedicule of statuary marble with an inscription, set against a background of veined Italian marble. Rising damp has caused considerable staining caused by salt formation. The most prominent of these aedicules is the central one. Strongly Gibbsian in character, it commemorates George, Viscount Torrington (d.1732), the first Byng to be ennobled and the person in whose honour the vault was constructed. Under his tablet is the marble cover to the resting place of Admiral Byng, the celebrated victim of political expediency who was executed in 1757, with its outstanding epitaph. Later burials have taken place in the loculi situated within the south-east and south-west platforms, which are three rows by two: only those in the south-west corner have begun to be used, and the dates of decease of the interred persons range from 1764 to 1961. The Byngs stopped burying their dead here in the early 19th century: the last of the early Byngs to rest here was Bridget, 5th Viscountess Torrington who died in 1813, and the family moved to Yotes Court, Kent thereafter. There thus remains considerable free space within the vault.

6 Summary of alterations

The vault consists of a finely executed family burial chamber of the mid-1730s which has undergone considerable alteration at upper levels and yet which remains intact at the most important lower register. The exterior of the vault was substantially rebuilt in c1814. The topmost courses of the chamber and the roof have been completely rebuilt, almost certainly in 1892. Three different entrances have been made at various times: the original entrance from the chancel was closed up, perhaps at the time of the 1814-16 rebuilding, and a new entrance created by lengthening the eastern window to form a door. An internal entrance onto the south-western 'viewing platform' was probably created at the same time, the door leading on to which was probably blocked up in c1905.

7 Attribution

The identity of the designer of the vault is at present not known. It includes masons' work of a high order, and the Palladian clarity of the lower register (so at odds with the makeshift entrance arrangements and altered upper level) suggests the involvement of a professional. One possible candidate might be Isaac Ware (1704-66), who is known to have worked for Admiral John Byng in the 1750s. Ware had strong connections with the Admiralty through his master, Thomas Ripley. The first Viscount Torrington was a sometime Lord of the Admiralty, and the second Lord Torrington, who caused the vault to be built, was sometime Treasurer to the navy and a Commissioner of Greenwich Hospital, of which Ware was clerk of the works from 1733.

The possible involvement of Ware here is made more distinct by comparing the vault with a plate in his *A Complete Body of Architecture* of 1756. Although this book makes no explicit reference to any of Ware's own buildings (let alone the vault), the engraving of a

stone-fronted house on plate 13 does include a rustic or lower ground floor that is arcaded with impostes just like the vault's northern wall, and faced in similarly neatly executed ashlar masonry. Thus the derivation of the vault's design from domestic Palladian architecture is manifest, and the involvement of an architect such as Ware is all the more likely: a possibility that biographical circumstances, as outlined above, makes quite feasible.

8 Assessment

The Byng vault is of considerable architectural and historical interest. In terms of funerary architecture (still a little-studied field) it is a highly unusual arrangement. Julian Litten, the authority on vaults and burial arrangements, has pointed out a comparable example of an attached funerary chapel entered externally: the Tufnell mortuary chapel of 1800 at Boreham, Essex. However, despite the fact that several alterations have taken place, *the Byng vault remains in essentially the same form as when it was drawn by Thomas Fisher in 1811*. The remarkable inscription to Admiral Byng (sometimes given to Dr Johnson himself) is of national importance, and the vault is in some ways the most interesting part of the whole church. Its architectural character has not received any attention before, and should not be under-rated. John Murray's *Handbook for Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire* (1895 edition) described the Byng 'mausoleum or "columbarium"' as 'the most noticeable object here', a verdict it is hard to disagree with. Proposals to divide the space laterally in two and insert a parish room will inevitably adversely affect the interest of the vault. Despite the early Victorian idea of converting the vault into a Sunday School room, this remarkable chamber does not lend itself to adaption or sub-division.

9 Recommendations

- 1 That the Parish Council is dissuaded from seeking the sub-division of the Byng Vault in order to create a parish room.
- 2 That the rainwater goods and soakaway arrangements are closely examined in order to reduce the acute problem of rising damp within the vault.
- 3 That the RCHME undertakes a proper survey of the church as a whole, including the Byng Vault, which is deserving of photographic and drawn record.

Roger Bowdler
Historical Analysis and Research Team
January 1999

SOURCES

Kenneth Ashworth, *The Parish Church of All Saints, Southill, Bedfordshire. A Short History and Guide* (revised by Colin McCartney, 1994).

GEC, *The Complete Peerage* XII, part I (1953), 788ff.

Thomas Fisher, *Collections Historical Genealogical and Topographical for Bedfordshire* (1812), pl. 134.

John Murray (publishers), *Handbook for Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire* (1895), 162.

VCH Bedfordshire III (1912), 256-61.

Isaac Ware, *A Complete Body of Architecture* (1756).

Chris Pickford, *Southill: church notes* taken from Bedfordshire Record Office sources, etc. (Typescript)

Letter from Julian Litten, Victoria and Albert Museum, 19th September 1998.

APPENDIX: INTERMENTS WITHIN THE BYNG CHAPEL

The vault contains seven distinct bays: three on the north wall, numbered west to east 1-3; one on the east (number 4, empty); two on the south side (numbered east to west 5-6) and one on the west (number 7, empty). Bays 1-4 and 7 consist of a major opening over two smaller lower loculi; bays 5-6 consist of three rows of loculi, each two abreast.

Bay 1

Upper: the Right Hon. Pattee Byng, Viscount Torrington PC, Captain of the Yeomen of the King's Guard, 1699-1746 and his relict, Lady Charlotte (d.1759) and two infants (d. 1728, 1735).

Lower left: His Excellency Robert Byng [Governor] of Barbadoes (d.1740)

Lower right: Hon. Elizabeth Byng, his relict (d.1786)

Bay 2

Upper: the Right Hon. George, Viscount Torrington, 'Admiral and Commander in Chief of HIS MAJESTY'S Fleet', PC, KB (d.1732) and his relict Margaret, Dowager Viscountess (d.1756)

lower left: 'To The perpetual Disgrace / of PUBLICK JUSTICE / The Honble JOHN BYNG Esqr: / Admiral of the Blue / Fell a MARTYR to / POLITICAL PERSECUTION / March 14th: in the Year 1757 when / BRAVERY and LOYALTY / were Insufficient Securities / for the / Life and Honour / of a / NAVAL OFFICER.

Lower right: The Hon. Edward Byng (d.1756)

Bay 3

Upper: the Right Hon. George, Viscount Torrington, Major-General, Colonel of Foot (d.1750).

Lower left: Bridget, 5th Viscountess Torrington (d.1823).

Lower right: John, 5th Viscount Torrington (d.1813).

Bay 4

empty

Bay 5

empty

Bay 6

Upper row, left: Lieut-Col. Arthur Stanley Byng, 10th Viscount Torrington (d.1961)

right: empty

middle row, left: Anne, relict of George Byng (d.1805)

right: George Byng Esq. Of Wrotham Park (d.1789).

Lower row, left: empty

right: John Byng Esq. (d.1764)

Bay 7

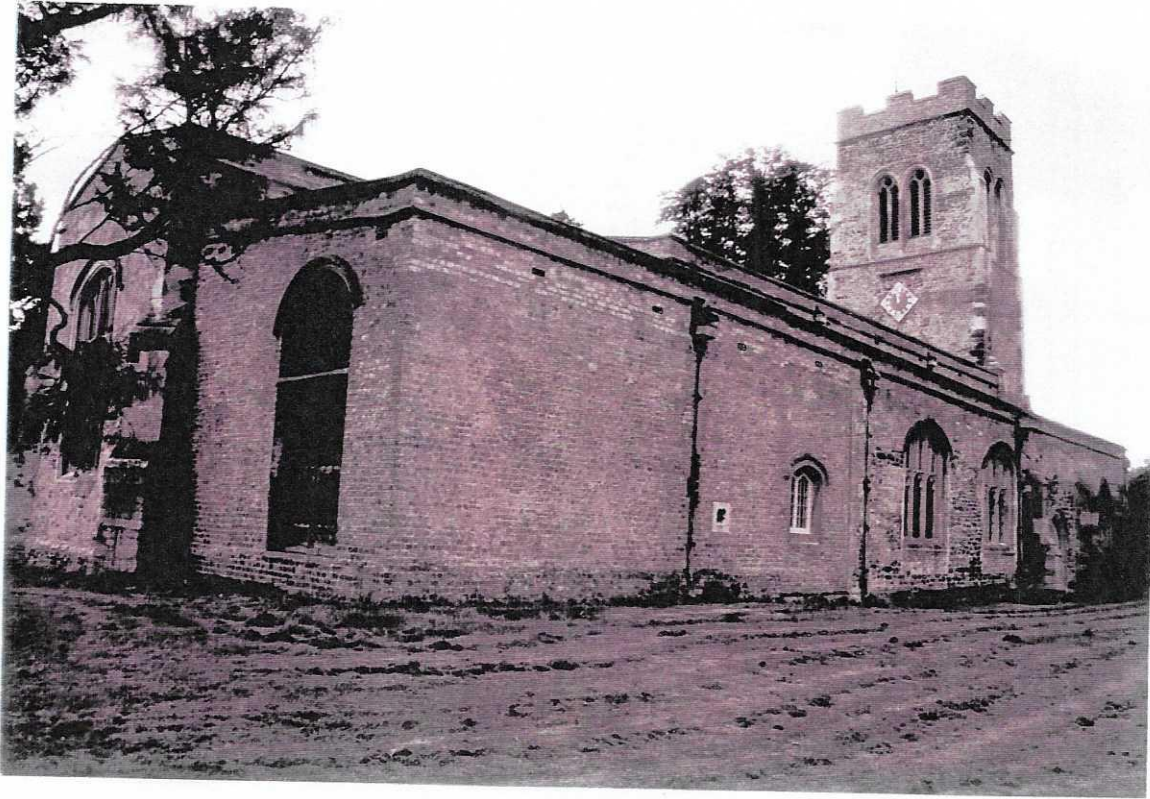
empty.

Upper wall, west side

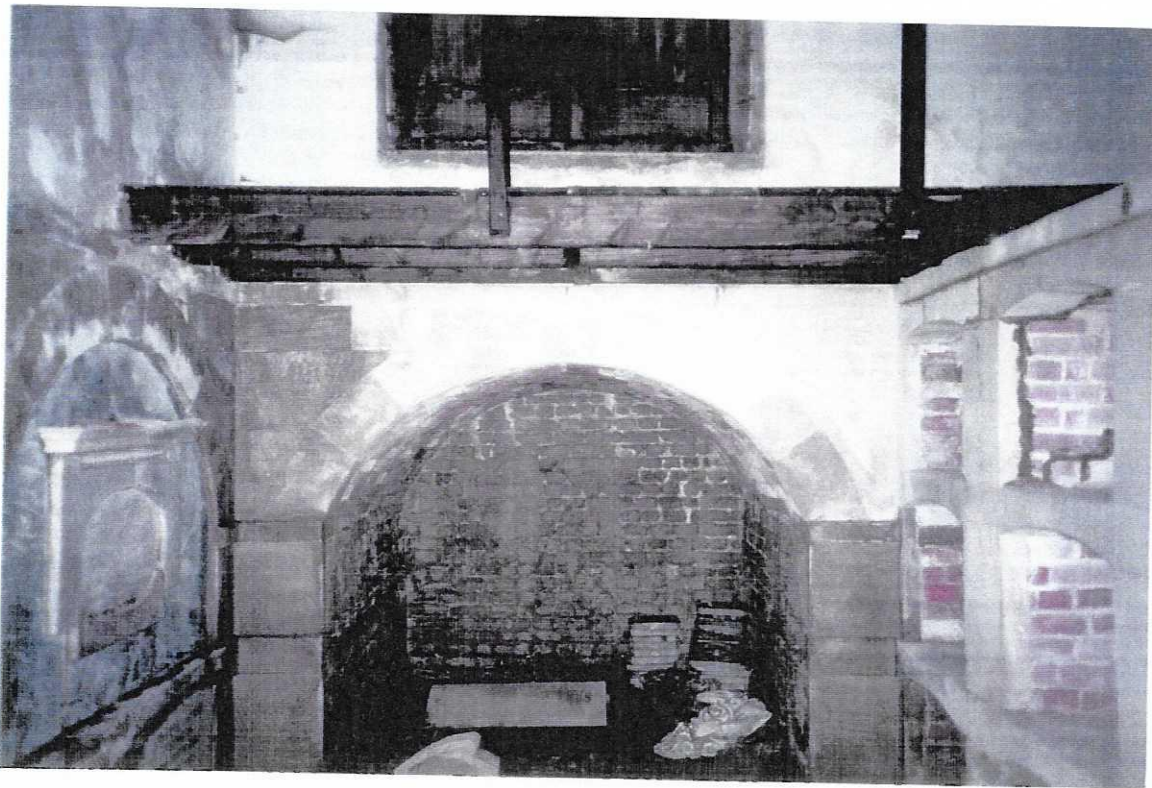
A cartouche to the Hon. Colonel Francis Byng (d. 1734) and his wife Helena.

Upper wall, north side

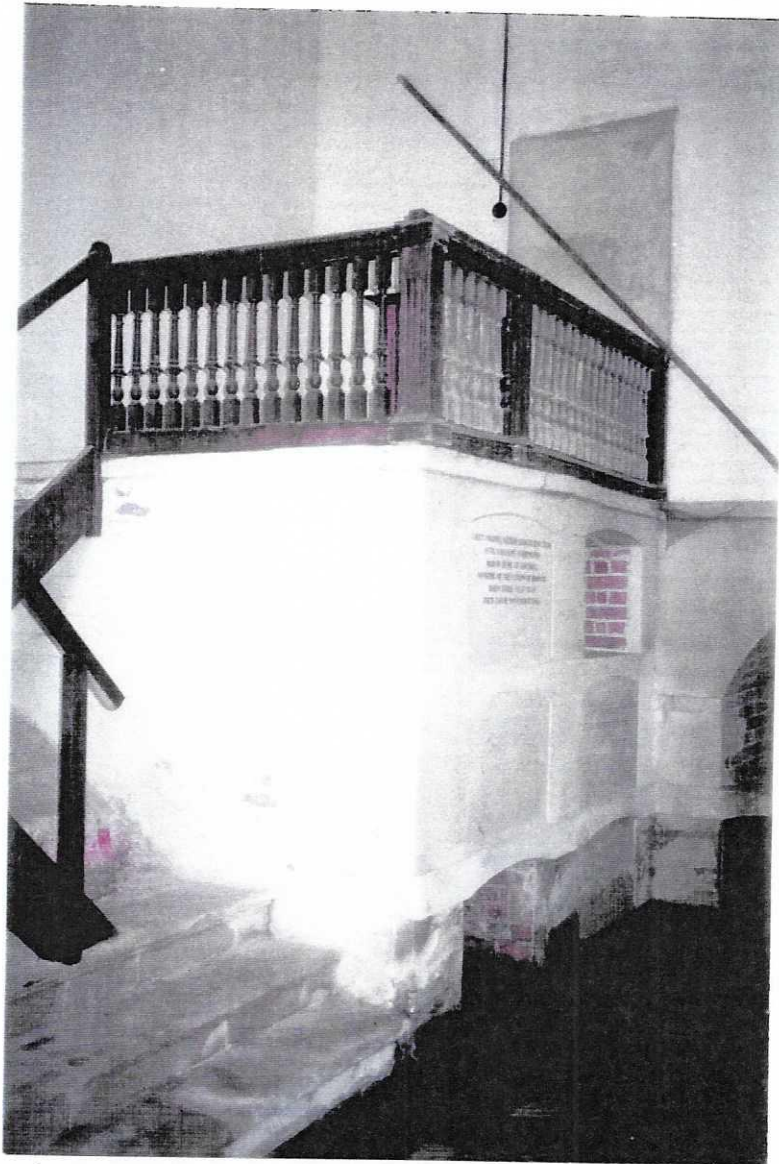
Armorial carouche with the arms of the Byngs, set within an auricular frame with the motto TRIA JUNCTA IN UNA ('Three joined in one') below a viscount's coronet.



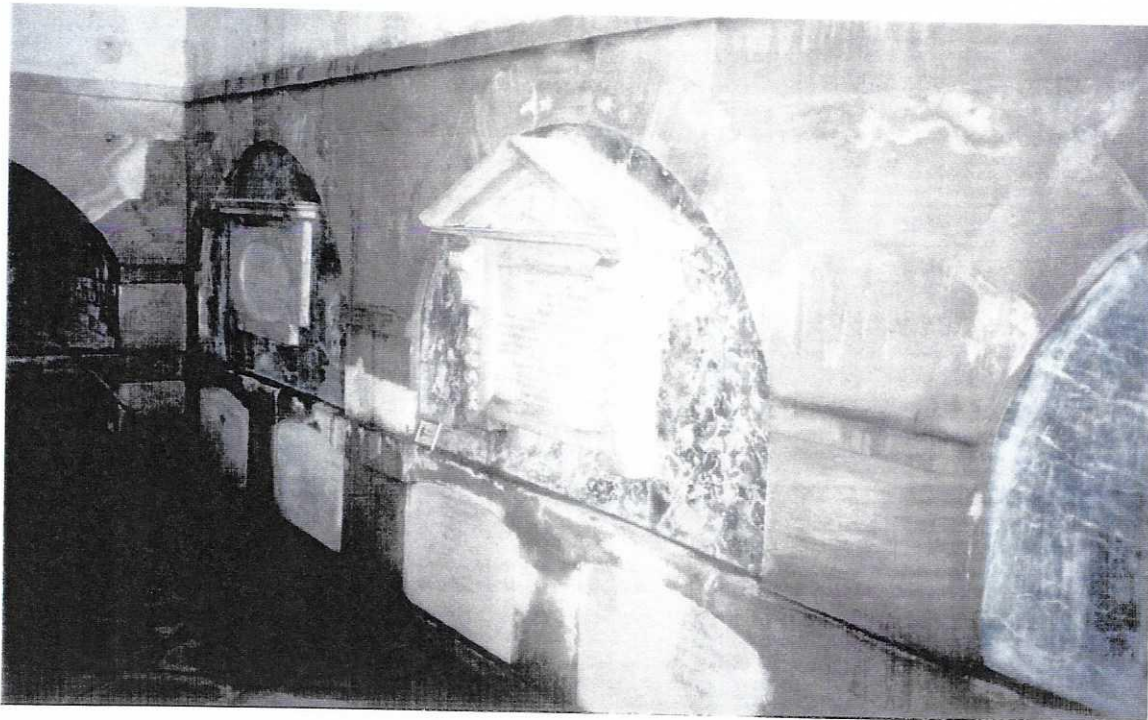
All Saints, Southill, Beds: north-east corner, showing exterior of the Byng Vault.



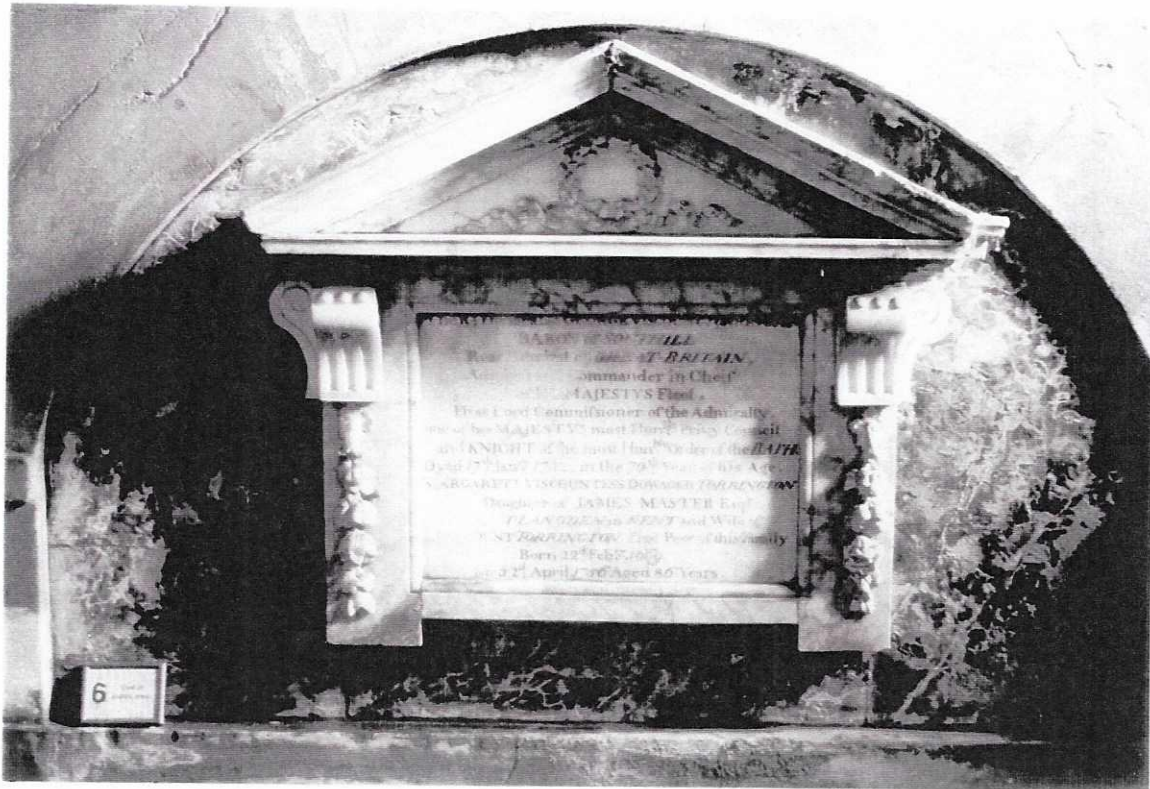
Byng Vault: interior, lower section of east side showing empty bay below door



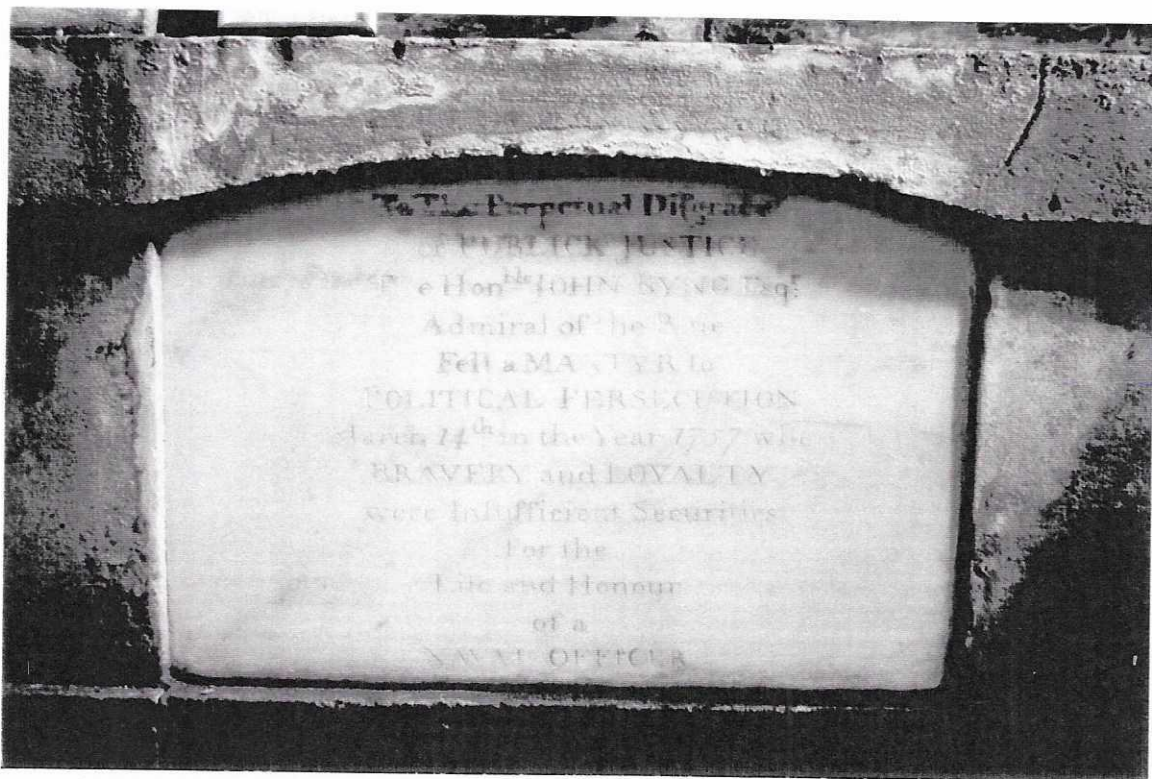
Byng Vault: interior to south-west, showing steps, platform and blocked door.



Byng Vault: interior to north-west, showing main memorials on north wall.



Byng Vault: memorial to George, 1st Viscount Torrington (d.1732)



Byng Vault: memorial to Admiral John Byng (executed 1757).