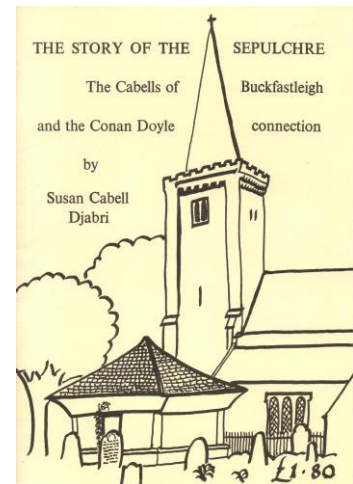


## THE CABELL TOMB AT HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, BUCKFASTLEIGH

*In 1990, when the Cabell Tomb was “in a sad state of dilapidation” Mrs Susan Cabell Djabri, a member of a branch of the Cabell family, published a carefully researched booklet “The Story of the Sepulchre” to be sold to raise money for the repair of the tomb. Today it is good to be able to report that the tomb is in a much better state of repair. What follows is a greatly simplified account of the history of the tomb based on Mrs Djabri’s research. This has been prepared by the Rev. George Day, retired ordained minister, based at St Luke’s Church, Buckfastleigh.*



Mrs Djabri wrote, ‘For many years, the tomb has been wrapped in superstition, so that its very real historical significance has been obscured. Until quite recently, the local children believed that, if they walked around the tomb three, seven or thirteen times, and poked their fingers through the keyhole of the door or the iron grille, the devil would appear and their fingers be gnawed off! Even now, the story of the wicked “Squire Cabell”, whose supposedly evil life led him to be regarded as a sort of local Dracula, continues to be propagated by books of Devon ghost stories written for the tourist market, while the real story of the Cabell family, which is infinitely more fascinating, seems to have been forgotten.’

Some of the stories – such as Cabell’s supposedly evil reputation, him being hunted to his death across Dartmoor by black dogs, or alternatively black dogs heard howling round Brook Manor as he lay dying, and the heavy stone laid over his grave being put there to prevent him coming back from the grave – are at least partly due to the Rev Sabine Baring-Gould in his 1907 “Little Guide” to Devon. Other stories were told to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and found their way, mixed with other tales from various sources, into his novel “The Hound of the Baskervilles”.

### **The first Richard Cabell**

Richard Cabell, originally from Frome, in Somerset, married Susannah Peter, from Buckfastleigh, in about 1580, and they then settled in Buckfastleigh. He was seen as something of a Puritan, calling for a funeral service without “funeral pomp or popish sermons” and adding a long exposition of his personal faith. It seems very unlikely that he was the source of the tales of an evil Richard Cabell.

Susannah died in 1597 and Richard in 1613. They were the first occupants of the tomb, though the penthouse building only came later.

### **The second Richard Cabell**

He gained the title “esquire” and later seems to have become lord of the manor of Buckfastleigh. He and his wife Mary lived at Brook Manor, which is a couple of miles north-west of Buckfastleigh. He prospered greatly, but chose the Royalist side in the civil war, and so became liable in the commonwealth period to some heavy fines. Just before his death in 1655 he was involved in a legal dispute with townspeople who were not using the mills that he owned. This perhaps showed an unfortunate attitude to ordinary local residents, but Mrs Djabri concluded ‘the second Richard does not seem to have had the characteristics of the “wicked” Richard.’

### **The third Richard Cabell**

He was clearly determined to make his mark in public life. In 1656 he built a fine new manor house at Brook, or greatly extended an earlier building. He also built the Cabell Tomb for his father and grandparents. His wife Elizabeth came from a leading family, and her father was

made a baronet in 1661. Richard and Elizabeth had no male heir, only a daughter, also called Elizabeth. There is an oral tradition that he kept mistresses at Hawson Court, just up the hill from Brook Manor. Overall however, he does not seem to actually deserve his evil reputation, but it is known that he was much disliked in Buckfastleigh, and it is he who is probably the Richard Cabell behind the stories.

### **Or a composite figure?**

After the death of her parents, the younger Elizabeth eventually married Cholmeley D'Oyly, a distinctly dubious character, a bigamist and libertine. By the end of the 17th Century Elizabeth and her husband were living at Brook Manor, and Cholmeley D'Oyly was buried at Buckfastleigh. So might there be some confusing of identities in the stories of the evil squire, with elements of the third Richard Cabell and his disreputable son-in-law being put together?

### **Or perhaps some very prosaic reasons**

Mrs Djabri in her booklet suggests other factors may have been at work in the creation of the stories.

During the early 19th century there was a spate of body-snatching from Buckfastleigh churchyard – so could stories of a devilish figure and of hell-hounds have been deliberately created to frighten people away from the tomb?

Or perhaps some of the stories were pure inventions, fed to people like Baring-Gould and Conan Doyle, satisfying the very frequent desire for tales of mystery and intrigue?

### **And today**

It seems unlikely we will ever get to the bottom of the stories. Today Holy Trinity Church is a roofless ruin after arson in 1992. The parish church is now St Luke's, Buckfastleigh, and the church seeks to discourage the propagation of tales of the occult surrounding the tomb, and instead to present it and the surrounding graveyard as a place of genuine historical interest and as a scene of peace and harmony.