

**ONE of the strangest places in pre-war Southampton was the catacomb beneath All Saints' Church at the corner of High Street and East Street.**

This "underground City of the Dead", as it was once described, dated back at least to the 17th century, more than 100 years before the church was rebuilt in the 1790s.

Between then and 1868, when the last burial took place, the remains of several hundred people were laid to rest there, many of them distinguished local residents.

They even included a Chancellor of the Exchequer to King Charles II.

The catacomb comprised a central passageway with a series of parallel side passages branching off it.

Each avenue was lined by sealed tombs.

"The coffins were thrust into brick apertures, each with an end to the passageway," wrote the *Echo's* Townsman E A Mitchell after visiting the catacomb in the 1930s.

"Each aperture was separate from the rest, and when the end was bricked up and a slab bearing the name and particulars of the occupant affixed, such compartment was completely airtight."

It's hard to imagine a grimmer place to visit but it was not without its lighter side, as Mitchell observed.

He noted that each avenue extended a couple of feet under the High Street pavement and had above it a grating which admitted a little light and air.

"The central passage ends just beneath the pavement in front of the church porch and the walls and floor beneath the grating, together with the cobwebs which adorn Skew, are plentifully besprinkled with confetti that has been thrown over happy brides and bridegrooms as they have come down the steps of the church."

It was, said Mitchell, a "strange little irony in this doleful place - symbols of festival in the abode of death."

The church itself had an 800-year history for it was granted to the monks of St Denys by Henry II in the 12th century.

From the 17th century comes a story of the night



All Saints Church, Above Bar, Southampton in 1926 before a visit from the Prince of Wales.

# Centuries-old 'City of Dead' under church



The gloomy catacombs of the crypt that once existed below the church.

that three of the church's five bells were mysteriously stolen.

The Mayor, John Speed, offered a reward through the columns of the *London Gazette* but the bells were never recovered.

In the 18th century the old

church fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1792.

Freemasonry's Grand Master Provincial laid the foundation stone of its replacement at a ceremony attended by poet-laureate John Pye, who was staying in Southampton and composed

an ode to mark the occasion.

The new church, completed in 1795, was impressive, resembling the ancient Temple of Minerva in Greece, with great classical pillars fronting on to the High Street.

Inside, its unsupported arched ceiling had a huge span of 60 feet - the complete length of the church.

The novelist Jane Austen became a regular in the congregation a few years later when her family lived in All Saints parish at Castle Square.

She mentions the church from time to time in her letters, noting in January 1809 that they had been unable to attend on two Sundays running.

But they made it on the third Sunday despite it being "a very blowing day".

All Saints' imposing frontage was one of the High Street's most memorable features before the Second World War.

But the striking building, like many of its neighbours, was sadly and dramatically reduced to ruins during a German bombing raid in December 1940.

The catacomb - fitted out as an air raid shelter at the start

of the war - survived virtually intact.

But in August 1944, with demolition of the ruin awaited, its 403 permanent residents were removed for reburial in a communal grave at Hollybrook Cemetery.

"Each coffin was of oak with a leaden shell," reported the *Echo* at the time.

"Some were in a good state of preservation while others had crumbled to dust."

In later years shops and a multi-storey car park were built on the site.

All Saints' parish registers - scorched and damaged by molten tar and candle wax during the fire which followed the bombing - date back to 1653.

An early burial entry relates to "Elizabeth Loder, barbarously murdered in ye Porters Field, whose body was dugged up for John Norborn and others to touch her body" - a reference to the old custom of touching the bodies of murder victims or executed killers to cure disease.

The painter Sir John Millais was baptised at All Saints, the best-known of many eminent people whose names appear on the restored registers.