

The population of Stoke Gabriel has grown considerably in recent years as numbers of retired people and younger professionals, with children of school age, relocate to it from other parts of the country. In contrast, there are families who have lived in the parish for generations and who have contributed to its life in countless ways. There are many such families, chief amongst them perhaps is the Churchward family, although no person with the name resides in the parish today. But in the service of the parish church there is one family that is pre-eminent and that is the Narracott family although, as with the Churchwards, there is no such named person living in the parish today.

The name of Narracott is derived from the habitational name "Nordcot" which is a conjunction of old English names "nord" meaning north and "cot" meaning cottage or shelter. Its etymology involves such variant names as Norcott, Norcutt, Norkutt, Norkett etc.¹ Other family names, such as Northcote, are also derived from the same habitational name and continue to co-exist with Narracott.² Although not exclusive to the county of Devon, the family name of Narracott has long been associated with it, having first been identified in the early 12th century at Northcott, a hamlet in the parish of Boyton and the hundred of Black Torrington.

In the parish church guide book, it is recorded that "George Narracott had been the church verger for 51 years and prior to that the Narracott family had handed down the post of verger from father to son for 450 years, in an unbroken line since the Reformation in 1540."³

There is also a monument on the north side of the nave of the church, which bears the inscription: "In memory of George Narracott Verger 1935-1987 and of his forbears vergers in this church from 1440".

George Narracott was appointed verger and sexton of the parish church in 1935 on the death of his father, James, who in turn was appointed to the office in 1916 on the death of his own father, also called James. The passing of one Narracott and the appointment of another to the office attracted much publicity.⁴ In particular, the perpetuation of the tradition that the Narracotts had been sextons for many centuries and that the office passed down through the family from father to son captured the public imagination, both locally and nationally. The family was held in high regard and many newspapers published articles relating more generally to the history of the family and also to their association with the Churchward family. Reference to the Narracott name and the tradition was even made by Beatrix Cresswell in her Notes on Devon Churches:

"...the oldest name, perhaps, among the cottagers and artisans of the village; where they claim to have been masons, and sextons ever since there was such a place."

"Sexton Narracott buried the first Churchward that ever be, and family after family they've kept it up."⁵

The history of the Stoke Gabriel Narracotts and their tradition as sextons of the parish church has been investigated by others but the time is right to update it and bring it together.

Genealogical History of the Stoke Gabriel Narracotts

The report of the death of James Narracott in 1916 triggered questions as to the evidential support for the tradition. In particular, the attention of the editors of the local history journal, Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries, was drawn by several correspondents to the following statement in the Express and Echo:

“By the appointment of a son of the late sexton at Stoke Gabriel, near Totnes, the office is continued in the Narracott family, in which it has been since 1440”.⁶

The editors expressed doubts as to the accuracy of this statement and raised the matter with the recently resigned incumbent of the parish, Reverend Hugh Pigot, who said that “he certainly has his doubts about the statement, but as far as he knows there is no means of proving or contradicting the claim.” The editors invited readers to provide evidence for or against the statement.⁷ Mr Tapley-Sower took up the challenge and carried out searches through the parish registers relating to baptism, marriage and burials. The registers are one of the most complete in the county, commencing from 1539, the year following the issue of an injunction by Thomas Cromwell requiring parishes to keep such records. The earliest Narracott entry that he found was in 1604 when Robert Narracott (Norkote) married Elizabeth Crappinge in the parish church. He also found that two of their sons, Alexander and David, had been baptised in the church. In his 1917 report, Mr Tapley-Sower concluded that the Narracott name was unknown in the parish before 1604.⁸ The conclusion was contextualised in 1999 in an article “The Narracotts – Sextons of Stoke Gabriel since 1440?” by Mr Bonstow.⁹

Today, the registers are all accessible on-line.¹⁰ Fresh searches have been carried out and the findings of Mr Tapley-Sower are largely confirmed. Additionally, it has been discovered that Robert Narracott was the oldest of five children of Phyllype Narracott (Naracote) and Mary Holdyche, who were married in Totnes in 1579.¹¹ Robert came to the parish sometime before 1604 (presumably from Totnes) and, having fathered four children in addition to Alexander, died in 1610. None of Robert’s siblings came to Stoke Gabriel and by 1641 the only male Narracott in the parish over 18 years old was Alexander as indicated by the Protestation Return, a declaration required to be made that year by all adult male parishioners.¹² (Alexander’s siblings, Roger, Edward, David and Thomas Narracott, had either died or had moved away from the parish by this time). Thereafter the Narracott name appears frequently in the parish registers. A simplified Narracott family tree is attached as Appendix 1.

The registers aside, there are no helpful parish-originating records dating from the 15th and 16th century. In about 1570, however, the Earl of Pembroke, William Herbert, undertook a survey of all his estates including the Manor of Paignton which had been acquired from the Lord Bishop of Exeter and comprised the parishes of Paignton, Marldon and Stoke Gabriel. Similar in content to the Domesday Book, the report provides a detailed listing, parish by parish, of the people who leased manorial land or property and for Stoke Gabriel mentions numerous names, including the Churchwards, but does not once mention the name of Narracott.¹³

Although the Narracott name has its roots in the 12th century and was in continuous existence in the county since that time in one form or another, the evidence shows that the name was introduced to Stoke Gabriel from Totnes in the early 17th century. This appears to be in conflict with the tradition that the Narracotts had been present in the parish since 1440 or 1540 as recorded on the nave monument and in the church guide book respectively. The year 1540 is clearly incorrect since the parish registers and manorial survey reveal an absence of Narracotts from that time through to the 17th century when Robert Narracott arrived in the parish. As far as 1440 is concerned, the possibility cannot be excluded that a separate branch of the Narracott family was established in the parish in the 15th century and that it ceased to exist before the introduction of the parish registers, thus creating an interregnum until the 17th century when another branch was introduced through Robert Narracott. There is however no evidence for or against this possibility.¹⁴ A timeline for the existence of Narracotts in the parish of Stoke Gabriel is provided in Appendix 2.

As to the Churchwards, their name appears many times in the parish registers for Stoke Gabriel from the very first year of their introduction in 1538 and thereafter. The available evidence indicates that the Churchwards pre-existed the Narracotts in the parish and not the other way around.

The Narracotts as Sextons of Stoke Gabriel Church

Of the surviving parish documents from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, relatively few identify holders of ecclesiastical office other than the priest and churchwardens. Those that do include the parish registers, the minutes of the annual vestry meetings for 1844-1940 and the 19th century gazetteers for the county of Devon. Another source of information is the headstone inscriptions in the parish churchyard although the earliest of these dates only from about the mid-18th century. Using such sources, some headway has been made in identifying the holders of the office of sexton from the 17th century to date.

Robert Narracott died in 1610 at the young age of 30. The qualifying age for a sexton was 21 and none of Robert's sons would have been old enough to meet this requirement until at least about 1625. Consistent with this, the churchwarden accounts for 1617 identify the name of the sexton, as follows:

“Item pd william doone for his sextonshipp the last year”¹⁵

Evidently, the office of sexton was occupied by William Doone in 1616 and the Narracott's occupation of the office could have commenced only after this time once a male member of the family had reached the qualifying age. William Doone seems to have moved away from Stoke Gabriel sometime before 1641 since he is not listed in the Stoke Gabriel Protestation Return or in the parish burial register. A vacancy would have thus been created for the office sometime after 1616 and before 1641.

The earliest document that bears upon the Narracott tradition is the parish burial register for 1794 in which the vicar, Reverend Finney Bellfield, records alongside the entry for the burial of Matthew Narracott (1714-1794) the fact that “he was Sexton of this parish for more than 52 years.”¹⁶ It can be deduced from this that Matthew would have commenced his sextonship in 1742, which happens to be the same year as the death of his father, also called Matthew (1673-1742). Although the existence of a coincidence cannot be discounted, it is more likely that the son, Matthew (1714-1794), succeeded his father on his death. In other words, both Matthew Narracott (1714-1794) and his father, Matthew Narracott (1673-1742), were sextons.

In turn, the father, Matthew Narracott (1673-1742), might have succeeded his own father, also confusingly called Matthew (1636-1710), on his death. It is notable that this Matthew (1636-1710), who is the son of Alexander (1604-1682), is the only possible candidate from his generation since his only male sibling, Edward, died in his infancy. Likewise, Alexander is the only possible candidate from his generation since, as mentioned previously, his male siblings had either died or moved away from the parish. It is entirely possible therefore that Alexander or his son Matthew was the first Narracott to be appointed as sexton but no relevant evidence has been found.

Moving forward in time to the 19th century, the minutes of the Annual Vestry meeting for 1853 identify John Narracott as “Sexton last year”.¹⁷ Billing's Directory for 1857 confirms that John Narracott was still sexton.¹⁸ Most helpfully of all, there is a headstone for John Narracott's grave in the churchyard which contains an inscription that he was “for 60 years

sexton of this parish".¹⁹ This is John Narracott (1795-1880) who was the great grandson of sexton Matthew Narracott (1714-1794). It appears that he served in office for the longest period of all the Narracott sextons.

The minutes of the Annual Vestry meeting for 1880 record that "The meeting lastly proceeded to appoint a Sexton in the place of John Narracott who has resigned...and unanimously resolved that James Narracott be appointed to the office of Sexton of the Parish."²⁰ This is a key minute since it informs of two events. Firstly, John Narracott resigned from office, which was unusual but he was 85 and his decision may have been prompted by ill health since he died later that same year. Secondly, the office of sexton was conveyed from grandfather John Narracott (1795-1880) to grandson James Narracott (1849-1916) and not from father to son. In other words, the intermediate Narracott, namely Robert Narracott (1821-1898), did not hold office. Robert was almost 60 when the vacancy arose and he may have considered that a younger man – his son – was more suited to the post. The grave of James Narracott (1849-1916) confirms that he served in office for 37 years.²¹

The minutes of the Annual Vestry meeting for 1918 record that "Mr Narracott should be appointed Sexton formally by the Vestry, with retrospective force to Dec 6 1916, when he succeeded his late father."²² The newly appointed sexton was James Robert Narracott (1878-1935). His grave contains the inscription that he served in office for 19 years, that is until his death.²³

Although the minutes of the Annual Vestry meeting for 1936 have not been located, it was in that year that the last of the Narracotts, namely George Narracott (1915-1987), the son of James Robert Narracott, was appointed to the offices of sexton and verger. His was the first formal appointment as verger although his predecessors had undertaken many of the duties associated with the office. Like that of sexton, the office of verger is an ancient office. The duties of a sexton include grave digging and general graveyard maintenance. The duties of a verger include ceremonial and management responsibilities for the care and security of the church. In recent times, the digging of graves has been organized by funeral directors and the sexton's role has been limited to grave digging for cremated remains. In smaller places of worship, especially in rural areas, such as Stoke Gabriel, the two offices are often combined. George's cremation tablet confirms that he was in office for 51 years, having been appointed at the young age of 21.²⁴

A timeline of Narracott sextonship, based on the foregoing information, is provided in Appendix 3. There is a period of 26 years from 1794-1820 for which it has not been possible to identify the office holders. It may be assumed that yet another Matthew, Matthew Narracott (1741-1811), succeeded his father, Matthew Narracott (1714-1794), on his death. Matthew Narracott (1741-1811) was a parish clerk, as indicated later, but he himself died in 1811, which was after his son, Roger Narracott (1768-1796), had already died at an early age and when Roger's son and future sexton, John (1795-1880), was only 16 years. A gap in the lineage thus exists and it is possible that one of Roger Narracott's three male siblings was sexton for the period from 1811-1820, at the end of which John Narracott (1795-1880) succeeded to the office and thus restored the lineage. This is however speculation since no evidence has been found to inform the situation.

On the death of George Narracott in 1987, there was no son to succeed him; nor was there any other Stoke Gabriel Narracott. George represented the end of the Stoke Gabriel Narracott lineage that had commenced in the early 17th century. But the present incumbent of the office, Norman Betts, maintains the tradition, if not the Narracott name, since his great grandfather is George's grandfather, namely James Narracott (1849-1916). Norman

represents the 13th generation since Robert Narracott came to Stoke Gabriel in the early 17th century. He was trained by George from about the age of 15 and, upon the invitation of the Reverend John Scholefield, succeeded George as verger and sexton when George died. Norman completed 30 years of service in 2017 and, later that same year, was invited to receive Maundy money from the Queen, an honour bestowed on those selected by the diocesan bishop for their service to church and community. The number of recipients is equal to the Queen's age and on this occasion there were 92 men and 92 women. On the 29th March 2018, Norman made the journey to Windsor, met the Queen and duly received the Maundy money. It was a proud and memorable occasion for Norman and the parish.

In conclusion, the available evidence provides sufficient and general support for the tradition that the Narracott family has occupied the office of sexton from the 17th century. The evidence also shows that the office was generally passed from father to son on the death of the former although there are a couple of exceptions that were probably occasioned by the particular circumstances of the situation.

The Narracotts as Parish Clerks of Stoke Gabriel Church

In the early 17th century the office of parish clerk required a degree of literacy and competency in singing but in subsequent centuries it became more administrative. The available sources show that the Narracotts occupied this office as well.

The parish burial register for 1811 identifies Matthew Narracott (1741-1811) as the parish clerk. Both White's Directory for 1850 and Billing's Directory for 1857 identify Roger Narracott (1807-1870) as parish clerk.²⁵ Roger was the grandson of the previous parish clerk, Matthew Narracott (1741-1811). Moreover, Kelly's Directory for 1883 and 1889 identifies James Narracott (1849-1916) as parish clerk as well as sexton.²⁶

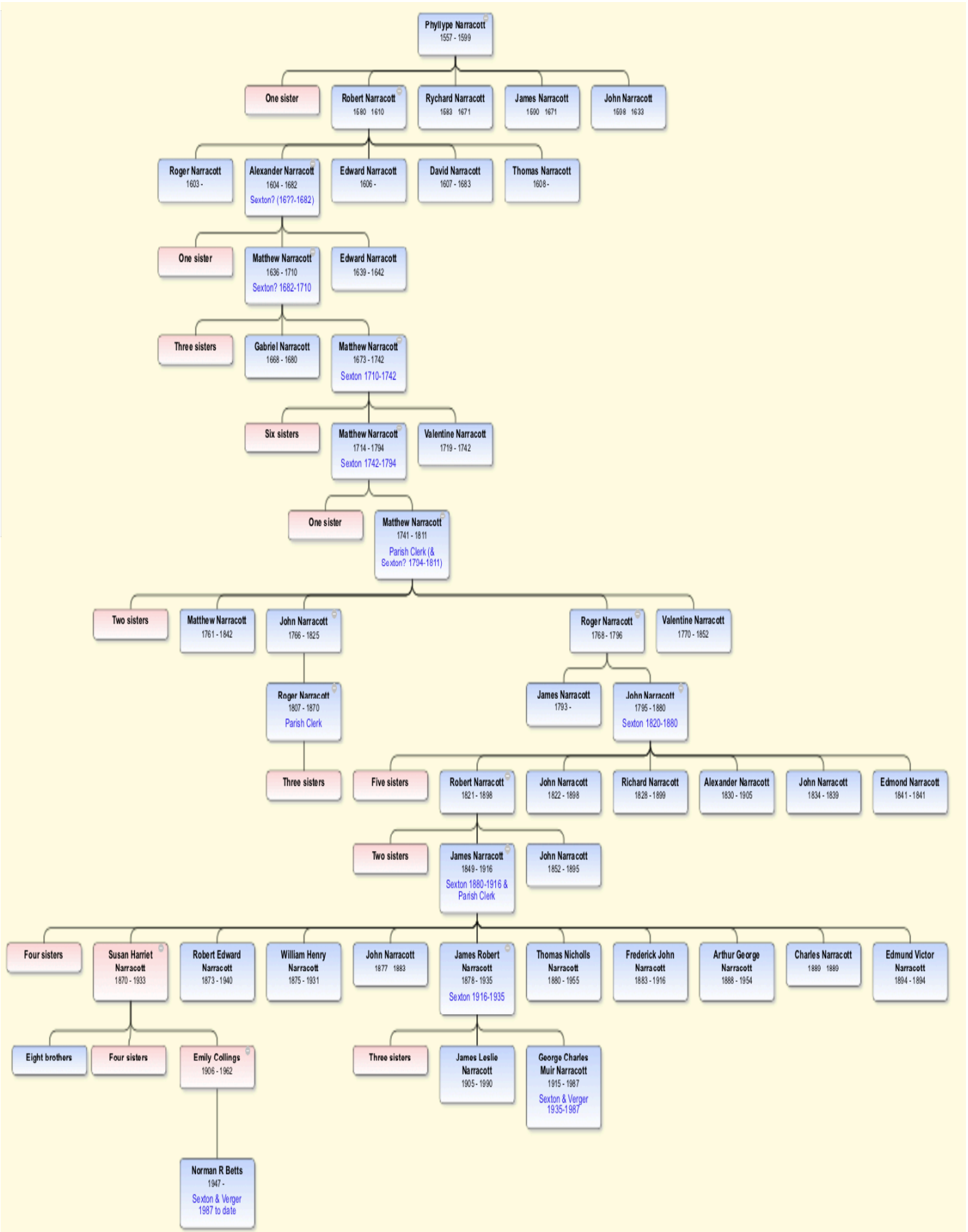
At many times during the last four centuries, the Narracotts have occupied the office of sexton or verger or parish clerk or various combinations of them. One can truly say that since their arrival in Stoke Gabriel, the Narracotts have provided an unparalleled period of faithful service to the parish church over many generations during centuries of political, social, economic and ecclesiastical change.

Mike Stott, July 2018

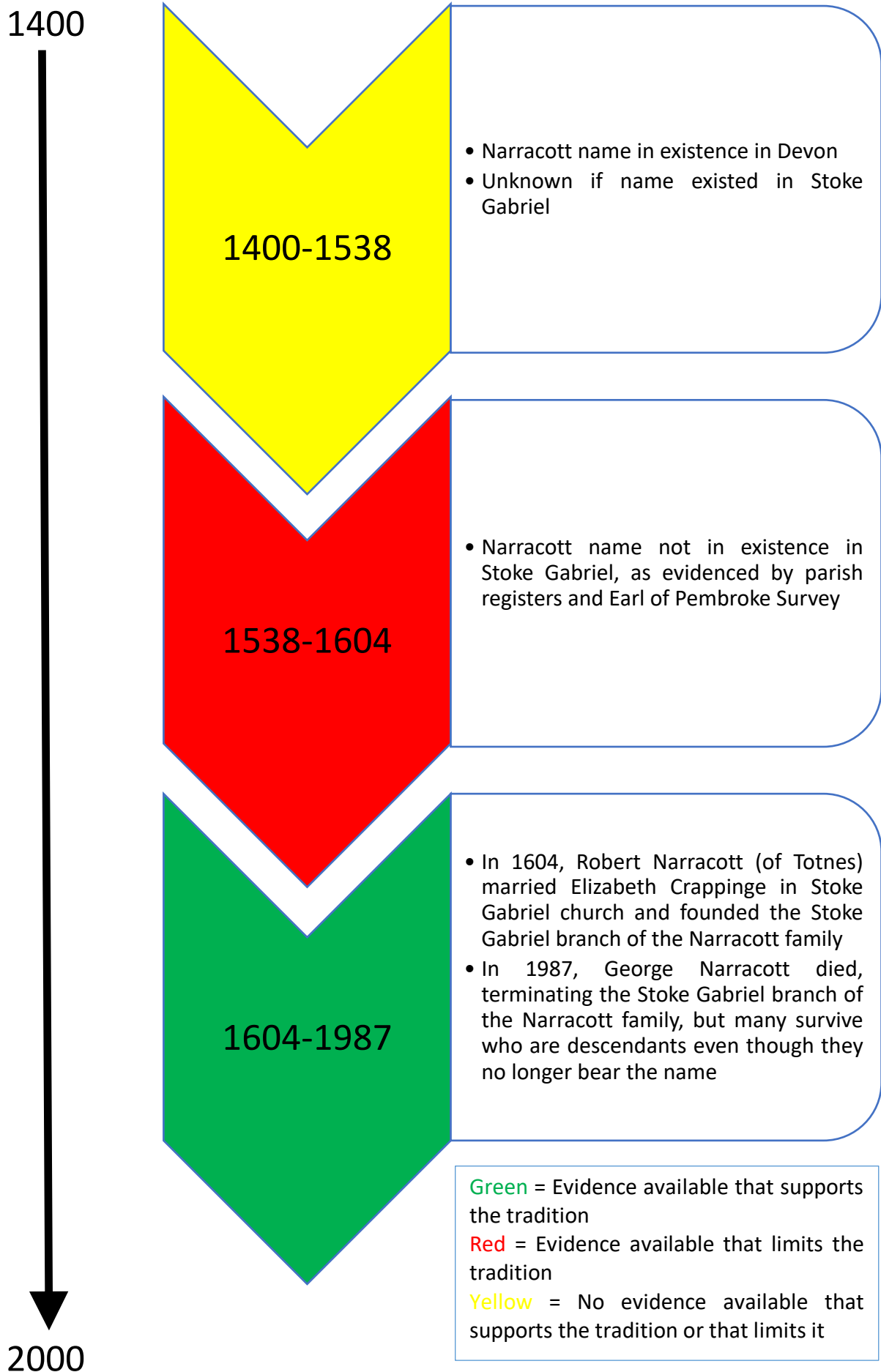
* With grateful thanks to Jane Tarr for furnishing me with a copy of her family tree and to the current verger, Norman Betts, both of whom have James Narracott (1849-1916) as their Great Grandfather.

In the attached audio link, Norman Betts is in conversation with John Cox and describes some of the history of the parish church. The original recording was made by John in April 2012.

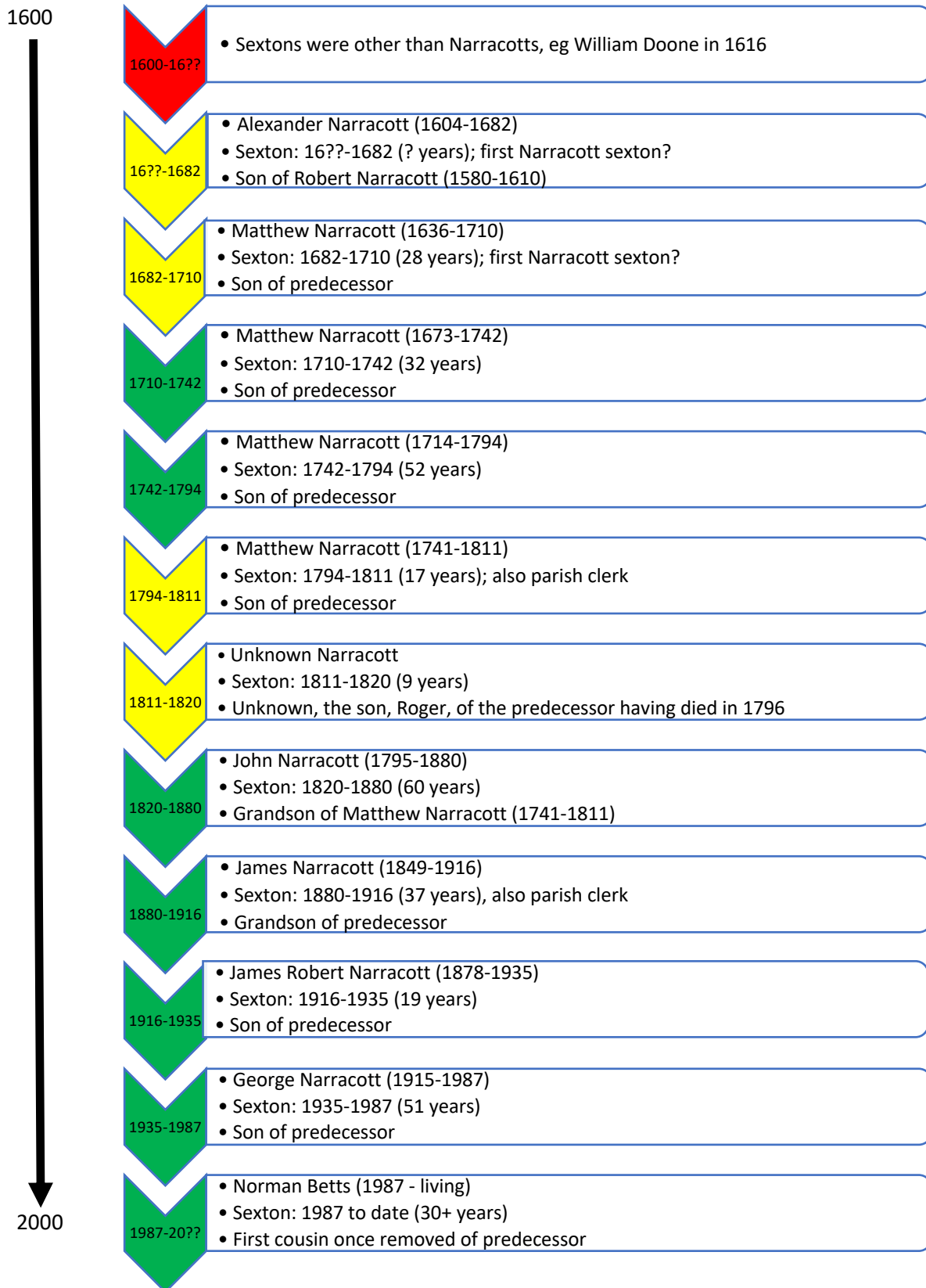
Appendix 1- Narracott Family Tree



Appendix 2: Timeline of Stoke Gabriel Narracotts



Appendix 3: Timeline of Narracott Sextonship



Green = Evidence available that supports the tradition

Red = Evidence available that limits the tradition

Yellow = No evidence available that supports the tradition or that limits it

End notes:

- ¹ <http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Narracott#ixzz5Eo8Sm1DK>
- ² Sir Stafford Henry Northcote, first Earl of Iddesleigh (1818-1887), MP for North Devon in 1866 and Chancellor of the Exchequer (1874-1880), was the last lay patron of Stoke Gabriel church before the right of patronage reverted to the Bishop of Exeter in the 19th century.
- ³ *Church Guide, Church of St Mary and St Gabriel* (Graham Norman (Printing)) and *Stoke Gabriel Booklet* (Produced by John Battison, 2005), available in the parish church and post office.
- ⁴ British Newspaper Archive; <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>
- ⁵ Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), s726.5/DEV/CRE, Beatrix Cresswell, *Notes on Devon Churches, The Fabric and Features of interest in the churches of the Deanery of Totnes*, Revised in 1922 on the basis of original notes of 1904; and Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), Milles Parochial Returns, 1755, Stoke Gabriel Cuttings file, A9
- ⁶ *Express and Echo*, 17th February 1917
- ⁷ *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 1916-17, Vol 9, p190
- ⁸ *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 1916-17, Vol 9, p215
- ⁹ <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/StokeGabriel/Narracotts>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.ancestry.co.uk>; or <https://www.findmypast.co.uk>
- ¹¹ The Totnes parish registers date from 1556, some twenty years later than those for Stoke Gabriel. It is not therefore possible to go back beyond Phyllype Narracott.
- ¹² The Protestation Return was a declaration of allegiance to King Charles I, Parliament and the Protestant faith and required signature by every male parishioner over the age of 18 years.
<http://www.devonheritage.org/Places/Stoke%20Gabriel/StokeGabrielProtestaionReturn.htm>
- ¹³ *Survey of the Lands of William First Earl of Pembroke*, South West Heritage Trust, Taunton, Somerset, Shelf AR2-14, Privately printed in 1909 for presentation to members of the Roxburgh Club.
- ¹⁴ The faculty application for the nave monument contains no supporting evidence either. Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 1981 A/PW8
- ¹⁵ Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 1981 A/PW1 (1617)
- ¹⁶ Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 1981 A/PR1 (1794). The information that was legally required for burial registers at this time comprised the name, age and date of burial of the deceased and it was most unusual to record anything else.
- ¹⁷ Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 1981 A/4/PV1 (1853)
- ¹⁸ *M. Billing's Directory and Gazetteer of the County of Devon*, (M. Billing's Steam-Press Offices, Birmingham, 1857), p529
- ¹⁹ Grave No 728, Parish Church Graves Index
- ²⁰ Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 1981 A/4/PV1 (1880)
- ²¹ Grave No 861, Parish Church Graves Index
- ²² Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 1981 A/4/PV1 (1918)
- ²³ Grave No 849, Parish Church Graves Index
- ²⁴ Grave No 849, Parish Church Graves Index
- ²⁵ *White's 1850 Devon*, A reprint of History, Gazetteer and Directory of Devonshire by William White, (Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1968), p443; and *M. Billing's Directory and Gazetteer of the County of Devon*, (M. Billing's Steam-Press Offices, Birmingham, 1857), p529
- ²⁶ *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire*, (Kelly and Co, London, 1883), p410 and *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire*, (Kelly and Co, London, 1889), p526