

Sudden Death

Sudden deaths from rapidly transferable infectious diseases were seen as 'bad' deaths for Christians because they allowed no time for spiritual preparation and repentance. There was no cure for such things as typhoid and because the patient had to be isolated there was also not the opportunity for the 'proper' farewells to families that were felt to mark a 'good' death. A number of the epitaphs in this section strongly hint at this situation. As with 'pain', the period 1800-50 has many more sudden death epitaphs than would be expected in proportion to the total number of stones from the period (45% against 30). The period before 1800 had only three such stones so the number is not statistically significant. Prior to the enlightenment era, it had been a common belief that death-bed repentance would guarantee redemption, but that sudden death took away this possibility. Thus the dire warnings that those reading some of these epitaphs might be next! There are few such epitaphs after 1850 either – but by then the trend was to short epitaphs.

1731 SE059 WHITE John 61
All you that comes to see my stone
Think how quickly I was gone
Death did me short warning give
Therefore be careful how you live.

1732 SE111 BATEMAN John 34
Just in the middle of my prime, death called me from the stage.
Therefore remember well the time of thy short pilgrimage

1771 SW032 CLIFTON Ann 51
Stay passinger (sic) depart not from this stone
But stand and ponder where I am gone.
Death quickly took my life and sense away
And laid me down in this dark bed of clay
Consider it and take home this line
The grave ye next is opened may be thine.

1801 SE033 BARROTT Elizabeth 19
By sudden death I'm snatched away
Death scarcely left me time to say
Lord have mercy on my soul
So absolute is his control.
Reflect when thou my grave do see
The next that's made may be for thee

1816 SW006 MANN Thomas 19
Just like the morning loud did begin to shine
But blasted in my bloom so fast I did decline
My time on earth was short & I could no longer stay
Death summoned me to go, I could not say him nay
Farewell my parents dear! So tender & so kind,
Farewell companions all that I have left behind
Weep not my parents dear nor in the least complain
For your great loss no doubt is my eternal gain

1828 SW120 BRICE Elizabeth 49
Thou who with health art highly blest may fall beneath this sod,
Eve though dost close thy eyes in sleep. Prepare to meet thy God
In health I saw the morning bright and yet before the sun
Had shed his beams of radiant light my glass was fully run.
(Amos 4:12 Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel).

1833 NE002 SANSOM Matilda 23
Oh cruel death that would not be deny'd
But broke the bonds of love so lately ty'd,
I did not think thou would have called so soon
But found it night before I thought it noon

1834 SW069 COULISHAW John 49
By sudden death was called away
Death scarcely left no time to say
The Lord have mercy on my soul
So absolute was his control
Reflect when you my grave do see
The next that's made may be for thee

1870 NE136 CHEETHAM Isaac 45
Death to me little warning gave
And quickly sent me to the grave
Then boast not, reader, of thy might
Alive at noon but dead at night.

1881 NE003 MEES John 26
In the midst of life we are in death
(Book of Common Prayer, The Burial of the Dead, First Anthem)

Oh what a sudden change, I in a moment fell
I had not time to bid my friends farewell
Think nothing strange, death comes to all
For before tomorrow you may fall.
(Occurs on several memorial stone web sites for churches across the country)

1884 NW102 SHIPMAN Harriett 34
Be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye
Think not the son of man cometh
(Matt 24.44)