**Comports of Cooling and \_Great Expectations\_.**

My first encounter with \_Great Expectations \_was as an eleven year old, watching the 1946 David Lean film in a school hall. I was spell bound and terrified in equal measure as Magwitch appeared from behind the tomb to menace the young Pip. I was there, I was Pip.

Very much later I realised that Pip’s terrifying encounter with Magwitch had taken place in Cooling churchyard, the man who ‘started up from among the graves at the side of the porch’ to threaten Pip was hiding behind a tomb of one of my ancestors, and the tombs that were ‘sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine’ were the tombs of Comport children, all of whom died in early infancy. There are in fact thirteen lozenge tombs grouped around the headstone of the parents of many of them. The parents stone towers above the tombs that are ‘each about a foot and a half long’.

One summer day a cousin and I went to the Hoo Peninsula searching for Comports. We found plenty. At Cooling, close to the church porch, ten lozenge tombs, several of which were the children of Michael and Jane Comport of Cooling Court and later Cooling Castle. The dedications make for pitifully sad reading. William 1771, 8 months;, William 1773, 7 months; Frances 1775, 4 months; James 1777, 4 months; Mary, 1767; William 1779; Sarah Elizabeth, 1779, the child of George Comport of Gattons House at Cliffe; Elizabeth, 1779; Elizabeth, 1792; and Thomas, 1801, the child of Michael Comport of Decoy House, High Halstow. The other three lozenges belong to the children of John and Sarah Rose Baker. Sarah had been a Comport. In High Halstow we found similar Comport tombs, set close to the church porch and grouped in front of the parents’ headstone. In this case they are the children of Michael Smith Comport and his wife Mary Ann.

At Cooling there is also a chest tomb with dedications to a large number of Comports - Jane and Michael, some of their children and other relatives. Like a giant stone table, it dominated this area of the churchyard. Was it the headstone among the lozenge tombs or the chest tomb that was the ‘high tombstone’ that Pip had ‘held tighter to’ as he was tilted over until he had a sense of ‘helplessness and danger’ and was ‘dreadfully frightened’? The confusion arises in part because both tombs commemorate Jane and Michael Comport. On the chest tomb the inscription states that Jane Comport died October 1789, aged 47 and her husband Michael followed in January 1797, aged 51. Other inscriptions record the deaths of their children who lived into adulthood, among them another Michael and a Jane. It appears that the Comports were a force to be reckoned with on the Hoo Peninsula at this time, particularly in Cooling. As for the Comport connection with Dickens, I wonder if Compeyson - the other convict - is in name at least inspired by the name Comport. Likewise the Jane Comport mentioned in \_*An Uncommercial Traveller*\_ may have been inspired by one of the Jane Comports of Cooling.

When it is a ‘rimy morning, and very damp’, when ‘the gates and dykes and banks’ and our village church come ‘bursting at me through the mist’ I hear a ‘terrible voice’ and see a man start ‘up from among the graves’ and I am eleven again and spellbound but terrified.

Article by Dr Pat Argar, neé Comport