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The Rough Guide to Church Alabaster Monuments

Introduction

All of our churches have monuments. Many are in freestone but some are in a translucent stone called alabaster. Alabaster is a member of the limestone family which includes gypsum, marble, feldspar and Purbeck stone. In its mined state it is soft and can be carved but its outer layer hardens in contact with air and can be polished. It is found in a variety of colours from pure white/cream to purple, brown, yellow or green. The colouring differences are the impurities leached from the marle beds in which alabaster is found. The chemical name is Calcium Sulphate.

Alabaster from abroad is different. This is Calcium Carbonate of the ancients, mostly golden coloured and much harder than Calcium Sulphate.

There are limited sources of Carbonate Sulphate in Britain. It has been mined in Watchet, Somerset, Penarth, South Wales, Ledsham, Ripon in Yorkshire and Cumbria but the largest and most active beds are in the East Midlands in the area between Fauld in Staffordshire and Redhill in Nottinghamshire and particularly around Chellaston in Derbyshire.

Alabaster is found in the Keuper and Permian marle layers deposited during the Permian period in layers close to the surface amongst gypsum (Cbp). It is found in stratified layers about 3-4m thick which vary in colour from top (white) to bottom (veined). In times past the veined alabaster was discarded but with the onset of painted monuments the veined alabaster found a new use as alabaster takes paint very well and is long lasting. Later still the veined alabaster was attractive for its finish and was used in 18th and 19th century houses as a decorative feature.

Beginning of an Industry

Although the Normans were aware of alabaster and used it for building (Tutbury church 1160) it was not used for monuments until 1328 when the Duchy of Lancaster acquired the manor of Tutbury. Alabaster had been mined locally for a century and Duchy's steward drew his attention to its suitability for carving. Lancastrian, Edward III, instructed him to mine sufficient alabaster for tombs for his father Edward II which can still be seen in Gloucester Cathedral. Later the manor came to John of Gaunt who extended the mining to another owned manor at Chellaston Derbyshire. The Gloucester effigies caused a stir and resulted in the fashion for memorial effigies in Britain and Europe so that alabaster was sought from the East Midland's field through to the 14th to 17th century.

Church memorials

Alabaster was found in churches and used for the following:

- Floor slabs – inscribed and plain
- Free standing images
- Panels and retables
- Reredos
- Effigies
- Mural tablets with or without effigies
- Church furniture

It is important to realise that with the changes in religious doctrine many monuments became unfashionable or subject to desecration. Before giving guidance on identification it is important to outline these changes.

The Reformation and after

The reformation of Henry VIII is well known but little destruction of memorials took place until the reign of his son Edward VI. From 1550 a policy of destruction of images, reredos and retables removed almost all of these from English churches. Attempts at hiding these by the laity resulted in a number being unearthed in more enlightened times (see the images from the village of Flawford, Nottingham). In addition many images and panels were not destroyed but were shipped overseas from where they have been recovered into British museums in the 19th and 20th century (see Nottingham castle museum and the Victoria and Albert museum – particularly the Swansea Retable). The Elizabethan era continued to search for and destroy hidden images and panels but this destruction faded out at the beginning of the 17th century.

Effigies of people were not seen as threatening in the 16th century and were generally left alone (apart from Tudor vandalism towards Yorkist memorials). However, in the 17th century during the Commonwealth some effigies (and stained glass windows) were attacked by Puritans.

Floor slabs

Floor slabs are found dating from the late 14th century. These are usually white or cream and indicate the source is most likely to be Chellaston. They are found inscribed or plain. The inscriptions suffer from damage by being walked on but are worthy of recording. Unfortunately the inscriptions are usually in Latin but a 20th century researcher by the name of F A Greenhill MA, FSA, (1896-1983) carried out much research into East Midlands slabs.

The details are:

Notes of F A Greenhill in the custody of John Coales FSA, Somerton, Somerset (1931 – 2007)
Incised Effigial Slabs – A Study of engraved stone memorials in Latin Christendom 1100 to 1700

By: [Frank A. Greenhill](#)

ISBN: 0571107419

Publisher: Faber and Faber - 1976-03-08

Format: Hardcover



Crude inscription on the 1505 Babington slab in Ratcliffe



The tomb of John Prescott 1498 priest of Ratcliffe with tonsure and mass robes

Free Standing Images

It is unlikely than any will be encountered. However in the case of Flawford, the images were hidden from the Commissioners of Edward VI by the laity under the floor of the chancel. These were discovered in the 1770s but this is almost certainly not the only case and there may be yet be more images found hidden in our churches. For the Flawford images see the details on the Southwell History Project website and the Nottingham Castle Museum.

Panels, Reredos and Retables

(Note: Nottingham was famous for table top panels usually of John the Baptist, retables which are freestanding displays of religious scenes in a hinged wooden frame which stood on the altar and reredos were similar but mounted on the wall behind the altar)

As for Images all altar displays were removed by Edward VI. However, a few fragments have been found or imported from Europe, some within our area – see below:

Place	Subject
St Michaels and all Angels, Stewkely, Buckingham	Remnant of retable
Yorkshire Museum, York	Six making a full retable found at the site of a former priest's house in 1957
Drayton church, Berkshire	A single panel of the passion
British Museum	Altar piece formerly in Kettlebaston church, Suffolk
Willoughby on the Wolds, Notts	Panel in a 15 th century tomb chest
Lydiate RC church, Lancashire	St Catherine and St Cuthbert formerly in the chapel of Lydiate Hall
Naworth Castle, Cumbria	St Oswald formerly in Lancercoast Priory
St Mary's church, Nottingham	St Thomas
St Mary's Elham Canterbury, Kent	St Thomas
Wells cathedral, Somerset	Annunciation
St Mary the Virgin, Chessington, Surrey	Annunciation once part of a retable. The local history dates this to 1376
St Mary the Virgin, Bletchingley, Surrey	Adoration of the Magi. Has a very nice 1870 reredos by Street
St Bartholomew, Yarnton, Oxford	Adoration of the Magi formerly found at St Edmunds Hall, Oxford. These 15 th century tablets have been fitted into a reredos but one was sent to the British museum and one to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London
St Mary, East Rudham, Norfolk	Coronation by God the Father. Fragments. It is believed these were buried at one time.
Hawley Hampshire	Betrayal
Haddon Hall chapel, Derbys	9 panels depicting the mocking of Christ purchased 1933. A hinged triptych with a wooden crest from the original rood screen
St James, Abinger, Surrey	Crucifixion. This survived a direct hit from a V1
The Priory Workington, Cumbria	Crucifixion and ascension
St Mary, Coddenham Suffolk	Crucifixion. Found walled up in a Tudor cottage in the village and restored to the rood screen.
St Marys Shrewsbury, Salop	Trinity
St Peters, Mancroft, Norwich, Norfolk	Female Saints.
St Stephens Chapel, Norfolk	Prophets
In Norwich cathedral, Norfolk	Angels

In the church of Our Lady in Montréal, France there is a retable (wooden screen holding paintings or carved tablets) which is a triptych (central panel with hinged side panels). Formerly over the altar the retable is housed in an alcove at the side of the choir. The history of the church claims that the alabaster carvings came from Nottingham during the 100 years war (1337 to 1453). In 1971 the central three carved panels were stolen but two remain both depicting the life of the Virgin Mary. This retable may give some

indication as to the detail of the reredos and retables found in Nottinghamshire churches (the Haddon Hall triptych below, is almost identical).



From 1840 there was a Gothic revival and many refurbished churches had reredos replaced. Many copy the style of the medieval carvers but in freestone (Barrow on Soar) and where alabaster has been used it is either Italian (Thrumpton) or of inferior quality (Kingston on Soar).

Researchers should check stone reredos. Marble will feel cold to the touch but alabaster will be warm. In addition look for the individual panels in a wooden frame and note the castellated frieze which is a characteristic of the Nottingham carvers and may have been reproduced (Barrow on Soar).

Chest effigies (without mural panels)

Note: mural panels are attached to the wall and are not physically connected to the chest effigy. Chest effigy/effigies sit on a tomb chest usually decorated along the side and sometimes with an inscription running along the edge.

Any tomb before 1330 is unlikely to be in alabaster. Effigies exist from 12th century but are usually in Purbeck Marble, a very much harder material and as such the effigies are cruder.

A note on dating effigies is appropriate here. Many cases exist of monuments being specified in wills. In some cases it is clear the monument was created decades before the death of the owner. In the case of Bess of Hardwick in Derby Cathedral her memorial was created circa 1601 some 6 years before her death and she was known to have visited the tomb a number of times (well in keeping with her style). On the other hand, in the case of Cecily the wife of Bishop Sandys (of Southwell) the monument is recorded as 1619 despite her being interred in the churchyard in 1611.

Therefore the date of a monument may be +/-10 years either side of the date of death. The biggest discrepancy so far located is the 36 year post-commemoration of a lady in Nettlestead, Kent. This can be explained because chest tomb cost some £100 to £120 whereas a simple mural could cost £20 with a mural of head and shoulders from about £40, thus bringing monuments within the budget of a lower stratum of gentry.

One of the best authorities on effigies from 1330 to 1560 was Arthur Gardner (see reading list). He classified the effigies (to 1566) as follows (with some overlapping of dates):

Class	Dates	Description
I	1330-1380	Early Gothic – knights in 14 th century armour, heads on cushions, horizontal panel on chest
II	1380-1420	Middle Gothic – canopy over heads, separate panels on chest, collars
III	1420-1450	Late middle Gothic – angels with shields, bedesmen, feet on animals
IV	1440-1485	Late Gothic – Yorkist decoration, inscription, detailed ladies fashion, crest on helm
V	1485-1547	End Gothic – Lozenge shaped panels on chest, inscription on chest edge, garter decoration, SS collar with Tudor rose, ladies headdresses
VI	1539-1566	Transition – basic Gothic but with increasing renaissance elements
VII	1550-1603	Tudor renaissance – Tudor plate armour and weepers, ladies with fashion, inscriptions in Latin. Heads of knights on helm with crest. Painted.
VIII	1603-1670	Jacobin renaissances – Dutch influence with carefully carved features and protrusions such as noses, hands and feet

separate and cemented in place. Family depicted as weepers. Inscription in English¹

(Note Class IX and X relate to murals and will be dealt with later and classes VII and VIII have been added by the author as Gardner refused to classify anything beyond 1566)

Note 1: Care should be taken in reading inscriptions when tombs are installed long after death. In the case of Henry Sacheverall, died 1585, his tomb was not constructed until 1625 by which time the wife of his son could not remember who Henry's wife was and incorrectly identifies her as the daughter of Germaine Ireton instead of the widow.

Mural Tablets With or Without Effigies

In the second quarter of the 16th century skilled Dutch people fled the wars between the Dutch Insurgents and the Spanish which peppered Holland. Amongst these were a number of stone carvers. The first family was the Jansens in 1567 who settled in Southwark (later assumed the name Johnson), the Hollemans in 1584 to Burton on Trent and Nicholas Stone in 1613 to Long Acre, London.

These brought to England a style of memorial known as the mural. These had advantages in that they were more cost effective and could be mounted on the wall thus taking up no floor space. The Dutch style is noted for a canopy often containing the armorial representation of the family, supported by two columns and, in most cases, kneeling figures at prayer stalls.

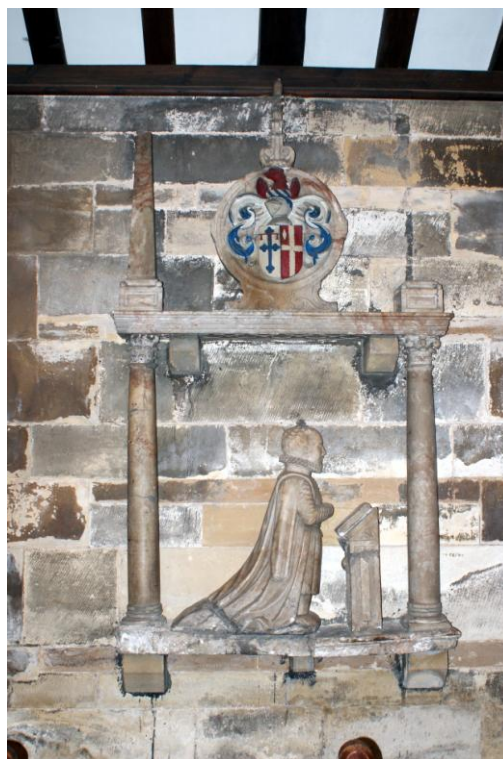


The chest tomb and mural memorial to Henry Sacheverall in Ratcliffe on Soar showing all the features of Dutch/Jacobin influence. The tomb dates from 1625. There are two inscriptions in English and three “weepers” representing Henry's three children two who died in infancy. The three wives are dressed in true clothing style for the date of their death except for Lucy (on right) who is dressed as in 1625 (she died 1667). The tomb retains much of its original colour. The black squares in the pediment are cockleshell marble one of the rare use of this stone obtained from the Chatsworth estate. The carver is unknown.

Only the work of Nicholas Stone has been seriously researched with reliance on his notebooks and accounts. Much work remains to be done. Nevertheless these have been classified as follows:

Class	Dates	Description
IX	1590-1650	Dutch mural with effigies – columns and armorial inscriptions, painted, effigies kneeling at prayer stalls, pinnacles ²
X	1613-1670	Post-Dutch mural without effigies – plain wall mural with inscriptions – early ones all in alabaster – later ones in carved frames with marble inscription panel

Note 2: Some monuments post 1620 have only head and shoulders of individuals in a frame. In the case of Hanbury church, Staffordshire (highly recommended for a visit) the memorial to a Royalist had to be placed in the east aisle “because he could not face being observed for eternity by two Puritan Ladies” both have their murals placed in the chancel.



The monument to a Bevercotes in Ordsall church, Nottinghamshire circa 1603. The monument has been moved twice with a period of storage during which the back panels were lost. It shows the “Dutch” columns, kneeling effigy and prayer stall surmounted by an armorial device.

Church Furniture

Alabaster is attractive for furniture such as fonts and pulpits. Hanbury church in Staffordshire is on a hill beneath which is the Fauld mine. The floor, pulpit, font and all the tombs are Fauld alabaster.



The modern Hanbury font in fine alabaster with Dutch style columns. The green alabaster is probably from Chellaston

There are instances where candlesticks, bowls and vases have been carved for individual churches the best known being in Chellaston Parish church and in the Methodist Chapel in the same village.

Identification of Memorials

The first action is to broadly categorise the monuments into slabs, chest effigies, mural monuments with effigy or plain mural monuments with inscription. Slabs and chest monuments will be on the floor but murals will be on or built into the wall³.

Note 3: There are examples of incised slabs mounted on tomb chests (see Hanbury church) but they are rare.

Note the details of who is commemorated in the church and match with monuments. This can be done by church records, internet or reference books. For chest effigies 1330 to 1566 Gardner's book is particularly useful. The Torre Manuscripts 1690-1694 (Nottingham Archives ref MS L1) are good for most others. George Fellow's books are worth reading particularly *Arms, Armour and Alabaster round Nottingham* of 1907⁴.

Note 4: Covers Clifton, Colwick church - (since demolished with effigies transferred to Newstead Abbey), Nuttall, Ratcliffe, Shelford, Stapleford, Willoughby and Wollaton but describes certain period effigies in detail.

For those interested in medieval carving any book by Francis Cheetham is recommended.

For mural monuments the current state of research is fragmentary. Walter Spiers in 1919 carried out a complete review of the murals of Nicholas Stone, 1613 to 1647 but found none in Nottinghamshire. Johnson of London provided one effigy for

Bottesford, Leicestershire but this is the only one so far identified and the details of his work and that of the Hollemans has yet to be found. What can be said is that almost all murals descend from one of these Dutch “schools”.

Identify if alabaster or part alabaster and/or marble. Alabaster will not be used before 1330 and between 1700 and about 1840. Note the colour, white, cream, green, veined purple, brown and for traces of painting. Painting on alabaster in the 15th and the early 16th century was often restricted to retables and reredos but painted effigies increased later in the 16th century as the source of white alabaster was worked out. Almost all 17th century effigies are painted to about 1670.

Note the details of the carving of the effigies. It is observed that carvers were more in tune with ladies fashion than with men’s. This is particularly true of headdresses. Medieval ladies had flapped, crespine or coned headdresses which can be closely dated. Even more so in Tudor times with the pediment (gable hood), French hood or Queen of Scots headdresses setting dates to within a few years.

It is believed that carvers would see ladies every day in fashionable clothes and would be able to copy. On the other hand, men who wished to be depicted as knights, would not be seen by carvers in their armour unless there was a war or at times of musters. As a result the style of armour tended to lag the period⁵.

Note 5: In the case of Ralph Sacheverall in Ratcliffe (died 1539) his armour is clearly Plantagenet and out of date in the mid Tudor period leading one to the assumption that whilst his lady was in 1520s fashion his effigy was an old style “stock” item.

Until the late 16th century the faces of effigies rarely reflected what the person actually looked like. With the onset of the renaissance style likenesses began to be fashionable and late class VII through to class IX effigies may have a resemblance to their owner. This restriction does not apply to any decoration worn.

In medieval through to Tudor times the status of the effigy owner was more important than any likeness. In 1370 John of Gaunt introduced the collar of SS which became the symbol of the house of Lancaster. This was awarded from that date to 1460 and from 1485 until discontinued by Edward VI in 1549.

Only 115 effigies nationwide have SS collars of which 102 are men and 13 are ladies. Amongst these are Ratcliffe, Hoveringham and Whatton.

Not to be out-done the Yorkists also produced a collar of suns and roses from 1460 to 1469 and 1470 to 1485. The pendant is often a hog or portcullis. The presence of a Yorkist collar attracted the attention of Tudor vandals and in consequence many of the effigies are severely damaged. Effigies with Yorkist collars include Sutton Bonington and Holme Pierrepont. The latter is odd because it is reputed to date from 1499 some 13 years after the accession of the Tudors leading one to believe that the tomb was built before the occupant’s death⁶.

Note 6: Gardner classified the Holme Pierrepont tomb as Class IV which ended circa 1485 reinforcing the view that the tomb was built early. However, the will directs the executors to place the tomb in “his sepulchre” after his death so doubt remains.



The effigy of Ralph Sacheverell 1539 showing the SS collar and Tudor rose pendant. The lady to the right has a decorated short pediment (Gable hood) headdress dating from about 1520 and replaced by the French hood about 1539. Ralph is shown with a high jousting top to the breastplate which was out of fashion in Tudor times. Hands are horizontal consistent with Gothic style.



The effigy of Sir Robert Goushill in Hoveringham showing the SS collar from which the pendant has been broken. This dates from circa 1403 to 1420. The knight was killed at the Battle of Shrewsbury in suspicious circumstances and was probably posthumously awarded the honour for his valour.

Other decorations include the Order of the Garter (on the leg), coronets (minor royalty) and judges coif (close fitting head cap).

It is worth investigating as why such decorations were awarded⁷.

Note 7: In the case of Ralph Sacheverell it would appear the award was because he assisted the Earl of Essex and Cardinal Wolsey in making the arrangements for the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520.

Conclusion and Readings

This is only a brief guide to alabaster. If you require any assistance please contact me:

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Whilst the records for tombs from 1330 to 1560 are in good shape those from 1560 onwards and particularly any mural tombs are incomplete. If any researcher would care to inform the author of any tombs encountered then this would be appreciated.

Thank you for your interest I hope you have found this presentation useful.

Recommended reading list:

Greenhill – alabaster slabs (see earlier)

Arthur Gardner 1940 – Alabaster Tombs (deals only with Gothic)

Francis W Cheetham – Alabaster carvings in the Castle Museum or any other book

George Fellows 1907 – selected churches in Nottinghamshire

William St John Hope and W L Spiers writing for the Walpole Society