

BALSHAM PARISH CHURCH

A GUIDE TO THE BRASSES

**This guide is free to be taken away.
If you wish to contribute to its cost
(about £1)
there is a box in Church.**

1. THE BRASSES AT BALSAM PARISH CHURCH.

There are three Brasses at Balsham. Two are for former Rectors - John Sleaford d.1401 and John Blodwell d.1462 and the third is for an unidentified Knight c.1480s. None of these is now in its original position where, as far as is known, the bodies of John Sleaford (just inside the Chancel), John Blodwell (just outside the Chancel and in the Nave) and the Knight (in the Nave) still lie. There may have been other Brasses now missing. It is common-place to blame the era of Oliver Cromwell (1640s-1660s) for destruction but vandalism took place earlier and later; Brasses were often re-cycled.

Brasses were usually ordered by a man during his lifetime so he could control their design as to reflect his career and opinion of himself. Brass dating is no exact science and depends on knowledge about the various "workshops" and their styles. There is a "Cambridge School" but the Sleaford and Blodwell Brasses come from the "London B" workshops.

In the 18th. Century the **Sleaford Brass** was intact and the inscription recorded. By 1808 (Lyson's Magna Britannia) it had lost a small piece, now there is more missing. The **Blodwell Brass** is intact but the engraving of the leaden shields is almost all gone and there are only faint traces of the cross hatching on other lead parts. The figure of the **Knight** is intact but the inscription portions have been long missing.

Three versions of the two Sleaford and Blodwell inscriptions are provided - one in Modern idiom within the text and at the end the Latin followed by a Literal Translation. The Latin spelling on the Brasses follows mediaeval practice and abbreviation. This is modernised, with missing parts provided in [] square brackets and contractions extended in () round brackets: The soft "c" is often now written 't' and the "ae" is now so written though in mediaeval times it was contracted to e.

2a. JOHN SLEFORD c.1330-1401.

John Sleaford was a "King's Clerk" - a man in Holy Orders but primarily a Civil Servant. He began his career in the household of Philippa of Hainault (Queen to King Edward III) and on the merger of her household with that of the King he was transferred to the Wardrobe Administration or 'Supplies Department' of the Crown. He became Keeper of the Privy

Wardrobe of the Tower in 1365 (this department dealt with small and valuable objects, including arms, canons and gunpowder), and Keeper also of the Great Wardrobe, which dealt with bulk supplies, in 1371. In both these offices he succeeded Henry Snaith, whom he also followed as Rector of Balsham. He probably took his name from the town of Sleaford, Lincs; there is also mention of (a brother ?) William Sleaford, in the royal service as a Clerk of Works and Dean of the King's Free Chapel of S. Stephen, Westminster.

King's Clerks had limited basic salaries, augmented by Fees of Office and supplemented by ecclesiastical income drawn from various appointments obtained for them by Royal pressure upon the Bishops.

This is how John Sleaford became Rector of Balsham in the mid 1360s and the Public Records reveal his many appointments. Such King's Clerks were seldom in their parishes, where pastoral work was carried out by substitutes, but in the case of John Sleaford there is evidence of his local activity from before the time he lost his office as Keeper of the Wardrobe, as well as from afterwards. He held the lease of Oxcroft Farm in the 1370s, he had land at Linton. His Brass records that he "built the church" and gave the stalls. In 1384 he is known to have owed £400 (later marked paid) and perhaps by this he financed rebuilding of the Nave with its Clerestory windows and two side aisles.

He was closely identified with the "old regime" of King Edward III which, after the death of Queen Phillipa, had been corrupted by the influence of the King's Mistress, Alice Perrers. A rival establishment gathered about the King's grandson (son to the Black Prince), later King Richard II. It was Sleaford's duty to superintend the burial of King Edward III, for which records show his acquittance, and with the installation of the new regime Sleaford lost his Royal appointment as Keeper of the Wardrobe in 1377 and, probably thereafter retired to Balsham. There is a hint of resignation in the inscription on the Brass.

2b. THE SLEFORD BRASS.

His Brass shows him wearing a Cope decorated with named Saints, each holding the proper symbol. There are the two SS. John (for his name); the two SS. Mary (the Mother of Jesus and the Magdalene); two popular women saints in the mediaeval era, SS. Margaret and Katherine; S. Etheldreda for Ely and S. Wilfrid (who had received Etheldreda's monastic vows)

for Ripon where Sleford was a Canon.

The Brass carries his monogram IS; armorial bearings for his Royal patrons, Queen Philippa of Hainault and King Edward III; and symbols of the Evangelists Mathew, Mark, and Luke but that for John is missing. At the top his path to judgment is depicted - his soul is on a sheet held by two angels while above is God as Holy Trinity and the inscription (freely rendered to English "O Holy Trinity, I beseech you to receive me at the end."

Within the border is a verse inscription with some words abbreviated or left understood. It tells of his career, clerical appointments, connection with King Edward III, and work at Balsham.

2c. THE SLEFORD INSCRIPTION IN MODERN IDIOM.

(About the Margin).

Portrayed here, John Sleford lies beneath this stone. He was Rector by appointment, and after the World had abandoned him he opened his purse generously. He protected good men and firmly punished vices. He had been loved by King Edward, who lingered into evil times; while he still prospered he was Keeper of the King's Wardrobe (or: while the King still flourished he was keeper of the Wardrobe). He built this church and never regretted his gifts afterwards. He had these stalls made, and poured out money for them freely. He was first a Canon of Wells, and then of Ripon. He ended his life peacefully, dying on the feast of Edward (King and Martyr) ending his life peacefully at the very end of the year of our Lord 1400. When his body was carried down to the grave it was already the first (year of the new century). O merciful Christ, I pray he may enter heaven. May he feel no sorrow, because Christ bore sorrow for the sake of all men.

(Above the soul of Sleford)

O Holy Trinity, I beseech you to receive me at the end.

3a. JOHN BLODWELL c.1380s-1462.

John Blodwell had a Church, rather than a "Royal," career. Son of a father also a priest and married what time clerical marriage was frowned upon, he had dispensation to become ordained, and later to omit all reference to illegitimacy. Llan-y-Blodwell is a village in Shropshire on the Welsh borders, perhaps family connections account for the fact that he held the Deanery of S. Asaph, though whether he was ever there is not clear,

From the inscription he was a Welsh lawyer, educated at Bologna and working in Rome, fluent in five languages. He was involved in diplomatic correspondence, attended the Council of Constance (1414-18) where he was associated with the man who later became Pope Martin V and who gave him a fulsome praising testimonial in a Papal Letter of commendation; he was also used by the English King for diplomatic missions.

His arrival in the Diocese of Ely is probably connected with the appointment of another Welsh lawyer, Philip Morgan, as Bishop of Ely 1426-1435, for whose will he later acted as Executor. He is recorded as an ecclesiastical judge in a dispute involving patronage of S. Botolph's Church Cambridge; described as a "Vicar-General," and may have acted on behalf of Cardinal Louis of Luxemburg. Having been involved in the surrender of Joan of Arc to the English, Louis lost his French revenues and was compensated by appointment as (absentee Bishop and) Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Ely (1438-1444). Probably about the 1440s John Blodwell lost his sight; from this time he began to relinquish his clerical appointments; in 1456 his house was burgled.

3b. THE BLODWELL BRASS..

His Brass is complete. The inscriptions are in elegaic couplets. Around the margin is a descriptive border while at the foot there is a verse dialogue, a convention common in late mediaeval lyrics, between Blodwell (letters in relief) and "Death, fate, or whatever" (letters in intaglio).

Reading from the top, his Cope (with its "tongued lion" motifs) is decorated with two Archangels Michael (for his home Parish of S. Michael, Llan-y-Blodwell) and Gabriel (for his legal career); two Archbishops S. David (for Wales) and S. John of Beverley, (Bishop of York prior to its elevation to archiepiscopal status and Patron Saint for the handicapped); two Bishops S. Thomas Canteloupe of Hereford and S. Chad of Lichfield (in both dioceses he held preferment); and the two popular women Saints Margaret and Katherine.

In the Canopy are the two SS. John the Evangelist and the Baptist (for his name); two Apostles SS. Peter and Andrew (for the Church); S. Asaph (for his Deanery) and S. Nicholas (perhaps in honour of his patron Pope Nicholas V 1447-55), and two popular Celtic women SS. Brigid and Winifred (from Holywell, not far from Llan-y-Blodwell). The roundels of lead bear faint heraldic traces, probably for himself and/or the Bishop and Bishopric of Ely.

3c. THE BLODWELL INSCRIPTION IN MODERN IDOM..

(About the Margin).

The eminent doctor John Blodwell rests for a while beneath this stone. He was blind for a long time; while he lived here as a little old man he was an ornament of the Church and gave kind refreshment to his fellow men. May God himself be to him refreshment, light and peace. He died on the sixteenth of April 1462. May God in his mercy give eternal rest. Amen.

(At the Foot).

- Blodwell.** Wales gave me birth, Bologna taught me both systems of law (i.e. both Roman and Canon Law); 1.
Rome gave me the opportunity of practising law, and five nations gave me knowledge of their languages (*i.e. English, Welsh, Latin, French and Italian*). 2.
- Vox Secunda.** All these achievements of yours have become a burden to you. 3.
- Blodwell.** Praise, fame, good health, strength, rank, long life, surely these things can be offered to God (*or: may be enjoyed as they*) come from God) ?
- Vox Secunda.** You might as well think of them as vain and transitory. 4.
- Blodwell.** What is the flowering of life, then ? 5.
- Vox Secunda.** All flesh is grass, which soon dies. Do you (*Now addressing the reader, not Blodwell*).
beseech God in your prayers to have mercy on the dead man; beseech him also that, before you are like him, 9.
you may become aware that living men who are not oblivious are controlled by this law - the man who

4. THE KNIGHT IN ARMOUR.

The identity of the Knight is unknown. The Armour is "Yorkist" in style and points to the latter 1470s. Balsham was an ecclesiastical manor and there was no influential local family to which he might be related, though the Alingtons of nearby Horseheath may be a possibility. forbears and descendants are buried at Horseheath but this is only conjecture.

William Alington d.1485 was killed at the Battle of Bosworth, his burial place is unknown; his forbears and descendants are buried at Horseheath but this is only conjecture.

5a. THE SLEFORD INSCRIPTION; LATIN TEXT.

(Above the soul of Sleaford).

P(er)sonis trine, posco me susc(ipe)re fine.

(About the Margin).

- | | |
|---|-----|
| Io(an)n(es) Sleaford, di[ct(us) Recto]r, mu(n)do q(ue) relict(us) | 1. |
| Bursa no(n) strict(us), lacet hic s(u)b marmor(e) pict(us), | |
| Fautor iustor(um), consta(n)s ultor vitior(um), | 3. |
| Que(m) rex Edward(us) dilexerat, ad mala tard(us). | |
| Gardroba(m) rexit illi(us) du(m,) bene vixit. | 5. |
| Eccl(es)iam struxit ha(n)c; nu(n)q(ua)m postea luxit; | |
| Haec fecit stalla, large fu(n)de(n)s q(ue) m(e)talla. | 7. |
| Canonic(us) p(ri)mo Wellis, Ryppon fuit imo. | |
| Edwardi festo decessit fine modesto, | |
| [Regis et Anglorum qui detulit acta re(gn)or(um), | |
| (Anno)] mille(si)mo quadri(n)gen(tensim)o quoq(ue) pleno. | 11. |
| Huic adde(n)s p(ri)mu(m), deductu(m) corp(us) ad imu(m). | |
| 0 cleme(n)s Chr(ist)e, caelos precor intr(e)t ut iste. | 13. |
| Nil habeat triste, q(uia) p(er)tulit o(mn)ib(us) iste]. | |

5b. THE SLEFORD INSCRIPTION; LITERAL TRANSLATION.

John Sleaford, appointed as Rector and having been abandoned by the World, not a severe man in the use of money (*lit: as to his purse, in other words not a mean man*), lies portrayed here, beneath the stone. He was a protector of just men and a constant punisher of vices, Whom King Edward, lingering into evil days (*lit: slow towards evils*), had loved. He ruled his (*the king's*) Wardrobe while he prospered (*lit: lived well*). He built this church; he never grieved for it afterwards (*or: he never shone afterwards*). He made these stalls, pouring out gold and silver liberally. He was a Canon first of Wells, then of Ripon. He, who recorded the acts of the English kingdoms, Departed (this life) by a gentle death on the feast of Edward the King (*or: he departed this life by a gentle death on the feast of Edward the king, who*

denounced the acts of the English kingdoms), the year 1400 being complete. His body was carried down to the grave, adding to this the first (*year of the new century*). O merciful Christ I pray that this man may enter heaven. May he know nothing sorrowful, because he (*Christ*) bore it (*i.e. sorrow*) for all men.

(Above the soul of Sleaford)

O one, threefold in your persons, I beseech you to receive me at the end.

6a. THE BLODWELL INSCRIPTION; LATIN TEXT.

(About the Margin).

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|---|----|
| Egregius doctor, hoc qui sub marmore pausat, | 1. |
| Joh(a)n(nes) Blodwell, longo tempore caecus erat. | |
| Hic residens vetulus, decor ecclesiae, bonus hospes | 3. |
| Cui deus hospitium sit, requiesq(ue), dies. | |
| Qui obiit (sexto decimo) die Mensis Aprilis | 5. |
| Anno domini mill(esi)mo c.c.c.c.lxj | |
| Cui deus aeternam det miserans requiem. Amen. | 7. |

(At the Foot).

- | | | |
|---------------------|--|-----|
| Blodwell. | Cambria me genuit, docuit Bononia iura; | 1. |
| | Praxim Roma dedit, natio quina, loqui | 2. |
| Vox Secunda. | H(a)ec tua pompa labor. | 3. |
| Blodwell. | De(o) sint laus, fama, salutes, | |
| | Vis, genus, (a)era, decor. | 4. |
| Vox Secunda. | Vana caduca putes | |
| Blodwell. | Quid florens (a)etas ? | 5. |
| Vox Secunda. | Brevis est o(mn)is cara f(a)enu(m) | |
| | Ignorans metas, curris ad ima senum. | 6. |
| Blodwell. | Sors pluat ambita ? | 7. |
| Vox Secunda. | Nichil o(mn)i parte beatum | |
| | Invenit hac vita, pr(aet)er amare deum; | 8. |
| | Quem pius orando poscas functo misereri | 9. |
| | Et te, non quando consimilem, fieri | |
| | Ut noscas memores vivos hac lege teneri: | 11. |
| | Est hodie cineres, qui tuit ignis hieri. | |

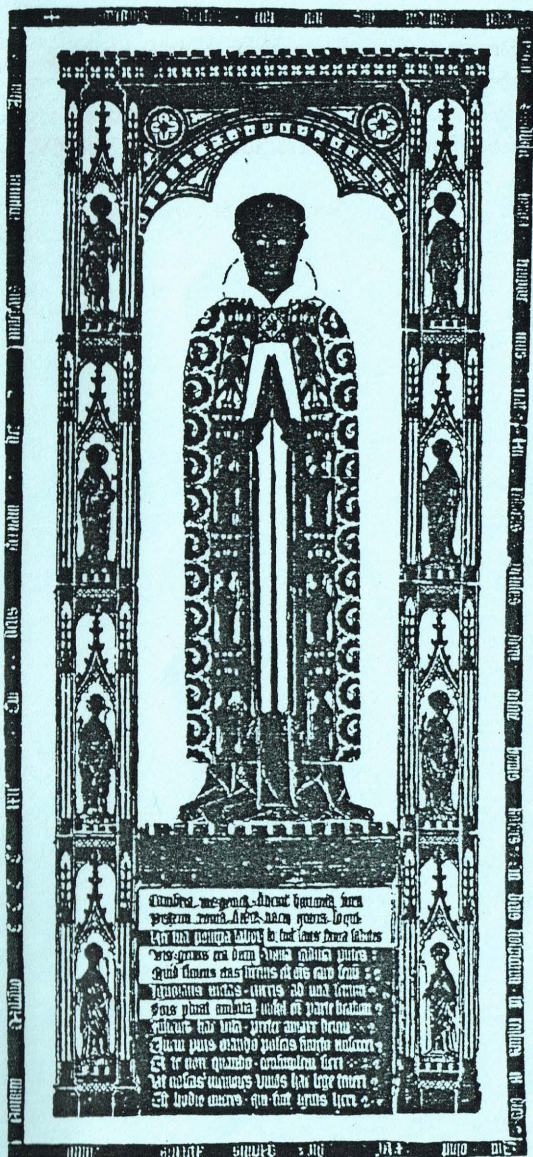
6b. THE BLODWELL INSCRIPTION; LITERAL TRANSLATION.

About the margin.

The eminent doctor John Blodwell, who stays for a while beneath this stone, was blind for a long time. A little old man, living here, he was an ornament of the Church, a good host; to whom may God be refreshment, rest and light (lit. day) He died on the sixteenth day of the month April, in the year of our Lord 1462; to whom may God, pitying (him) give eternal rest.

At the foot.

- Blodwell.** Wales gave me birth, Bologna taught me the laws;
(i.e. both Roman and Canon Law); 1.
Rome gave me the practice of law, and five nations
(lit: the five each nation) gave me speech. 2.
Vox Secunda. This your outward show has become a trouble. 3.
Blodwell. Praise, fame, good health, strength,
rank, long life, beauty, may be offered to God
(or: may come from God) 4.
Vox Secunda. You may think them vain, transitory things.
Blodwell. What is the flower of life (lit: the flowering age) ? 5.
Vox Secunda. All flesh is short lived grass.
Not knowing the limits, you are running to the end
(or lowest point) of old men. 6.
Blodwell. Fate may rain down the things strived for ? 7.
Vox Secunda. The pious man finds nothing happy in this life
on any side, except to love God; 8.
whom (may you) beseech in prayer to have mercy
on the dead man, and (beseech) that before (lit: not
when) you are like him 9
you may become (such a man) that you may know
that mindful living men are restrained by this law:
he is ashes today who was fire yesterday. 11.



THE BRASS OF JOHN BLODWELL

THE BRASS OF THE KNIGHT IN ARMOUR



7. REFERENCES.

The Monumental Brass Society.

P.J. Heseltine, The Figure Brasses of Cambridgeshire, Solo Publishing, 1981 has a working bibliography.

For John Blodwell refer to W.N.C. Girard: John Blodwell, Rector of Balsham, Transactions of the Monumental Brass Society, 1993 Vol XV Pt. 2 at pp.119-136.

WNCG. February 1998.