

A TUDOR-PERIOD TOMB AND VICTORIAN MEDDLING: THE CASE OF SIR NICHOLAS LISLE'S TOMB MONUMENT AT THRUXTON

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian rebuilding of Thruxton church, and in particular the unusual priest's door and window in the chancel south wall, have attracted the attention of Nikolaus Pevsner and others. None have hitherto been aware of a mid-nineteenth century photograph that refutes any suggestion this work was carried out as a single project. Additionally, the tomb monument for Sir Nicholas Lisle is re-assessed and its architectural links to work in Winchester cathedral are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Thruxton, a small village in the north-west corner of Hampshire, was home to the de Lisle family for some one hundred and fifty years, from around 1400 through to 1542. They had been the leading family on the Isle of Wight from at least the thirteenth century and from whence they took their name (Hicks 2004). The Lisle's established themselves on the mainland by the beginning of the fifteenth century, and Thruxton was apparently their main home. Traces of their moated manor house, which stood adjacent to the north side of the parish church, can still be found on the ground, although early Ordnance Survey maps reveal the site more clearly (OS 6" series, 1872–3). Thruxton church (Fig. 1) provided the burial place for many of the Lisles, the earliest dating to 1407 (VCHH, 388). This paper is concerned with a later burial, that of Sir Nicholas Lisle who died in 1506, and the arrangements made for his funereal monument, together with its remodeling in the nineteenth century (Fig. 2).

In many respects the monument erected for Sir Nicholas is of no great note, even allowing for a potential architectural connection to

Winchester cathedral. More intriguing is the treatment of this monument in the nineteenth century when it was restored – or should that be meddled with? – in the later 1800s. Pevsner described this work as being by someone he called 'an anonymous rogue' and the architecture as 'outrageous but full of pluck' (Pevsner & Lloyd 1967, 57 and 620; and see Bullen *et al.* 2010, 75 and 517).

The view of Sir Nicholas's tomb from outside the church shows a tomb chest that apparently projects through the south wall of the chancel (Fig. 1). Above it is a three-light window filled with Victorian stained glass and, to the west, a priest's door. The quality of the stonework, along with details of the sculpture, indicate that the door and window are 'recent' work and can be identified as Victorian. The tomb chest panel, of a different stone and much weathered, is quite evidently a great deal older and clearly not of the same date. However, the Victorian door and window were not installed as a single work. Unbeknownst to Pevsner, the tomb and the space it occupies were not altered once but twice in the nineteenth century; first in the 1840s or 1850s and again *c.*1869. This multi-phase meddling can be seen from a photograph taken of a group of figures standing in the churchyard at the south east corner of the chancel. The photograph is undated but belongs to the period between *c.*1845 and 1869 (Fig. 3). It is the depiction of the chancel south wall that attracts our interest here. The priest's door giving access to the chancel has been remodelled and given a porch, but the window to the east is not that we see today, thus indicating this was a two-phase work. More often than not it is difficult to distinguish what precise changes were made to a church in the nineteenth century. Thruxton however benefits



Fig. 1 The church of St Peter and St Paul, Thruxton, from the south-east.



Fig. 2 Thruxton church, the south face of the tomb chest for Sir Nicholas and Cecily Lisle.

from a sketch made of the church in 1765, and this as we shall see provides considerable evidence for the development of the church and the presence or otherwise of individual features (Fig. 4).

SIR NICHOLAS LISLE'S TOMB AT THRUXTON

Thruxton had been held by the Cormeilles family for around three centuries from the

Conquest until the fourteenth century, when the manor somehow passed from the Cormeilles to the Lisle family (VCHH, 387–8; GEC, *Peerage*). Professor Michael Hicks, whose biographical study of the Lisles is indispensable, referred to the multiple uses of the first name John amongst the Lisles by listing them as John i–vii (Hicks 2004). The first of the Lisles at Thruxton arrived through the marriage of Maud Edington, a relation of William Edington who was bishop of Winchester 1346–67, to Sir John Lisle [iii] (d. 1370). Their son, John Lisle



Fig. 3 A mid-nineteenth century view of Thruxton church from the south, showing a group of figures amongst whom are the Reverend Donald Baynes and the Reverend Henry de Foe Baker (HRO 79M71/PZ18/1).

[iv] (d. 1407/8), was the first of the Lisle family to be buried in Thruxton church; his burial is commemorated by a fine brass. His son, John Lisle [v] (d. 1429), chose to be buried at Chute, in Wiltshire, another substantial Lisle manor. The Lisle estate was inherited by yet another John, [vi], who died in 1471 and he chose to be buried at Thruxton. His fine Purbeck marble tomb chest was set into a wall recess on the north side of the chancel, where it remains to this day. This tomb was later subsumed into

the much larger monument and ambulatory chapel created by the Winchester cathedral mason, Thomas Bertie, for his grandson and his wife in the 1520s (Riall 2007).

Sir Nicholas Lisle was about 26 years old when his father died in 1471, but was not knighted until 1487, at the coronation of Henry VII's queen, Elizabeth of York (GEC *Peerage*). By comparison with his forbears and his son, another John, Sir Nicholas Lisle appears to have led a relatively undistinguished life, not



Fig. 4 An ink-wash sketch showing Thruxton church from the south-east taken by Francis Grose on 23 August 1765 (Portsmouth Museums and Records Service, 2011/145).

becoming sheriff of either Hampshire or Wiltshire, nor having any significant military role. This perhaps was his real achievement: to avoid any entanglement in the politics or the warfare of the latter part of the fifteenth century, thereby preserving his family's estate for a future generation. Nevertheless, he could not avoid involvement in all aspects of Hampshire county life: he was listed as a justice of the peace in 1480/1 and again in 1486, and was a commissioner of the array in 1491. He died 20 March 1506 (*Inquisition Post Mortem*, 21 Henry VII). In his will he expressed his desire to be buried on the south side of the high altar in the parish church of Thruxton (TNA, PROB 11/15). His will mentions his wife Cecily,

John Lisle [vii] his son and heir who died in 1524, and a kinswoman, Joan, who was a nun at Amesbury. It also lists gifts to the priories at Edington (Wilts) and Mottisfont (Hants), as well as to the parish church at Thruxton. Rather curiously, the author of the article on Thruxton in the *Victoria County History of Hampshire*, Francis Bickley, was unaware of this will, and thus unable to identify for whom the tomb monument on the south side of the chancel had been erected (VCHH, 390). An earlier commentator, Charles Long, identified the tomb as that of Sir Nicholas Lisle, and mentioned Lisle's will, sometime before 1853 (Long 1853).

Lisle's will confirms that the tomb is his and



Fig. 5 Thruxton church, the tomb monument of Sir Nicholas and Cecily Lisle from the north.

that it was erected after his death. Sir Nicholas's son was an altogether more substantial and important figure. Sir John Lisle was knighted at the same time as Prince Henry was created the Prince of Wales, on 18 February 1503. Sir John was sheriff of Hampshire in 1506–7, and again in 1517–18, as well as a member of various commissions of oyer and terminer,

commissioner of peace, and for collecting subsidies, as well as an important figure in military affairs (Riall 2007, 37–8). By the end of Henry VII's reign Sir John would have been a well-known figure in Hampshire, and someone who occupied a leading position in the circle of locally important men who were associated with the then bishop of Winchester – Richard



Fig. 6 Thruxton church, angel corbel from Lisle monumental arch.

Fox (bishop 1501–28). This membership of the Hampshire elite, and a known association with bishop Fox, would have enabled him to seek the services of the master mason at Winchester cathedral when it came to designing and building a tomb for his father.

The monument erected for Sir Nicholas Lisle comprises a tomb chest that was set into

a wall recess and beneath a panelled arch with a castellated cornice (Fig. 5). In many respects it echoed the original arrangements for his father's tomb, which occupied the generally preferred location on the north side of the chancel. The tomb chest for Sir Nicholas Lisle comprises a typical rectangular, late Gothic tomb-chest that is covered in deep and detailed

conventional carving in what Pevsner termed the 'usual Gothic details'. The side and end-faces of the chest have carved panels that feature narrow, niche-like panels that flank square panels in which are centrally placed shields (Figs 2 & 5). These are now blank, but presumably were originally painted to show the Lisle heraldic achievements. The tomb chest has a thick tomb slab with deep mouldings around its edges designed to hold a brass chamfer inscription. The tomb chest is set against the east jamb of the monumental arch, and partially obscures some of the panelling on the underside of the arch, which suggests that the tomb chest is no longer precisely in its original setting.

Rather unusually the tomb projects through the chancel wall but more curiously the south face of the tomb is composed of a different stone to that used for its north face. Moreover, the south face not only differs in its carved details but is very heavily weathered, unlike the internal face, which remains very crisp in its details. These problems are explored later in this paper.

The wall recess into which the tomb was placed was enriched through the addition of a monumental arch that spans the tomb and provided an enriched architectural setting above it that is akin to an overmantle (Fig. 5). The entire edifice is bounded by buttresses that rise from corbels that are formed by angels who clasp shields to their chests (Fig. 6). A second pair of angels with shields cap the buttresses. At the centre point of the arch, and in the middle of the castellated cornice, is a vase from which emerge a bunch of lilies – a pun or rebus for the Lisle family. The base of the vase has carved on it the Lisle heraldic badge: a sunburst. The top of the panel has a stringcourse onto which a ribbon was carved; this no doubt originally held an inscription that may have named those buried here. Sometime in the nineteenth century this was replaced by a verse taken from the Bible, 'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee', (Isaiah 26:3). There are a number of other similar inscriptions around the church interior, all probably dating to the 1840s and indicative of the high-church Anglicanism of this period.

The sculpted angels are of wider interest.

Although the standard of the carving is unexceptional, indeed it is not at all of the best, and the figures have a tense, indifferent quality about them, they nevertheless echo the style and quality of similarly contrived angels holding shields to be seen in Winchester cathedral. The Thruxton angels are stylistically close to those used as corbels to support the vault erected above the chapel in which bishop Langton (bishop 1493–1501, died 27 January 1501) was buried (Fig. 7). Both sets of angels reveal a carver who had little ability to carve the human forms on which angel figures were generally based, and still less the ability to give these figures any character. The presence of the heraldry of the see of Canterbury shows that the Langton vault was erected after he died; he passed away only a few days after his election as archbishop of Canterbury (Biddle 1993, 257–9). The chapel is generally dated to around 1505–10, with the woodwork for the chapel perhaps not being installed until towards the end of this period (Tracy 1993, 242–5). Whoever was the mason who created and installed the vault over Langton's chapel, it was not the same man (or team) that was responsible for the remodelling of the cathedral presbytery. More angel figures clasping shields can be seen in this part of the cathedral (Fig. 8), but they are very different to those in the Langton chapel and at Thruxton. The angels with shields in the presbytery, which are set on corbels supporting the wooden high vault over the presbytery and on bosses in the stone vaults of the presbytery aisles, were in all probability the work of Thomas Bertie (Riall 2009; Riall 2011). His presence in Winchester is first documented in the 1515, but he may have been in the city from around 1510. His angel figures are a great deal more accomplished, and considerably superior in both style and characterisation to both the Langton and Thruxton angels. Each piece of his sculpture offer an individual character with effusive hairstyles and interesting faces, unlike the earlier pieces that are bland, lacking in character, and with almost identical features from one to the next. The identity of Thomas Bertie's predecessor as the master mason of Winchester cathedral is not known, although some of his work has been identified. This is mostly in



Fig. 7 Winchester cathedral, angel corbel in the Langton chapel vault of c.1500–10.

the east end of the cathedral, where a long-running building campaign was undertaken by the priory of St Swithun's (as the cathedral then was) to rebuild the Lady chapel and the chapels on either side (John Crook in Bullen *et al.* 2010, 582–4). It was this mason, or a member of his team, who was responsible for the tomb monument for Sir Nicholas Lisle and his wife, Cecily.

A PUTATIVE SOUTH CHAPEL

The new and much enlarged edition in the *Buildings of England* series for Hampshire, covering Winchester and north Hampshire, asserts that at Thruxton there was a chapel on the south side of the church 'that was demolished in 1800', and that the arch over Sir Nicholas Lisle's tomb 'opened to a south chapel' (Bullen *et al.*

2010, 517, and *Ibid.*, 519). Whilst it is conceivable there was a priest's door in the south wall of the chancel from the later medieval period, there is no evidence for a south chapel and indeed it is unlikely there was ever any such structure. There was however a chapel to the north of the chancel, which was built in the 1520s for Sir John and Mary Lisle that was demolished in 1799–1800 (Riall 2007; VCHH, 389–90). The architecture of the church was recorded in a sketch drawn by Francis Grose in August 1765, which shows the entire building viewed from the south east (Fig. 4). This sketch is important for the details it provides of the layout of the church prior to 1796, when the church tower collapsed. This was rebuilt by 1800 (date plaque on the tower battlement), using materials taken from the Lisle (or north) chapel. The east end of this chapel is just visible in Grose's sketch through the draping foliage of the trees in the churchyard, and shows that it was contiguous with the chancel. However, it seems most unlikely that Grose would have ignored the Lisle tomb chest if it had projected through the chancel wall. There was no south chapel in the mid-eighteenth century. There is unfortunately a tree that obscures the view of this part of the church, however it is perhaps implausible that the window and buttress just east of the priest's door that are shown in the mid-nineteenth century photograph were present in 1765 (Fig. 3).

VICTORIAN MEDDLING

Like many of Hampshire's churches, the church of St Peter and St Paul at Thruxton was almost completely remodelled in the nineteenth century. Windows were removed, their tracery refreshed and new glass was fitted when the windows were replaced; walls were refaced both internally and externally; and the interior refitted with new pews and choir stalls, a new altar, a new organ, together with extensive redecoration. Much of this renewal was recorded by the incumbent parish priest, the Reverend Donald Baynes (1807–84), who was the vicar at Thruxton from 1837 until 1859. He left a written record of these developments in a disused parish register that has entries from

1702 to 1812 (HRO 79M71/PR2). The description by the Reverend Baynes is dated 1846, and this probably marked the end of the first phase of work in the Victorian period. The Lisle chapel on the north side of the church had been fully demolished by 1801, but nothing was built here until 1839, when the present brick-built vestry was erected (a plaque on the exterior gives the date). Water-damage can still be seen on the north side of the mid-1520s Lisle monument, which intimates that this part of the building was left exposed to the elements for a time following demolition of the chapel and the erection of the vestry.

Building the vestry was possibly the first step in renewing the church at Thruxton. Baynes's account shows that in the 1840s there was a rolling programme of work that saw, as noted above, an extensive refit of the church. In addition, a new porch was added on the south side of the tower, and the windows in the tower and north aisle refurbished. For reasons that remain unclear, work on the chancel was restricted to the chancel south wall. It was not until 1869 that the chancel was finally and fully refitted, in the second main phase of work, with the east window renewed and new glass placed here. This work is recorded by an inscription cut into the string course beneath the east window, which dates it.

Most unusually, the tomb of Sir Nicholas Lisle projects through the chancel wall, but it is the case that this is a Victorian conceit. Had there been a south chapel, then it would have been perfectly normal for the tomb chest to project through the wall, but the lack of any evidence for this putative chapel indicates we must seek another explanation. The tomb chest face was certainly visible externally before 1853. Amongst a number of antiquarians who took an interest in Hampshire's churches was Charles Long, who published accounts of his visits, amongst them Thruxton. He observed that, 'part of the arch has been bricked up and a portion of the sculpture may still be seen on the outside' (Long 1853, 308). Although his comments were published in 1853 it is not known when Long visited the church. Nevertheless, his commentary might be taken to suggest the tomb had been moved before 1853. Further, it may be that the door



Fig. 8 Winchester cathedral, angel figures from the presbytery of c.1510–18.

case should also be dated to the 1850s, for he would surely have noticed that. This however would mean taking his ‘portion of sculpture’ as indicative of the tomb chest – it may well be that what he was referring to was the window tracery. Less equivocal is the evidence provided by the earliest photograph of the church which probably shows Long’s window still *in situ*.

The buttress, and the window beside it, to

be seen in the Victorian period photograph (which can be dated to 1859) offers a key to understanding the evolution of this part of the church (Fig. 3). They are no longer present; moreover, the presence of the buttress clearly indicates that was not possible for the tomb to project through the wall – there is insufficient space. Removal of the buttress after the photograph was taken allowed the tomb to be

reconfigured, so that the south face projected through the south wall to be seen as it is today.

The main faces of the tomb do not, however, provide a matching pair, although the exterior is closely copied in the interior. Particularly noticeable is the crispness and fine state of the stonework of the tomb faces inside the church, whilst that outside is very weathered and eroded. Moreover, the stone used for the south face is different to that used for the tomb faces inside the church; this can be seen most notably through the differences in grain of the stone. This might seem unsurprising, but the stonework of Sir John Lisle's (d. 1471) tomb chest is similarly lacking in crispness. Closer inspection of Sir Nicholas Lisle's tomb chest reveals differences in the layout of the carving, changes of geometry in the tracery and in details such as the plinths in the niches, the treatment of the ogee arches that head the niches and the details of the crockets and finials. Quite noticeable is the treatment of the shields and their placement in individual panels: in the south face there is more of the trefoil cusping visible than there is on the internal faces. Additionally, the south face shows individual panels that were individually carved and then butted together – the joints are clearly visible where the mortar has fallen out of the joints – whereas the north face is jointed in a different manner. Taken together, it would appear to be the case that the south face of the tomb is the original face of the tomb, and that the whole tomb chest was turned around so that entirely new panels could be inserted into the tomb on the south side of the chancel. It is not known why this was done, but it was presumably for aesthetic reasons, perhaps to provide a sharp echo to the newly installed, stone-cut Gothic-panelled, high altar. It may also be no co-incidence that a tomb chest at the east end of the north aisle, erected for Nanny Baynes, and dated 1869, was styled in a similarly sharp evocation of a Gothic tomb.

THE SOUTH DOOR AND WINDOW

As viewed today the south wall of the chancel provides a buttressed façade with a two-light window in the west bay, and a door with a three-light window in the east. Pevsner declared that



Fig. 9 Bishopstone church, Wiltshire, the medieval priest's door.

this doorway and window 'was outrageous but full of pluck', (Pevsner & Lloyd 1967, 620; and see Bullen *et al.* 2010, 517). The mid-nineteenth century photograph reveals that the door and window as seen today were added separately (Fig. 3). The photograph shows a group of people standing outside the priest's door, amongst them Donald Baynes, who stands on the far left of the group. It is possible that the photograph was taken to mark his retirement, in 1859, from his post at Thruxton and the arrival of the new parish priest: Henry de Foe Baker, who stands to the right of Baynes.

To Baynes therefore we can 'credit' the re-arrangement of the Sir Nicholas Lisle tomb, the addition of the door porch, along with the installation of a two-light perpendicular style window and also another buttress (just east of the window). The door porch is a Victorian copy that was loosely modelled on the medieval priest's door at Bishopstone church

in Wiltshire (Fig. 9). The somewhat saccharine angel with shield was added at the same time as the window. Pevsner describes this as 'a normal doorway would have no fun, and so the left jamb suddenly develops a niche at an angle, the roll moulding of the jamb splitting for the purpose' (Pevsner & Lloyd 1967, 620). He evidently was unaware of the Bishopstone door case, or perhaps did not make the connection between the two.

The window now in the south wall of the chancel was added later, probably as part of the same campaign that saw the renewal of the chancel east window in 1869. The three-light window was doubtless intended to give the impression that it had been cut through to allow the inclusion of the priest's door. The label over the window has a label-stop on the east that comprises a shield which has a series of letters set either side of a floral device. This might be a monogram from Henry de Foe Baker, who held the advowson of the church during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and it is possible he commissioned these later works. The door porch may have been provided through the patronage of Mrs Sophia Sheppard of Amport. She held the advowson in 1837 when Baynes was appointed its vicar. She commissioned the building of a church at Theale, near Reading in Berkshire, which was designed and built in the Victorian Early English style by the architect Edward Garbett. It may be that he should be identified as Pevsner's 'anonymous rogue'.

CONCLUSIONS

The tomb for Sir Nicholas and Cecily Lisle was almost certainly a product of the mason's

workshop attached to Winchester cathedral, and can be dated to the period c.1506–10. It is highly improbable that there was a south chapel at Thruxton, for if so then it would almost certainly have housed the next Lisle burials, in the 1520s, which instead were located on the north side of the church alongside a new chapel.

The church was the subject of sketch taken in 1765, but while this shows a priest's door neither a window, a buttress or a tomb chest can be seen all of which appear in a later nineteenth-century photograph (Figs 3 & 4). The perpendicular window has since been lost and replaced by a different window, installed perhaps in the 1860s when the buttress was removed, which in turn leads us to conclude that the Lisle tomb in the south wall did not protrude through the wall until the mid-nineteenth century. The priest's door was probably installed in the late 1840s or early 1850s.

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