

## LOOK, BUT DO NOT TOUCH

What's under the carpet? Not a question you may ask very often when church crawling...but it is the one which is the most likely to bring a delightful surprise. The carpet is most probably concealing an elegantly lettered stone tombstone, but every so often, it will be drawn back to reveal a monumental brass.

Stained glass is hard to see, sometimes even with an excellent pair of binoculars, wall paintings survive in very few churches, but over 7000 brasses still exist more or less intact. The iconoclasts of the Reformation and the Civil War objected to secular as well as graven images, so many brasses were looted for their material. But brass was not as valuable as silver, gold, or jewellery, so many brasses have outlived the vandalism of the Reformation and the Civil War.

Like stained glass, brass was an imported material and it was not until 1568 that there is any evidence of the manufacture of brass in England. Many early brasses, from c. 1320, were also designed abroad in France and Flanders, but there also a tradition of English design from a slightly earlier date (c. 1275). By about 1320, a design formula had evolved: a full length figure or figures, sometimes surmounted by elaborate canopies; diminutive figures at the base; and an inscription set in a fillet either at the edges or at the lowest point.

Apart from their intrinsic beauty, brasses are of considerable interest to several specialist disciplines. The fashion historian, for secular and religious dress, finds a continuous, dated series of images of secular and religious dress, stretching over four centuries. Similarly, the military historian can follow the evolution of armour, from as early as 1275. Ironically, just at the point when plate armour was being made redundant by the cannon (c.1450), its representation in brass achieved a peak of functional beauty. Clearly, the military tailor was a profession well in demand in medieval times.

Lettering is equally well represented. Up until about 1360, inscriptions in the Uncial or Lombardic style, round, legible and well-formed letters, were set in narrow fillets. Its successor, the Black Letter style (1360-1410) used more upright letters, and is difficult to read. There followed 150 years of less stylised, more individual scripts, more rounded, less neat, but generally easier to read.



Heraldry appears on coats of arms in separate shields, or in canopies, finials or spandrels, or as banners, or on clothes. The usual esoteric vocabulary of describing can be applied in every case, as the images are usually very clear. For the non-initiate, it is regrettable that the devices are rarely accompanied by mottoes.

Whatever the subject, most brasses are now a rather drab yellow-brown colour and one's instinct is to reach for the Brasso. However, originally, as with many aspects of medieval churches, garishness (to our eyes) would have been the ruling aesthetic: the brasses would have been bright yellow, and heraldic devices were picked out in yellow, white, blue, black, green, or purple.

Somerset is a middle-ranking county in terms of the number of brasses. The Home Counties and Norfolk have the greatest number; the North of England very few. Of the 50 or so brasses in Somerset, 25 have civilian subjects, 16 are military, and 9 are ecclesiastical. None is earlier than 1430; 16 date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the remainder are from the following century. It is hard to say whether this distribution is typical, for as far as I know, there is no nationwide analysis of dates and subjects.

Above: Sir William Wadham and his mother. Image © Monumental Brasses in Somerset, by A.B. Connor, printed in the Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society.

The county has one outstanding example: on the table tomb to Sir William Wadham and his mother (c. 1440), in the north transept of St. Mary's Ilminster. Unusually, it has a triple canopy over each figure. Sir William is stylishly dressed in the most fashionable plate armour, from Italy, of course (Milan). His style signifiers are the heavy reinforcements to the left shoulder and the over-long gauntlets. He is much more dressy than his mother, who wears a widow's costume, a kirtle with tight sleeves and a mantel.

As a general rule, it is a question of look, but do not touch. Older readers may recall a boyhood (hardly ever a girlhood) experience. Yes, I was a trainspotter, but I also drove my parents mad to find butchers paper and cobblers wax, to make rubbings. And, as someone who has no creative skills, I was delighted to see the form of the brass appear as I rubbed away. 'Rubbing away' is the right phrase, as brass rubbing is now banned in many churches. So now you should just look and take a rubbing only if you have permission.

Monumental brasses are well documented. Of older works, the standard is set by Herbert Macklin, *The Brasses of England* (1907; several revisions; the 1960 edition is the most attractive as book). Herbert Macklin was one of those splendid Anglican clergymen who may have cared more for his antiquarian research than for his flock. His congregation may have been neglected, but posterity has been the gainer.

But all printed sources have been outclassed by the truly impressive website ([www.mbs-brasses.co.uk](http://www.mbs-brasses.co.uk)) of the Monumental Brass Society, to which the reader is referred and from which the information on Ilminster and the image of Sir William Wadham and his mother was obtained. Where there's brass...there is an endless source of interest.

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