

# The Tomb Beneath the Loft

By JEROME BERTRAM

## SUMMARY

*The most prominent monument in Christ Church Cathedral is the huge altar-tomb with brass indents surmounted by a stone canopy, and a wooden loft or gallery, filling the easternmost arch of the arcade between the Latin Chapel and Lady Chapel (Fig. 1). It has never failed to attract notice, and has commonly been known in recent years as the 'Watching Loft', though its real purpose and origin have never been investigated. Consideration of its possible purposes leads to the suggestion that it may be intended for a singing loft. The associated tomb can be identified with reasonable probability as that of Sir Robert Danvers and his second wife Katherine (died 1462), similar to three other Oxfordshire monuments to associates or friends of Sir Robert.*

## DESCRIPTION

To begin by examining the monument itself: it consists of an altar-tomb with a Purbeck marble cover-slab measuring 2.58 x 1.22 m. in which are well-preserved indents for monumental brasses.<sup>1</sup> The outlines (Figs. 2 and 3) indicate a man dressed in a long mantle with a hood or thick collar, and a close-fitting cap, with an irregularity at his feet on the left compatible with the suggestion that they rested on a lion. The lady is dressed in a mantle, and a 'horned' headdress. There were five shields and a marginal inscription on a fillet without any features at the corners. The outlines, particularly those of the headdress, suggest a date in the 1460s.

Parallels for the female figure profile are at Latton (Essex), 1462; Wollaton (Notts.), 1467; and Thame (Oxon), undated but normally considered to be c. 1460 (Fig. 5). A female figure with a very similar headdress, but without the mantle, is found as one of the anonymous pair of figures at Adderbury (Oxon) (Fig. 6). Her figure in turn is a close parallel to the fragmentary anonymous figure at Aston Rowant also in Oxfordshire (Fig. 7).

A parallel for the male figure can also be seen on the Latton brass,<sup>2</sup> which depicts a judge and wife; he is dressed in a mantle of similar outline to that on the Christ Church indent, although the head outline is slightly different in that hair does not escape around the close-fitting cap as it does at Oxford. A much closer parallel to the profile is found on the earlier brass to Sir John Cassy at Deerhurst (Glos), 1400, where the feet rest on a lion (Fig. 8). The mantle as an item of male dress seems to be confined to judges and mayors. Given that a mayor would be shown bare-headed, whereas the close-fitting cap or coif is the distinctive headdress of the legal profession, we can be reasonably confident in saying that the brasses depicted a judge and his wife, and were made between 1460 and 1467.

Enclosing the altar-tomb is a stone canopy, supporting a wooden loft. Both are panelled and carved in a manner entirely compatible with a date in the 1460s. There are no heraldic devices, initials or other clues as to the donor of the structure, but motifs of vines with grapes, and roses. A notable feature is the unadorned panel on the northern side of the east end of the stonework, above the stairs (clearly visible in Fig. 4). Although there are no signs of any fixing, presumably there was a sculptural panel or inscription set here. On the north

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in *Monumental Brass Society Transactions*, xi (1974), 330.

<sup>2</sup> Illustrated in M. Norris, *Monumental Brasses – the Memorials* (1977), pl. 162.



Fig. 1. The tomb and the loft seen from the south. Drawn by C. Wild, engraved by J. Skelton.

side towards the east end are the mutilated remains of an ordinary set of liturgical sedilia. They were cut back flush with the rest of the panelling, presumably when the Latin Chapel was wainscoted in 1630.

The loft is reached by an extremely steep and very worn staircase, and contains nothing. At the east end there are grooves in the stonework which could possibly, but not necessarily, have supported a chantry-altar.<sup>3</sup> If so, there would have needed to be a footpace, but the eastern end of the flooring has been renewed, concealing any evidence. Both wooden and stone parts of the monument clearly belong together, and are probably in their original place, although the wooden ceiling of the loft does not now quite fit against the pre-existing stonework. (We must remember that Dean Duppa moved the monuments around in 1630, and that in particular the present barrier of monuments separating the Latin and Lady Chapels is not authentic.) At some time considerable repairs have been carried out, using large iron nails, and similar nails have been driven into the stonework at both ends of the loft. On the woodwork are some original carpenter's marks, some geometric designs, and a few post-dissolution graffiti, including the recommendation of 'King o' Scots' for the 1844 Derby.

Beneath the monument is a vault, which was opened in 1889, entered from the Latin Chapel through a four-centred arched doorway. Inside was a single oak coffin, of 15th-century type, containing the body of a woman 5 ft. 6 in. high. The remains of another skeleton were found in the south-east corner, assumed to be one disturbed during the building of the vault.<sup>4</sup>

#### A SHRINE?

Speculation as to the purpose of the monument begins with the assumption by all the earlier antiquaries that it was the actual shrine of St. Frideswide, and that the persons commemorated by the brasses were her parents King Didanus and Queen Safrida. This is first suggested by Wood: 'The Shrine of St. Frideswyde. This is a neat and elegant structure erected over a Tomb, which had on it the effigies of a man and woman in brass, which are torn off, said to be in memory of Didane and Saffride, the said St. Frideswyde's parents.'<sup>5</sup> This view is followed by, among others, Browne Willis and Richard Gough, and as late as 1814 by R. Ackermann.<sup>6</sup>

In support of this theory we must recognise that the unusual design of the monument is perhaps closer to that of a saint's shrine than of anything else. I am not aware of anything quite like it in England, but on a smaller scale the nearest parallel must be the shrine-base of St. Thomas Cantilupe in Hereford Cathedral. Here there is a tomb-chest with carved sides, bearing the indents for a brass figure of the saint on top. Above this is a stone canopy which undoubtedly supported the wooden feretory enclosing the saint's bones. The pattern of stone chest surmounted by arched stone canopy supporting wooden feretory is quite well established. Given that the brass figures could not have represented St. Frideswide herself, the suggestion that they were her saintly parents is not implausible. We are now aware that it was not uncommon for monuments, including brasses, to be provided in the later Middle

<sup>3</sup> Visible in J. Blair (ed.), *Saint Frideswide's Monastery at Oxford: Archaeological and Architectural Studies* (1990), Fig. 72.

<sup>4</sup> P. Dearmer, *The Cathedral Church of Oxford* (1897), 90-1; S.A. Warner, *Oxford Cathedral* (1924), 60.

<sup>5</sup> A. Wood, *History of the University*, ed. J. Gutch (1790), App. 306.

<sup>6</sup> B. Willis, *Oxford Cathedral* (1730), 411; R. Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments*, ii (1799), p. clxxxviii; R. Ackermann, *History of the University of Oxford*, ii (1814), 73-4.

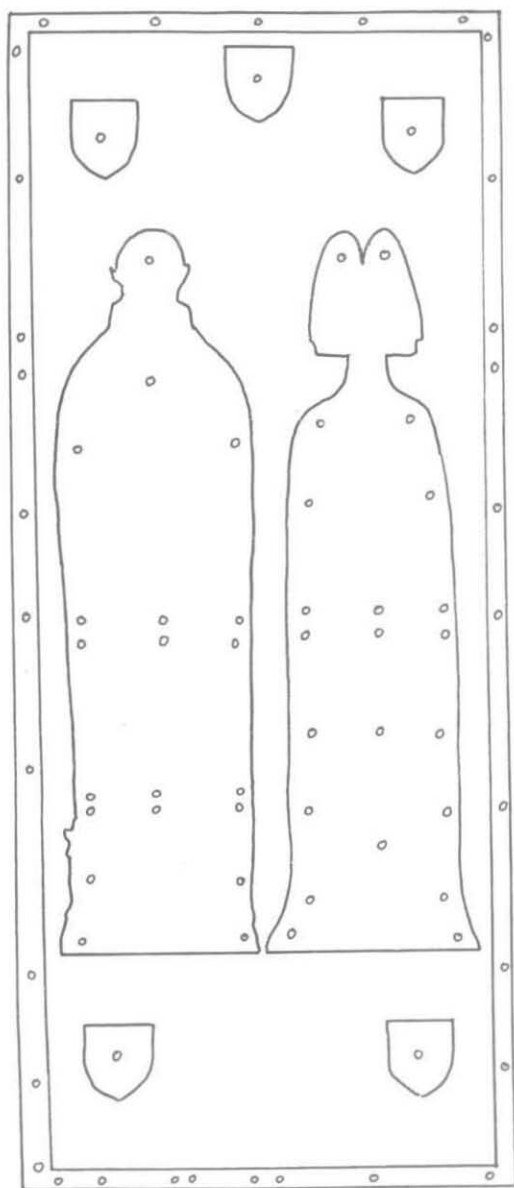


Fig. 2. Outlines of the lost monumental brasses on the tomb. Drawn by the author from rubbing in Ashmolean Museum, 1972. (Height of female figure 1.46 m.).

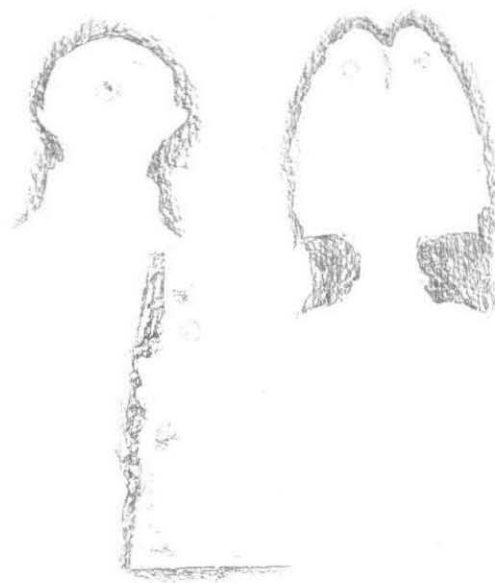


Fig. 3. Details of the heads of the two figures, and the disturbance on the left of the mantle possibly indicating a lion.

Ages for Saxon saints or founders. An obvious local example is the brass indent of the mid 15th century for St. Beornwald at Bampton.

This theory was generally considered to have been exploded by the discovery in 1875 of much of the authentic shrine, clearly dating from the late 13th century, and thus compatible with the fact that the shrine is known to have been rebuilt in 1289. It was re-erected in the Lady Chapel, on the south side of the monument in question. Subsequently it came to be

believed that this was near or on the actual location of the shrine in the 13th century, although John Blair and others have shown that it is much more likely to have been in what is now called the 'Latin Chapel', in the second bay from the east and off centre towards the south.<sup>7</sup>

#### A WATCHING LOFT?

In the middle of the 19th century the theory was first advanced that the monument, while not being the shrine itself, was nevertheless closely linked with it, being a 'watching loft', to provide security for the shrine. J.R. Parker, writing in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1856, and Orlando Jewitt in 1861 in the same journal both attribute the suggestion to Professor Willis.<sup>8</sup> Jewitt examines the monument in some detail, and concludes that 'the present building was erected in the reign of Henry VI, 1422 to 1461, by a civilian – probably a merchant – and his wife, for the double purpose of a monument for themselves and as a watching loft to the then rich and costly shrine of St. Frideswide.' The engraving (Fig. 4) by Jewitt which is captioned 'St. Frideswide's Shrine' was evidently made before he came to this conclusion.

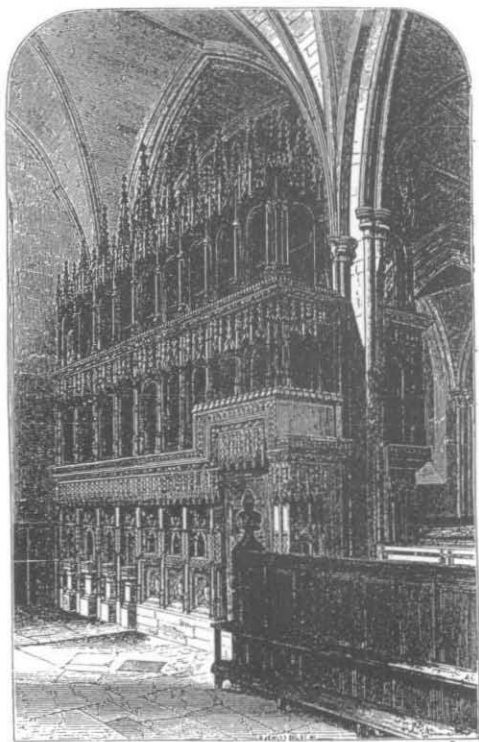


Fig. 4. The tomb and the loft seen from the north-west.  
Engraving by Orlando Jewitt, before 1861.

<sup>7</sup> Blair, *op. cit.* note 3, pp. 246-51.

<sup>8</sup> J.R. Parker, in *Gentleman's Magazine* (1856) pt. ii, 585-8; O. Jewitt in *ibid.* (1861) pt. i, 76-7.

Colour is given to this by the conviction of a scholar in 1469 for stealing necklaces and precious stones from the shrine, leading the University in 1471 to request that greater veneration should be shown to St. Frideswide.<sup>9</sup> The fact that only one body, a female, was found in the vault in no way derogates from this explanation, for it is not at all uncommon for only one person to be buried in a grave intended for two, or indeed for brasses or effigies to be prepared showing a husband and wife when only one was ever intended to be buried at that spot. The sedilia on the side of the monument would have served the altar at the east end of the Latin Chapel, presumably that of the shrine, which agrees with the idea that the monument is connected with the cult of St. Frideswide.

The watching-loft theory has been widely accepted, but there are objections. If on the one hand the shrine really stood where it does now, in the Lady Chapel, the watchers in the loft would have to negotiate the extremely steep and dangerous steps and run round the pillars separating the Latin Chapel from the Lady Chapel, during which time the burglar would be halfway down the nave on his way home. If, on the other hand, the shrine really stood where Dr. Blair suggests in the Latin Chapel, it would actually be totally invisible from the watching loft because of the position of the said steep and dangerous staircase. The often-cited parallel is the loft at St. Alban's Abbey, but that too is somewhat problematic, and there is no very clear evidence for the existence of 'watching lofts' in this sense of a position for security watchmen to guard the shrine.<sup>10</sup>

#### A CHANTRY?

Another option is that the loft is simply a chantry chapel for the persons commemorated beneath and has no connection with St. Frideswide at all. As far as general design and layout go, the whole structure does bear a resemblance to the common 15th-century type of chantry chapel combined with a tomb, though I am unaware of any where the tomb chest occupies the whole of the lower story quite in this manner, forcing the cult upstairs. Indeed if it were not for the long-standing tradition linking the monument with St. Frideswide, it would never have been assumed to be anything else. However, the purpose of a chantry chapel is for the celebration of Requiem Mass, for which a stipend needs to be provided, to keep the priest and pay for the incidentals of the Mass. Such a stipend needs an endowment, and there is no evidence yet that any such endowment was made. A number of chantry foundations are recorded for St. Frideswide's, notably that of Lady Montacute, 1345, but there are none from the 15th century.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, there is no clear evidence on whether there ever was an altar in the loft. The Inventory mentions two altars in the north aisle, i.e. the present north choir aisle and Lady Chapel, and two more in 'the north side' – if there was only one altar in the Latin Chapel that leaves one to be accounted for. This could have been in our loft, though it could equally well have been attached to the real shrine of St. Frideswide, or even been somewhere in the north transept.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 71.

<sup>10</sup> C. Tracy, 'The St. Alban's Abbey Watching Chamber: a Re-assessment', *Jnl. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.* cxlv (1992), 104-11.

<sup>11</sup> A. Wood, *History of the City of Oxford*, ed. A. Clark (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xv, xvii, xxxvii), ii, 170-2.

<sup>12</sup> *Cartulary of St. Frideswide*, ed. S.R. Wigram, i (1894), App. 380-3.

## A SINGING LOFT?

A fourth possibility, not previously canvassed, is that the upper part of the structure is a singing loft. A small choir could very well be placed up there to sing at services both in the Lady Chapel and the Latin Chapel, around the shrine of St. Frideswide (wherever it was positioned). Such singing galleries are not common in English churches, but can be found, e.g. in the great Hanseatic Nicolaikirche at Stralsund of the late 15th century. In this possibility, as with that of the 'watching loft', it would be a matter of the testator making provision for his own tomb plus a structure of benefit to the Priory as a whole, for which no special endowment would be necessary. The privilege of burial in such a prominent spot would be effectively paid for by the provision of a useful gallery.

## THE DONORS

Resolving the question must involve identifying the donors. It is still possible of course that they really were King Didanus and Queen Safrida, commemorated by a 15th-century brass beneath a watching or singing loft connected to the cult of their daughter. I am inclined to discount this partly because of the uncertainty of the function of the loft, but mainly because of the 15th-century burial found in 1889. Moreover in the 15th century St. Frideswide's Priory was impoverished, and is unlikely to have been able to provide such a showy piece of work for very little practical function. The search is really for a judge, or just possibly a mayor, who died (or preferably whose wife died) in about 1465.

Among mayors of Oxford in this period whose place of burial is unknown, we find John Clerk, mayor frequently between 1459 and 1479, Robert Attewode, mayor and M.P. in 1453-8 (died 1461), Richard Spragot, mayor off and on between 1447 and 1473, and John Dobbles, mayor in 1469.<sup>13</sup> None of these is likely to have been wealthy enough for such a splendid tomb, and there is no record linking any of them with St. Frideswide's.

High court judges are less common, and in fact there is only one possible candidate, Sir Robert Danvers, who died in 1467.<sup>14</sup> Robert Danvers was admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1420, and was raised to the bench in 1450. He was associated with Archbishop Chicheley, and acted as his agent in buying property to endow All Souls' College. Although essentially a London man, he did hold manors in Oxfordshire, and his father John Danvers (died 1457) is described as of Cowthorp in Oxfordshire, married to Alice, daughter of William Verney of Byfield, and owner of the manor of Adderbury which he bought from Sir Thomas Wickham in about 1440.<sup>15</sup> In one way or other the Danvers family is connected to all the great Oxfordshire families of the period. Robert lost his position on the bench on the accession of Edward IV but was almost immediately reinstated, being knighted on the occasion of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth Woodville. He is frequently mentioned as serving the county, usually in association with Richard Quatremain of Rycote.<sup>16</sup> He died on 17 April 1467.

Unfortunately his will, made 15 April 1467, which is remarkably brief and to the point, requests burial *in ecclesia sanctae crucis in West Smythfeld London, videlicet in capella beatae Mariae ibidem juxta tumulum ubi corpus Agnetis uxoris meae requiescat humatum* – 'in the church of the Holy Cross in West Smithfield (i.e. St. Bartholomew the Less), specifically in the Lady

<sup>13</sup> Wood, *City*, iii, 23-4.

<sup>14</sup> E. Fosse, *Judges of England*, iv (1851), 428; F.N. Macnamara, *Memorials of the Danvers Family* (1895), esp. 102-14.

<sup>15</sup> V.C.H. Oxon. ix, 60.

<sup>16</sup> *Cal. Patent Rolls, Edw. IV*, 23 April and 11 May 1463; *Cal. Close Rolls, Hen. VI*, i (1451).



Chapel there where the body of my wife Agnes lies buried.<sup>17</sup> Stow confirms that there was a monument there to the two of them.

All is not lost: Sir Robert had at least two wives. Agnes was, it seems, the daughter of Sir Richard Delaber of Hereford, and widow of William Herle. She must have married Sir Robert before 1441, and was the mother of Alice, born 1442 and Agnes, born 1445, possibly also of a son Henry. She seems to have died soon after 1445. By 1456 we find mention of a new wife, Katherine, daughter of Drugo Barentine of Great Haseley, and widow of William Fettiplace, by whom she had three daughters, Anne, Isabel and Sibyl Fettiplace. In 1457 she bore Danvers a last daughter, Joan. By 1462 she was dead, and her lands in Abbefeld were granted in trust to John, Lord Wenlock, during the minority of the three Fettiplace girls.<sup>18</sup> Sir Robert Danvers' will makes provision only for his youngest daughter Joan, £200 on her marriage, and is witnessed by his son Henry. The inquisition post mortem names his heirs as the three daughters Alice Burnaby, Agnes Denys and Joan Danvers – the implication is that Henry had died at the same time as his father, or at least before the inquisition.<sup>19</sup>

One unsubstantiated source gives Sir Robert a third wife, Agnes, daughter of Richard Quatremain of Rycote, possibly the mother of the middle daughter.<sup>20</sup> Certainly Danvers was very friendly with the Quatremains, but there is no record in their own pedigrees of Richard and his wife Sibyl having any offspring: indeed their heir was Richard Fowler, son of his close friend Thomas Fowler who is probably the third figure represented on Richard and Sibyl's brass at Thame<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 5). As we have seen, the brass, and indeed the altar tomb on which it rests, do bear a close resemblance to the monument in Christ Church, and must have been made at about the same time, but the resemblance is sufficiently explained by the known friendship without necessitating a relationship as well.

The very existence of this third (or intermediary) wife is uncertain, but Katherine Danvers certainly existed and needed to be buried. If she died in 1462 she could easily have been the lady represented on the tomb, beside her husband in his judge's robes. Surely it was her body that was found in the vault, where her husband might have expected to join her. Yet in the ensuing five years there was enough time for her memory to fade, or for Danvers' older children to persuade him to revert to the memory of his first love, so that in the event he willed to be buried in London by the side of Agnes, née Delaber. If there had been an intention to endow a chantry chapel over the tomb, this could have been frustrated by the new will (under what pressure from the heiresses?) so that in the event the chantry was never endowed and the chapel never consecrated, remaining empty and useless from the day it was constructed until now. If on the other hand it had been intended from the start as a singing loft, it would have been useful for that purpose in any event.

Once we have a probable identification for the brass figures, certain other identifications fall into place. The Quatremain brass at Thame (Fig. 5) is to a known associate and so similar that both must have been ordered at the same time, from the prestigious London 'D' workshop. The anonymous figures at Adderbury (Fig. 6) which have hitherto resisted identification, for inscriptions and heraldry were lost long ago, could very plausibly represent Sir Robert Danvers' parents, John and Alice, made not immediately on John's death in 1457 but as part of the same order as the Oxford and Thame brasses some five years later. The fourth, extremely fragmentary, brass at Aston Rowant (Fig. 7) now seeks an

<sup>17</sup> P.R.O., P.C.C. Godyn 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Cal. Patent Rolls, Edw. IV*, 12 March 1462.

<sup>19</sup> P.R.O., Inq. Post Mortem, no. 46 of 7 Edw. VI.

<sup>20</sup> *Misc. Gen. et Her.* N.S. iv (1883), 213.

<sup>21</sup> *Oxf. Jnl. of Monumental Brasses*, i (1898), 144-5.





Fig. 5. Brass of Richard and Sibyl Quatremain, c. 1460, from Thame, Oxfordshire. Illustration from *Monumental Brass Society Portfolio*. (Height of female figure 90 cm.).



Fig. 6. Brass possibly of Sir John and Alice Danvers, from Adderbury, Oxfordshire. (Height of female figure 40 cm.).

owner, and one can be found. It now comprises the lower half of the female figure, a group of five daughters, and one shield, all partly covered by pews. Old rubbings in the Society of Antiquaries' collection and the Bodleian<sup>22</sup> show that there were two identical shields, each bearing a fess between three boars' heads couped, impaling two chevrons which must be the well-known local family of Fettiplace (*Gules, two chevrons argent*). The most obvious Fettiplace

<sup>22</sup>Bodl. MSS. Rubbings Phillipps/Robinson 885, rubbing by Henry Hinton.

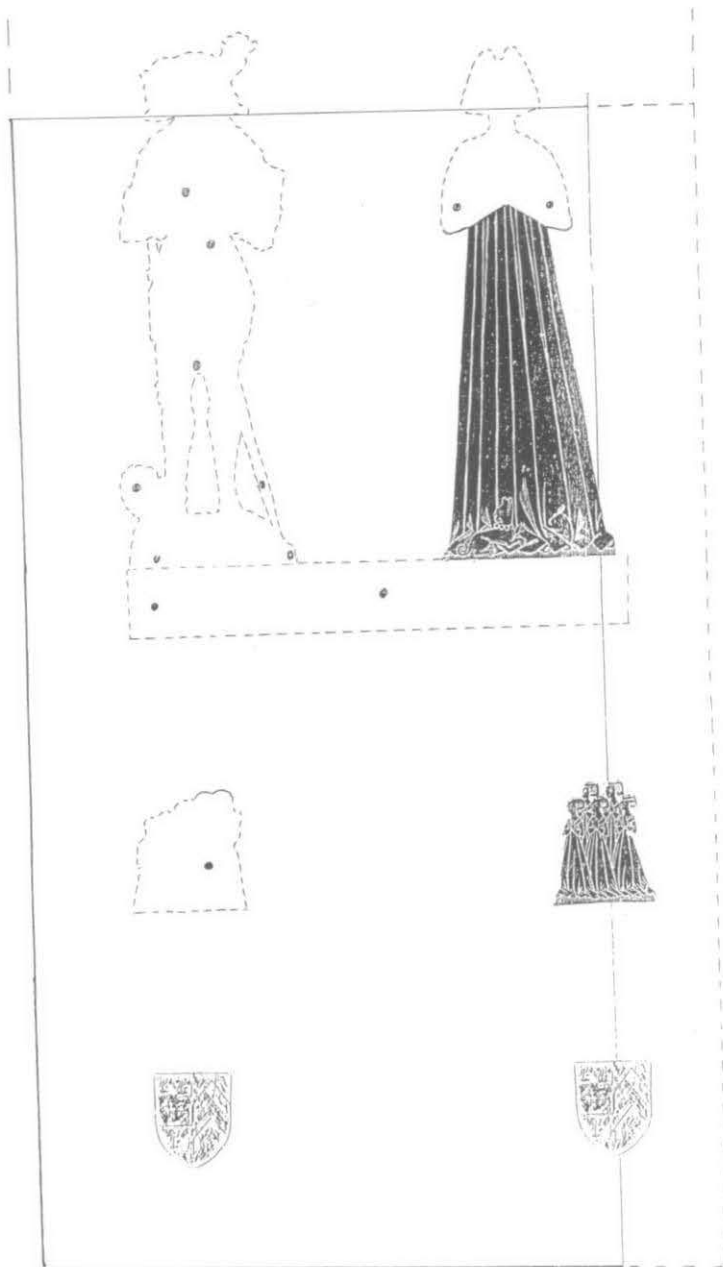


Fig. 7. Remains of brass possibly of Sir William and Katherine Fettiplace, from Aston Rowant, Oxfordshire. (Height of female figure originally *c.* 90 cm.).



Fig. 8. Figure of Sir John Cassy, 1400, from Deerhurst, Glos. Illustration from *Monumental Brass Society Transactions*. (Height of figure 99 cm.).

couple is Sir William Fettiplace of Stokenchurch (which was then a hamlet of Aston Rowant parish) and his wife Katherine, none other than Sir Robert Danvers' later wife;<sup>23</sup> in other words a fourth brass was made at the same time as the others to commemorate Katherine with her first husband. The only hesitation in declaring the identification certain stems from the curious heraldry – one would expect that Fettiplace would have been the first arms, impaling Barentine (*Sable, three eagles displayed argent*). The boars' heads are a difficulty. As shown they look like the arms of Alyson or Swinton, neither of whom have any local connection, but they are not unlike the arms of the Buckinghamshire family of Barton, *Sable, a chevron between three boars' heads coupé or*. The names Barton and Barrentine sound similar enough for a mistake to have been made. In any case the surviving shield of the Quatremain brass at Thame is equally bizarre, displaying Quatremain in second place, impaled by Grey, the family of Richard Quatremain's mother. The herald involved in designing the series of brasses appears to have been prepared to marshal arms in an unusual way – it may be that the boars' head arms represent Sir William Fettiplace's mother. (No weight should be placed on the fact that five daughters appear on the Aston Rowant brass whereas only two or three are recorded as born to Katherine and William Fettiplace – it is normal for brasses to represent all children including those lost in infancy who would not be mentioned in any records.)

The balance of probability must therefore be that the two brass figures on the tomb in Christ Church commemorated Sir Robert Danvers and his wife Katherine, made soon after her death in 1462, and part of a considerable order of brasses from London for four Oxfordshire churches. Whether the loft above was intended for a chantry chapel, a watching loft or a singing loft must, however, still remain uncertain.

*The Society is grateful to the Chapter of Christ Church Cathedral for a grant towards publication of this paper.*

<sup>23</sup>V.C.H. Bucks. iii, 98-9.