

Late Medieval Jugs with Lettering

By G. C. DUNNING

THE handle of a pottery jug illustrated on FIG. 67 and on PL. XXV, A, was found in 1964 in the course of building operations at Abthorpe, 3 miles SW. of Towcester, Northamptonshire. It is at present on loan to the Central Museum at Northampton. The handle is made of light brown sandy ware, highly fired, dense in texture and heavy in weight. The surface is brown with a purplish tone, and has patches of green glaze near the upper end. It is a strap-handle, 5.25 cm. wide, with three shallow grooves down the back. Pottery of this colour and dense texture, known at a number of sites in the midlands, is usually referred to the late 14th and early 15th centuries, e.g. a jug from a deposit dated 1422-23 at Leicester Castle.¹

The interest of the Abthorpe handle centres in the letters stamped lengthways in the grooves. In the middle groove is a complete impression, with part of another above it, and the stamps in the side grooves start at this level. The letters are in Lombardic characters and read retrograde upwards R A C I C X ☒. Each letter is incuse, whereas the saltire cross at the end is in relief. The stamp used to make the impressions was evidently a strip of bone or hardwood, about 0.65 cm. wide and 4.6 cm. long, with the surface cut down so that the letters stood in relief on it.

The only known parallel for the lettering on the Abthorpe handle is on the complete jug from Hertford Street, Coventry (PL. XXV, B,C; FIG. 68), in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum at Coventry.² The jug is cylindrical in form, 20.65 cm. high and about 10.3 cm. in diameter. Its ware and the large patch of dark green glaze on the front and sides are very similar to those of the Abthorpe handle, and it is quite possible that both pots were made at the same place somewhere in the midlands. The source cannot yet be identified with certainty, since the jugs do not correspond with the products of the known pottery-making sites in this region. Although fairly comparable in date, the two jugs are not, apparently, from the kiln at Potterspury, Northamptonshire, which E. M. Jope suggested was working during the 14th century, perhaps continuing into the 15th century.³ More relevant to the problem of the source of jugs stamped with lettering is the pottery from the series of kilns at Nuneaton, only 8 miles NNE. of Coventry, which Mr. Philip Mayes, Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of Leeds, excavated in 1967. For the purpose of the present paper he has kindly reported as follows on the Nuneaton kilns and pottery:

¹ K. M. Kenyon, *Excavations at the Jewry Wall Site, Leicester* (Rep. Research Committee Soc. Antiq. Lond., xv, 1948), p. 247, fig. 79.

² *Antiq. J.*, ix (1929), 379, with illustration.

³ *Archaeol. News Letter*, no. 2 (March, 1950), p. 156.

'The eighteen pottery-kilns at Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton, range in date from the late 13th century down to the middle of the 16th century; in addition, one kiln producing middle 14th-century encaustic floor-tiles and plain roof-tiles was found. It can be fairly assumed that this industrial centre was one of the principal sources for the supply of medieval pottery to Coventry. Among the earlier products at Nuneaton are face-jugs and figural-decorated jugs, similar in style to those found at Coventry.⁴ Preliminary examination suggests, however, that the fine whitish wares known in Coventry are lacking in the excavated material.

'The 14th- and 15th-century kilns at Nuneaton also produced, in turn, the brick-red and the highly fired brownish wares with a purple-toned surface that occur in some quantity at Coventry in late medieval deposits.⁵ Cistercian wares formed a considerable part of the product of the kilns datable *c.* 1500. No examples of jugs stamped with lettering were found among the products of the kilns, so that at the moment it seems unlikely that these were made at Nuneaton. Detailed examination of the several tons of pottery recovered from the kilns has not yet been completed, but it is certain that another source for the supply of medieval pottery to Coventry remains to be located.'

The lettering on the Coventry jug (PL. XXV, B,C; FIG. 68) is stamped in a continuous spiral of five lines round the upper part of the pot; evidently it was impressed by a roller-stamp about 3 cm. in diameter, on which the letters were cut in relief. The inscription consists of the group of letters M E A M Q O D M Q repeated continuously in badly executed Lombardic characters, the second Q (unless it was intended for G) being upside down. A close parallel for the shape, and for the rim and handle sections of the Hertford Street jug is provided by the upper part of a jug found in a 15th-century layer in the recent city-wall excavations at Coventry.⁶ The other pottery of this date from these excavations shows that rouletted decoration on jugs appears to be frequent at this period, so that the continuous lettering on the Hertford Street jug may be regarded as a specialized version of a motif common at this time.

The date *c.* 1400 or early in the 15th century assigned to the two jugs on typological grounds, and by comparison with the dated pottery from Leicester and Coventry, is further confirmed by the character of the letters on both of them. Although close similarity is hardly to be expected in view of the very different nature of the media, the lettering on the pots compares favourably with that of Lombardic capitals on late medieval seals.⁷

In neither instance can the lettering on the jugs be interpreted, either as a complete word or words, or as the initial letters of several words. This does not, of course, signify that the letters had no meaning originally. It is facile to suggest

⁴ *Med. Archaeol.*, IV (1960), 120-23, figs. 45-46.

⁵ Charmian Woodfield, 'Coventry city wall excavation report', *Trans. Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, LXXXI (1966), 99 ff.; see especially the report on pottery, pp. 106-29.

⁶ *Op. cit.* in note 5, p. 121, fig. 12, no. 81; see also p. 125 f., fig. 6, no. 11, and fig. 9, no. 25.

⁷ H. S. Kingsford, 'The epigraphy of medieval English seals', *Archaeologia*, LXXIX (1929), 149 ff.

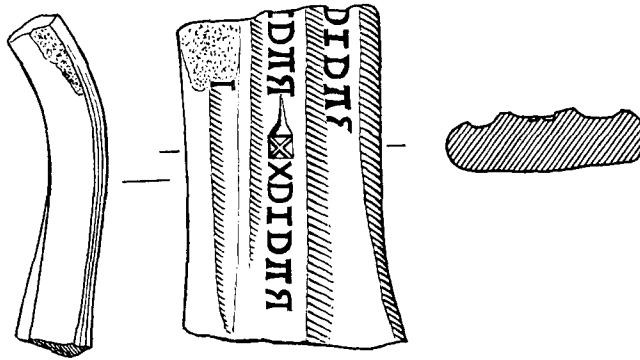


FIG. 67

HANDLE OF JUG FROM ABTHORPE, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE
(pp. 233, 236) Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$

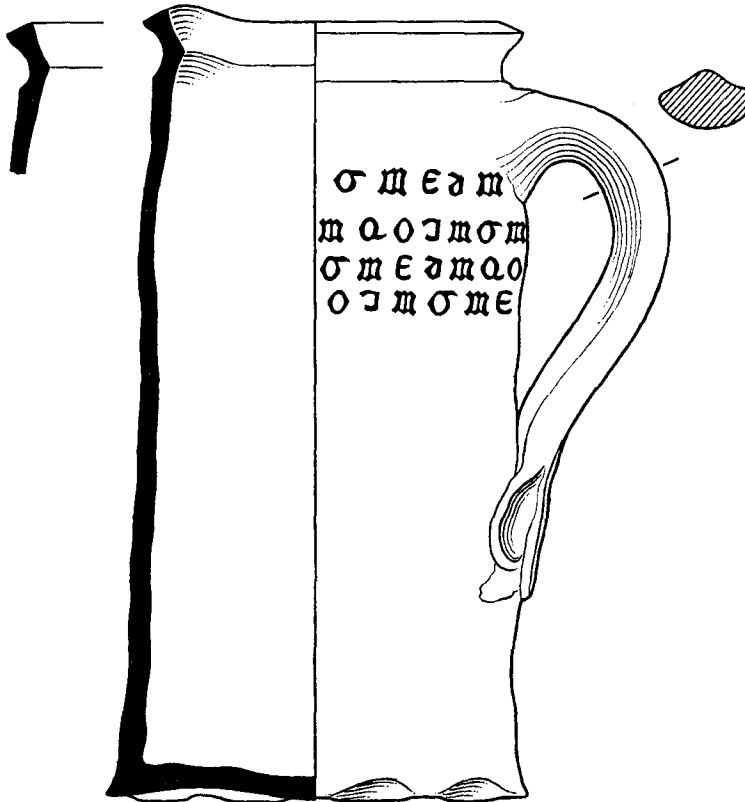


FIG. 68

JUG FROM HERTFORD STREET, COVENTRY, WARWS.
(p. 233 f.) Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$

that the letters are simply a form of decoration derived from floor-tiles with alphabets or other legends, or result from the copying of Latin inscriptions on monuments such as grave-slabs by illiterate potters, and neither of these explanations is satisfactory. The possibility that the groups of letters are to be regarded as charms or exorcisms seems to be worth pursuing, even if the result is, in the nature of things, plausible rather than conclusive.

The letters on the Abthorpe handle have proved to be more tractable than those on the Coventry jug, for which as yet no explanation is forthcoming, whichever letter is taken as the starting-point. In fact the letters on the Coventry jug form little more than a jingle, though they appear to be derived from the initial letters of words in Latin, not English. An interpretation of the letters on the Abthorpe handle was first proposed by Father Anselm Cramer, O.S.B., Librarian of Ampleforth College, York, who suggested that they may be connected with the cult of St. Osburga at Coventry. St. Osburga (or Osberga), who died in 1016, was the first abbess of the nunnery at Coventry ravaged by Cnut and the treacherous Eadric in that year.⁸ The memory of the patroness of the nunnery retained its charm for the clergy and people, and her shrine was the scene of many miracles. At a synod of the archdeaconry of Coventry held in 1410 the cult of St. Osburga was confirmed and her birthday honoured as a feast, which is still kept in the Roman Catholic diocese of Birmingham.⁹ Father Cramer suggests that the letters on the Abthorpe handle could be meant for RA CIO X, that is, RA MX or *ratum (radicitum)* 1010, i.e. a date and not the initial letters of a word.¹⁰ This explanation is all the more convincing because it gives the letters on the Abthorpe handle a religious meaning of great local significance in the midlands, and brings them into line with the inscriptions on some of the floor-tiles in this region, which will be discussed below. I am greatly indebted to the Venerable L. J. Stanford, archdeacon emeritus of Coventry, and to Canon G. H. Parks, chairman of the Coventry Diocesan Advisory Committee, for kindly supplying further information about St. Osburga and her connexion with Coventry.

A hopeful line of enquiry, kindly suggested by Miss J. Russell-Smith, Department of English, Birkbeck College, London, who has also supplied much information, is that the letters on the jugs, in particular those on the Coventry vessel, are ciphers or the initial letters of each word of a prayer formula. In this connexion some of the exorcistic letters on the medal of St. Benedict are very informative. The reverse of the Benedictine medal¹¹ is essentially a cross, accompanied by certain letters which at first sight give it a cabbalistic appearance. The medal

⁸ Sir William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*, I (1730), 157; *V.C.H. Warwickshire*, II (1908), 52, 57; and T. D. Kendrick, *A History of the Vikings* (1930), p. 268.

⁹ *The Book of Saints* (5 ed., 1966), p. 536; compiled by the Benedictine monks of St. Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate.

¹⁰ It may be noted that the use of C and reversed C as components for a date occurs in the late 19th century as a deliberate archaism, when the Gothic Revival was in full swing. See the title-page of W. Chaffers, *Pottery and Porcelain* (1866), where the date is printed as CIO IO CCC.LXVI. I am grateful to Professor H. P. R. Finberg for his comments.

¹¹ P. L. P. Guéranger, *Essai sur l'origine, la signification et les privilèges de la médaille ou croix de Saint Benoît* (Poitiers, 1862). See also the Abbé Cochet, 'On a medal of St. Benedict', with remarks by Sir John Evans, *Numismatic Chron.*, n.s. III (1863), 123-27. This medal was attached to a rosary found in the grave of a Benedictine monk at the abbey of St. Wandrille-Rançon, Dépt. Seine Maritime, Normandy.



FIG. 69

THE BENEDICTINE MEDAL (pp. 236 ff.)

a, obv. and rev. of medal-cross struck at Monte Cassino (*phh.*: *London Museum*; sc. $\frac{2}{1}$); *b*, drawing of rev. of same medal (after Bouvilliers, *op cit.* in note 12; sc. $\frac{3}{1}$)

illustrated in FIG. 69 was struck at Monte Cassino in 1880 to commemorate the 1,400th anniversary of the birth of St. Benedict.¹² In two articles on the history of the medal¹³ evidence is given that the medal was first struck early in the 17th century, probably at Metten in south Germany, though three of the verses represented by letters on the medal are certainly medieval in origin. These verses appear as the legends on an illustration in a 14th-century *Biblia Pauperum* of

¹² Dom Adélard Bouvilliers, *The Medal-Cross of St. Benedict* (Belmont Abbey Press, Belmont, North Carolina, 2 ed., 1932).

¹³ Dom Justin McCann, 'The early history of the Benedictine medal', and 'The later history of the Benedictine medal', *Ampleforth Journal*, xxxviii (1933), 83-94 and 149-58. I am much indebted to Mr. L. Tebbutt, Borough Librarian, Stamford, for kindly obtaining a copy of this journal for me.

south German provenance,¹⁴ in the Herzog August Bibliothek at Wolfenbüttel, near Brunswick (PL. xxvi). The drawing shows a tonsured monk (*Religio*) armed with a cross on a long shaft, which he is pointing like a lance at the figure which confronts him. This figure is labelled *Figura mundi*, and represents the seven-vices-woman, a winged female form with a serpent's tail, wearing a diadem of peacock's feathers, who personifies the Seven Deadly Sins. She holds a chalice in her right hand and is offering it to the monk. The Latin verses which this lively scene illustrates, which also appear as initial letters on St. Benedict's medal, are:

SUNT MALA QUAE LIBAS, IPSA VENENA BIBAS = S M Q L I V B (evil are the draughts thou offerest; mayest thou drink thy own poison);

VADE RETRO SATHANA, NUNQUAM SUADE MICH I VANA = V R S N S M V (begone Satan! and suggest not to me vain things); and

CRUX SACRA SIT MICH I LUX, NON DRACO SIT MICH I DUX = C S S M L and N D S M D (may the holy cross be my light, let not the dragon be my guide).

The protective formulas of the kind employed on the Benedictine medal would be appropriate on a domestic jug, either as an exorcism for water or as a spell against poison. A more explicit example of this kind of device than the letters on the Coventry jug is provided by a small jug, 17 cm. high, found at Spilsby, Lincolnshire (FIG. 70); it is in the City and County Museum at Lincoln. The jug is made of brick-red ware, highly fired, with a few splashes of yellow glaze on the body and handle. In publishing the Spilsby jug some years ago, Mr. F. H. Thompson suggested, with good reason, a 15th-century date for it.¹⁵ The meaning of the word incised on the side before firing is not at once apparent but, if the first letter is taken as a reversed B, the whole may be read as *Binedice* for *Benedice*. The jug is an ordinary, plain example of the sort of vessel mass-produced over a large part of England in the late medieval period.¹⁶ The inscription on it may well have a double meaning. The alliteration of *Benedice* and *Benedict*, coupled with the recollection of the saint's escape from the poisoned wine that was once offered to him, would be in accordance with medieval taste.¹⁷ Moreover, the religious character of the inscription aligns it with those on the floor-tiles of the midlands, which remain to be discussed.

That protective spells may be expected on pottery in this region is shown by some of the inscriptions on floor-tiles of the middle 15th century in the midlands,

¹⁴ H. Cornell, 'Neue Forschungen zur Geschichte des Benediktus-Kreuzes', *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktiner-Ordens*, n. F. XI (Salzburg, 1924), 3-6, fig. 2; *id.*, *Biblia Pauperum* (Stockholm, 1925), p. 81.

¹⁵ *Reports and Papers of the Lincolnshire Architect. and Archaeol. Soc.*, v (1954), 10, fig. 3, no. 6.

¹⁶ There are several dated parallels for the Spilsby type of jug, which naturally vary in shape and in detail in the different regions of Britain. Jug found with a coin of Edward III at Hemswell, Lincolnshire, *Antiq. J.*, xxxiii (1953), 216, fig. 1; jug with coins down to 1422-25 at Terrington St. Clements, Norfolk, *Numismatic Chron.*, 6 ser., viii (1948), 183, fig. 1; jug with coins deposited after 1388 at Bredgar, Kent, *ibid.*, fig. 2; jug with coins deposited after 1399 at Skipton, Yorkshire, J. D. A. Thompson, *Inventory of British Coin Hoards A.D. 600-1500* (1956), p. 124, pl. iv, c; jug with coins deposited c. 1377-80 at Neville's Cross, Durham, *ibid.*, p. 55, pl. ii, a; and jug with coins deposited c. 1325 at Lochmaben, Dumfriesshire, *ibid.*, p. 86, pl. iii, e.

¹⁷ St. Benedict could well claim to be the patron saint of archaeologists, by virtue of his miraculous restoration of the pieces of a sieve broken by his nurse: see Dom Justin McCann, *St. Benedict. By St. Gregory the Great* (Princethorpe Priory, Rugby, 1941), p. 111.

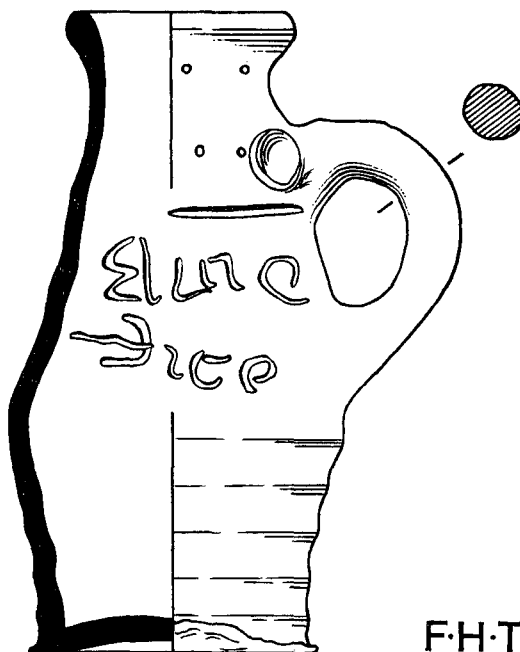


FIG. 70

JUG FROM SPILSBY, LINCOLNSHIRE (p. 238)

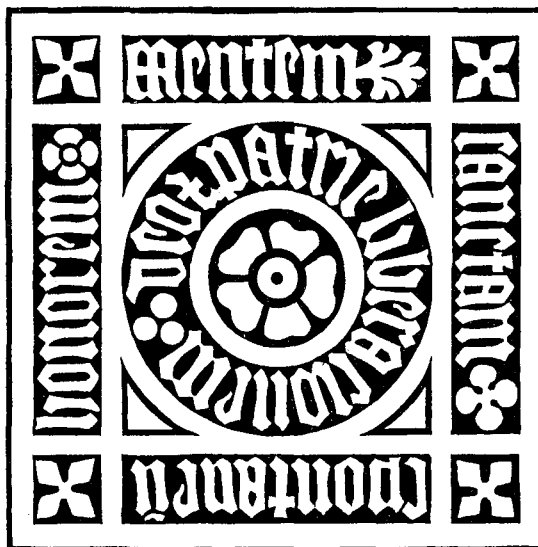
Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$ 

FIG. 71

FLOOR-TILE WITH INSCRIPTION, FROM
MALVERN, WORCS. (p. 240). Sc. $\frac{1}{2}$ After Nichols, *op. cit.* in note 20

which are thus broadly contemporary with the two jugs with lettering and moreover occur in the same part of the country. I am much indebted to Mrs. E. S. Eames for drawing my attention to these tiles in the present context. The tiles belong to the Great Malvern series, and have been found at Malvern, Nottingham,¹⁸ Shrewsbury and York (FIG. 71). The inscription, in black letter, reads **MENTEM SANCTAM SPONTANEUM HONOREM DEO ET PATRIE LIBERACIONEM** (the holy mind, honour freely rendered to God, and liberty to the country). This legend, the epitaph of St. Agatha,¹⁹ became celebrated in the middle ages and was frequently used on church bells. According to Nichols,²⁰ who first drew attention to this inscription on the floor-tiles, it appeared on an early 15th-century bell at Kenilworth Church. It is also included in a 15th-century compilation of medical recipes and charms in the British Museum (Add. MS. 12,195), where its efficacy is indicated by a marginal gloss 'for fyre', alluding to St. Agatha's prayer at her martyrdom.

The repetition of some of the letters in both of the inscriptions on the pottery (C on the Abthorpe handle, and M and Q on the Coventry jug), also occurs on floor-tiles with the five letters W G W E R on a quadrant. The source of these tiles was apparently a kiln at Coventry, and examples are known from five sites in Warwickshire.²¹ The letters, as yet undeciphered, appear to represent the initials of words rather than a single word.

Finally, it appears to be significant that all these enigmatic inscriptions, whether on pottery or floor-tiles, belong to a very circumscribed region in the midlands: nothing of the kind is known on medieval pottery elsewhere in England. The distribution is in fact as restricted as that of many of the regional groups of medieval pottery in Britain.²² This limitation, and the protective or religious meaning of those inscriptions that can be understood, suggest that there may be some connexion with the practice of sorcery in the midlands in the middle ages.

Two very notorious cases of witchcraft figure largely in the legal records of the 14th century. Since both of them took place in the midlands and are exceptional among the numerous trials for witchcraft in England,²³ they merit consideration in the present context.

The first case, in 1303, concerned charges against one of the chief men of the realm, Walter Langton, treasurer to Edward I, who was appointed bishop of Lichfield. He regarded his see as a reward for skilful service rather than as a spiritual office. Langton was accused before Pope Boniface VIII of demonology and of paying shameless homage to the Devil. After a searching enquiry the bishop was able to clear himself of these charges.²⁴

¹⁸ *Trans. Thoroton Soc.*, xxxvi (1932), 97, no. 86, and LIX (1955), 96, pl. ii, 1 (Lenton Priory).

¹⁹ F. Cabrol et H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, I (1907), 850.

²⁰ J. G. Nichols, *Examples of Decorative Tiles* (1845), p. viii, no. 75.

²¹ *Trans. Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, LX (1936), 21, fig. 17.

²² E. M. Jope, 'The regional cultures of medieval Britain', *Culture and Environment: Essays in Honour of Sir Cyril Fox* (1963), pp. 327-50.

²³ Margaret A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), *passim*; Pennethorpe Hughes, *Witchcraft* (1965), pp. 56-103.

²⁴ Montague Summers, *The Geography of Witchcraft* (1927), p. 55.

The second case, in 1324, was directly connected with Coventry. No less than twenty-seven defendants, all men of Coventry, were tried at the King's Bench for murder by fashioning and tormenting a wax image. These men formed a compact with a famous witch, John of Nottingham, then living in Coventry, and paid him a large sum of money to undertake the slaying of Edward II, the prior of Coventry, and various other officials who, so they asserted, had ground them down with heavy taxation. The wax images were made in a secluded manor-house near Coventry, and their efficacy was first tried out by thrusting lead pins into the wax figure of a hated courtier, Richard de Sowe, who died in agony. Before the full exercise could be carried out on the intended victims, John's servant, Robert Marshall, turned king's evidence, and all concerned were arrested. Full details of the thaumaturgic procedure were given at the trial, though the accused were eventually acquitted.²⁵

These cases of witchcraft have been quoted at some length as evidence of the power and intensity of the cult in the midlands in the 14th century. Judged against this background, the inscriptions on the pottery vessels appear to reflect a prophylactic pattern exclusive to the midlands, and expressed in a different way on each pot; it is worth underlining that practices of this nature are susceptible of being expressed by archaeological material. The meaning attached to the letters and words was presumably understood at the time, and their potency recognized, but these are now only partly known to us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My cordial thanks are due to Mr. W. N. Terry, Curator of the Central Museum, Northampton, for facilities for studying the Abthorpe handle and for supplying a photograph of it; Mr. C. J. Scott, Museums Curator of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, for similar facilities and photographs of the Coventry jug; and to Mr. F. H. Thompson for the loan of his drawing of the Spilsby jug. I am very grateful, also, to the Director of Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, for the photograph from which PL. XXVI is taken, and to the London Museum studio (Mr. B. J. Gray) for the photographs for FIG. 69.

I am especially grateful to the authorities of St. Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate, for the gift of the Benedictine medal illustrated in FIG. 69, and for the loan of the publication by Bouvilliers.

My grateful thanks are due to Miss J. Russell-Smith and Mrs. E. S. Eames for their help with the inscriptions, and in providing comparative material. I am also much indebted to Father Anselm Cramer, O.S.B., the Venerable L. J. Stanford and Canon G. H. Parks for kindly providing information on matters ecclesiastical. Finally, I am grateful to Professor F. Wormald, lately Director of the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, for his interest in the epigraphic problems of the lettering and for supplying some of the references.

²⁵ Summers, *op. cit.* in note 24, p. 149.