

# THE FUNERAL HELMET OF SIR THOMAS VINCENT IN STOKE D'ABERNON CHURCH.

BY

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THE following description of the close-helmet hanging in St. Mary's Church, Stoke d'Abernon, was written at the request of Lady d'Abernon who brought it to me to examine at Hertford House in October 1938. At that time the helmet was covered with a thick coating of mastic varnish, which must have been applied fairly recently with the commendable intention of preserving the metal from further oxidization. This gave the helmet an unnaturally sleek, chocolate-coloured appearance and concealed traces of the gilt floral decoration commonly applied to helmets when adapted for funerary purposes. At my suggestion this was removed and a dressing of vaseline substituted. The accompanying photograph (Plate V) was taken at the same time.

It is safe to say that the majority of helmets surviving in English churches have received no care or attention since the day they were hung above the tomb of the deceased three or more centuries ago. The opposite extreme, and one equally to be avoided, is overcleaning, in the erroneous belief that the surface of the helmet should be of bright steel. At the time they were installed church helmets were usually painted a dark slate colour, to which gilt floral decoration was added, especially on the visor. If simply oiled from time to time with vaseline, deterioration by rust can be easily prevented.

It should not be forgotten that the helmet and accompanying insignia (gauntlets, spurs, sword, tabard and escutcheon) are part and parcel of the monument to which they belong and should receive equal care and respect. They were carried by the heralds behind the bier in the funeral procession as symbols



FUNERAL HELMET OF SIR THOMAS VINCENT SHOWING FRAGMENT  
OF CREST IN POSITION.

*facing page 84]*



of an earthly state which the deceased had left behind him for a world where no such distinctions exist. The practice still survives at Royal funerals and to some extent at military ones, where the cap and sword are placed on the coffin and followed by the deceased's charger with the boots reversed in the stirrups. Some helmets may have actually belonged to the deceased in their lifetime, but the furnishing of a herald's funeral was usually supplied by the undertaker, when the helmet would be bought and paid for as part of the funeral expenses. This accounts for the fact that helmets are often of a considerably earlier date than the funeral ceremony in which they took part. The helm of the Black Prince, which still hangs over his tomb in Canterbury Cathedral, is the earliest surviving example in this country of a church helmet *in situ*.

The present instance, although made up from parts of two different helmets, dates from seventy or more years prior to the death of Sir Thomas Vincent in 1613. The two parts must then have been put together, painted and gilt, and a spike added for the crest. The crests on funeral helmets are usually made of wood,<sup>1</sup> painted according to their heraldic tinctures. They are often carved with some spirit, as for example the life-like bulls on the Nevill helmets at Birling, Kent, or the eagle on the helmet of Sir John Gostwick at Wilmington, Bedfordshire. Unfortunately in this case only a portion of the crest survives.

The skull and visor, though approximately contemporary, belong originally to two separate headpieces of the second quarter or first half of the sixteenth century. The skull has a keel-shaped central ridge, with a longitudinal groove along the top, and is pierced with a key-slot for attaching a crest. When adapted for funeral purposes at a later date an iron spike has been fixed about an inch in front of this to carry the wooden funerary crest. The skull is articulated three times at the back by means of two narrow lames and one longer neck-plate. This articulation at the back of the skull, instead of lower down on the neck, is unusual. Other instances of this feature occur on an Italian helmet with bellows visor in

<sup>1</sup> This would be too top-heavy for actual wear. Surviving crests of tournament helms are usually of moulded parchment or leather.

the Musée de l'Armée at Paris (No. G. 33) and a similar one in the Vatican. It also occurs on an Italian "casquetel" in the Wallace Collection (No. 234), and the probability is that the Stoke d'Abernon helmet was made in Italy. The long neck-plate has a central ridge, its edges are turned over on the inside, and it is evident that originally it extended to a point at the back, which has since been cut off square. There is a row of holes for lining rivets inside the brow, on the top of the neck-plate (hidden on the outside by the lame above, and with the rivets still in place), and a group of three holes in the centre of the neck lower down.

The chin-piece, or lower bevor, is pivoted at the same points as the visor. It is embossed with a ridge round the jaw which corresponded with the lower edge of the visor originally made for it. The edge in front is turned over and there is a square piece cut out in front opposite the mouth. There are a row of lining rivets round the upper and lower borders, the latter hidden by the gorget plate. The chin-piece was secured to the skull by a catch on the right side, at the point where a slot is cut in the former. To the lower edge is riveted a gorget plate, which has been taken from a helmet of later sixteenth-century date. It has a sunk border and roped lower edge, which has subsequently been cut off square like the back. The top edge is bevelled and cut in an invecked pattern in front.

The visor is formed of one piece of metal, pointed in front, with two horizontal sights cut in the upper part, their lower edges being rolled over on the inside. Its form indicates a date within the first half of the sixteenth century, since later visors are usually made in two parts, the visor proper containing the sight, and the ventail or upper bevor covering the face. It is pierced with seven small circular breaths on the left side (upper part) and seven and thirteen similar holes respectively on the upper and lower parts of the right side. The present pivot holes at the sides are not the original ones, which were placed further back, and their former position can be discerned where the ends have been cut off short to adapt the visor to the existing skull. There are traces on the visor, gorget and chin-piece of the gilt floral decoration which it was customary to add to a funeral helmet.

The crest of carved wood has been much damaged by beetle and only a fragment remains. It took the form of a bear's head, painted grey (argent), rising from a ducal coronet gilt (for Vincent). It would have been supplied for the purposes of the funeral. Of the other insignia carried by the heralds behind the bier and subsequently hung up in the church over the tomb only the tabard now remains. The illustration in Mr. Cripps-Day's chapter on Church Armour in Sir G. F. Laking's *Record of European Armour and Arms*, 1920-22, Vol. V., fig. 1759, shows the tabard as it was before recent restoration.

The monument of Sir Thomas Vincent, with his reclining effigy in armour and his lady beside him under an arched canopy, has been described and illustrated by the late Mr. Philip Johnston in his account of the church in *Surrey Archæological Collections*, Vol. XX (1907), pp. 51-2, pl. x.