

Eighteenth-century stonemasons in the Black Mountains

by Bob Silvester & Liz Pitman

The churches in the Black Mountains of the South Wales borderland contain an exceptional number of 18th-century stone wall tablets commemorating people from various social classes. Many of the stones were signed by local masons and it is possible to recognise both families and individuals at work, and determine the market areas they exploited. The most colourful of these monuments were produced by three generations of the Brute family from Llanbedr in south-eastern Breconshire. Each member of the family created his own distinctive style, but while Thomas Brute's products were distributed widely, competition at the end of the 18th century restricted his grandson's work to a limited area around Llanbedr.

Adorning the walls of many parish churches in England and Wales are memorial tablets dating from the 17th century to the present. Predominantly in marble, with occasional examples in brass, stone and even wood, they generally commemorate the families of the local gentry and the clergy who ministered there and were frequently the work of urban sculptors and masons (Esdaile 1946; Broome 1995). Regional variations are only to be expected and distinctive trends, particularly in churchyard monuments fashioned from stone, have been identified in Cornwall, the Vale of Evesham and amongst the masons who used Ketton stone and Swithland slate in Leicestershire (Burgess 1979, 120). Breconshire (now part of Powys) offers a marked contrast to the pattern found in most other regions of Wales. Here, and in the adjacent parts of Radnorshire to the north and Monmouthshire and Herefordshire to the east, internal memorials in stone proliferate, the work of masons whose products were geographically localised and provincial in style, and which are the subject of a current survey by the writers.

With a few exceptions these memorials define a trend which emerged in the first decade of the

18th century and faded out 150 years later because of changing attitudes in the established church, rather than amongst those who commissioned such memorials, and because of legislation which prohibited burial within churches (Rodwell 1989, 157). Those who were commemorated in local stone, though not necessarily buried within the confines of the church, were not the local gentry – who were still remembered on marble tablets – but were from lower down the social scale. Most frequently encountered are gentlemen farmers or their wives – those whose names would have been on the box pews in the body of the church rather than on either side of the altar. The inscriptions carry the title, 'Gent', after the name of the deceased or the widower, together with the name of their residence, almost invariably a farm. But artisans are also recorded: a blacksmith at Llanfihangel Crucorney (Mon) in 1766 (on the basis of the allusions to the trade in the commemorative verse); a carpenter at Llandefalle (Brecons), a cordiner (cordwainer) at Brecon Cathedral from 1805, a midwife at Llangatock (Brecons) in 1773, an officer of excise at Llanddewi Rhydderch (Mon) in 1809 and, from the same church, a weaver in 1785. Local incumbents appear regularly, stone taking the place of

marble for many. And above all, children were commemorated. Of the 21 monuments at Llandefalle, six are dedicated solely to children, and of a similar number inside the church at Llanfilo (Brecons), eight were to those who died before the age of 20. Some of these were the children of traders and artisans. Elizabeth Tuck died at the age of 17 in 1797, the daughter of an innholder at Llanbedr (Rads), while Alice Walters, buried in 1817, was the daughter of a shoemaker at Trallong (Brecons). On the church walls, both inside and out, are memorials to people who elsewhere would be commemorated on gravestones in the churchyard – a reflection of what Rodwell has called the 18th-century obsession for burial within the church (1989, 158).

Sandstone derived from local quarries, such as those in the hills above Llangatock on the south side of the Usk Valley between Brecon and Abergavenny, provided the raw material for virtually all of these memorials. Frequently the red and grey sandstone wall tablets were given a surface coating of black paint, particularly on the more elaborate examples that are generally found inside churches. This evoked not only the colour most intimately associated with death, but also seems to have been an attempt by the stonemasons

to imitate slate, an illusion not altogether unsuccessful when judged against the misinterpretations that have surfaced in earlier commentaries (eg Harthan & Wight 1947, 135; Pevsner 1963, 308). The availability of Old Red Sandstone through Breconshire and into Monmouthshire and Herefordshire partly explains the concentration of these monuments in this part of south Wales. Moving northwards into Radnorshire, where the sandstone gives way to shales and siltstone, the prevalence of stone memorials declines dramatically.

It is not possible to offer even a general estimate of the number of stone memorials fashioned in this region from the earlier 18th century onwards. Well over 300 were noted in Breconshire alone by one of the writers during the Cadw-funded survey of historic Welsh churches in 1995/6. Within a seven-mile radius of Brecon the village churches of Llanfilo, Llanspyddid and Llandefalle have 35, 29 and 21 stone tablets respectively, yet others such as Cantref, Llanfaes and Llangasty Talyllyn contain none. Each of the latter is a Victorian rebuilding, and together with the earlier furnishings, the wall tablets were considered inappropriate in new churches and were discarded. This pattern of loss is repeated across the country as Lloyd has shown in Carmarthenshire (1989, 39). The wholesale removal of monuments has continued almost to the present day. At Bronllys (Breccs), the wall tablets have been removed from the interior of the church at some point during the last 20 years and stacked against an outside wall. The loss of memorials must be attributed not only to deliberate clearance but also to weathering. Those affixed to external walls, a sizeable proportion, show the effect of weathering. Of the 35 at Llanfilo, 14 are outside: three of these are now largely unintelligible because their surfaces have flaked away, and four others are gradually disintegrating.

A significant aspect of this group of monuments is that many of them are signed. Llandefalle has eight unsigned, but 13 carry the signatures of four different stonemasons. Of the 21 tablets inside Llanfilo, only four are unsigned. The rest are the work of five masons. Inside the remote church of Crickadarn higher up the Wye Valley in northern Breconshire, six or perhaps seven masons were responsible for the 13 signed monuments out of a total of 19 on the church walls. Some of these masons appear only rarely. To William Parry, responsible for the blacksmith's memorial at Llanfihangel Crucorney in the late 18th century, can be attributed only two signed stones, suggesting that stonecutting represented only one element of his trade. This is implicit in the work of the Cartwrights of Aberedw (Rads). Amongst the earliest known memorials is a stylistically coherent but unsigned group from Aberedw for the period 1707–15, almost certainly the work of Jeremiah Cartwright (d 1722) whose own memorial describes him as a builder and stonecutter. This memorial was probably the work of his second son, William, who signed one of a pair of chest tomb slabs at nearby Llandeilu Graban (Rads) in 1747, and also painted the Hanoverian Arms on a board for

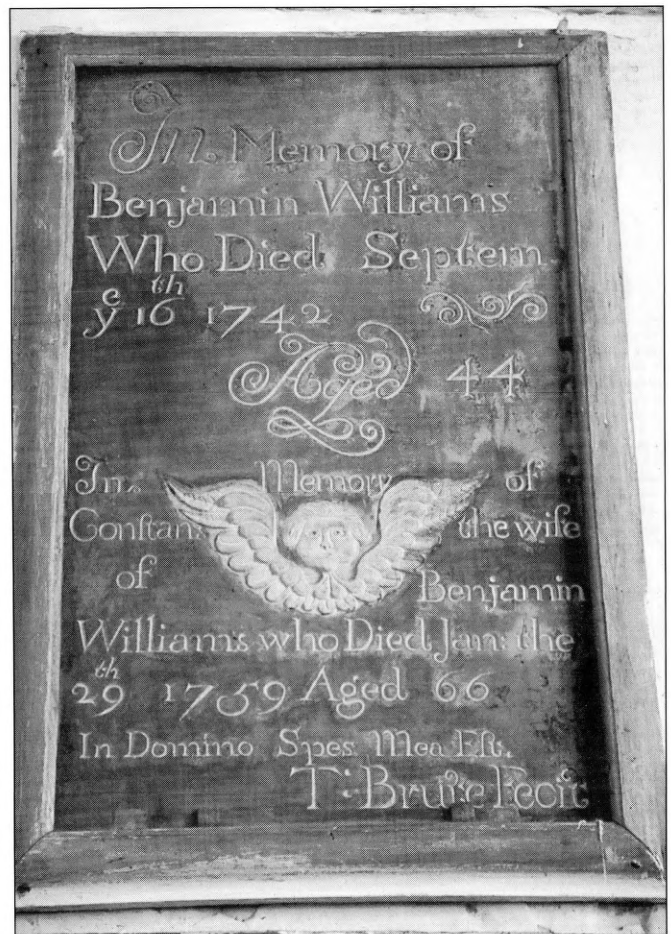


Fig 1 Wall monument by Thomas Brute: Llandefalle, Breconshire (Photo: L Pitman)

Colva church (Rads) in 1733, but who is otherwise unrecorded. Other masons were more ready to sign their work. The most prolific Breconshire mason of the 18th century was Thomas Games of Talgarth (Breccs) who described himself as a stonecutter on his marriage bond in 1791. Over a period of more than 50 years from 1753, we have records of over 100 signed stones, three-quarters of them mural tablets and the remainder gravestones and ledgers. Other active masons included T(homas) Powel and T(homas) Phillips both also of Talgarth, John Prichard of Clodock (Heref), Hughes of Felinfach (Breccs) and Roger Havard of Disserth (Rads). Each mason developed his own style.

Most distinctive were the monuments produced by the Brute family of Llanbedr near Crickhowell

– the only Breconshire masons to have received some attention in previous studies, primarily because of the colourful and flamboyant nature of their work (Harthan & Wight 1947; Haslam 1979, 327; Davies 1996, 86). The present study has focused initially on the Brute family and all their products, both painted and plain, inside and outside the churches of the region. At least four generations of the Brute family worked as masons: John (1665–1730), who appears as a mason in the family records but does not appear to have signed his work; his son Thomas, (1699–1767); his grandson Aaron (1731–1801); and his great-grandson, John (1752–1834). Sixty-seven signed Brute monuments have been identified to date, a mixture of churchyard gravestones, chest tombs and ledgers, graveslabs set in church floors, and mural tablets affixed to internal and external church walls.

The churchyard monuments are, not surprisingly, the simplest – basic gravestones or chest-tomb slabs with little if any ornamentation. Walterstone churchyard (Heref) contains a small tombstone with a typical Brute foliate border and a faded, disintegrating signature of A Brute at its base, while Cwmyoy (Mon) has a chest tomb with an unusual ‘key’ pattern for the border, signed by T Brute. A staple of many of the masons working in the region, such simple churchyard memorials often went unsigned. The churchyard at Llanbedr contains a significant number of 18th-century gravestones designed to a common style with a winged cherub carved at the top. None of these appears to be signed, though signatures can become covered when stones settle into the ground and humic material accumulates, but their prevalence in the home village of the Brutes favours production by one or more of the family. One of these simpler stones is to Ann Brute who died as a child in

1817 and has the ornate foliate border which is one of the hallmarks of a Brute monument.

Churchyard monuments were rarely painted in the Black Mountains region and none of those by the Brute family appear to have any trace of paint. Some internal floor slabs did have paint, if only in white to enhance the inscription, though damp and the passage of feet have done much to wipe the stones clean. Thirty of the 51 signed internal monuments retain a substantial amount of paint, whilst many of the unpainted examples are finely carved and decorated (Fig 1). The paintwork on many of the memorials is vivid, appearing almost as fresh as it would have been when first painted. Traditionally, the colourful paints were produced from vegetable substances and lichens using a recipe which was reputedly handed down from generation to generation and was written on the front page of a family Bible lost in a fire about 1840 (Brute 1990, 21). It is these painted monuments which have attracted most interest because of their style and originality. Davies, for instance refers to a ‘naive, but highly attractive interpretation of Rococo ... their

unabashed joviality making for very cheerful funereal monuments’ (1996, 86), while Haslam described their motifs as consisting primarily of ‘chubby cheeked cherubs, not very dire angels, heraldry, and so on, encircled in wreaths of leaves, branches, and sprays of flowers, all gaily picked out in gold, red, blue and green. Broadly Rococo in spirit, they are executed with unabashed primitivism’ (Haslam, 1979, 56).

Each of the Brutes developed a particular and, in some respects, unique decorative repertoire. Other than an anomalous wall tablet in Llangattock Lingoed (Mon) referred to below, Thomas’ earliest dated monument, a floor slab of 1721, is in Llantilio Crossenny (Mon). His last, in the same church, commemorates someone who died in 1768, the year after his own death – apparently confirmation of the belief that masons would cut and decorate ‘blanks’ at slack periods, leaving space in the centre for the lettering to be inscribed at a later time when a customer ordered a memorial. At present, 32 monuments signed by Thomas Brute are known, including a few with the prefix ‘Pr’ (= by), adopted by two or three other



Fig 2 Detail from a wall monument by Thomas Brute: Llanvetherine, Monmouthshire (Photo: L. Pitman)

Breconshire masons on occasion. The most common decorative feature of a Thomas Brute monument, and one that he adopted throughout his working life, is the winged cherub (or putto), a common enough feature of 17th- and 18th-century memorials, though his have a style of their own. Thomas' putti frequently have rather puffy cheeks, curly hair (looking as though they had recently had a rather tight perm), and wings which begin under the chin and then turn upwards on each side of the face (Fig 2). This motif can appear at the centre or base of a monument. When it occurs at the bottom, the putto is sometimes accompanied by acanthus leaf decoration on each side and a butterfly motif below. The feature that caught the eye of earlier writers was the 'droll bambini in loin cloths' (Burgess 1979, 186) though these angels appear on only two monuments, from Llantilio Pertholey (Mon) and Crickhowell (Brecs). Dated 1727 and 1728 respectively, these are early in Thomas Brute's career and are clearly not representative of his overall output, and while the winged cherubs continued, with some modification of style, in the work of Thomas Brute's son and grandson, the 'droll bambini'

are not seen again, at least in this form.

Aaron Brute's work is much more colourful and flamboyant than that of his father. Nineteen signed monuments have been identified. Thomas' work has limited floral decoration, such as acanthus leaves, but it is with Aaron that the development of the 'primitive Rococo' is clearly seen in the guise of floriate borders, trailing flowers – particularly tulips – and a signature set within its own small decorative cartouche (Fig 3). Like his father, Aaron uses cherubs as part of his design, but their wings lack the sweep of Thomas' cherubs, and are best described as stubby. Aaron adopted two distinctive motifs in his work: the use of a vase or container with trailing flowers and leaves, and a rope-like motif within a floral border. The colour on some monuments might be thought excessive: that to the 14-year old son of the Reverend Philip Price (1775) at Walterstone has a highly gilded border, a gilded basket, a cherub with gilt hair and wings, green foliage and red flowers, together with a florid carved Aaron Brute at the base.

John Brute's work shares a number of stylistic similarities with that of his father, particularly the ornate foliate

rococo borders and winged cherubs, though only 14 signed monuments have been recorded to date. His cherubs lose the stubby wings that Aaron preferred and return to the longer wings of Thomas' cherubs, but, as well as flicking up on each side of the cheeks, they are sometimes depicted with one wing curved downwards. At a time when fashions in monumental sculpture were moving towards a more classical style represented by draped urns, pilaster columns and pediments, John maintained the family tradition of a robust, rather primitive style, which was conservative in design compared with the products of contemporaries such as Hughes of Felinfach. Like Thomas, John also carved full-length cherubs, but the style is very different. John's cherubs appear in pairs, one in each of the top corners of the monument. They have chubby, rosy cheeks, a cheerful smile, straight gold painted hair, and blue décolleté dresses trimmed with white and tied with gold belts. Below the belt, the blue skirt is stylishly draped, revealing a little more pink flesh. They appear to be one-legged, and lean rather rakishly towards each other, blowing golden trumpets, waving a palm and looking extremely pleased with their lot (see cover photo from Partrishow, Brecs). They do indeed make for 'very cheerful funeral monuments' (Davies 1996, 86), yet as with the 'droll bambini' (Burgess 1979, 186), they have only been encountered twice, at Cwmyoy and Partrishow, and they are late in John's repertoire, dating to 1806 and 1804 respectively. Our experience suggests that it is these cherubs, cheerfully representing the soul and resurrection, that most attract people to the Brute memorials today. Tastes change, as this 19th-century view on painted cherubs shows: 'I suppose there are persons who admire these conventional forms of ugliness, with puffy faces of pink and white, black (often squinting) eyes, gilt hair and wings, which are



Fig 3 Detail from a wall monument by Aaron Brute: Llantilio Pertholey, Monmouthshire (Photo: L Pitman)

Fig 4 Distribution of known Brute monuments (Illustration: B V Williams)

intended as one order of holy angels' (Rev F E Paget in 1843 cited by Burgess 1979, 34).

The assessment above is necessarily based on those surviving memorials that carry the Brute name, but we can be certain that not all of the memorials carved by them during the 18th century were signed. For instance, a monument at Llowes (Rads) carrying a lengthy eulogy to a baronet has the winged cherub and rather fleshy acanthus leaves which are the hallmarks of Thomas Brute, but carries no mason's name, while an unsigned monument at Cwmyoy, virtually the next village to the Llanbedr home of the Brutes, has trailing flowers, a rope-like border and a cherub, all characteristics of the work of Aaron Brute. More problematic is the wall tablet to Thomas, the two-year old 'son of Thomas Brute vide Mason' in Llanbedr church. Dating from 1724, this unsigned work is surely the work of Thomas at an early stage in his career, for it is inconceivable that he would have commissioned and paid another stonemason to produce the memorial, but it is unusual for the cherub head in appliqué plaster. This device does occur again on later memorials at Crickadarn and Llanvetherine (Mon), though neither

carries a signature. Equally certain is the fact that other stonemasons in the region were producing wall tablets in a style sufficiently similar in their use of cherubs and decorative borders for them to be wrongly attributed on the basis of a cursory examination. Llangattock church (Brecs) contains several Brute memorials but there is one of 1780 signed by T Jones which could easily be mistaken for a Brute product. In the churches nearest to Llanbedr, such as Partrishow and Cwmyoy, are a number of fine painted unsigned monuments which are of the right date yet appear subtly different from the 'usual' Brute styles. The attribution of unsigned memorials to the Brute family and to other Black Mountains masons is part of the ongoing study and necessitates a photographic archive of all comparable wall tablets, which is currently being compiled.

The 67 signed monuments can represent only part of the Brutes' output over more than 90 years, but they are sufficient to offer a guide to the changing distribution of the products from the Brute workshop (Fig 4). Inherent in such a study is the assumption that the vast majority of the memorials were set up within a short time of death. The more elaborate marble monuments of the

period testify to the years that could pass before the erection of a suitable memorial to the deceased, and occasionally this can be demonstrated for their simpler stone counterparts. A plain tablet by Thomas Brute commemorates Jane Pritchard of Llangattock Lingoed who died in 1660, nearly 40 years before his birth. Allied to this is the problem created by multiple commemorations on a single tablet, perhaps to the family members of a single generation or to several generations of the same family. Careful study of the inscription and particularly its style usually clarifies the date of the initial work. The fact that so many Breconshire memorials were signed is an advantage. In neighbouring Carmarthenshire, about two-thirds of the church memorials had signatures (Lloyd 1989, 36), but many of these were marble monuments. To the north in Cardiganshire, Chater, in his study of gravestones, encountered not a single signed stone and had to classify various groups on stylistic grounds (1976, 140).

The products of Thomas Brute's workshop are spread widely across Breconshire and into Radnorshire and Monmouthshire, in some 18 churches. There are examples of his work at Defynnog 20 miles (straight

line distance) to the west up the Usk Valley, and at Llanbedr Painscastle in the hills of southern Radnorshire 18 miles to the north-west with a further six churches containing his memorials at distances between ten and 20 miles. Eastwards his work reached Llantilio Crossenny, ten miles away. Aaron's work is more restricted. A graveslab at Gwenddwr, 18 miles to the north-west, is effectively an outlier, and the remaining 11 churches which contain his memorials are no more than ten miles from his home. The pattern of contraction continues with John. Llanvapley is nine miles to the east but the remaining seven churches, including Llanbedr itself, are restricted to a radius of no more than six miles from the workshop.

These distributions reflect an increasingly competitive market in stonecutting as the 18th century progressed. Thomas Brute certainly did not have the field to himself. Apart from the Cartwrights of Aberedw, there was the stonemason known only by his initials of W W who produced graveslabs in one of the Black Mountains valleys to the north of Llanbedr, and others such as Watkins of Brecon whose work is known from only one or two examples. All of them worked only their local areas and it seems likely that stonecutting was just one of their crafts. The fact that Thomas Brute's work was commissioned by people living 20 miles away indicates his emerging reputation and the skilful use of advertising if only through signatures on the memorials. In contrast to many of the signatures that appear on marble memorials of the time, the Brutes' signatures were not unobtrusive engravings in a corner of the memorial, but integral parts of the design, prominent at the base of the stone tablet, and sometimes set in their own foliated border. It is noticeable too that there are no memorials signed by Thomas Brute in Llanbedr itself, yet he was

probably responsible for the memorial to his infant son in 1724, as well as for many of the gravestones in the churchyard. While standard graveyard memorials may not have merited a signature, it is also reasonable to presume that he felt no need to sign memorials erected in his own village. His craft would be known to every villager and, in practice, he would have had a monopoly.

By the third quarter of the 18th century, Aaron had considerably more competition than his father, and it may be that a wish to differentiate his products in the home market of Llanbedr led him to signing two of his earliest known works there. Elsewhere in Breconshire the distribution of Thomas Games' less elaborate mural tablets overlaps that of the highly decorated memorials produced by Aaron but not greatly so. With a few exceptions Games' 'catchment area' in central Breconshire was not impinged upon by Aaron Brute, but there were others such as Powel of Talgarth, William Parry and the obscure William Prothero, who at Llanbedr Painscastle in 1767 was responsible for filling in the second panel of a mural tablet that had been originally designed by Thomas Brute. By the third generation the market for John Brute was limited to the immediate locality of Llanbedr, particularly the small communities in the Black Mountains valleys to the north-east, Cwmyoy, Parrishow and Llantonny (Mon). The Talgarth workshops and Hughes of Felinfach dominated the markets of the Usk valley to the west, while Jones of Abergavenny and Edward Prichard of Longtown and later his namesake, John of Clodock, produced more classical memorials for the communities immediately to the east.

While other masons continued to sign their wall memorials well into the mid-19th century, the work of the Brute family faded out in the second decade of the century. It is unlikely

that many more signed Brute monuments will be discovered, but certainly more unsigned examples await recognition. While some of the monuments retain their fresh paintwork, many of the external stones are being degraded through weathering and some of the internal ones are fading as a result of damp or, in one instance, fire damage. The work of the Brutes and their contemporaries provides a striking example of the development of local styles in funereal monuments, and it is important that they are recorded while there is still an opportunity.

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