

# Permanent Easter Sepulchres: a Victorian Re-creation?

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*During the last twenty years there has been a renewed interest in Easter sepulchres. It was Pamela Sheingorn's ground-breaking work which brought increased attention to them.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Eamon Duffy, in *Stripping of the Altars*, wrote of Easter sepulchres in this way:*

*... the most imaginatively compelling of the Good Friday ceremonies, though associated with the cross, came after the solemn liturgy had ended. This was the custom of the 'burial' of Christ in the Easter sepulchre, an observance which left a deep mark not only in the minds of medieval English men and women but in the very structure of many parish churches.<sup>2</sup>*

*I shall be arguing in this essay that Duffy is overstating his case and that the claim that the structure of very many parishes provides evidence for the ubiquity of permanent Easter sepulchres is not well founded, either. In order to explain why I have reached such radical and unexpected conclusions (unexpected and, indeed, unwelcome to myself), I shall need to outline the story of Easter sepulchres in England from their beginning.*

## *The origins of the Easter sepulchre liturgy in England: the 10th century*

The earliest literary evidence referring to an Easter sepulchre is to be found in the *Regularis Concordia* – a document resulting from the Synodal Council held in Winchester, possibly in 973 at the invitation of King Edgar. The reference to the Easter sepulchre occurs in a series of carefully worded instructions about the liturgies which were to be used during Holy Week and Easter in the monasteries of the kingdom:

*On that part of the altar [una parte altaris] where there is a space for it there shall be a representation, as it were, of a sepulchre, hung about with a curtain, in which the Holy Cross, when it has been venerated, shall be placed.<sup>1</sup>*

The instructions appear simple but, in fact, are very ambiguous and have misled a number of scholars over the years. Heales, for example, in his major study of Easter sepulchres, expresses some confusion about the phrase 'in una parte altaris' and writes:

*This does not seem very clear; as the early medieval altars appear to have been solid, it may have been a recess beside, not in the altar.<sup>1,2</sup>*

The ambiguity of the phrase has led to the suggestion that the sepulchre was a hollow within the altar; others have said that the sepulchre was actually on the altar.<sup>3, 4</sup> But in a careful analysis of the word *altare* in the 10th century, Spurrell has conclusively shown that the word *altare* in the *Regularis Concordia* is used in two senses: it can mean the

altar table itself or it can also refer to the entire sanctuary. Clearly, it is this second meaning that is relevant in the present context.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the ambiguities in the original *Regularis Concordia* instructions, it is clear that once the cross had been deposited in 'the place of the sepulchre', a form of Holy Communion followed and the liturgy moved on its way.

There were, in fact, four major 'acts' in the liturgy prescribed by the *Regularis Concordia* which surrounded the Easter sepulchre from Good Friday until Easter Day<sup>1</sup>:

The *adoratio*, in which on Good Friday the cross itself was adored.

The *depositio*, in which the cross, after the *adoratio*, was wrapped in linen and was carried in procession to the 'sepulchre' and placed within it.

The *elevatio*, in which, at some time before Matins in the very early hours of Easter Day, the sacrists came into the church, removed the cross from the sepulchre and 'set it in its proper place'.

The *visitatio*, in which, during Matins, four monastic brothers put on robes; one of them made his way 'stealthily' to the Easter sepulchre and sat there quietly, holding a palm branch in his hand; the three other brothers, wearing copes and carrying thuribles, entered and went towards the sepulchre, 'step by step, as though searching for something'.<sup>1</sup> The *Regularis Concordia* makes clear that this liturgical drama was designed to be imitative of the three women going to the tomb, there to be greeted by an angel. When the monk / angel saw the three coming close, 'wandering about as it were and

*seeking something*, he began to sing, softly and sweetly: 'Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, O Christicolae'; the three answered together: 'Jhesum Nazarenum', to which the response was: 'Non est hic. Surrexit sicut praedixerat.' Following that, the 'angel' showed the sepulchre devoid of the cross, with only the linen wrappings in place. The three 'women' then moved towards the sepulchre, placed their thuribles within it, took the linen and held it up before the clergy and sang 'Surrexit Dominus de sepulchro'. At this point, in the 10th-century liturgy, the abbot announced the hymn *Te Deum Laudamus* and all the bells in the church were rung.<sup>3</sup>

Even in this highly abbreviated account of the liturgy, it is not difficult to imagine the power it must have had upon those who participated: all those flickering candles, the wafting of incense, the singing, the processions. It needs to be remembered, too, that as Winchester was the royal seat, the presence of the King and the court would have added to the drama. The *Regularis Concordia*, of course, was not intended to be the instructions for Winchester alone, but was part of the reform movement addressed to monastic houses in England.

### *The location of the Easter sepulchre in the 10th century*

As far as the Easter sepulchre itself is concerned, it seems most likely that it must have been a temporary structure situated near the altar – but there is a question of topography to be resolved.<sup>3</sup> It is generally agreed that the Old Minster at Winchester was the setting for the Synod at which the *Regularis Concordia* was promulgated.<sup>2</sup> It is conceivable, therefore, that the structure of that building might have played a significant part in shaping the liturgical instructions surrounding the Easter ceremonies.<sup>4</sup> The Old Minster was subject to development during the 970s and 980s (it was rededicated in 980) and had a new west work comparable to the west works of Corvey on the Weser and Werden on the Ruhr. The west work was 23 metres square and 35 metres high. It provided an axial entrance to the church and had a raised western choir which, as Biddle says, provided 'a suitable setting for choirs taking part in the Easter liturgy'.<sup>3</sup> The question is whether these west works really did play any significant role in the Easter liturgies, as they are believed to have done in Germany, for example, at Essen, where it is said the *visitatio sepulchri* was performed in the western tribune.<sup>4</sup> In the monastic church of Corvey in the ninth century it is known that the lowest storey of the great western tower was designed as a deliberate echo of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> As Ottonian Germany was something of a political model for the kings of Wessex, might the Ottonian-influenced west work of the Old Minster have been used as were Ottonian west works in Germany, for parts of the Easter and royal ceremonies?<sup>7</sup>

There is not opportunity in this article, for reasons of space, to explore this question further but, suffice to say, there is not a single hint in the *Regularis Concordia* which might lead to the conclusion that the Winchester west work was used for the Easter sepulchre liturgies. Rather the liturgy, in its simplicity, seems to be designed for a relatively unsophisticated building.<sup>6</sup> More to the point, the idea that the upper chapels in the west work could have been the place for the sepulchre and for the burial of the cross makes no dramatic or symbolic sense.<sup>7</sup> 'Burial' does not happen, as it were, in an upper chamber; it occurs at ground level. Further, because the *Regularis Concordia* states that one of the purposes of the ceremony is for 'the strengthening of the faith of unlearned common persons and neophytes', the visibility of the ceremony would be of the essence.<sup>9</sup> Such visibility could not be achieved in the small chapels of the upper west work but would be achieved if the ceremonies took place in the main body of the church. It seems reasonably safe to conclude, unless firm evidence is produced to the contrary, that in England at least, the Easter sepulchre ceremonies did not take place in the west works but were centred on either the altar dedicated to the Holy Cross in the nave or, more likely, at the high altar in the presbytery.

### *The role of a cross in the Easter sepulchre ceremonies*

Before moving on to how Easter sepulchres might have developed from these 10th century beginnings there is one further element which deserves attention, namely the nature of the cross used in the Holy Week and Easter rites. What kind of cross might this have been? The *Regularis Concordia* offers us some clues: in the liturgies for Holy Week and Easter, the cross for the *adoratio* sequence was set up before the altar (*ante altare*).<sup>8</sup> It was held up by two deacons, one on each side; it could fit on to one cushion carried by a deacon; it could be wrapped in linen and be thus 'buried' in the Easter sepulchre.<sup>10,11,12</sup> Early on Easter Day, before Matins, it was taken from the sepulchre and put 'in its proper place'.<sup>9</sup> If we assume that the two deacons required at the *adoratio* sequence were there simply to provide dramatic symmetry and not because the cross was of such a size that it required the strength of two people to hold it upright, all the other characteristics that it has, for example, being able to be accommodated on a cushion, suggest a cross of no great size – yet it would need to be large enough to be visible to the onlookers and look precious enough to carry the theological weight placed upon it.

There is one cross still extant, the 'Brussels cross' (Plate 1) which fulfils all these criteria. Measuring 21½" by 10¾" (549mm x 277mm), it is constructed from a flat oak core and was originally covered with jewels and beaten silver.<sup>10</sup> It is not only its size and beauty which make this such a fascinating object, it is also has rich and densely layered iconography. Around the edge of the cross is an inscription:

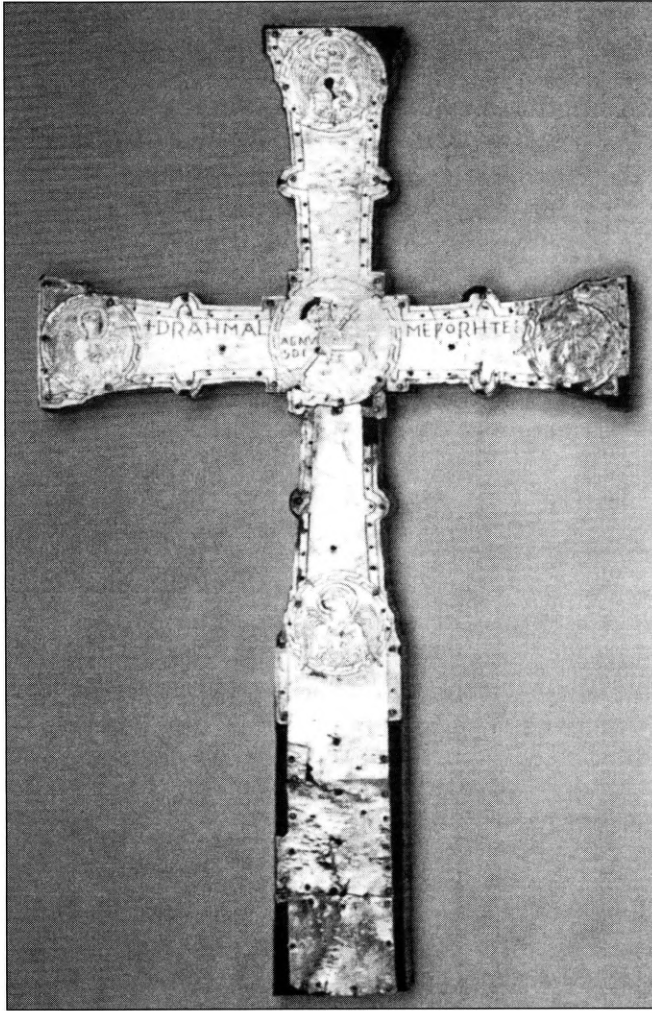


Plate 1 The Brussels Cross; 21½ ins high by 10½ ins wide

*Cross is my name; once trembling and drenched in blood I bore the mighty king.*

The phrase is obviously an allusion to a passage in *The Dream of the Rood*.<sup>11</sup> This cross, through its self-referential verbal imagery is 'personified'. The other inscription on it, 'Drahmal made me', has a saga-like sonority and beauty. The cross, it would seem, is not regarded as simply one physical object amongst others but is seen as having its own inherent vitality. In that sense it is representative of other Anglo-Saxon stories in which crosses miraculously came alive. During the Danish invasion it was claimed that a crucifix at Abingdon 'came to life and, with its arms, extracted stones from the walls of the monastery and drove the Danes away'.<sup>12</sup> Thus the Brussels cross is not only personalised, and not only shares in an Anglo-Saxon tradition concerning crosses which have miraculous vitality ascribed to them, but it is also rich in theological symbolism. On the reverse of the cross, at the centre, is the *Agnus Dei*, and the symbols of the four evangelists are incised on the four extremities of the cross.

The theology is further enriched because the core wood, of which the cross itself is constructed, was believed to be

part of the True Cross. It is very tempting to claim as others have, that the Brussels cross preserves the fragment of the True Cross sent to King Alfred by Pope Marinus in 883. Unfortunately, most scholars are agreed that the Brussels cross dates from the early 11th century and thus could not have had any connection with King Alfred, nor with the Easter ceremonies at Winchester in 970, but the close proximity between the scholars' dates for the construction of the cross (they suggest that it was made c 1000-1010) and the Winchester ceremonies leaves the question tantalisingly unresolved.<sup>14</sup> Whilst it would be pleasing to be able to claim that the Brussels cross really was used at Winchester at Easter time, the comments of Aelfric (c 955-1010) about crosses in general provide a cooling dose of realism:

*'Christians must truly revere the sanctified cross in the Lord's name, because we do not have the one on which he suffered, but its likeness is holy nevertheless, to which we bow in prayers constantly to the great Lord who suffered for mankind, and the cross is the remembrance of his great passion, holy through him, although it grew up in a forest.'*<sup>13</sup>

The Brussels cross itself, then, whilst not necessarily being the one used in the original ceremonies at Winchester, may be considered symbolic of the crosses that were used; but because the Easter sepulchre is so frequently alleged, especially by 19th- and some 20th-century scholars, to have been the recipient of the consecrated Host, with the cross being omitted from their references it is important to recognise that in the very first documentary evidence we have, from the 10th century, the cross is the dominant feature. There was no eucharistic element at all associated with the Easter sepulchre in those earliest rites. And as for the sepulchre itself it was obviously a temporary and not a permanent structure.

### *Developments in the Easter sepulchre ceremonies from the 10th to the 13th century*

The question that inevitably follows from these findings is whether it is possible to trace any developments in the liturgy, or in the physical structures associated with Easter sepulchres, in subsequent centuries? It would seem at first sight not unreasonable to assume that the liturgies of Holy Week formulated at the Winchester Synod, with such ecclesiastical and royal authority, would have been adopted subsequently by those monasteries most closely associated with the 10th century monastic reform movement and its proponents, Dunstan, Aethelwold and Oswald.<sup>14</sup> It is in fact possible to trace links between some of the monasteries: for example, the hymnal used at Worcester during the abbacy of St Wulfstan in the second half of the 11th century was the one used in Winchester at the time of Aethelwold.<sup>16</sup> If a hymnal which obviously originated in Winchester was being used at Worcester, it might seem reasonable to imagine that

the same Easter sepulchre ceremonies were also used. Unfortunately, that can only remain speculative, and in any case, what is known is that where the *Regularis Concordia* was introduced in other places, for example, in Eynsham (Oxfordshire), by Aelfric, a former and devoted student of Aethelwold, it was changed and adapted for local use.<sup>16</sup> Some elements of the Holy Week liturgy were considerably simplified. Aelfric's instructions about the service of the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday completely omit the *depositio* element and he also completely omits any mention of the *visitatio sepulchri* on Easter Day.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that if Aelfric (and presumably others) felt able to omit both the *depositio* and the *visitatio*, then the likelihood of any permanent feature being created to represent an Easter sepulchre is very small indeed.

Further evidence to buttress this hypothesis comes from Scandinavia. In 1028 King Canute founded the first monastic settlement in Norway at Laurent at Nidarholm, a small island in the Trondheim fjord. The monastery was probably staffed by monks who came from the group of monasteries reformed by Aethelwold. Lilli Gjerlow, in her study of early Christian liturgy in 11th century Norway, refers to a fragment of an English missal which, she says, was written not in the great scriptorium of the Old Minster but in one of the houses which came under Aethelwold's sphere of influence.<sup>17,18</sup> The fragment contains the Good Friday prayers and psalms that were prescribed by the *Regularis Concordia*. In spite of that close connection with the English liturgy she states that there are no extant permanent Easter sepulchres in medieval Norwegian churches.

Further, in England, where it is possible to trace the influence of the great monastic reformers, Dunstan, Aethelwold and Oswald on the overall design of churches, no evidence has yet emerged to indicate that any of those churches had a permanent Easter sepulchre. Deerhurst (Gloucestershire), for example, which may have been reformed by Oswald about 970, by the end of the 10th century had a heightened western tower and probably had three principal altars on a west-east axis, but it does not appear to have had within its structure anything which could be construed as a permanent Easter sepulchre.<sup>16</sup>

In brief, in England before the Conquest there really is no evidence for the existence of permanent Easter sepulchres – and even temporary ones, following the changes to the liturgy suggested by Aelfric, are elusive almost to the point of non-existence. The liturgies of Holy Week introduced by Lanfranc after the Conquest lost the narrative simplicity of the Winchester rites. It is true that the *adoratio* sequence of Good Friday remained in place, but the cross no longer carried the personification element of the Anglo-Saxon liturgy. Instead, there was a transfer of personification from the cross to the consecrated Host:

*'When they approach the altar all the brethren shall adore the body of the Lord on their knees.'*<sup>17</sup>

There was no attempt to create a sepulchre – and the cross was neither 'buried' nor 'raised', nor was there any 'visit' to the sepulchre early on Easter Day. In Lanfranc's liturgies there is no word about Easter sepulchres. Nevertheless, in Winchester and elsewhere, the liturgies of the *Regularis Concordia* survived.<sup>18</sup> The liturgical provision in England in the 11th and 12th centuries was a mixed economy.

Some degree of clarity in things liturgical only began to emerge in the 13th century with the birth of the *Sarum* rite.<sup>19</sup> It would seem that the gap between Lanfranc's work of the 11th century and the arrival of the *Sarum* rite in the early 13th century means that it is impossible to ascertain what happened to the Easter liturgies, and therefore the Easter sepulchre, during that time. At the risk of oversimplification what can be said to happen within the *Sarum* rite is that the emphasis upon the cross in the *Regularis Concordia* is married with the emphasis upon the consecrated Host in Lanfranc, with the result that on Good Friday after Vespers, the cross is placed in the sepulchre with the Host.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, however, the rubrics do not make clear what the sepulchre itself was like, though it does appear to have had a 'door', nor do they make clear where it was situated within the topography of the church.<sup>22</sup>

It is only at the beginning of the Easter Day ceremonies that the sepulchre, quite briefly, becomes the centre of attention. In the church, before Mass, and with the entire building lit by candles, the community assembles. Then the rubric says:

*'Two clerks of higher rank, with candle bearers, thurifers, and the clergy around them, shall go to the sepulchre, and after first censing the sepulchre with great veneration, that is to say with genuflection, they shall speedily and with privacy place the body of the Lord upon the altar.'*<sup>21</sup>

The phrase '*speedily and with privacy*' is not easy to interpret but presumably implies that the sepulchre is not in the sanctuary but close by – there would be no need to specify haste if the sepulchre were very close to the altar. Having placed the Host on the altar they return to the sepulchre and take from it the cross, which is then carried in procession to an altar on the north side of the church. Meanwhile, at the high altar, the sub-treasurer has taken the pyx and suspends it (enclosing the consecrated Host) in a 'tabernacle'.<sup>22</sup> All the bells of the church are rung '*in a clash*' and the anthem '*Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more*' is sung. In the north-side chapel a prayer is said.<sup>24</sup> The rubric states what should happen next:

*'... all shall genuflect with joy in the same place and adore the cross, especially those of higher rank, and then they shall return quietly without procession to the quire.'*

In the *Sarum* rite there were three powerful visual elements:- The cross, laid in the sepulchre, later carried to a north-side chapel.

The **Host**, taken from the sepulchre in its pyx to the tabernacle above the high altar.

The **great rood** which became the station where the New Testament story of the angel and the Marys was rehearsed.

The Easter sepulchre itself plays only a fleeting role in the *Sarum* Holy Week liturgies. 'Resurrection' is centred elsewhere: on a cross, on the elevated Host and on the rood.

The *Sarum* rite came to dominate English church life in the late medieval period and it is the relationship between that rite and the creation of possible **permanent** Easter sepulchres which will be explored next.

### *Aumbries: prototype Easter sepulchres?*

Thus far this essay has outlined the nature of Easter sepulchres and has tried to show that **temporary** Easter sepulchres were the earliest form. Pamela Sheingorn, whilst also drawing attention to this fact, nevertheless argues that in addition to Easter sepulchres only erected for the Holy Week and Easter season, there were and are:

*'a large number of permanent Easter sepulchres, made up of several distinct groups.'*<sup>23</sup>

The assumption that permanent Easter sepulchres existed, and exist, is built into the descriptive analysis of the interiors of churches by numerous local historians, including Nikolaus Pevsner and his associates, and others; but it is an assumption which is open to serious challenge. Sheingorn seems to suggest, for example, that aumbries might well have been a form of permanent Easter sepulchre. In positing an aumbry as a permanent Easter sepulchre, she follows the lead of the 19th century antiquarian, Alfred Heales. Writing in 1868, he said:

*'We do find, very frequently indeed, a small arched or square-headed recess to the north-west of the altar, sometimes with a modern door remaining, and always with the marks of hinges and bolts; this, which we commonly call an aumbry, would be extremely suitable as the deposition for the pyx or the pyx and crucifix, and it seems exceedingly likely that it was intended to receive them in Holy Week, rather than to entrust them (as must elsewhere have been the case) to the temporary wooden structure.'*<sup>24</sup>

The difficulty with the Heales/Sheingorn hypothesis, that lockers on the north side of the chancel were '*exceedingly likely*' to have been used as permanent Easter sepulchres, is that it fails to take seriously enough the dominant metaphor of 'burial' within the *Sarum* rite, and it also fails to take seriously enough the great variety of places within church buildings in which lockers are actually found. For example, using the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (RCHM) survey of the counties of Buckinghamshire,

Herefordshire, Hertfordshire and Westmoreland as the database, it turns out that there are, in those four counties, 126 lockers, but only 35.7% of them are in the north wall of the chancel. The remainder (64.3%) are found in a wide variety of places. Weston-under-Penyard and Fownhope (Herefordshire) both have lockers in the second stage of a tower; Aston Clinton (Buckinghamshire) and St Michael's, St Albans (Hertfordshire), have lockers on what are now the outside walls of their churches, presumably used originally by anchorites. Marsh Gibbon (Buckinghamshire) and St Ippolyts (Hertfordshire) have double lockers and St James, Hanslope (Buckinghamshire), has no fewer than three lockers in its chancel. This would seem on the face of it to suggest that lockers were multipurpose cupboards whose location in the liturgical topography of the churches was not necessarily very significant. In his book *The Chancel of English Churches*, Francis Bond devotes a chapter to aumbries and he refers to their use at Durham Cathedral, by quoting extensively from the *Rites of Durham*:

*'At Durham every altar had 'severall aumbries and some two ... In the north side of the quire there is an Almyerie, near to the High Altar, fastened in the wall, for to lay anything pertaining to the High Altar.'*<sup>26,27</sup>

In the *Rites of Durham* itself, the detailed description it provides of the Easter ceremonies, including an account of the Christus monstrance figure, is followed immediately by a detailed description of the cathedral's aumbries.<sup>26</sup> It might have been expected, had any of the aumbries at Durham been used as an Easter sepulchre, that this would have been mentioned, but no connection at all is made between the aumbries and the Easter sepulchre ceremony. Furthermore, if lockers really were just storage cupboards (precursors of sacristies and vestries) it seems inherently unlikely that they would have been used in the *Sarum* rite to represent the

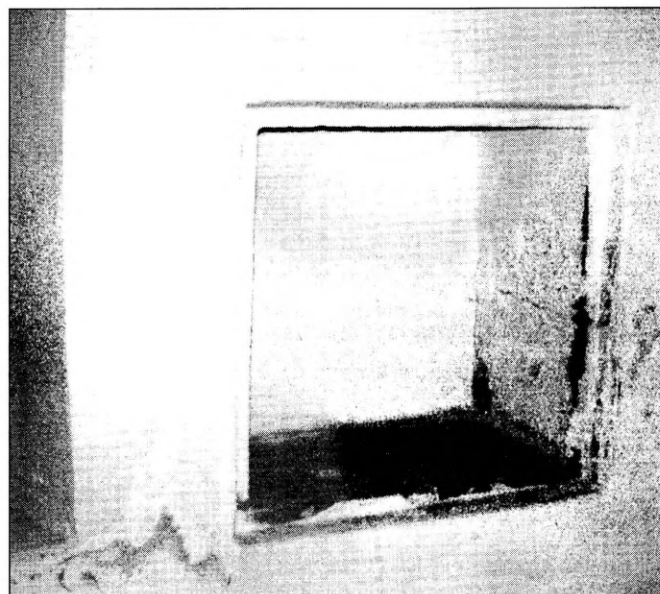


Plate 2 St Mary's, Clothall, Hertfordshire; 23ins by 23ins by 14½ ins

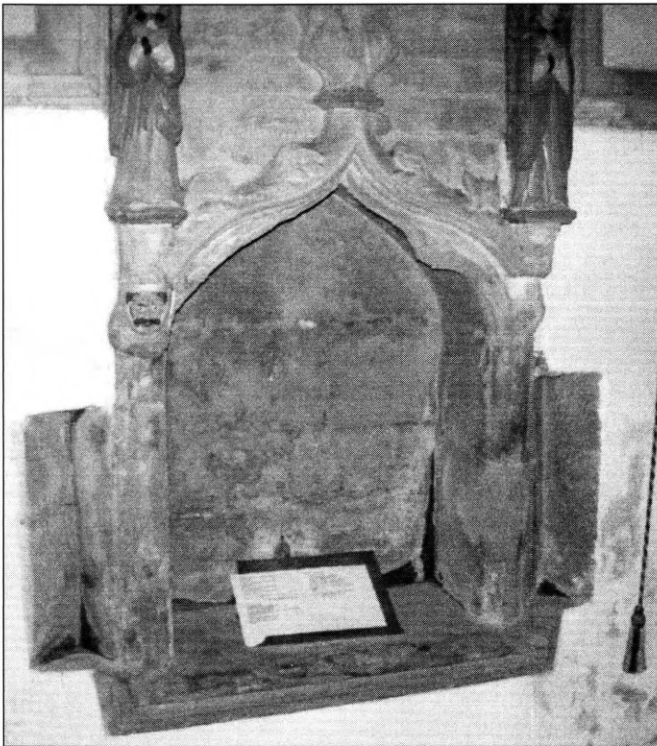


Plate 3 St Michael's, Aston Clinton, Buckinghamshire; 36ins to peak by 26ins by 14ins

tomb of Christ; they simply do not have the physical characteristics which would lend themselves to the burial metaphor of the Good Friday / Easter liturgy. For example, the locker in St Mary's, Clothall (Hertfordshire, Plate 2), by its shape, its scale and its treatment, indicates that it had a utilitarian purpose; it would be difficult to argue with any degree of conviction that it might be symbolically sepulchral.

Neither Sheingorn nor Heales argue that all aumbries constitute permanent Easter sepulchres, but when those aumbries which are on the north side of the altar, and therefore in the place where most people assume the Easter sepulchre was 'placed', are compared with aumbries in other locations in churches and no physical differentiation can be shown to exist between them, the hypothesis that those on the north side could be 'permanent Easter sepulchres' (in Sheingorn's phrase) has to be called into question.

### *Some possible early permanent Easter sepulchres*

Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that there are some lockers whose architectural treatment might lead to the conclusion that they could have been designed specifically for the Easter liturgy. For example, St Michael's, Aston Clinton (Buckinghamshire, Plate 3) has a niche which has been heavily restored over the years and which might, at first sight, appear to have been designed with an Easter sepulchre purpose in mind. In 1796, a contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine* wrote about this locker:

*In the north wall ... is a small niche with a flowered arch, bouquet point and on top of the pillars two figures, that on the west broken, on the east a female. On each side of the pillars is a very narrow slit. Whether this is the remains of a holy sepulchre must be left to the determination of better judges.<sup>25</sup>*

Subsequent visitors to Aston Clinton, including George Lipscombe in 1847 and members of the Buckingham Architectural and Archaeological Society in 1895, did not define the recess as an Easter sepulchre, though the Victoria History of the County (VCH) of Buckingham, referring to it as 'much restored', declared that it was 'probably' an Easter sepulchre.<sup>27,28,29</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner<sup>26</sup> does not define the niche as an Easter sepulchre. The brightly painted angels of a recent restoration indicate that someone intended the niche to be interpreted as an Easter sepulchre. The difficulty with this interpretation is revealed by the dimensions of the niche: it is 36" high, 26" wide, but only 14" deep, and clearly designed around a vertical axis. Any cross being placed in this niche would have to be inserted vertically rather than horizontally, and thus the death/burial theme of the *Sarum* rite would be negated.

Aston Clinton, then, might offer some proof of a desire by restorers in the 19th and 20th centuries to transform the niche into an Easter sepulchre, when its original purpose could well have been quite different. The same may be said

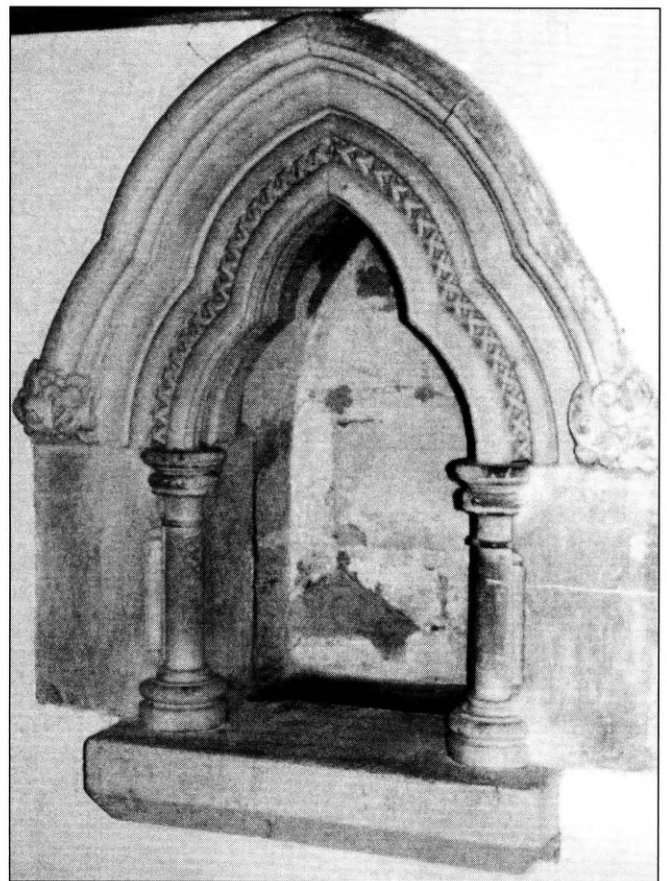


Plate 4 St Mary's, Furneaux Pelham, Hertfordshire; 26ins to peak by 16ins by 14ins

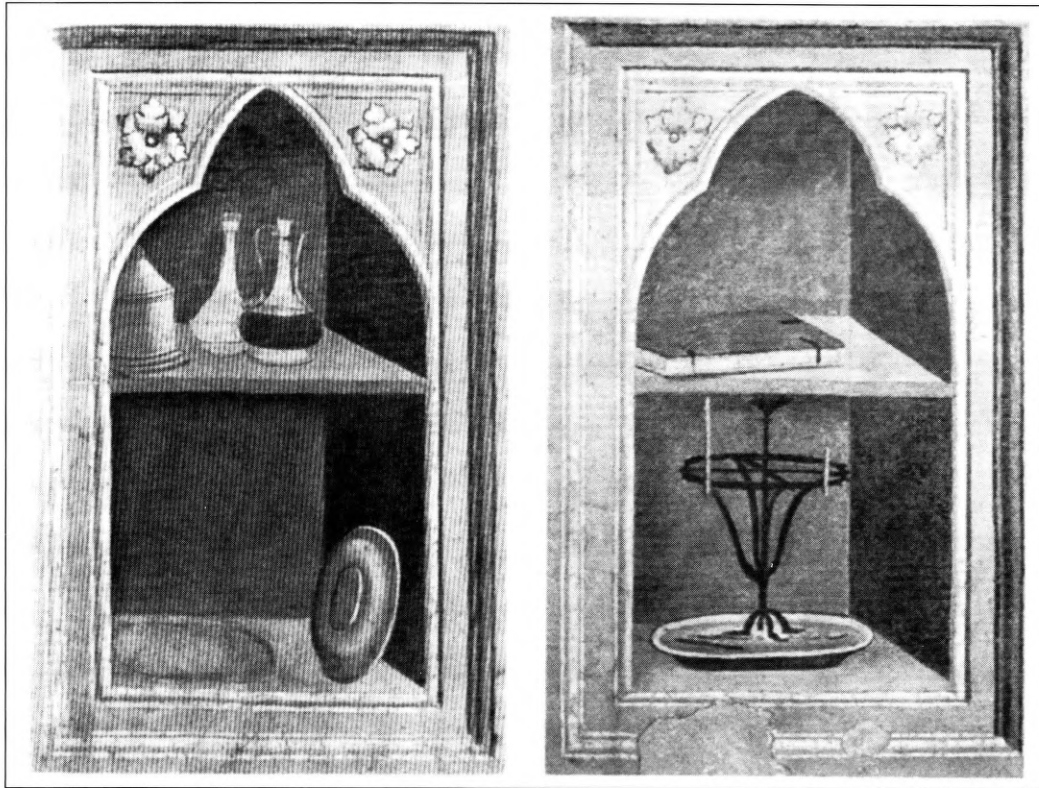


Plate 5 Detail from a painting by Taddeo Gaddi

of a niche at Furneux Pelham (Hertfordshire, Plate 4); Furneux Pelham was visited by a number of antiquarians in the early 18th century; neither Henry Chauncy nor Nathanael Salmon refer to the niche. Cussans refers to the niche in the later decades of the 19th century as a *'lancet-headed aumbrey'*.<sup>28,29,30</sup> However, the VCH for Hertfordshire, describing the chancel in 1908 as being of late 13th century date, states: *'in the north wall is a small recess with trefoil arched head all of modern stonework, possibly an Easter sepulchre'*.<sup>27</sup> Only three years later, the RCHM's inventory for Hertfordshire expressed certainty about the niche: *'Easter sepulchre in north wall of chancel, recess with modern arch'*.<sup>28</sup> Later writers, Cameron in 1939-40 and Whitelaw in 1990, also express certainty about it being an Easter sepulchre.<sup>30,31</sup> The pattern of interpretation at Furneux Pelham, therefore, moves from no comment in the 18th century to certainty in the second decade of the 20th century.

The main question to be asked of Furneux Pelham relates to its design. It has a marked vertical axis which does not lend itself to the death and burial motif of the *Sarum* rite; is it therefore not more plausible to interpret this niche as either an aumbry or a credence? A comparison of the Furneux Pelham niche with that of a fresco by Taddeo Gaddi of two fictive niches, c 1328-1334, at the base of the east wall of the Baroncelli chapel, Santa Croce (Florence), suggests that to describe the niche at Furneux Pelham as an aumbry or credence is probably more accurate than to define it as an Easter sepulchre (Plate 5).<sup>30</sup>

The niche at St Mary's, Redbourn, Hertfordshire, follows

a very similar pattern of interpretation to that of Furneux Pelham (Plate 6). In the 18th century the niche is not mentioned by Chauncy, nor by Salmon. By the late 19th century, however, Cussans states: *'On the north side is an Easter sepulchre'*.<sup>29</sup> Surprisingly, perhaps, neither the VCH for Hertfordshire nor the RCHM for Hertfordshire make any claim that this might be an Easter sepulchre, although Pevsner does and so does Whitelaw.<sup>31,30</sup> The design of this niche suggests a strong vertical axis but its form is deceptive: it is only 17.5" high, whereas it is 23" wide and would, therefore, be capable of receiving a cross laid flat, as though for burial. It is liturgically 'fit-for-purpose'; nevertheless, it could be interpreted in a number of ways, other than as an Easter sepulchre.

The antiquarian pattern of interpretation for All Saints, Sandon, Hertfordshire, follows the previous examples at Furneux Pelham and Redbourn (Plates 6, 7). There are no interpretations of the niche as an Easter sepulchre in the 18th century but, in the late 19th century, that particular interpretation appears. Cussans writes:

[There is] *'an aperture in the wall under a single widely splayed arch ... It is difficult to determine the purpose it was intended to serve. It is not in the place where aumbreys are usually to be met with and may have been devised as an Easter sepulchre'*.<sup>31</sup>

In 1905, F W Low read a paper about All Saints, Sandon, to the East Hertfordshire Archaeological Society, in which, referring to the niche, he stated:

[It] *'seems most likely that it was intended as an Easter*

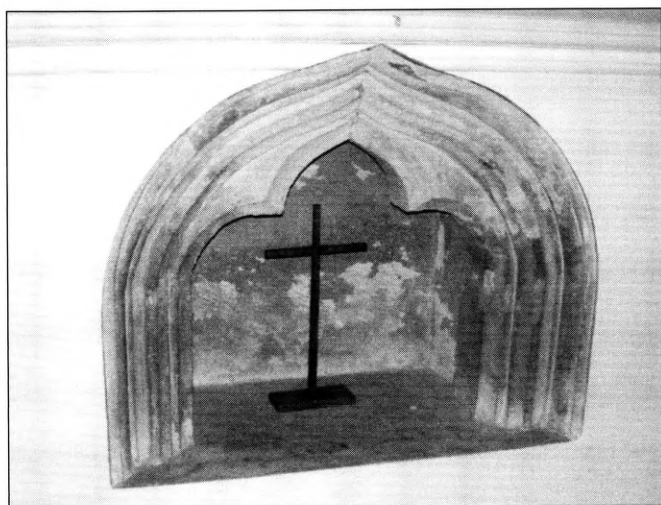


Plate 6 St Mary's, Redbourn, Hertfordshire; 17½ ins by 23 ins by 17½ ins



Plate 7 All Saints, Sandon, Hertfordshire; 12 ins by 23½ ins by 11 ins

*Sepulchre in which the Reserved Host was kept from Maundy Thursday until Easter Day.*<sup>32</sup>

This brief survey of lockers might suggest that the vast majority of them were designed simply to be multipurpose cupboards. A few lockers may indeed be Easter sepulchres, but it would be wiser to suggest that for such an interpretation to have validity, these lockers should have two distinguishing characteristics. Firstly, they should have an architectural treatment commensurate with the theological doctrines they are trying to convey. Secondly, they should be designed in such a way that the death and burial theme can be given appropriate expression; in brief, they are more likely to have a horizontal, rather than vertical, axis, and thus fit the requirements of the liturgy in an appropriate way.

It will have been recognised that there has been a sub-theme within this locker survey related to historiography. Evidence has been produced to show a distinct trajectory in the interpretation of lockers from the 18th to the 20th century. In the 18th century, by and large, the concept of the Easter sepulchre seems not to have been a part of the understanding of many antiquarians whereas, by the late 19th and early 20th century, the concept has entered common parlance.<sup>33</sup> The change of interpretation from the 18th to the 19th century does not, of course, *per se*, make the later interpretation wrong.

### *The role of antiquarians in defining Easter sepulchres*

Whilst it is true that the 18th-century Hertfordshire antiquarians, Chauncy and Salmon, did not at any point refer to Easter sepulchres, their counterpart in Norfolk, Francis Blomefield, certainly did. In his description of the parish church of Northwold, Blomefield wrote:

*'Against the East end of the North wall of the chancel is a large and lofty Pile of clunch or Chalk stone, the upper part is of curious, wrought Spire work with arch'd canopies, adorned with many niches [sic] and in them, little Pedestals for Images, on the Body or lower Part, are the effigies of three Men in armour, and three Trees, a Tree between each Man, all in a declining, falling Posture; this is, as I conceive what was before the Reformation called 'The Sepulchre of our Lord', the Posture of the Men alluding to what the Scripture observes of the Guard or Keepers of the Sepulchre ... These Sepulchres were erected always (as I take it) on the North Side of the Chancel near to the altar.'*<sup>34</sup>

Blomefield cites as evidence for this assertion, the will of Sir Henry Colet, and the will of Thomas Fiennes, Lord Dacre of Hurstmonceaux, dated 1 September 1531<sup>35</sup>:

*'He bequeathed his body to be buried in the Parish Church of Hurstmonceaux ... on the North side of the High Altar, appointing that a Tomb should be made for placing there the Sepulchre of our Lord.'*<sup>35</sup>

Blomefield suggested that the churches of St Michael's, Fincham, and Witton also probably had Easter sepulchres.

Only four years after publication of this first volume in Blomefield's work, William Stukeley, drawing heavily on Blomefield's work, also made references to Easter sepulchres, and the antiquarian, Richard Gough (1735-1809) quoted Blomefield extensively in the journal *Vetusta Monumenta*, for example:

*Mr Blomefield's description of the sepulchre at Northwold may serve as groundwork for that at Heckington, which I shall give from actual view and measurement.'*<sup>38,36</sup>

Gough waxed lyrical about Heckington:



*In the north wall of this church is the finest Holy Sepulchre I ever saw, charged with figures of Christ Rising between two angels.*<sup>37</sup>

Gough built on and developed Blomefield's work, not only quoting from the liturgies of Rouen, Malaga and Durham, but also citing continental specimens of Easter sepulchres. At La Pré Abbey, Issoudun, he noted there was 'a representation of the sepulchre of Christ with the body laid on the tomb, a beautiful figure'; and at Bourges: 'Near the altar at Bowges [sic], a tomb of our Lord, the figures inestimable'.<sup>39,38</sup>

Notwithstanding the extensive work of Blomefield and Gough, antiquarians in other counties in this study, in Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Surrey in the 18th century, did not refer to Easter sepulchres at all.<sup>39</sup>

The first few decades of the 19th century saw a burgeoning interest in architecture and Gothic architecture in particular.<sup>40</sup> In 1807 John Britton produced the first volume of his five-volume work entitled *The Architectural Antiquities of Great Britain*.<sup>41</sup> Ten years later, in 1817, Thomas Rickman produced his major work *An Attempt to Discriminate the Styles of English Architecture*.<sup>42</sup> The text details the orders of both Grecian and English architecture and although it goes into some detail, for example about mouldings, dripstones and niches, it makes no reference to Easter sepulchres. However, in the second edition of 1819<sup>43</sup>, Easter sepulchres appear. Rickman, describing Heckington (Lincs), says that there is 'the tomb of an ecclesiastic under a low arch in the chancel and the assemblage of niches used in the Catholic ceremonies at Easter and called a sepulchre'.<sup>45,44</sup> Thus it would seem that at some point between 1817 and 1819 Rickman had become better informed about Easter sepulchres. Had he, perhaps, by then read Blomefield or Gough?

It is interesting to note that whereas the descriptions of the Easter sepulchres in the 1819 edition are bare of detail concerning the liturgical function of Easter sepulchres, by the fifth edition of 1848, a note accompanying the illustration of a niche at Piddington (Oxford) states:

*A very rich specimen ... it is situated on the north side of the altar, in the usual place of the Easter sepulchre, and from the small figures of angels in the canopy, adoring some object which has disappeared, it may probably have been used to deposit the Host during the Easter ceremonies.*<sup>45</sup>

It needs to be noted that there is a distinct absence of any reference to a cross. References to the burial of a cross are to be found in Owen and Blakeway's antiquarian survey of 1825 entitled *The History of Shrewsbury*:

*The rood, or a picture of our Lord upon the cross, was put on Good Friday into a sepulchre set up on the north side of the altar.*<sup>46</sup>

In this quotation there is no reference to the burial of a

Host. Sixteen years later, in 1838, John Britton made reference in his dictionary to the burial of a cross:

*A peculiar custom of the Roman church was the interment in a sepulchre on the north side of the chancel, of an image or picture of our Lord on a cross.*<sup>49,50</sup>

However, Britton failed to mention the burial of a Host.

### ***Pugin and the creation of the myth of permanent Easter sepulchres***

In spite of Britton, Owen and Blakeway, other major reference books of the period, such as Matthew Bloxam's *Principles of Gothic Architecture* (which sold 17,000 copies between 1829 and 1859) and J H Parker's *Glossary*, did not carry any references to Easter sepulchres.<sup>49,50</sup> It was as though a slow-burning fuse, lit in the 18th century by the antiquarians Blomefield and Gough and encouraged from time to time by Britton and others in the 19th century, only really burst into flame with the arrival of AWN Pugin (1812-1852). It was in the final years of the 1830s that Easter sepulchres began to emerge more clearly out of their antiquarian obscurity. In 1836, or possibly 1837, Pugin produced a series of drawings which were intended to accompany the fastidious and painstaking work of the Roman Catholic priest, Dr Daniel Rock (1799-1871), entitled *The Church of Our Fathers*.<sup>49,47</sup> Pugin's sketch of an Easter sepulchre is worthy of note; it outlines an entombment group of six people. Joseph of Arimathea (?) is at the head of the Christ figure, holding the body beneath the arms. At the feet is a female figure, which appears to be embracing, or weeping over, the cloth-shrouded body; two male figures are in the background with two female figures, one of whom is kneeling. What makes the sketch so remarkable is that it appears to combine a French entombment group staged within an English entombment niche.<sup>48</sup> To one side is a massive, five-branched candlestick and, to the other, a hooded figure kneels at prayer, holding a rosary.

The sketch is a kind of medieval fantasy, a highly idealised 'construct'. In her study of the sketches, Margaret Belcher makes a telling point:

*Pugin is not concerned primarily with the architectural structure; these are not architectural drawings let alone detailed plans ... what he concentrates on ... is the event taking place against the background ... what he is illustrating is what, in his opinion, it felt like to be alive in the fourteenth century.*<sup>49</sup>

It is known that Pugin met Rock, the church historian and ecclesiologist no later than 24th June 1837 when Pugin noted Rock's name in his diary during a visit to London. It seems highly likely that the meeting with Rock led Pugin to refine his own thinking about the architectural components of churches, and Easter sepulchres in particular. In Pugin's

designs of imaginary churches, there is no Easter sepulchre in a drawing of a chapel in 1831; neither is there one in his ground plan of a Catholic chapel produced in 1832; nor in his design for St James', Reading, whose foundation was laid on 14th December 1837. However, in his design for St Marie's [Pugin's spelling], Uttoxeter, (to which Trappes-Lomax assigns the date 1838) there is an Easter sepulchre 'Opposite to the [sedilia] ... is an arched recess to serve as the sepulchre in Holy Week.'<sup>50</sup>

In 'Article II', first published in the *Dublin Review* (February 1842), Pugin referred to the new churches for which he was architecturally responsible and said:

*'... the chancels are built precisely after the ancient models and bear a good relative proportion to the length of the church; they are also duly provided with screens, sedilia, sepulchres, reredoses, etc.'*<sup>51</sup>

In that same article, Pugin, in describing St Bede's, Masborough, stated that it included:

*'... all the essentials of a Catholic church ... nave, southern porch, font, chancel, rood screen, altar, sedilia, sepulchre, belfry.'*<sup>52</sup>

In *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England*, published in 1843, he enumerated the things necessary for a 'complete Catholic church'. They included 'an arched tomb to serve as the sepulchre for holy week.'<sup>55,53</sup> It was also in *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England* that Pugin described the purpose of an Easter sepulchre:

*'On the gospel side of the chancel and nearly opposite the sedilia, we generally find an arch forming a recess and canopy to an altar tomb; this was used as a sepulchre for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, from Maundy Thursday till Easter Sunday morning, which was antiently [sic] practised in the Sarum rite.'*<sup>54</sup>

In spite of his reference to *Sarum* he failed to mention the burial of the cross. Was it for ideological reasons that he laid so much emphasis upon the Host? He was, after all, campaigning vigorously for the reinstatement of the Roman Catholic faith in England – and the significance of the doctrine of the Mass, with its theological emphasis upon transubstantiation, was central to that campaign.

For Pugin and Rock the Easter sepulchre was an object which carried a series of complex and powerful meanings. In the new Catholic churches built by Pugin the Easter sepulchre was a reminder of the ancient faith of England; it was a witness to that idealised age when people reputedly flocked to the Easter ceremonies; it was a signal of the link made between the Mass and the afterlife – but it was perhaps, above all, a symbol of authenticity which, paradoxically, pointed backwards to the past but also forwards to a new and coming golden age of faith. It seems

very probable that out of the dynamic relationship between Rock and Pugin there occurred a powerful and highly influential reworking and re-energising of the Easter sepulchre phenomenon.

Pugin and Rock were not the sole source for this development; it is clear that in the creation of the Cambridge Camden Society by J M Neale and others in 1839 another impetus was given to Easter sepulchres. In 1839 the Cambridge Camden Society produced one of its first instructional pamphlets entitled *A Few Hints on the Practical Study of Ecclesiastical Antiquities*.<sup>55</sup> That first edition, whilst describing *aumbryes* and *piscinae*, did not include any references to Easter sepulchres. One year later in 1840 the second edition was produced and Easter sepulchres were included. It offered the following definition:

*'Generally, a shallow recess in the chancel, under an obtuse arch, rising about three feet from the ground. The use was for the reception of elements consecrated on the Coena Domini (Maundy Thursday), till the celebration of High Mass on Easter Sunday. They are said usually to occur on the north side, with what truth it may be questioned.'*<sup>56</sup>

The third edition published in 1842 provided even more detailed definitions. For Neale and his fellow ecclesiologists Easter sepulchres were interesting, even intriguing, objects for study but they did not regard them as absolutely vital components in the promotion of an ideological programme; for Pugin and his later followers Easter sepulchres were part of an idealising, utopian process.

In 1870 Matthew Bloxam gave a lecture on Easter sepulchres to the Lincoln Diocesan Architectural Society.<sup>57,59</sup> He drew attention to the liturgical origins of Easter sepulchres and said that he believed the great majority of Easter sepulchres in England were temporary wooden structures. He tried to clear up misunderstandings that had arisen about what should or should not be claimed to be an Easter sepulchre:

*'In the Concilia, I do not mean the Concilia Generalis but the Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae ... I do not find in any of the Synodical or Provincial Constitutions relating to church furniture, any order for the sepulchre in the articles therein enumerated as essential to a church. It appears to have been regarded much in the light of organs to our churches, the gifts of individual benefactors, whilst the arches under which Easter sepulchres were placed, or the architectural and sculptured compositions within which they were deposited and which at the present day are popularly but erroneously, known as Easter sepulchres, bore the same reference to the sepulchres as the organ lofts ... bore to the organ.'*<sup>57</sup>

The tone is a long way removed from the energetic, obsessive zeal of Pugin and from the excited discoveries of the Cambridge ecclesiologists – but Bloxam's gentle, wary

scepticism was unable to alter the dynamic thrust created by Pugin and by the ecclesiologists. The elusiveness of permanent Easter sepulchres and their linkage with the idealised past and the desire for an idealised future which their mid-Victorian proponents had created, meant that they would continue to fascinate later antiquarians and scholars.

### *Conclusion: the myth of permanent Easter sepulchres in England*

Hard, robust and objective evidence for the existence of large numbers of permanent Easter sepulchres in medieval English churches really is sparse indeed. It seems rather that the developments in conceptualisation which were given such a boost by Pugin, by the Cambridge Camden Society and by later Victorian ecclesiologists, led to the phenomenon in which the ideological desire to discover permanent Easter sepulchres meant that many objects which had never actually been Easter sepulchres were redefined to fit that aspiration. People saw what they wanted to see, rather than what was actually there. The Victorians created a myth which, like many myths, continues to entrance. And the question now is whether the classic English examples so frequently quoted by 20th and 21st-century historians as Easter sepulchres, really are Easter sepulchres at all. Sekules is surely correct in saying that these are complex entombment structures, centred on the Mass – not designed for a liturgical ceremony which happened only once a year, but rather used on a daily basis for the reservation of the sacrament, and thus reminding all involved, daily, to pray for the donor.<sup>58</sup> Further research needs to be done, not simply on the so-called Easter sepulchres themselves, but on the entire architectural, iconographical, cultural, theological and liturgical contexts in which they are found; perhaps then their secrets may be unlocked. What is certain from my research on this subject thus far, is that they made a major, formative impact upon late 18th-century antiquarians and 19th-century historians in embedding the **concept** of permanent Easter sepulchres in the minds of later authors.

Meanwhile, it is probably much more profitable to ask of permanent Easter sepulchres why there seem to be so few, rather than to ask why there are so many which have, as yet, to be recognised.

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### Notes

- 1 Symons 1953, 50
- 2 For a brief discussion of the relationship between the likely date of the Synod and the use of the Old Minster as the locus for the Synod, see Parsons 1975, 5
- 3 Biddle 1975, 138
- 4 For details of the west work at Essen and its use in liturgy, see Klukas 1984, 86
- 5 Wood 2001, 190
- 6 The relationship between the liturgical instructions of the *Regularis Concordia* and the west work of the Old Minster depends upon the dating of both. If the dedication of the building was not until 980 and the *Regularis Concordia* was written in 970, then clearly there would have been no direct relationship, but as the Old Minster west work extensions were being constructed, as Biddle argues, between c 971 and c 974, clarity about the relationship is not really available
- 7 Raw 1990, 46-47. Raw makes a claim for the use of west works for the Easter sepulchre ceremonies based on the images of the three Marys in the *Benedictionales* of Aethelwold and Robert of Jumièges.
- 8 Symons 1953, 42
- 9 Symons 1953, 49
- 10 For the most recent detailed study of the Brussels Cross see Ó Carragáin 2005, 339-354
- 11 For further exploration of the links between the Brussels cross and the *Dream of the Rood*, see Webster 1984, 91; Gordon 1926, 235-238
- 12 Kobialka 1999, 48
- 13 Bedingfield 2002, 129, footnote 58
- 14 Aethelwold trained at Glastonbury under Dunstan and had been the principal tutor of Edgar. He became one of King Edgar's closest advisers (Deanesly 1961, 304). The compilation of the *Regularis Concordia* was attributed to Aethelwold by Aelfric (Knowles 1950, 43)
- 15 Jones 1998, 39:  
*'Although Aelfric saw the Concordia as a useful model, he was not at all timid about adopting and supplementing the source where necessary.'*  
Jones argues that the omission of the *visitatio sepulchri* may have been because there were too few participants available for the liturgy at Eynsham, or because the Office was too long
- 16 Klukas 1984, 90
- 17 Knowles 1951, 41
- 18 Golding 1994, 172-173  
*'... the old liturgy of the Regularis Concordia completed one hundred years earlier survived unchanged. Winchester proclaimed continuity'*
- 19 A A King, 1959, 307, in attempting to trace the origins of the *Sarum* rite, concludes: *'When all is said and done ... it must be confessed that with our present knowledge it is quite impossible to identify any specific 'ancestor' for the Sarum use. Its essential framework is ... in the same line of development as Lanfranc's statutes for Canterbury, the Ecclesiastical Offices of John of Avranches, and ultimately, perhaps, the Ordines Romani.'*
- 20 Warren 1913, 263. It is interesting to note that in the *Hereford* and *Rouen* rites, the cross alone was buried, whereas in *Sarum* the cross was buried together with the Host (Bishop 1918 (b), 295)
- 21 Warren 1913, 288-289
- 22 Warren 1913, 289. For further details concerning the means of reservation of the Host in a pyx, see Micklethwaite 1901, 30-31
- 23 Sheingorn 1987, 35
- 24 Heales 1868, 296
- 25 *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1796, 841
- 26 Pevsner 1960, 145
- 27 Page 1908, 104
- 28 Royal Commission 1910, 91
- 29 Cussans 1881, 234
- 30 Whitelaw 1990, 115
- 31 Cussans 1873, 234
- 32 Low 1906, 46
- 33 For reasons of space it is not possible to produce further evidence in this article to buttress this claim but there is a considerable amount of it which, it is hoped, will appear in a future publication.
- 34 Blomefield 1739, 517
- 35 Blomefield's source for this was Dugdale's *Baronage*. See Blomefield 1739, p.518. It cannot be denied that in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, some high status individuals asked that their tombs should be so constructed that they could act as a platform for temporary Easter sepulchres. Again, in an essay of this length, it is not possible to explore this phenomenon in detail. Such evidence as there is indicates that such altar tombs, designed with an Easter sepulchre use in mind, are rarer than historians have previously suggested
- 36 *Vetusta Monumenta*, vol 3, 1796, plates 31 and 32, 1
- 37 Gough 1796, 305
- 38 *Vetusta Monumenta*, vol 3, 1796, plates 31 and 32, 3
- 39 It has not been possible to examine every antiquarian county history of the 18th and 19th centuries but in carrying out this research and in tracing the attribution by scholars of the Easter sepulchre from the late 20th century back to the 18th century, two major antiquarian sources are invariably quoted, namely Blomefield and Gough. Having looked at antiquarian county histories of Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Surrey, I have not found any references to Easter sepulchres prior to Blomefield and Gough. Perhaps further research will prove this to be unusual but for the moment it seems to have some indicative usefulness.
- 40 For a pithy analysis of the Gothic revival, see Lewis 2002
- 41 Britton 1807, Britton 1809, Britton 1812, Britton 1814 & Britton 1826
- 42 Rickman 1817
- 43 Rickman 1819, esp Appendix 121-382
- 44 Rickman 1819, 245

- 45 Rickman 1848, xlii  
 46 Owen 1825, 346  
 47 Rock 1849-53  
 48 Alexandra Wedgwood, 1985, 167:  
 'The illustration shows an interesting example of Pugin's knowledge of French and English ecclesiastical buildings; the architecture of the canopy is typical of England, whereas the scene of the entombment is common in France.'
- 49 Belcher 1982, 328  
 50 Pugin 1843, 17  
 51 Pugin 1843, 94  
 52 Pugin 1843, 113  
 53 Pugin 1843, 17  
 54 Pugin 1843, 38  
 55 Neale 1839  
 56 Neale 1840  
 57 Bloxham 1871, 70  
 58 Sekules, 1986. Whilst, in my view, Sekules is absolutely right to argue that the Lincs/Notts 'Easter sepulchres' are essentially sacrament shrines, a number of puzzles remain. If they are related to the introduction of the feast of Corpus Christi, why are there not more such shrines in England? Why are they found within such a small geographical area? What is the relationship between these shrines and the 'Easter sepulchre' at Patrington, Yorks?

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