Lawrence Butler and the 'Minor' Monument: A Tribute

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Readers of the Society for Church Archaeology's Newsletter will have seen the sad news reported there of Lawrence Butler's death just before Christmas 2014. By way of tribute to SCA's former President (Fig 1), the editor of this journal thought it appropriate to commission a short piece about one aspect of Lawrence's work in particular. As readers will know, he was an important figure in many fields of medieval and post-medieval archaeology, and he undertook significant excavations on many classes of medieval monument, but these more general works have, perhaps, occluded his contribution to a more specific field of study, which Lawrence almost re-invented for the modern era: 'minor' monumental sculpture of the medieval period. This was the topic that first engaged him in archaeology, and it consumed him for a period of at least 15 years between the early 1950s and the mid 1960s. Following his period of intense work on the topic, not only was it more clearly defined, but Lawrence had begun a process of cataloguing these minor sculptures that has subsequently been taken up by other scholars in various areas of the country. This tribute attempts to locate Lawrence's work in this field by first examining his predecessors, and thereby to put his own achievement into some context. A final section notes the work of a few of his 'continuators' and suggests that this topic still has much to offer as an important source of information about the upper echelons of medieval society.

The earliest published evidence we have for Lawrence Butler's interest in this field is his paper on Nottinghamshire monuments dating from 1952, when he was only 18 and a sixth-former at Nottingham High School (Butler 1953). It is only a short paper, but he had evidently already been working on the topic for several years by then, and he had already developed a format for recording – involving simplified measured drawings – that he used throughout the next 60 years. He once admitted to me that the fieldwork for this Nottinghamshire paper was conducted on his bicycle at weekends and in the school holidays, and indeed he claimed that he had begun his work whilst still at junior school, presumably immediately after the war. It is no surprise then, that on taking up the scholarship he had won to Peterhouse, Cambridge, in September 1952, he was accompanied by his bicycle and his drawing equipment. Whilst there, any number of local churches were investigated by the enthusiastic young cyclist. Indeed his Cambridgeshire work resulted, in 1957, in the publication of a second of his 'county studies' of 'minor monuments' in the *Proceedings of the Cambridgeshire Antiquarian Society*; a somewhat longer paper than for Nottinghamshire, but one which, nevertheless, takes a similar form to that in his inaugural work (Butler 1957).

By the end of his time at Cambridge, Lawrence had become so committed to his archaeological research that he was keen to take it to a higher level. So, evidently whilst still an undergraduate at Cambridge, he began working towards his PhD, which was registered in the history department at Nottingham – his 'home' university – in 1955. Lawrence was to report later that the PhD was inspired by Professor

Fig 1
Lawrence Butler on the slopes below Dolforwyn Castle, considering his major excavations there in 1994 (Photo: Jon Kenny)

AC Wood, the historian of Nottinghamshire, but that his supervisors were actually Professor JS Roskell, the historian of Parliament, and Nottingham University's great economic historian Professor JD Chambers. Chambers, in particular, was an inspirational teacher and is now widely agreed to have been one of the founders of modern economic history. He was an advocate of collecting complete sets of economic data and building historical arguments on the basis of the statistics they would generate; very much an empirical approach. It seems likely that Lawrence was impressed with this way of thinking, as his methodology too was 'empirical', in the sense that he aimed to collect the totality of examples within his sample area and then use the patterning they displayed to extract meaning.

Lawrence's thesis must have been what we would call today a 'part-time' doctorate, as was the way of things then, and he makes it clear, in the introduction, that it was based largely on fieldwork done, not whilst he was at school or at Cambridge (though clearly the material he acquired then was used for these counties), but whilst he was doing National Service in the RAF. During his term as a Cold War warrior between 1955 and 1958, it seems that Lawrence could be found – apparently still on his bicycle – travelling out from the various East Midlands airbases to which he was posted, to visit local churches and to study and record their grave-covers. It almost seems, then, that Lawrence's fieldwork area was dictated for him by the locations of the airbases to which he was posted: if not for the RAF's deployment along the eastern side of England in the initial stages of the Cold War, our seminal study of these monuments might have been in Yorkshire, the North-East or the South-West. Some of his research trips in Lincolnshire were made on his RAF-issue bicycle, during a posting to RAF Swinderby and its satellite stations, for example, and the fruits of these particular visits were published somewhat later in a short offering in the local Lincolnshire history and archaeology journal (Butler 1963–4). His Lincolnshire publication, however, did not deal with all the later categories of minor monumental sculpture he was assessing in his thesis, but was aimed more at ensuring that certain interesting finds of early (ie pre-Conquest) sculpture left out of DS Davies' prodigious listing and cataloguing work before the war, were put into the public domain (Everson and Stocker 1999, 3). There were not many such pieces, but several were of considerable significance. History does not record whether Lawrence was actually posted to the North-East by the RAF, but he was stimulated to work on 'minor' monuments in that region at about this time by a rather folksy article that had appeared in *Archaeologia Aeliana* in 1956 (Fyson 1956). His paper two years later (Butler 1958) not only placed discussion of these monuments in a more reasoned context, but also discussed how the patterning of monuments in the North-East appeared to differ from the area with which he was more familiar further south.

In 1958, the award of a Revis Grant for the academic year 1958–9 gave Lawrence the leisure to undertake more systematic visiting, and particularly to consolidate the enormous mass of information he had already been collecting for more than a decade. But the grant was not sufficiently generous to live on for long, so the recently married archaeologist enrolled on a teacher training course at Merton College, Oxford and, in September 1959, brandishing his diploma, he embarked on his teaching career in St Albans. It was short-lived; in that same year he was appointed to the staff of the Welsh Royal Commission, where, on the one hand, he stayed for six years (until he joined the new archaeology department at Leeds University

in 1965) and, on the other, he developed interests in excavation and building survey which started to replace his initial single-minded pursuit of minor monumental sculpture. There are, consequently, few – if any – published accounts from his pen of minor burial monuments in the Principality.

Nevertheless, whilst in Wales, there was a PhD to be finished, and the gentlemanly atmosphere of the Royal Commissions in those days made it easy for Lawrence to draw his conclusions together for submission in October 1961 (Butler 1961). This was by far the most complete statement on this category of burial monument that had yet been produced. In it, he not only noted enormous numbers of examples but, critically, he grouped them together in various categories and proposed typological developments for both the cross-head types and for the other features they display (Fig 2). It is a two volume work, with the illustrations bound separately, and consisting of 12 chapters and a succession of bibliographies offered in the form of appendices (one per chapter), combined with long lists of monuments illustrating the categories and themes set out in the relevant chapter. The illustrations volume contains a mere 40 pages, but many of these are arranged as plates, with a combination of exquisite little ink drawings on tracing paper (now sadly yellowed) and black and white photographic prints. In all there must be about 200 discrete images.

After the doctorate, it remained to transmit its conclusions to the wider scholarly world, a task that Lawrence began immediately, by offering a paper to the *Archaeological Journal*, then edited by Christopher Stell. The version eventually published in May 1965 is, necessarily, a great contraction of the PhD, and the editor required two whole chapters to be dropped entirely (Butler 1965). These were the final two chapters in the thesis, which dealt, on the one hand, with the quarrying of the stone and with the procurement of monuments and, on the other, with the light cast upon 'trade' within the East Midlands by the patterning of different types of monuments. These more discursive sections – the 'so what?' of the thesis – were dropped in favour of the definitions of the various classes of monument and the inclusion of long lists of occurrences. It is clear that – in those days before the digital database – the editorial board of the *Archaeological Journal* conceived their primary role as being the curator and communicator of datasets.

Important though it was, Lawrence's research and writing about early grave-covers should not be seen as an investigation of an entirely new subject. Non-effigial grave-covers (which is essentially what Lawrence meant by the term 'minor monumental sculpture'), had been a topic of serious antiquarian interest since the later 18th century. Amongst his collections of so many other things, Richard Gough (1735–1809) collected examples and information that fell well within Butler's definition, and his mammoth volume *Sepulchral Monuments* contains some of the earliest engravings of such objects (Gough 1786). But, as with so many other categories of medieval ecclesiastical artefact, it was the great attention paid by the Cambridge Camden Society and the Tractarian Movement in the 1840s that propelled minor monumental sculpture into the limelight. In that decade Matthew Holbeche Bloxam, the great populariser of medieval church architecture, had asked Oxford University Press to print a volume on the evidence for medieval burial techniques for private circulation, under the title *Fragmenta Sepulchralia* (Bloxam nd). Shortly afterwards, in 1849, the John Henry Parker publishing empire produced

Fig 2
Figure 4 from Lawrence Butler's seminal 1965 paper, demonstrating his systematising approach to the study of 'minor' monumental sculpture

their contribution, by Rev Edward Cutts (1849). This important – and still useful – volume was published under the sanction of the central committee of the – as yet un-subdivided – *Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* and was intended to be the first in a series of 'Archaeological Manuals'. Indeed, its publication was part of the process by which the Archaeological Institute asserted that this part of the fledgling subject of archaeology was a serious scholarly activity, in line with their vision for the entire new discipline. Cutts' volume is essentially a collection of engravings (83 plates, illustrating probably treble that number of artefacts) arranged in what he argued was their approximate chronological order. Cutts' intention, though, was to focus attention on various exceptional features of the monuments: he described distinctive artefacts and other unusual aspects of design amongst the monuments he illustrated. Although some of his cross-head types are grouped together, there is no sense of a typological study about his work, influential though it was. Consequently, it was what might be called an 'anecdotal' study, with interesting examples being discussed in approximate chronological order. Indeed Cutts thought that *'the shape of the cross is not of so much service in ascertaining the date as might have been expected'* (Cutts 1849, 51) and therefore it was the chronology of the additional detail that led to correct dating. Cutts also avoided introducing monuments in any material other than stone, so his examples do not include monuments with brasses (even though – perversely – a couple of his illustrations do appear to be indents).

The important comparative evidence offered by monumental brasses was embraced, however, by the rival publication from George Bell and Co. Indeed they commissioned the author of the foundation study of English brasses, Charles Boutell, to write it for them. *Christian Monuments in England and Wales*, published in 1854, sets out to be altogether more discursive, grouping together monuments in order to discuss particular features. The book enjoys a much higher standard of design than Parker's offering, and engravings are placed within the text so that details are seen on the page at the point at which they are discussed. As it includes not just comparative examples in brass but also an entire section on 'semi-effigial' monuments, Boutell's book is inevitably broader in scope, and his discussion less detailed. He was, however, not afraid to attempt to date monuments by their cross form (Boutell 1854, 17–24), but even so, this also remains an 'anecdotal' analysis rather than the systematic study of a 'corpus'.

These two books satisfied both antiquarians and the more casual church visitor for the remainder of the century, although Brindley and Weatherall's 1887 volume added more examples in the same vein. The designs depicted by all these writers were now available for architects and monumental masons to imitate, and indeed for certain Victorian clergymen, like the irrepressible Edward Trollope, to recommend to their flock as models (Trollope 1858). Rather than devote themselves to general surveys, serious antiquaries of the second half of the 19th century set about the task of collecting and logging examples of monuments in their own districts, leading to a number of significant studies of this type; perhaps the most important of which was Charles Hodges' account of monuments in County Durham (1884; see also Ryder 1985, 2–3). It was not until 1902 that another general book attempting to analyse this class of monument was published – *A Short History of Ancient Sepulchral Cross-slabs* by K Styan. Styan's book, arranged like Cutts', with a block of plates accompanied by a section of catalogue style entries, attempted to display monuments of similar types together. Unlike Cutts, however, Styan believed that the cross-head forms were the key to providing the date for any particular stone. Even so, her attempt to place the monuments in chronological order is somewhat unconvincing and partly dependent on untested assertions that the monuments in question belonged to named individuals.

In the first half of the 20th century, the indefatigable efforts of FH Greenhill represent the most notable work on the topic. His systematic work around the Midlands in the 1930s and 1950s resulted in important publications relating to Leicestershire and Rutland (Greenhill 1958), Lincolnshire (Greenhill 1986) and eventually to discussion of the entire country (Greenhill 1976). But, although he collected examples that would match Butler's definition of 'minor monumental sculpture', Greenhill's focus was on monuments bearing images of all types incised into the stone, rather than inlaid, as it the case with English brasses. Greenhill's collections of what he called 'incised slabs' was aiming, therefore, at nothing less than a complete corpus of two-dimensional monumental sculpture, excluding only brasses. Thus it is that, for example, Greenhill's notes on monuments in Lincolnshire include many monuments that Butler also included in his lists, though Greenhill's lists are far from complete for this county. Like his predecessors, however, Greenhill failed to be systematic about the description of cross-head types in his work and, when his extremely useful listing for

Lincolnshire was finally published three years after his death, in 1986, Brian and Moira Gittos were given the task of providing a comparative terminology, correlating the terms used by Greenhill with those *'now in general use'*, deriving from Lawrence Butler's 1965 paper (Gittos and Gittos 1986).

From the fact that these additions to Greenhill's Lincolnshire volume were considered necessary when it was finally published, then, we can see that Lawrence Butler's systematising thinking and methodology had represented a major step forward compared with the anecdotal approach of Cutts, Boutell, Styan, and indeed Greenhill. Lawrence saw the value of collecting together a 'complete' corpus of material and then analysing it by defining 'groupings'. As was the case then, and remains to a large extent the case today, these assessments of groupings were mostly aimed at defining 'schools' of production – an essentially art-historical approach that had dominated the study of monumental brasses, and indeed medieval sculpture more generally, throughout the second half of the 20th century, and which was, no doubt, imported from there.

Lawrence Butler's approach could be readily expanded beyond the East Midlands. Indeed efforts to expand the corpus of this monument type have been taken forward by Brian and Moira Gittos, working in North and East Yorkshire and in the South-West (Gittos and Gittos 1989; 2012), and by Peter Ryder in Yorkshire, the North-East and the North-West (Ryder 1985; 1991; 2005). In a recent paper, indeed, Brian and Moira Gittos called for the establishment of a formal corpus of this material covering the entire country, though they propose this as a mechanism for avoiding unwonted destruction as much as for scholarly analysis (Gittos and Gittos 2010). In their paper, Brian and Moira Gittos make various estimates about the total numbers of such monuments, but the size of the project they define will be too much for a single researcher. It is also the case that a single format for reporting these stones has yet to be agreed; most researchers use their own recording methods and terminology. Generally speaking, there also tends to be a piecemeal and casual approach to geological identification, the significance of which Lawrence Butler himself stressed. It is understandable, of course, that isolated researchers do not have access to specialist geologists to assist their identifications, but without the engagement of geological expertise, any corpus of this material will be of much less value. Furthermore, there remain fundamental inconsistencies in terminology between different researchers – even extending to naming the monument types themselves, and thus to confusion about which types of stones are collected. Lawrence did not give a strong lead on this point, unfortunately, calling them 'coffin-lids … cross-slabs, grave-covers or floor stones' (1965, 111), but Brian and Moira Gittos prefer 'cross slab grave stones' (2010, 29), whilst Peter Ryder has been consistent in calling them 'cross slab grave covers' (1985; 1991; 2005).[1]

But the 'corpus approach' can be fundamentally unsatisfying. If not undertaken thoughtfully, it becomes no more than a continuation of the 19th-century taxonomic tradition. It can be reflexive, in tending to focus exclusively on questions of typology and/or date, without recognition that there is a range of other external information, documentary as well as material, that can give the stone fragments proper meaning, and offer them an opportunity to contribute to wider debates in medieval history and archaeology. This is why it is so pleasing to see that the latest work on this category of monument is taking information derived from a corpus-style census of monuments, but is using it as evidence in a broader discussion about elite behaviour, settlement and landscape management in Yorkshire (McClain 2010). This approach will surely be the driver of further studies of these monuments. Census-like studies within restricted areas are fine, but they are best undertaken with the intention of integrating the evidence they contain with broader discussions generated from a wider variety of datasets, both material and documentary.

Although such approaches have originated since Lawrence Butler left this field to younger students, nevertheless, we can see him pointing in this direction, particularly in his 1961 thesis. Indeed, it is enormously ironic that the two thesis chapters cut out of the *Archaeological Journal* publication in 1965 (above) were the two in which Lawrence approached the question of what his monuments could contribute to contemporary discussions of patronage, trade and settlement. Who actually did the cutting? Butler himself, perhaps; but it is more likely that the scissors were wielded by the great cataloguer of nonconformist chapels, Chris Stell, the editor. It is likely, of course, that these would have been the very chapters most appealing to JD Chambers, JS Roskell and AC Wood, Lawrence's supervisors and mentors.

Once he joined the Welsh Royal Commission, and even more so after he joined the teaching staff at the newly-founded Archaeology Department at the University of Leeds, Lawrence Butler's enquiring mind took him into many new areas of medieval and

post-medieval archaeology: into medieval settlement studies, into castle studies and into church archaeology more broadly. But he never lost his interest in 'minor' monumental sculpture, and when I last visited him at home in 2012, it was to discuss something he had written 60 years previously about a group of 'minor' Nottinghamshire monuments. In his book-lined study, the thesis and related books about early monuments lay within easy reach of his armchair, and he reached both off the shelves for reference during our conversation, without getting up. They were evidently in regular use. He felt, he said on that occasion, that he had made his real contribution to this subject all those years earlier and it was now up to younger scholars to take it forward. With his passing in late 2014, everyone with an interest in this subject has lost a significant figure, but his academic contribution was a solid one, on which his successors can build.

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Notes

[1] I have always called them 'grave-covers' myself, being careful to distinguish covers from upright 'grave-markers' (Stocker 1986).

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