

Monumental Brass Society



CARE AND CONSERVATION
OF BRASSES AND SLABS

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Of all the monuments to be seen in the cathedrals and churches of Britain perhaps the least recognised are the medieval engraved memorial brasses. This neglect is not surprising when it is realised that brasses are generally to be found in the most inaccessible spots – under pews and mats, behind the organ, and even on external walls.
- 1.2 These memorials possess a wealth of colourful history and interest behind the purely visual aspect. Besides giving us a pictorial history of the development of armour, civilian fashions and ecclesiastical vestments from the 13th to the end of the 17th century, they form a valuable, indeed a unique, commentary on day-to-day life in medieval England.
- 1.3 All classes of society are commemorated: knights, ladies, clergy, merchants, schoolboys and servants. As brasses could be made in almost any size – ranging from a small half-effigy with two-line inscription to life-sized figures accompanied by canopy work – they were within the reach of a large cross-section of the community. This is underlined by the fact that the vast majority of persons commemorated by them are the possessors of names absolutely unknown to history.
- 1.4 The total number of medieval brass memorials surviving in the United Kingdom exceeds some 7,500 of which more than 3,500 are figure brasses – this quantity is significantly increased with the addition of Victorian and more modern memorials.

PRACTICAL STEPS TO BE TAKEN

- 2.1 Brasses should be kept clean with a duster and preferably with a bi-annual application of *Renaissance* micro-crystalline wax, which helps resist corrosive elements. Brasses should never be cleaned using metal polishes or other chemical cleaners. These contain abrasives, and/or acids, which can quickly remove the engraving. Any blue or green corrosion should only be removed by a trained conservator.
- 2.2 Wherever possible brasses and incised slabs should be in positions where they are not exposed to wear.
- 2.3 If brasses and incised slabs are not intrinsically protected by their position, they should be adequately covered with felt or some other very soft material. It may be necessary to cover this in turn with a heavier carpet. Such covering should never be impervious, since it would cause condensation. However, it may be necessary on high tombs if the church is exposed to a large numbers of bats.
- 2.4 If the brasses are not located in main walkways and are available for inspection an alternative to covering is to protect them with a light wooden railing or a rope to discourage careless walking.

- 2.5 Ideally it should be ensured that brasses and incised slabs can be viewed without having to move heavy furniture or other equipment. **The total permanent covering of monuments is especially deplorable**, as it entirely disregards their purpose, and means that there is no way of monitoring any corrosion or damp that is concealed from view. Brasses should never be concealed under fitted carpets. Indents and slabs must never be screeded for the provision of carpeting.
- 2.6 Where brasses and incised slabs are set on high tombs it is important, though difficult, to ensure that they are not used as bases for seasonal ornaments such as Easter gardens, or stands for water-filled vases full of flowers. There is need for care and tact here – high tombs are often positioned in key positions on either side of the sanctuary, where flower displays are seen to best effect. But the gradual damage to both stone and metal is very considerable. If the position must occasionally be used, some sort of protective covering should be made.
- 2.7 The pernicious influence of damp is greatly worsened if the monuments, whether on walls or floors, are not allowed to ‘breathe’. This they can do if exposed to the air or covered only by soft carpeting. They cannot do so effectively, if under glass or perspex or any impermeable carpeting or sheeting unless they are adequately ventilated.

PROTECTION FROM THEFT

- 3.1 If a brass becomes loose, or proud of its slab, it should be reported to the D.A.C.; if any part, however small, is completely loose it should immediately be removed to a safe place.
- 3.2 Brasses removed from their slab and wall mounted should be rebated and secured by rivets into a board of Cedar of Lebanon. The board itself should be mounted by means of stainless steel expansion bolts.

PROTECTION FROM DAMAGE

- 4.1 Under no circumstances should coconut-matting or rubber, plastic or foam backed carpets be used to cover brasses or slabs since all cause serious damage to anything underneath them. Coconut or other coarse matting traps grit and dirt which will abrade the surface of the brass or slab, while backed carpets can produce corrosion by trapping moisture or giving off harmful chemicals as they deteriorate.
- 4.2 If a fixed carpeting scheme is being considered which is likely to cover brasses and slabs on a fairly permanent basis please seek advice on the type of carpet and underlay to be used and consider having inspection panels in the carpet so that the brasses may be viewed and their condition monitored.
- 4.3 Brasses and incised slabs should not have candlesticks, vases or furniture placed on them; chair legs can scratch and loosen the brass and damage the stone.

Avoid putting floral displays on brasses as spillage causes damp and corrosion.

- 4.4 Brasses in slabs or on tomb chests will suffer if the monument is affected by damp. Damp is particularly damaging to Purbeck marble and other shelly limestones. Danger signs are: crumbling powdery stone surface, flaking paint, water marks or green stains or salts on the stonework. Slabs affected by damp should, wherever possible, be left uncovered. If brasses or slabs are attached to walls, great care is needed to ensure that they are protected from damp penetrating the walls and from corrosive elements such as limewash or iron. A brass secured with iron nails on to whitewashed plaster will inevitably corrode badly, and innumerable such cases exist. Expert advice must be sought on how to isolate the monument from the source of the damp, how to repair any damage and make the monument safe.
- 4.5 Brasses screwed to limewashed walls, or in contact with lime based plaster or cement, are likely to be suffering unseen corrosion on the back; instead have the brass mounted on a board of inert wood which can itself be fixed to the wall. A small air gap should be left to prevent a build up of condensation.
- 4.6 During interior decoration, monuments, including brasses, should be properly covered to protect them. Also if your church has a colony of bats the corrosive effects of their droppings on brasses can be severe; such brasses and slabs should be covered with felt and/or woven carpet to prevent damage.

BRASS RUBBING

- 5.1 Brass rubbing does not harm a brass if competently carried out, and the brass is securely fixed. Rubbers should be discouraged from kneeling or resting on brasses while working and should always use kneelers. Sticky tape must not be applied to the brass or its slab, though dry masking tape is permissible.

- 5.2 If a brass is frequently rubbed then the church should consider having a replica made for the purpose. The rubbing of brasses that are not securely fixed and firmly supported at the back should be prohibited until they have been attended to by a conservator, since applied pressure causes the metal to flex and may result in cracking or other damage. Brass rubbing should also be prohibited if the slab is showing signs of damp problems as it may hasten the deterioration.

- 5.3 Individuals wishing to produce brass rubbings should obtain permission from the incumbent or from some other designated person. It is commonplace for churches to make a charge for brass rubbing, the amount usually depends on the importance of the brasses concerned. It may vary from anything between a donation and £25.00. The Monumental Brass Society is able to provide guidance and a recognised code of practice. It is, of course, extremely important to ensure that the correct materials are used in order to avoid damage to brass or stone. In a few cases, where the brasses are especially important, permission is only given to members of the Monumental Brass Society. Application should be made in writing first.

HELP

- 6.1 If your brasses are in need of attention, now or in the future, financial help is readily available. There are various charitable bodies which will provide funds for the conservation of brasses, slabs and larger monuments but only if authorised expert conservators are employed.
- 6.2 Some D.A.C.'s ("Diocesan Advisory Committees") have Consultants who will be pleased to offer advice and guidance. Contact the appropriate D.A.C. Secretary who will supply details. The Hon. Conservation Officer of the Monumental Brass Society (see below) will willingly undertake site visits to provide guidance in cases where a D.A.C. has not appointed a recognised Consultant.
- 6.3 There are several sources of grant aid/financial assistance available for the conservation of brasses and slabs. Applications may be made to the following:

Trevor Parker, Administrator/Secretary
Francis Coales Charitable Foundation
The Bays, Hillcote, Bleadon Hill
Weston super Mare BS24 9JS

Martin Stuchfield, J.P., F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S.
President and Hon. Conservation Officer
Monumental Brass Society
Lowe Hill House, Stratford St. Mary, Suffolk CO7 6JX

The overriding principle concerning grants is that they must be secured before work starts and that retrospective applications will almost certainly be turned down.

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Dorset, 2001; County Durham, 2002;
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*Cover: Detail from brass to Richard Radclyffe, 1472,
at Middleton, Lancashire conserved by William Lack in 2004.*

*Prepared by Martin Stuchfield, J.P., F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S.
President and Hon. Conservation Officer
Consultant on Monumental Brasses to the Diocesan Advisory
Committees of Chelmsford, Norwich and St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich*