

BRASS RUBBING – A FASCINATING CRAFT FROM THE DISTANT PAST

When Medieval and Renaissance stonemasons set elaborately engraved monumental brass plates into the floors and walls of European churches they could hardly have envisaged that their work would eventually give rise to one of the 21st Century's most unusual crafts.

For, today, brass rubbing is carried out in most English-speaking countries, thanks to the availability of highly accurate copies of original brasses which have managed to survive the ravages of time and the destructiveness of wars and religious upheavals.

On first impressions brass rubbing appears to be a relatively simple task. Paper is fixed over the engraved plate and, when rubbed with coloured wax, the paper acquires an image of the person depicted on the brass below. Finished rubbings are prized as colourful wall decorations, and enthusiasts often develop sizable portfolios of armoured knights, regal lords and elegantly costumed ladies.

However, thanks to the efforts of those stonemasons hundreds of years ago, not all brasses are easy to rub. The stonemason's task was to cut an *indent*, or bed, into the stone where the brass was to be laid to enable the plate to partly sink into its surrounds for protection from damage and to make theft difficult.

The *indent* would be cut to match the shape of the brass but it was left to the stonemason to decide just how deep the bed would be. A shallow indent would allow the surface of the brass to remain above the surface of the surrounding stone, while a deep bed could bring the metal level with the stone, or even below it.

It is this distinction between *raised* and *flat* brasses that provides the real challenge in brass rubbing because the primary aim of the craft is to produce an image of the engraving, not of the surrounding stone. Many flat brasses require careful study and hours of painstaking work before a successful rubbing can be made. Such brasses are not for the inexperienced.

Not surprisingly, the story of brass rubbing begins with the story of the brasses themselves. In many instances brasses had their beginning in the wills and letters of deceased nobleman and wealthy merchants who chose to be immortalized in brass rather than in stone. John de Foxley, a merchant of Bray (1378), John Ansell of London (1516) and Samuel Harsnett, Archbishop of York (1630), are among those who left wills with detailed instructions for brasses to be engraved in their memory.

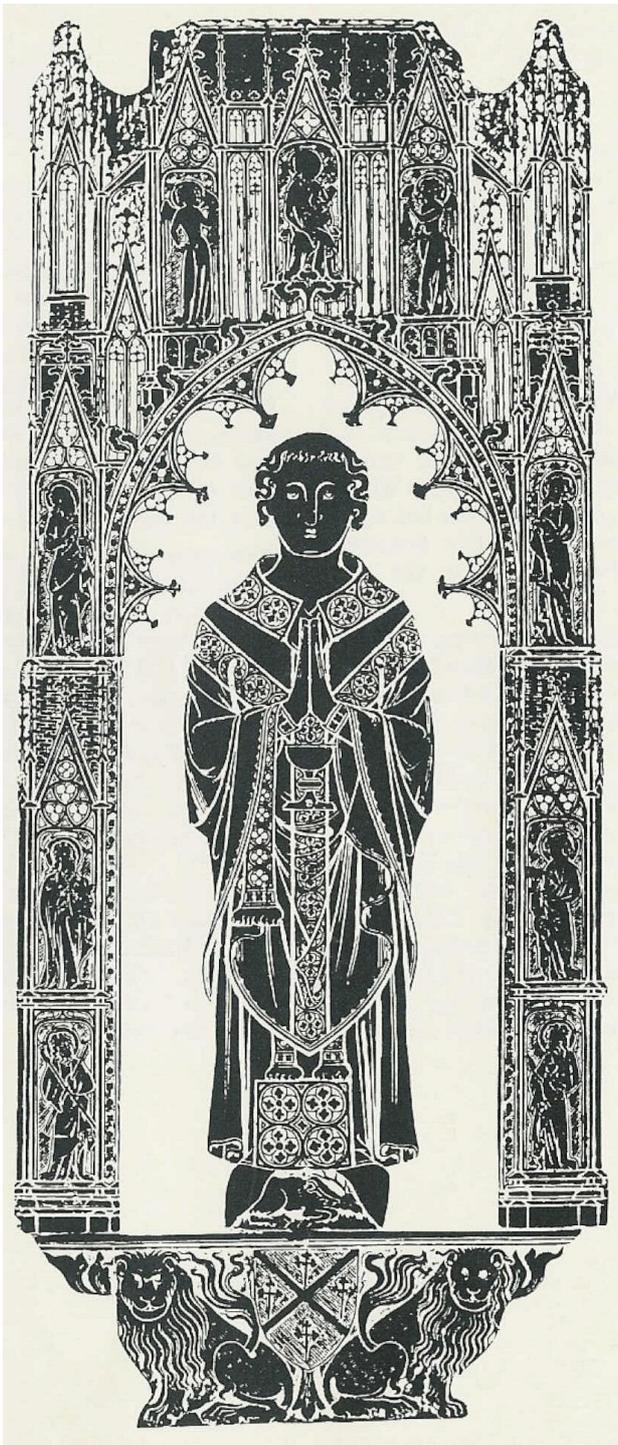
In other cases it was descendants who decided to order brasses for their departed loved ones. Sometimes this was done long after the event, giving rise to some fascinating anomalies in the resultant monumental plates. There is, for example, the 1504 brass to Richard and Elizabeth Wakehurst* who had died some fifty years beforehand. Close inspection of their memorial at Ardingly, in Sussex, reveals that the engravers dressed the figures in the fashions of the early 16th Century – clothing which would have been unknown in the lifetimes of those commemorated.

Brasses were a popular form of memorial from the 13th to the early 17th Century. Their light weight, plus the fact that they could be designed and cut into sections that could be transported in a relatively small package, gave them a great advantage in portability over heavy stone memorials.

The six-section brass to William de Kestevene* (1361) at North Mimms, in Hertfordshire, is a good example of a *travelled* brass. Made in Flanders, the installed brass is almost two metres high. However, it would have journeyed across the Channel in a container only half of this length.

In Melbourne, brass rubbing is one of the on-going activities of the Early Arts Guild of Victoria which conducts workshops in metropolitan and regional centres, with many visits to secondary schools. All materials and trained instructors are provided for these sessions, details of which may be obtained by 'phoning the Guild on (03) 9699 8417.

* Facsimiles of the Wakehurst and Kestevene brasses are in the Guild's extensive collection.



The six-section brass to William de Kestevne,
1361



Richard and Elizabeth Wakehurst
With fashions of the future