A Tough-Looking Knight With Flowers At His Feet

Perhaps the engraver just wanted to fill a gap in the design, or was the knight a softie at heart? Maybe he just loved flowers, or could he have been gay?

Many and varied are the responses whenever Year 8 students are asked about the flowers at the feet of Oliver St. John. Somehow the blooms always seemed at odds with the broad sword, heavy armour and belligerent stance of the knight. They posed a question that required an answer.

Oliver St John died in 1497 and his memorial brass, with its flowers, is in the church at Stoke Rochford in Lincolnshire (UK). His wife Elizabeth, who died in 1503, and their eight children are commemorated on brasses alongside.

Facsimiles of these plates were part of a collection acquired by the Early Music Consort of Melbourne in 1978 after the group played for the opening of a Brass Rubbing Gallery in Carlton and subsequently bought out the business! It was an unexpected outcome but brass rubbing, it was decided, would make an attractive addition to the group's many school programs.

But, first, research had to be done. Why and how were brasses made? Why were they so popular as memorials in Medieval and Renaissance times? And what of the various coats of arms and those many fascinating symbols – lions underfoot, roses on sword belts and even a crown on a knight's shoulder?

All these symbols, and many more, had something to say about attitudes and lifestyle. Importantly, they highlight the fact that few could read or write prior to the 17th Century when signs, symbols and illustrations were a vital part of education. In that regard brasses can be linked to the colourful story-telling in stained glass windows in churches.

Oliver St. John

The St John family at Stoke Rochford share one symbol that is common to almost all memorial brasses – each figure has hands joined as if inviting us to pray for the soul of the departed one.

With so many symbols to be considered, it is easy to understand why the flowers at the feet of Oliver St John escaped attention. In any case there still remained the possibility that they were just a whim of the engraver.

It took time to appreciate that individual decorations on brasses were generally there for a purpose. In the end, the reason for those flowers emerged. The problem was that in Medieval and Renaissance times the concept of Heaven, or Paradise, was broadly accepted but difficult to define. It had to be worth attaining, but what would be its format?

Earthly experience suggested two possibilities. Splendid gardens and lavish banquets were highlights of life at court and in the upper echelons of society. So why not imagine a Heavenly Garden, a Heavenly Banquet or, better still, a combination of both? The garden and the banquet are common themes in religious art works of the Renaissance.

When asked why we send flowers to funerals, today's brass rubbing students usually speak of respect, of care and of the need to lift the spirits of mourners. Occasionally the link between funeral flowers and the promise of New Life is made – drawing us closer to an ancient tradition that has been all but forgotten.

For the flowers on Oliver St John's brass were engraved there to remind onlookers that, while they may lament his loss, there was no need to be concerned for him. For Faith dictated that he was now in the Heavenly Garden.

Flowers at funerals speak to us about the fundamental Christian belief in Life Eternal. They are a powerful sign of hope which, if understood, can do much to ease the hurt of parting and the accompanying sense of loss. In essence, we are allowed to cry - that is human – but we don't have to worry.

Mark Hill