



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



‘THE BESTE AND FYREST OF AL LINCOLNSHIRE’. THE CHURCH OF ST BOTOLPH, BOSTON, LINCOLNSHIRE, AND ITS MEDIEVAL MONUMENTS.

Edited by Sally Badham and Paul Cockerham. Pp. xi and 266, Illus 246. Archaeopress (British Archaeological Reports British Series, **554**), 2012. Price £44.00. ISBN 978 1 407309 33 0.

To the casual visitor, the worn memorial slabs on the floor of the church of St Botolph in Boston might seem to be too far gone to warrant a closer look, let alone serious investigation to discover what information they might still hold. As the catalogues in the Appendix to this volume show, the majority of inlays in the incised slabs have disappeared over time, leaving only ghostly indents of faces and hands, and many of the brasses are now also gone or at best known through earlier rubbings and descriptions. Furthermore, the broken but otherwise well-preserved Tournai marble slab, to Hanseatic merchant Wessel de Smalenburgh (d. 1340), does not belong to this church, but was originally laid down in the Grey Friars’ church, while the two mid-fifteenth-century alabaster effigies discussed by Mark Downing in Chapter 9 came from the church of St John’s hospital.

Yet this lavishly illustrated volume manages to reconstruct not just the original appearance of the monuments that were once such a prominent feature in the church, but also the people that commissioned them, the community to which they belonged, and the way these memorials were meant to function before the Reformation, and how they fared thereafter. Ten carefully cross-referenced chapters provide a comprehensive view of the medieval town, its economic history and society (Stephen Rigby), the architectural history of the church (Linda Monckton), the religious guilds, their members and activities (Sally Badham), and their monuments (Badham, Paul Cockerham, Derrick Chivers and Downing). An essay by Jessica Freeman, of two extant large brasses in Boston and Barton-upon-Humber (Chapter 8), provides a case study of two merchants, Walter Pescod (d. 1398) and Simon Seman (d. 1433), that helps us match their effigial images and epitaphs to their careers and activities. The ten chapters are followed by catalogues with detailed descriptions of each brass, indent, effigial slab, cross slab and relief effigy (Appendix 1, pp. 172–225), and a discussion of the 1978–83 survey of the floor monuments in the church by Brian and Moira Gittos (Appendix 2, pp. 226–35). Bostonian wills referenced by Badham in her two essays are listed in Appendix 3.

Boston was an important mercantile town in the medieval period, which helps explain the desire of the townsfolk to build a new church with an ambitiously high tower. The first incised slabs may have been laid in the church while building was still in progress and were imported from Flanders, thanks to the Hanseatic trade links with Bruges and the fact

that these products were probably cheaper to commission there and transport by sea (Chapter 5). An exceptionally large number of foreign slabs are known to have existed at Boston, and not just at St Botolph's. Cockerham vividly illustrates the visual impact that these rows of large shiny slabs in the walkways of the church would have had but also the sense of status, community and continuity that they conveyed, and their memorial function. By the late fourteenth century, a fashion for brasses took over, but the trend remained for less obtrusive floor monuments over sculpted effigial tombs, perhaps because so much of the nave was occupied by guild chapels (Chapter 4).

This important study is Church Archaeology at its best. The contributors have made use of all the available social, historical and geological knowledge and of documentary sources — wills as well as antiquarian accounts — and with good reason. Much has been lost over time, and not so much at the Reformation as in later periods, for Boston's remote situation probably helped safeguard the town against the worst iconoclastic excesses, while the community itself also seems to have been unusually keen to preserve its civic heritage. Yet ignorance and a failure to understand the importance of even the ghostly vestiges of formerly splendid memorials have led to much more recent losses, when slabs were resigned to the skip in the course of building work at the church as late as the 1980s. Fortunately, there is still a chance that some slabs and brass plates may yet survive, either hidden under pews or forgotten in some cupboard. Besides offering a clear, accessible and methodological study of the monuments at Boston, this volume also highlights the importance of even the most worn slab in allowing us to build a picture of a medieval community. Let us hope that this message will have a much wider impact and help preserve similar monuments elsewhere in Britain and beyond.

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