

Report on a Plaque Discovered at the Parish Church of St. Mary Staunton on Wye Herefordshire 2020



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1. Introduction

In the first issues of this report the heraldic plaque was described but at the time it could only be said that it had been placed on a pew in the Parish Church of St Mary, Staunton on Wye, Herefordshire, after the conclusion of restoration work in 2020. It was unknown where in the church the plaque had been located, or whether it had actually been displayed in the building. Subsequently, a nineteenth-century inventory of the church accurately described the plaque though not its exact position.

The plaque has a shield shape, with the face a vertically divided (impaled) union of two armorial shields which likely represents a marriage. The husband's shield (left as viewed) is three boar's heads on a silver ground. The bride's on a blue ground has a silver chevron and three spearheads. The border is bicoloured with an outer gold and inner thinner black.

The reverse of the plaque has incomplete pencilled notes. There is also modelling of the stone likely connected with its original placement. The present condition of the plaque and imagery is reasonably good though there are significant deposits and abrasions.

2. Location of the Church

The village of Staunton on Wye lies 15 kilometres WNW of the City of Hereford, located just north of the A438. The Parish Church of St Mary is situated at the eastern end of the village (Grid Ref: SO375448).

The Church building dates from about 1200 though since 1720 has undergone alterations and part rebuilding. In 2019 restoration work commenced and was complete the following year. The plaque came to light at the conclusion of these works.

3. Physical Description of the Plaque

Dimensions	Width: 21, height 19, thickness 2.3 - 2.6 cms.
Volume	168 cm ³ (approx.)
Weight	1752 grams
Density	2780 kg/m ³ (approx.)
Stone	White marble
Composition	Slightly transparent white granoblastic structure 0.1 to 1mm (Fig. 2).

The plaque is vertically symmetrical having a flat top but rounded shoulders and being waisted before coming to a point at the base, does not conform to a traditional shield shape. The top edge is flat with a central irregularly circular drilled hole, diameter 6-8mm, depth 12mm (Fig. 1).

The front, sides and most of the back are smoothed. The back has an angled straight step near the top with the lower surface smooth and rough above the step (Fig 8).



Figure 2. Plaque showing central drill hole in the top edge.

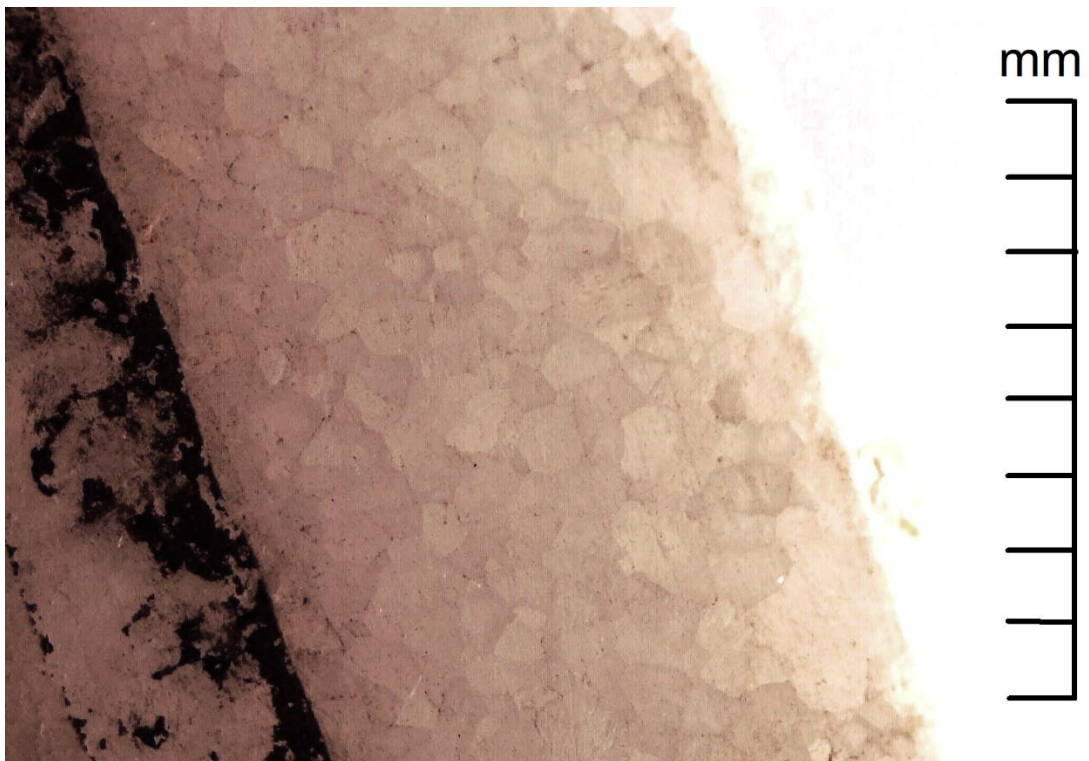


Figure 1. Granoblastic structure of the white marble.



Figure 3.

4. Front - Heraldry

The terminology in this section adheres to heraldic practice in that left and right (sinister and dexter) are that of a holder of a shield. Heraldic terms as italicized.

The *escutcheon* (Fig. 3) matches the shape of the stone. The shield is *impaled* (vertically divided) representing a union which is assumed to be the marriage of two families. There is a common *bi-tinctured* boarder, the outer Gold (*or*) and inner thinner black (*sable*), which is used also for the thin division (*pale*).

The *charges* are more artistic than representative in that they have been painted to be realistic with the use of multiple shades of colour and the inclusion of shadows, unlike 'flat' depictions that use fewer colours.

4.1. Dexter - Husband

Silver (*argent*) *charged* with three boars' heads. Each of the three boars' heads have different expressions and appear more canine than porcine. Identification as boars is by the addition of snouts and tusks. The two upper heads are smaller.

Each head is depicted in natural colours (*proper*) using shades of brown with red tongues (*langued gules*). The background silver (*argent*) is used in the eyes.

The cropping of the head is ambiguous and could either be close behind the ears (*couped*) or at the shoulders (*erased*). Fox-Davies notes (p. 200) that the English heraldic tradition uses erased boar's heads whereas the Scottish uses



Figure 4. Detail of the lower boar's head.

both. Welsh heraldry follows the Scottish, which is relevant in this case, given the location.

4.2. Sinister - Wife

The impaling of the lady's arms implies that she was not an heiress. Her arms are blue (*azure*) charged with three silver spearheads and bearing a silver (*argent*) chevron.

The three spearheads are slightly varied, and all executed in silver, brown and shadows of a darker colour (see below). The two upper spearheads are lower than the upper boars' heads.

The silver chevron has been given the appearance of a profiled (three dimensional effect) stone arch using four colours in straight lines on the under edges to imply a shadow.



Figure 6. Upper right spearhead.



Figure 5. The apex of the chevron showing details of the painted sculpting. The left edge uses three colours and the right four including a light one to give the idea of lighting from the left.

4.3. Border and Division

The central vertical division (*pale*) is black continuing as an inner black border. The outer wider border is gold.

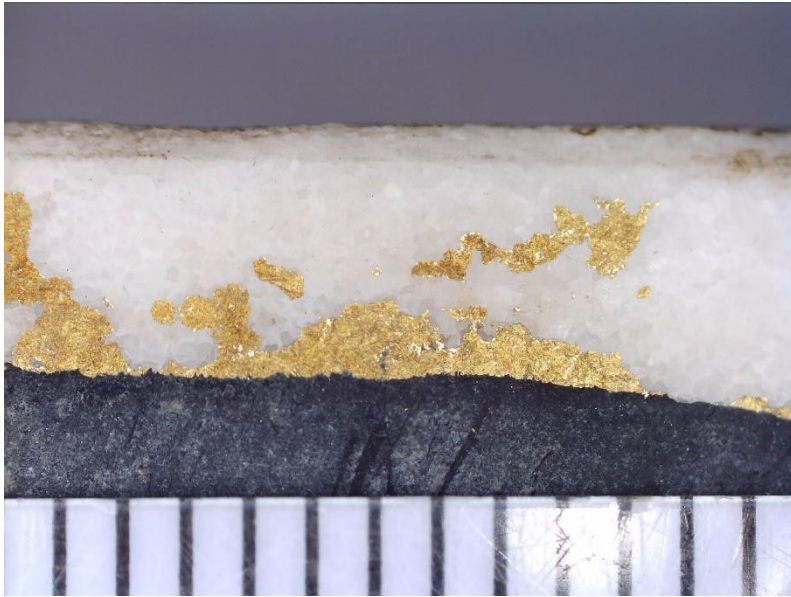


Figure 7. Close up image of the top border. The gold appears more torn than peeled suggesting gold leaf, however, smudges of gold paint have been detected on the side of the plaque (Fig. 10). Scale is mm.

5. Back



Figure 8. Reverse of the plaque showing the angled step and attached plaster.

An angled step on the back of the plaque separates a smoothed lower surface from a rough upper (seen in profiles in Figs 12 & 13). The rough surface may be that of the block supplied to the mason or alternatively where the plaque has been broken away and the rough part being the remnants of a larger flange. The latter is less likely considering the risk of attempting to break the plaque away with the greater chance of snapping the shields themselves.

Dabs of a pink coloured plaster appear on the back of the plaque. The plaster has fine grits and inclusions of white lime particles, suggesting a sand base and not a modern gypsum pink plaster. Building sand used locally has a red colour.

A pencil sketch and legend appear in the back (Fig. 9). The sketch approximates to the plaque shape with the central impalement and rough positions of the boars' heads on the left (as viewed), the right side is void. The names above the left and right respectively are Griffith and Powell though the ending of these names is not clear. Under the sketch is written "3 Boars heads" and under that the word "the", preceded by a faint letter possibly 'a', and followed by a word obscured by a dab of plaster but could be "Coat". This lower line may be in another hand and appears incomplete.

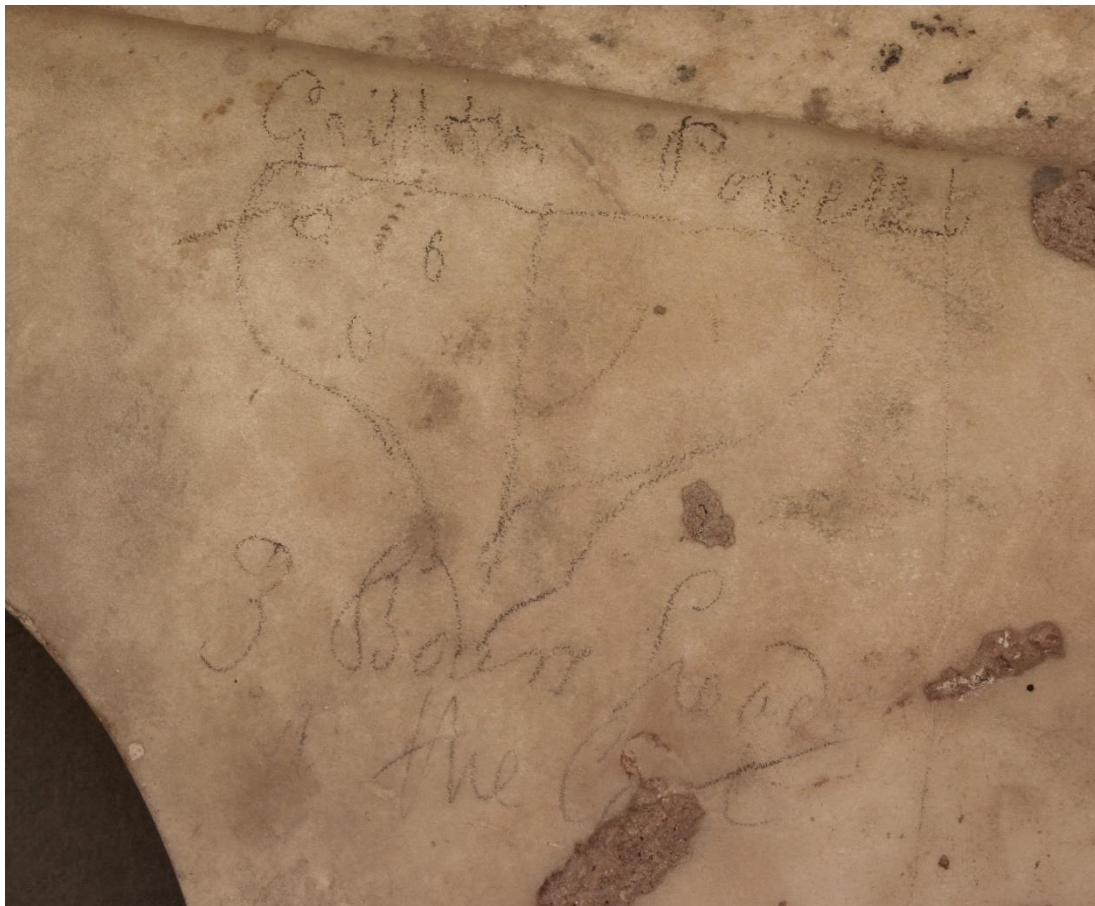


Figure 9. The pencilled writing and sketch.

The plaster application postdates the pencilled notes.

6. Sides

The sides of the plaque are smooth but have gained deposits that reveal something of its history.

The marble has taken on a grey tinge either through reactions with the environment or air bourn particles. The true white of the stone shows where the now lost gold border had overlapped the edges (Fig. 10). This figure also shows a brush stroke straying onto the side with some of the gold paint still visible.

Limewash splashing is found on both sides and the top of the plaque but not the face; the splashes originate from different directions. A likely cause of the splashing is the limewashing of a wall on which the plaque, or memorial, was situated. This favours a church setting and the plaque representative of other objects or fixings that would similarly have received splashes, and furthermore what cleaning, or lack of it, took place after the work was completed.

The splashed lime is soft, originally quite thick and some of it containing small bubbles (Fig. 11). A short discussion is worthwhile as a basis for comparative evidence, either within the church or elsewhere.

Limestone, converted to quicklime by burning, is added to water inducing a dangerous reaction that causes the water to boil. The mixture is stirred to ensure all the quicklime reacts. The resulting thick white soup (lime putty) should be left for weeks and longer to mature and is the basis for lime mortars, plasters and limewash. Lime putty is kept under water or else it begins to cure. When put to use lime must remain moist while it cures otherwise it will fail to harden properly or turn to dust.

Limewash should be applied in thin coats with a day between coats and at times when it will not dry too quickly or freeze. The wash - a mixture of lime putty and water - separates unless frequently stirred

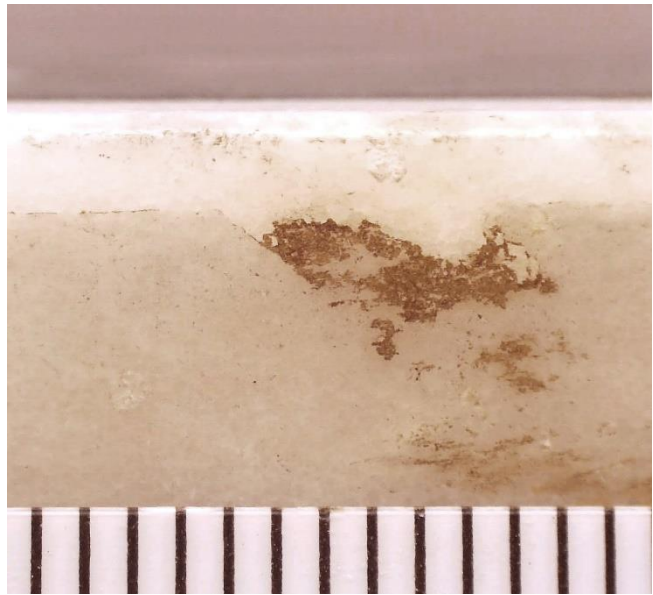


Figure 10. Side view of the edge where the gold border had overlapped the side and protected the marble from discolouration. Subsequent loss of the gold paint reveals the true white of the marble. Scale is mm.

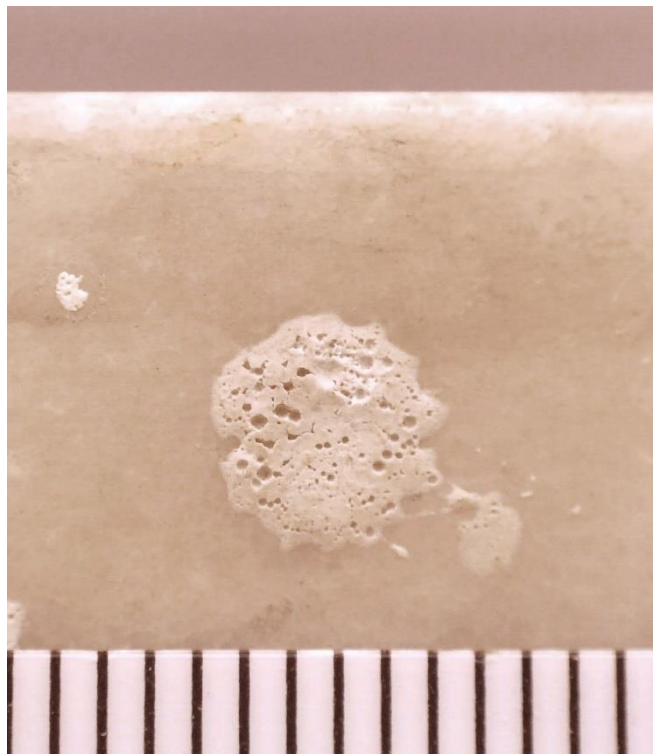


Figure 11. One of the splashes of the soft bubble-containing limewash on the side of the plaque. Also note the two tones of the grey discolouration demarcated horizontally through the top of the splash. Scale is mm.

and must be brushed well into a wall. Failing to observe all the requirements of lime and limewashing risks the wash cracking, failing to harden or easily parting from a wall. In these circumstances the splashes on the side of the plaque are not surprising.

The cause of the softness of the lime on the plaque can be attributed to incompleteness at any stage of the lime making or whitewashing. In Victorian and earlier times makers and users of lime were known to cut corners to save time in what were lengthy processes. The bubbles in the lime are present for two possible reasons. The wash becomes aerated with the frequently needed agitation or vigorous application; however, any resulting bubbles could be expected to disperse. It is possible also because of incomplete slaking and premature use that there were still pockets of quicklime in the putty waiting to react.



Figure 13. Left side of the plaque.

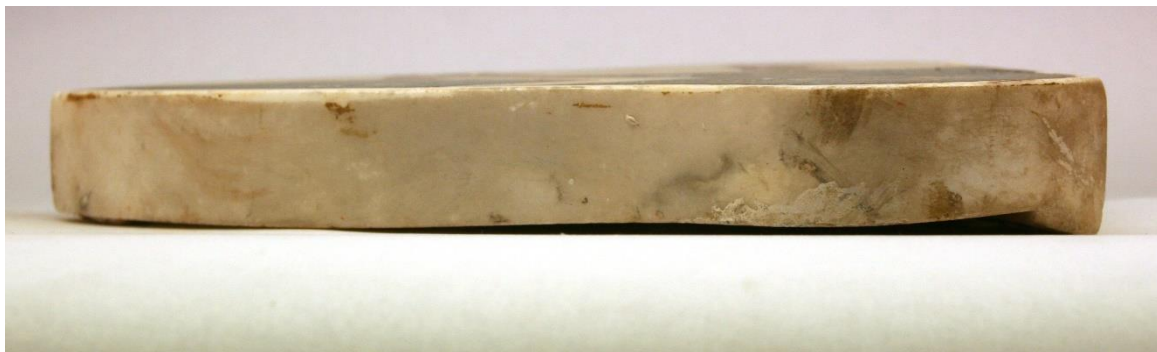


Figure 12. Right side of the plaque. In this and the previous figure the limewash splashes appear on both sides. A detailed image (Fig. 10) is of one of the splashes on the left side of the plaque. The splash on the right side is on the lower edge right of centre. There is a darker horizontal band of the grey discolouration at the top of the left side (see also Fig 10).

The limewash splashes overlay and are subsequent to the greying of the marble.

7. Condition

7.4. Front

The state of preservation of the face is currently reasonably good though there is colour muting, surface deposition and abrasions in the form of scratches, some of which are long, and patches of chipped paint which are linear in places. Adhesion of the remaining extant paints is good with yet no active serious peeling or flaking, though as scratches may be relatively recent a peeling process may have been initiated. Loss of paint is greatest at the edges where the plaque would receive most handling, but also the adhesive properties of the gold in the border may be less.

Surface depositions are more noticeable on the right against the blue ground. Most evident is an ochre substance that has striations as if an attempt were made to wipe off a wet deposit (Fig. 14). Possibly this deposit related to the plaster daubs on the back. On the left (as viewed) there are a few yellowish liquid splashes, and on the right on the blue, there are irregular small areas of red. There are a few small demi-spherical white deposits.



Figure 14. An ochre coloured surface deposit that seeming has attempted to be wiped away when wet. This striated deposit stops abruptly at the edges of peeled paint and spearheads and does not continue onto either.

Scratches are generally inclined vertically though the direction of the strike could be up or down; they are of differing depths (Figs. 3, 4, 6 & 15). The most noticeable scratch is on the left and penetrates the silver ground through to the stone but not always through the brown paints of the boars' heads. Scratches on the right shield do penetrate surface deposits but not the blue ground (Fig. 15).



Figure 15. Close up image of scratching that penetrates through the red and ochre deposits but not through the blue ground. The patches of lost paint coincide with scratches and could have been initiated by them; the loss here extends through to the stone. The image also shows the gritty texture of the blue paint. Side lighting was used to emphasise the texture and gouging, hence the false colours. The scale is mm.

Poor adhesion may occur through the reactions between paint and surface over time or contamination of the surface prior to painting, for example, from finger marks. Inclusions within the paint can be a cause of peeling. All these factors are potentially present.

Further to the scratches there have also been blows causing patches of paint loss, which are linear in places indicating juddering strikes (Fig. 16).



Figure 16. Linear abrasions resulting in paint detachment. The vertical lighter and darker ridges and furrows are paint brush strokes. Again, the false colouring is the result of side lighting. Scale is mm.

It is noticeable that there is an absence of dirt accumulation in the edge crevasses of the detached paint patches indicating the damage is relatively recent, or storage in a clean environment.

The upper jaw of the upper left boar's head has received blows, but the paint loss extends beyond the strikes.

The silver ground was likely painted first with the heads painted over it (see below). The delamination has mostly removed all layers of paint, including the silver, to reveal the underlying stone (Fig 17).



There is a surface impurity most noticeable on the blue ground but present also on other painted colours. It has the effect of dulling the colour, the original deeper tint being exposed by the scratches (Fig. 18). It is greyish and the distribution across the blue ground is nearly uniform and is strongly attached. This material has

not been determined, it could be a chemical reaction of the paint to an environment or an accumulation of air bourn particles, very possibly when the paint was wet.



Figure 18. A grey surface deposit is almost uniformly distributed across the blue background. The truer colour of the blue is exposed by the scratches.

8. Artistry and Materials

The plaque is hand painted, quickly executed with confident brushstrokes, for example, the boars' heads (Fig 19).

The paints and painting have only been analysed visually however these observations gives some indication of the materials and their application.

It is suspected that within the gold border the entire area was given the silver background wash. The other paints for the boars' heads, blue ground, spearhead details, chevron sculpting and black border painted on top. The silver ground appears in the boars' eyes, spearheads and chevron. It is difficult to be certain about this as the silver, as an undercoat, becomes detached together with the coloured layers above in the places where these are missing. There are very few places where the silver has survived when the paint above has been chipped or peeled away.



Figure 19. Upper right boar's head painted with quick confident brushstrokes.

The brown paints of the boars' heads and blue ground were viscous, the latter more so. They both contain grit like inclusions for which three reasons are advanced. The artists, or their apprentices, making paints themselves by grinding ingredients, painting may have been in a dusty environment, or quick application of paint may induce air bubbles. All these factors may be present.

Around each spearhead there is a clear ridge where the thick blue paint rises above them (Fig. 20). Possibly a mask was used (the opposite of a stencil) for each spearhead, with cut-outs of the spear shapes placed in the plaque and the blue painted over them. The cut-outs then lifted leaving a distinctive ridge at their edges. Using masks is not straightforward, if thin and flexible they would buckle under the brush strokes, ideally they would be rigid but still need holding down and removing carefully. The paint must be thick, as it is, otherwise it would

bleed under the mask. Alternatively the outlines of the spearheads could be painted freehand and the ridges simply a consequence of the blue paint being thick. The spearheads are all slightly different.

The outline ridges of the spearheads become clear with side lit images (Fig. 20). The same spearhead is shown in the split image (Fig. 21), normal lighting was used for the left-hand image (A) and side lighting (B), hence the colour difference. Also apparent in the latter image is the simplicity with which shadows were painted on the spearheads to give a three-dimensional effect. A few strokes with brown paint were sufficient, down the centre a broad one on the shadow side and thinner on the other side. This stroke also encroaches on to the blue ground and in doing so exaggerates the dark shadow.



Figure 20. The upper left spearhead imaged with a side light to show the outline ridge caused by use of a mask. The spearhead shaped mask was held in position while the background blue was painted around it.

A use of masks also explains the very straight upper edges of the chevron. Additionally, the chevron is not upright, the right slope is steeper than the left.



Figure 21. The final details of the spearhead were added with just a few quick.

9. Identification

9.5. Location in the Church and Removal

Descriptions of Herefordshire churches and their furnishings were compiled by the Rev. Charles Bird in the years 1842 to 1851. At Staunton on Wye he describes the plaque in sufficient detail uniquely to identify and it in the context of a memorial tablet. The tablet commemorates Charles Griffiths and his wife Susanna, giving their ages and death dates.

“on the s(outh) wall, Chas Griffiths. ob. Feb 1818.
aged 72, - Susanna, his widow, ob. Jan. 18. 1842.
aged 81. arms. 3 Boar's heads argent, a chevron
argent inter 3 lance heads.”

The tablet is still present above the pulpit (Fig. 22). Charles Griffiths and Susanna Powell married at Brobury in 1780 and were resident in the now demolished Church House in Staunton on Wye. The families are being researched though there is no indication so far that either had any rightful claim to the arms. It was not unknown in the nineteenth-century for families to boost their social standing by claiming honours which they were not entitled to have.

Bird's description implies a close association of the Griffiths tablet and the arms, but it is difficult to see where or how the plaque was placed. The reverse side of the plaque shows it was designed to be placed at an angle or on something that was at an angle. The tablet, however, appears to be complete with no indications of any appropriate angles.

With no known later reference to the plaque the date for its removal could be any time after the mid-1800s. Furthermore, the is the question as to why the plaque was removed and not the memorial tablet. Possibly it was realised to be a sham.

9.6. Armorial Bearings Tax

Displays of armorial bearings were taxed between 1798 and 1944.

After the tax was introduced, there were uncertainties on how the law was applied with local revenue inspectors making different decisions.



Figure 22. The Griffiths memorial tablet in Staunton on Wye parish church referred to by Charles Bird above the pulpit. It commemorates Charles Griffiths and his wife Susanna (nee Powell). The tablet to the left remembers their children.

The tax was on a sliding scale, the first two categories were dependent on the user already being liable for other taxes such as having windows, servants or carriages. Two guineas for arms displayed on a carriage, and a guinea for display anywhere else if liable for any of the then duties on inhabited houses. A third category is a catch-all half a guinea for everyone else (half a guinea then is nearly £100 today).

Originally the liability was on the “user or wearer”, but this was amended in 1803 to include those who “cause to be used”. Intentional and unintentional use (the latter where someone has other person’s arms) were both liable.

The only stated exemptions were for the royal family, and later for bearings used in trade. Apart from these the definition of ‘armorial bearings’ was very wide as was the liability. For example, the owner of a spoon bought second-hand with an engraved cornucopia could be liable, though enforcement was lax. The law was further amended later in the century, with increased fees in less categories and with the extra exceptions but none that appear relevant.

There were reports of people paying the tax when they need not and others not paying when they should, whether intentionally or not. It can be guessed that people stopped displaying their arms to avoid payment, like the blocking up windows to avoid the window tax.

Where arms are displayed in a church there is the question of who “causes it to be used”. The family would have been the original cause, but the parish church officers would have given consent. There are no surviving records of cases that help resolve this question, but decisions would be with the local revenue collector if he was diligent enough to seek payment. A best guess is that liability would fall to the family as a parish church would not likely accept responsibility for the extra expenditure. A working assumption is that the family would meet a demand for payment, if any, but what if later the family retained no interest in paying the tax or no longer had a presence in the parish? In that situation the parish church officers may have been held to causing the continued display of the arms, leading them to remove them. Arms have continued to be displayed in many other churches.

Whenever the plaque in Staunton on Wye church was removed it is unknown where it was stored until it was found on a pew after the recent restoration works. The contractors who would have placed it there have not provided an answer.

9.7. Heraldry

An initial search using likely blazons produced some candidate families but none that had known connections with the church or parish. A fit for a blazon is,

“Arg(ent). three boar's heads erased p(ro)p(e)r. HOGG”, (Papworth 1874, Vol II, p. 923).

The location of the Hogg family is not given.

The names Griffiths and Powell written on the reverse of the plaque are not yet regarded as certain. A search of Papworth with these names produced,

“Sa(ble). a chev(ron). betw. three spearheads or embrued gold. POWELL, Castle Madoc, Brecknock”, (Vol I, p. 450),

"Arg(ent). three boar's heads coupéd sa(ble)."..." POWELL, Worthen and All Stretton, co. Salop" (Vol II p. 923) and a similar blazon but “armed gu” belonging to BLAYNEY, Keynsham, Heref, derived from ap GRIFFITH, (Vol II, p924).

The first of the Powell entries is the wrong colour black (*sable*) as in the second with the boars' heads black whereas on the plaque they are painted in natural colours (*proper*). It is a lack of satisfactory entries in Papworth for Griffith and Powell, given the publication year, 1874, that casts some doubts, unless there are omissions because there is no surviving family or the plaque was retouched and the colours altered.

A post interregnum date would be advantageous as documentary evidence of a marriage or events in the family's lives ought to survive. A marriage would not necessarily have been within the parish, but a memorial indicates a possible death or at least a benefaction. None of the arms of the known families in the vicinity prior to that era correspond to the two on the plaque.

A fuller discussion of the heraldry and possible identifications is available at <https://churchmonumentsociety.org/2020/08/21/staunton-on-wye-the-heraldic-plaque>.

10. Bibliography

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