



*A Salisbury-Cathedral-centric view of History.*

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## PLANE SPEAKING

I was drawn to Mottisfont Abbey because its London Plane tree (*Platanus x hispanica*) is the largest in the country with a girth of 38.74 feet and a coverage of 16,146 square feet.

A priory was established by William Briwere, adviser to Kings Richard I, John and Henry III, in 1201. He was also a signatory to Magna Carta. Mottisfont became a place of pilgrimage as it was supposed to house the forefinger of John the Baptist - I can just imagine the salesman/pardoner's 'Delboy' spiel.

In 1536 the priory and its lands were exchanged for the villages of Chelsea and Paddington; they obviously did not play Monopoly in those days. William, Lord Sandys then converted the building into a Tudor house. In

1934, Gilbert Russell, a descendant of William Briwere, bought the estate which was given to the National Trust by his wife in 1957 after her husband died. One tree on the estate is the Oakley Oak with a girth of 35.23 feet, which must predate the abbey.



## CADAVER TOMBS - 1

Cathedral guide and medievalist Sue Stileman has written a fascinating article on this subject. It is too long for one edition of J&T so I have split it into three episodes. If you want the whole work in one go then it is on the website under 'The Column' (Guest Writers).



I joined the Wednesday morning guiding team in February 2023. I'm an early medievalist by training but since being at the cathedral have found myself becoming more and more fascinated by the late medieval period. This is thanks in part to the presence of two cadaver tombs in the cathedral, those of Thomas Bennett and George Sydenham.

Bennett was Precentor between 1542 and 1558 (prior to that he'd been secretary to Cardinal Wolsey), while Sydenham (d 1524) was Archdeacon and Chaplain to Henry VIII. The two tombs lie close to one another in the north-east transept and north choir aisle respectively. The identification of Sydenham's tomb, which lacks the tomb chest and identifying features of Bennett's, was surmised from an inscription and heraldry contained in a window that once stood opposite the tomb but was lost in the 18th century.



*Figure 1 Thomas Bennett's cadaver tomb, Salisbury cathedral*



*Figure 2 George Sydenham's cadaver tomb, Salisbury cathedral*

These two tombs were historically referred to as the 'fasting men' because of the wasted appearance of the effigies. From this, a legend developed that they'd fasted for forty days and nights, reducing themselves to the condition of skeletons and starving to death, but as Canon Fletcher noted in his lecture on Bennett delivered at Salisbury cathedral on May 2nd 1924 (a copy of which is in the archive), this was not correct. They are actually part of a specific funerary tradition that belongs to a precise period of history and are steeped in the rich symbolism of the medieval Catholic Church.

Cadaver tombs such as the two in the cathedral are a type of transi tomb where the effigy is designed to show the deceased's corpse in a specific state of decay. They are part of the Memento Mori tradition which translates as 'remember you must die' and are rare outside the Continent. There are only forty-four extant examples in England and Wales, one in Scotland and either nine or eleven (depending which sources you read) in Ireland. There were probably more of them before the Reformation but to date they have not received much scholarly attention and the little we know about them is the result of the work of a handful of academics.

Cadaver tombs begin to appear around 1400 and stopped being made around 1550. Thomas Bennett's (1554) is therefore one of the last. Thomas was mortally sick in 1554 and asked for his tomb to be completed, which it was with the date duly inscribed, then he recovered and lived for another four years, eventually dying in 1558. His tomb belongs to the brief period of Catholic restoration under Mary Tudor, sandwiched between the Protestant reigns of King Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth I. As such it is unique.

The development of cadaver tombs was almost certainly a response to the Black Death (1348-1350) which claimed the lives of around a third of the population. Mortality rates were highest amongst the poor where inadequate nutrition, poor hygiene and low living standards greatly influenced survival rates, but while the peasant classes bore the immediate brunt of the infection all sections of society were eventually affected by it, either directly or indirectly. The loss of agricultural labourers meant fewer hands to work the land and as a result, over time the countryside began to look different. Deserted villages, lone churches marooned in empty fields and, eventually, the steep ridge-and-furrow field systems eroding into shallow ripples were all physical reminders of the ravages of the Black Death that persisted long after the disease itself was over, but it also remained vivid in people's minds. By 1400, when the first cadaver tombs



Figure 3 Image of Danse Macabre courtesy of Wikipedia

begin to appear, the disease was still well within living memory, the spectre of death having haunted the formative years of the older members of communities. It's understandable then that

people were consumed with trying to explain death. It's no coincidence that the Danse Macabre also appears at this time, with its images of skeletons rising up from the earth to dance with each other or the living. Both the Danse Macabre and cadaver tombs reveal an obsession with death and a fixation on the afterlife, a desire to manage and influence both and so make them less terrifying.

Both are also physical manifestations of the Catholic idea of purgatory, the place where everyone except Saints (who went straight to heaven) and really naughty people (who went straight to hell) could expect to spend time paying off their sins. By praying for the recently deceased, friends and family could reduce the amount of time their loved ones spent in purgatory. The same idea finds expression in chantry chapels, although these predate cadaver tombs by more than a century. The sole purpose of a cadaver tomb was to elicit prayers for the soul of the departed. They achieve this in two ways: 1) moving the onlooker to pity and 2) reflecting the onlooker's fate. Many cadaver tombs have an inscription which read: as I am so shall you be. The message is clear: it doesn't matter who you are in life, the same fate awaits us all.

Cadaver tombs are formulaic almost to the point of uniformity. That's an incredible thought for the 15th century and it raises the intriguing possibility of a team of specialist stone sculptors, probably trained on the continent (most likely in Italy), travelling the country creating them. I asked some of the cathedral mason team what they thought of this theory and they thought it quite likely, given the level of craftsmanship, skill and expertise involved.

All cadaver tombs show the body in the same state of decomposition, known in the medieval period as the wet stage of death. There was a widespread belief during this period that corpses in the wet stage retained sentience. This is important, because if a corpse could still feel, then whoever saw the tomb would be moved to pray for it. Many cadaver tombs were located on main pilgrimage routes, so we know they were designed to be seen.

Most of them are also anatomically correct. This is something we take for granted today, but it was an extraordinary achievement in the medieval period when books on anatomy weren't widely available and human dissection was forbidden. In conversation with cathedral librarian, Dr Anne Dutton, I learnt that the first major illustrated anatomical treatise, *De humani corporis fabrica* (on the fabric of the human body) by Vesalius wasn't published until 1543. The illustrations it contained would have made it very expensive so it is unlikely it would have been widely available. At that date, it's also too late to have influenced the makers of most of the UK's cadaver tombs. So how did the creators of these tombs become sufficiently familiar with the inside of a human body to reproduce it so accurately in stone?

Opposition from the Church meant that dissection of human bodies was illegal in England until the 1752 Murder Act (which allowed the bodies of murderers to be dissected by the Company of Surgeons in London); however it had been practised in the 3rd Century in Alexandria by the Greek physician Herophilus of Chalcedon; by Galen (130-210) in Rome (when it was limited to observations made through the wounds of dead or injured gladiators), and once at the behest of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) in southern Italy after a suspicious death. To be continued in next edition.

#### THE INKHORN CONTROVERSY

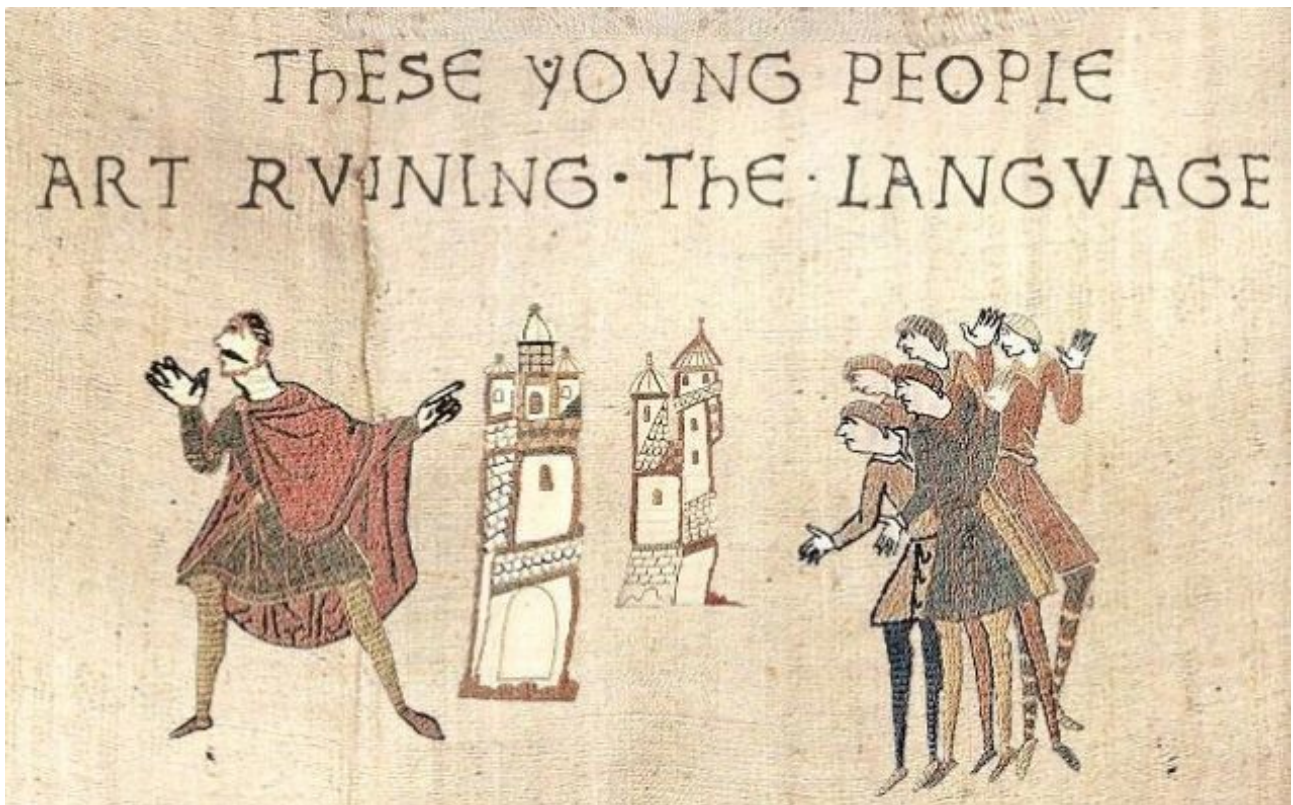
I came across this title in Melvyn Bragg's *The Adventure of English* (Hodder & Stoughton 2003) where it refers to the *Inkhorn* words which were new, usually elaborate, classically based terms that surfaced





during the Renaissance. Such words were often duplicates; Melvyn Bragg sites: benison/benediction, blame/blaspheme, chance/cadence, frail/fragile, poor/pauper. This controversy divided the academics as never before with the avant garde mining Greek and Latin for new words and the reactionaries not wishing English to be *polluted by foreign tongues*, despite it already being a melange.

Richard Mulcaster (1530 - 1611), the headmaster of Merchant Taylor's School, wrote: *I do not think that anie language, be it whatsoever, is better able to utter all arguments, either with more pith, or greater planesse, than our English tung is....I honor the Latin, but I worship the English.* His view prevailed and the language was immeasurably enriched. Imagine scientific discovery without being able to invent Greek and Latin based names. Then of course there is the Arts: William Shakespeare wrote about himself as *a man on fire for new words*.



The irony is that in some ways the controversy is still with us - you can see it plainly in France where the Académie Française vainly attempts to stem the inward flow of Anglo-Americanisms. English though is alive and well and living in publications like J&T. Cartoon *courtesy of Linked-in*.

FYI Sir Isaac Pitman was born in Trowbridge in 1813, the son of a hand-loom weaver. He worked as a clerk in Court Mills before leaving to train as a teacher. His *Stenographic sound hand* has come down to us as Pitman Shorthand. His memorial plaque is in Bath Abbey.