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# RECENT RESEARCHES IN CHISLEHURST CHURCH

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## INVESTIGATION OF THE WALSINGHAM VAULT

The chapel at the east end of the north aisle of St. Nicholas' church has for centuries been associated with the owners of the local Scadbury and Frognal estates, many of whom are buried in vaults under the chapel floor. In the north-east corner is a tomb-chest over which are epitaphs commemorating Sir Edmund Walsingham, Lieutenant of the Tower of London for twenty-two years, who died in 1549, and also his descendant, Sir Thomas Walsingham, whose death occurred in 1630 (Plate I).

Sir Thomas is known to have been a patron of the famous Elizabethan dramatist, Christopher Marlowe, and to have entertained him at Scadbury. This has given rise to speculation on the part of an American theatre critic, Mr Calvin Hoffman, that the Walsingham tomb might contain evidence to support his belief that the plays generally attributed to Shakespeare were in fact written by Marlowe.<sup>1</sup>

In 1956, Mr. Hoffman obtained permission to open the Walsingham tomb-chest and in May of that year the front was removed to reveal nothing more than a quantity of sand. Notwithstanding this setback, a new investigation was sanctioned by the Rector and Parish Church Council and a faculty was granted by the Diocesan Chancellor in 1984 to examine the contents of the vault adjoining the Walsingham memorial. By the Chancellor's direction the work was to be undertaken in a manner subject to the approval of the Archaeological Consultant to the Rochester Diocese. Permission

<sup>1</sup> See notes by the late Thomas Bushell in *Arch. Cant.*, lxix (1955), 219-21.



The Walsingham Tomb in the north-east Corner of Scadbury Chapel

was also given for the re-siting of the large monument to Earl Sydney (*d.* 1890) from its position near the centre of the chapel to the north-west corner in order that the area could be more conveniently used for purposes of worship (Plate II).

Opening of the vault took place between 28th November and 4th December, 1984, under the supervision of Mrs. A.E. Stocker, B.Arch., R.I.B.A., and observed by the present writer. The location of the original entrance being unknown, a hole about 1 ft. 6 in. wide was made in the chapel floor immediately in front of the tomb-chest. This revealed a brick chamber measuring approximately 9 ft. from north to south and 7 ft. from east to west. Lead coffins, estimated to be about thirteen in number, were seen stacked in three layers, the top of the uppermost being not more than 2 ft. 6 in. below the roof of the vault. Consequently, opportunity to examine the interior was very limited, although some of the investigating party managed to enter the confined space to record what was visible. Signs of the original entrance could be detected at the south end and the roof was seen to be a segmental barrel vault turned in red brick. Although the floor was not revealed, the height of the chamber was estimated to



Monument to Earl Sydney, after its Removal to the north-west Corner of the Chapel,  
1985

have been not less than 6 ft. The red bricks of the walls were laid in English bond, each measuring approximately 9 by 4½ by 2 in. So far as could be judged, the construction was compatible with a late-fifteenth century or sixteenth-century date. It was noted that the vault extended under the tomb-chest to within a few inches of the north wall of the chapel.

Coffins at the base of the stack had been crushed by the weight of those above and there was consequent disturbance to the positions of those in the upper levels. Plates on five coffins could be read and indicated the burials of the Rt. Hon. John Thomas Viscount Sydney (1831), his wife Sophia (1795), and his children: Charles (1773), Henry, aged seven, (1773), and Albinia Townshend, aged four (1770). Presumably, the coffins of the Walsinghams were in the bottom layer and could therefore not be investigated.

Mr. Hoffman was present at the opening and, having viewed the interior of the vault through the hole in the chapel floor, agreed that in the circumstances no more could be done to pursue his enquiry.

Another vault is known to lie beneath the chapel, containing thirty-two coffins. This was finally sealed at the end of the nineteenth

century after the burial of the Earl and Countess Sydney. At that time an air vent was constructed from the vault to a point outside the vestry. A pipe, presumably related to this, was observed running roughly south to north through the vault opened in November 1984.

#### THE WALSINGHAM TOMB-CHEST

The south side and west end of the tomb-chest have panels of Gothic decoration and it has been described as 'early fifteenth-century'.<sup>2</sup> There is no inscription on the tomb itself but the Renaissance-style panels above were added in 1581 and bear that date. Sir Edmund Walsingham, who is described on his epitaph as lying 'beneath this stony bower', was buried in 1549 which is later than the apparent age of the tomb-chest with its medieval decoration.<sup>3</sup> In his will, Sir Edmund stipulated that if he should die within twenty miles of Chislehurst, his body was 'to lye in the Tombe within the Chappell there where myself have usually sitten',<sup>4</sup> and this must refer to the vault as the tomb-chest was found in 1956 to contain no interment. A suggestion has been made that the tomb-chest was provided for Thomas Walsingham II who died in 1467 and under whose patronage the north aisle and Scadbury chapel may have been built. If this is correct, it might be taken to imply that the vault was made in the fifteenth century, seeing that the tomb-chest is set above it. Possibly, however, the tomb-chest pre-dates the vault in origin but was dismantled and re-erected after the construction of the latter. This may have been done by Sir Edmund's father, James Walsingham, whose gravestone bearing the indent of his brass, still lies in the middle of the chapel, having been removed from its original place on the north side. James died in 1540 and, for reasons previously stated, it appears that the vault already existed when his son Edmund made his will in 1549. On the limited evidence so far available, the respective ages of the tomb-chest and vault remain undetermined, but it is at least certain that the mortal remains of several generations of Walsinghams were interred here from the middle of the sixteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Newman, *Buildings of England – West Kent and the Weald* (1969), 208.

<sup>3</sup> T.W.T. Tatton-Brown has shown, however, that late-medieval type tomb-chests persisted into the sixteenth century; for example, Archbishop Wareham's tomb (1507) in the north transept of Canterbury Cathedral and the More memorial in Chelsea church (1532). See *Antiq. Journ.*, lx (1980), 229. St. George's, Beckenham, contains the Perpendicular type tomb-chest of Sir Humphrey Style (1552) which shows no Renaissance influences (*Buildings of England*, 141).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *The History of Chislehurst* (1899) by Webb, Miller and Beckwith.

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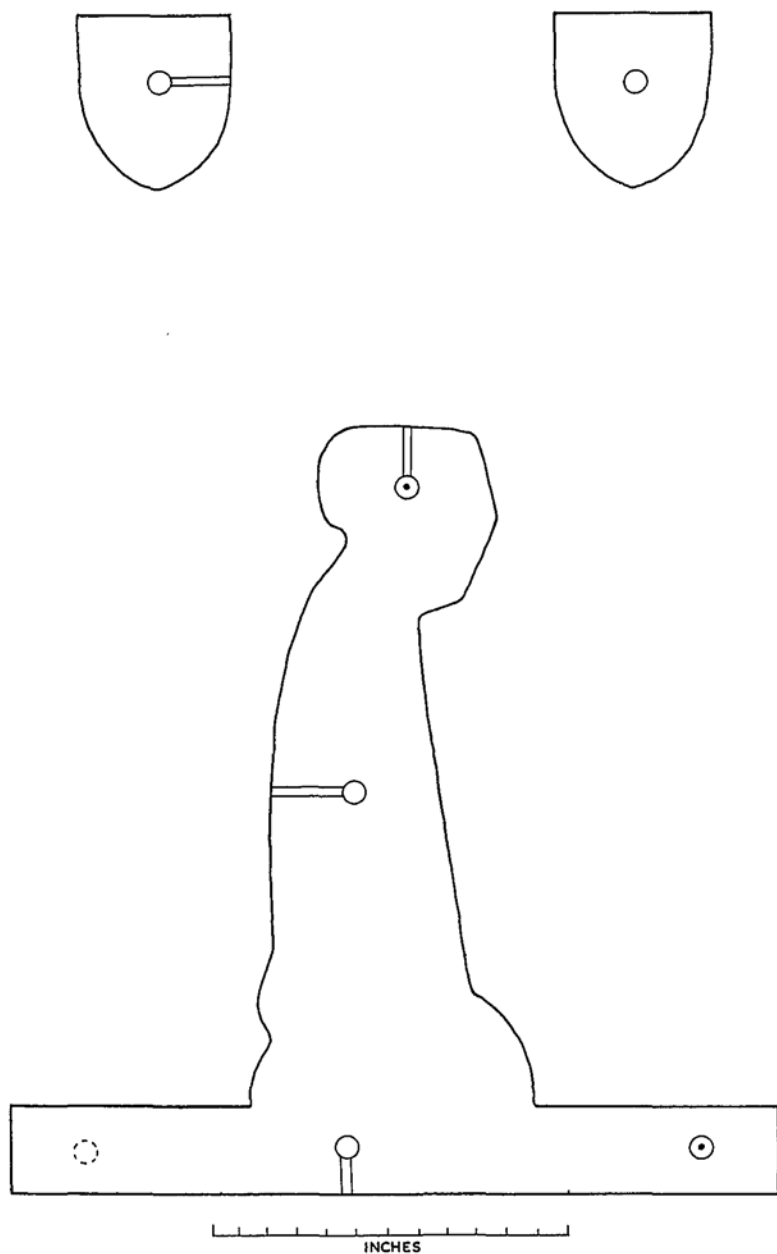


Fig. 1. Indent of the lost Brass to Constance Dryland (*d.* 1476), Wife of Thomas Walsingham II and later of John Grene.

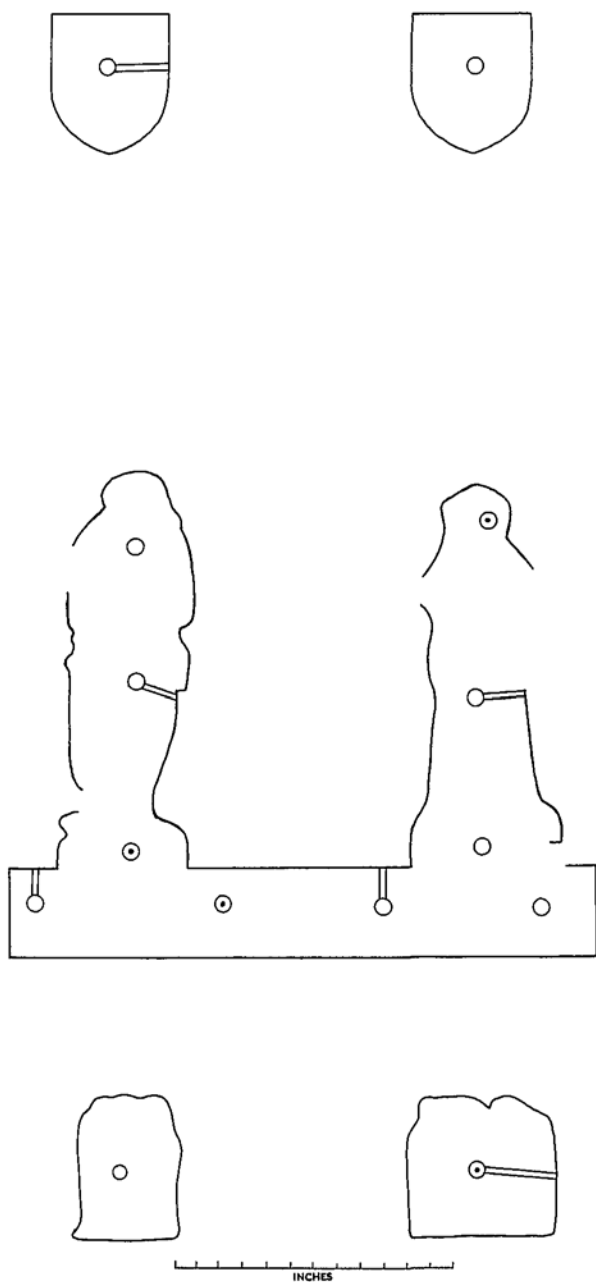


Fig. 2. Indent of the lost Brass to James Walsingham (*d.* 1540) and his Wife Elienor.

## INDENTS OF LOST BRASSES

On the floor immediately inside the entrance to the Scadbury chapel from the north aisle, there is a Purbeck gravestone bearing the clear indent of a brass consisting of the effigy of a lady wearing a butterfly head-dress, accompanied by a foot inscription plate and two shields. Thorpe noted this in his *Registrum Roffense* (1769) when the inscription was in place and he recorded it thus:

'Here lieth Custume Drylonde sumtyme the wyf of John Grene squyer, the doughter of James Drylonde, squyer of Devynton beside Feversham in Kente which died in the yere of oure lord MoCCCCXXVI the XIII day of November. On whos soule God have mercy. Amen.'

Elsewhere this lady is styled Constance Dryland, and it is recorded that she was first married, in 1459, to Thomas Walsingham II whom she survived. Her second husand was John Grene (*d.* 1485) who thus acquired the Manor of Scadbury which had belonged to the Walsinghams since Thomas Walsingham I bought it in 1424.

No record exists as to the arms shown on the two shields, but almost certainly one would have been DRYLAND: *Gules, gouttée d'eau, a fess nebulée argent*.<sup>5</sup>

From the fact that the head of the effigy is now to the east, it is apparent that the slab has been moved and this would account for some evident damage to its foot. It was in its present position, however, when Thorpe described it in the eighteenth century. The dimensions of the stone are approximately 4 ft. 5 in. by 2 ft. 4 in. There are lead plugs formerly retaining dowels for securing the brass to the stone, with pouring-channels from the edge of the indents.

In the centre of the chapel adjoining the east end of the Dryland gravestone, is another eroded Purbeck marble slab, measuring approximately 6 ft. 9 in. by 2 ft. 6 in. It bears the indents of two figures, a foot inscription plate, two shields and two groups of children. The outline of the two major figures is destroyed in places by flaking of the surface and the effigies had been lost when Thorpe recorded the then remaining inscription in the *Registrum*:

'Orate pro animabus Jacobi Walsyngham armigeri et Elienore uxoris ejus qui quidem Jacobus obiit X die Decembris anno domini M<sup>o</sup>.V<sup>o</sup>.XL et domina Elienora obiit . . . die . . . anno domini M<sup>o</sup>.V<sup>o</sup>. . . . Quorum animabus propicietur Deus. Amen.'

<sup>5</sup> These arms occur in a window in Nettlestead church as described in *Arch. Cant.*, xxviii (1909), 232. They are allusive: the red (*gules*) background indicating DRY LAND, refreshed by drops of water (*gouttée d'eau*) emanating from a cloud (*fess nebulée*).



The two effigies are identifiable as representatives of a somewhat debased type common in the first half of the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> James was shown in armour, bare-headed and turned slightly towards his wife who was correspondingly inclined, wearing the pedimental head-dress fashionable at the period. According to Thorpe, one of the shields – presumably above the head of James – bore the arms of Walsingham, given as *Pellettee, a cross coupé checky*.<sup>7</sup> Over the head of Elienor was WALSINGHAM impaling WRITTLE: *A bend nebulée, a cross croset in the sinister point*.<sup>8</sup> She was the daughter and co-heiress of Walter Writtle (d. 1473) of Bobbingworth in Essex.

James Walsingham was one of five children born to Constance Dryland in the eight years of her marriage to Thomas Walsingham II. He was born in 1462 and inherited from his mother estates at Davington and Royton. He married Elienor Writtle by the time he was eighteen and they were united for sixty years, she surviving him as shown by the fact that the date of her death was left unrecorded on the brass. James was Sheriff of Kent in 1496–97 and he was at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. Among his possessions were the manors of Chelsfield and Horton Kirby.

Thorpe refers to a plate depicting seven daughters and the former existence of one showing four sons. Names of three of the daughters are known: Cicely, Elizabeth and Margaret. The eldest son was Edmund previously mentioned, who was knighted at the Battle of Flodden in 1513 and became Lieutenant of the Tower under Henry VIII. A younger son, William, became father of the famous Sir Francis Walsingham, Secretary of State to Elizabeth I.

For a period before 1896 the gravestones in the chapel were covered by a wooden floor which afforded them some protection. Traces of pitch in the Walsingham indents show that the plates were bedded in this material and there are the usual lead securing plugs and pouring-channels..

The chapel floor has recently been covered by a wall-to-wall carpet so that the indents described in these notes are no longer available for inspection.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the brass to Edward Hawte (1537) and his wife Elizabeth in Erith church, and Sir Thomas Brooke (1529) and his wife at Cobham.

<sup>7</sup> Otherwise: *Gules, bezantée, a cross humettée, counter-compony, argent and azure*.

<sup>8</sup> *Sable, on a bend argent, a bendlet wavy of the field, in the sinister chief a cross bottonnee fitchée*. There is a drawing by Thomas Fisher, F.S.A., (c. 1800) of the gravestone in the Society of Antiquaries collection showing the shields in position, but the rubbing of the shield showing the Walsingham arms listed by Griffin and Stephenson in their *Monumental Brasses in Kent* (1923), 81, cannot now be traced.

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### THE EARL SYDNEY MONUMENT

The recent re-siting of this memorial, the work of Sir E. Boehm and Alfred Gilbert, has had the effect of obscuring features on its north and west sides. It is appropriate, therefore, to record the following:

On the north side is inscribed:

AND NOW, LORD, WHAT IS MY HOPE?  
TRULY MY HOPE IS EVEN IN THEE.

PSALM XXXIX, 8

NOW THE LABOURER'S TASK IS O'ER;  
NOW THE BATTLE DAY IS PAST;  
NOW UPON THE FARTHER SHORE  
LANDS THE VOYAGER AT LAST.  
FATHER, IN THY GRACIOUS KEEPING  
LEAVE WE NOW THY SERVANT SLEEPING

"EARTH TO EARTH AND DUST TO DUST"  
CALMLY NOW THE WORDS WE SAY  
LEAVING HIM TO SLEEP IN TRUST  
TILL THE RESURRECTION DAY.  
FATHER IN THY GRACIOUS KEEPING  
LEAVE WE NOW THY SERVANT SLEEPING.

At the west end, close against the panels of the screen, is a fine heraldic achievement, now permanently obscured.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Much of the biographical material and some of the other information in these notes is derived from the monumental *History of Chislehurst* (1899) by E. A. Webb, G. W. Miller and J. Beckwith, a work commissioned by Canon Francis Murray, Rector of Chislehurst.

