

# 1THE MEDIEVAL EFFIGY AT ST HELEN'S, ESCRICK

Brian and Moira Gittos

## Introduction

Very little is known about the history of the military effigy preserved in the church of St. Helen, Escrick in the East Riding of Yorkshire. It was presumably transferred from the medieval church, close to Escrick Hall, to each of its two successors on the present site. However, since the Lascelles family, who held Escrick through the thirteenth and most of the fourteenth-century were patrons of nearby Thicket Priory (amongst other establishments), the possibility that it was brought to Escrick following the Dissolution cannot be discounted.<sup>1</sup> For many years the effigy rested on the floor at the west end of the north aisle in a sadly mutilated state, with the lower part of the figure missing. It does not appear to have attracted the attention of pre-twentieth century antiquaries and the first detailed description of which we are aware is that of W. M. I'Anson in 1927.<sup>2</sup> The effigy was then 'Placed in a modern arched and canopied recess, specially made for its accommodation, in the *exterior* wall of the modern church....'. This recess can still be seen on the south side of the chancel. His accompanying drawing shows the effigy much as it is today and he dated it to c.1325. However, research by the present authors has indicated that the effigy is earlier in date. The revised dating has not met with universal approval and the significance of some of the armour details, particularly the method of attaching the scabbard to the sword belt has been the subject of vigorous debate. Nevertheless, this effigy belongs to a group of figures (which we have termed Yorkshire Series B) which were some of the finest in England at the time and the Escrick knight shows some features rarely seen on other effigies, which make him of national significance.<sup>3</sup> They include the long sleeved gown and the cloth draped across the top of his head.

## Description

The effigy is carved from what appears to be a block of Magnesian Limestone which, in the medieval period, was used for sculpture and church building throughout the area, especially in the building of York Minster itself. Much came from quarries in the vicinity of Tadcaster.

It is broken off across the thighs and the lower part has been lost. There is heavy damage to the edges of the shield and elsewhere, such as the hands and some of the edges of the base slab. The whole effigy is worn and weathered with the loss of much detail, including facial features. However, sufficient remains to reveal the quality of the carving and much of the original design.

The figure is shown recumbent with his head resting on two cushions, the upper one set diagonally, and he holds his hands at prayer. Although the lower part of the figure is lost, the angle of his right thigh, seen under the skirt of his surcoat, suggest that his legs were crossed. This was the normal posture for military effigies from the second half of the thirteenth-century until the 1340s, so it would be surprising if it were not so. His feet almost certainly rested on an animal, usually a lion or a dog, but all trace of this has gone. He is kitted out with a full suit of mail, including protection for the hands, which are secured at the wrists by small buckled straps. Over his head he wears a separate coif of mail held in position by a narrow strap of leather (or fillet) and probably with a skull cap underneath, revealed by the slight bulge in the coif. He wears a long surcoat over the mail which has bulky sleeves and would probably have reached down to about mid-calf. It has a narrow waist belt buckled at the front, with the free end hanging right down the figure as far as the break. On his left arm he carries a long plain shield without any carved heraldry and since the arms were a key means of identifying the figure, they must have been painted. It hangs from a strap over his right shoulder (guige) and there are two more straps (enarms), through which he holds it on his left arm. His sword, in its scabbard, is carried by a heavy belt, with a large buckle, resting diagonally across his hips. Its free end, after passing through the buckle, loops up, behind and over the belt, to hang down on his right side. The detail of its strap end is mostly worn away but it is ornamented with large, domed, circular mounts, set at intervals. Where the belt is twisted, so that the underside is shown, one of them can be seen as a depression in the leather. The attachment of the sword belt to the scabbard is also very worn but was of the interlocking ring method. The scabbard has two bands decorated with lozenges, one above the other, which carry the ring fittings for attaching it to the belt. A cloth is draped across the top of the head, spilling down onto the cushions and reaching the base slab on which the figure rests. The figure shows no significant undercutting and the integrally carved base slab has a plain chamfered edge which is well preserved down his right side but is otherwise obscured (especially by the shield) or broken off.

### **Special features**

The Escrick effigy has three special features, the sleeved surcoat, ring scabbard attachment and the cloth over his head.

Sleeved surcoats on English medieval military effigies are extremely rare and nearly all of them are to be found on figures of Yorkshire Series B which are located at: Temple Church in London (but known to have come from Yorkshire); Goldsborough (W. Riding); Norton (Co.

Durham); Bedale (N. Riding); East Harlsey (N. Riding); Howden (E. Riding) and Amotherby (N. Riding). The only other example on an English effigy of which we are aware is at Willoughby on the Wolds in Nottinghamshire. However, an incised figure slab at Gothem (Belgium) dated 1296 has voluminous sleeves<sup>4</sup> and a carved figure on the wooden choir stalls in Winchester Cathedral, holding a sword and shield, has a similar surcoat. The choir stalls date from 1307/8<sup>5</sup> and it may have been a short lived fashion.

The use of rings to attach the scabbard to the sword belt was a development of the fourteenth century. It was a gradual change, but by the middle of the century it is the norm right across English military effigies. When this change began is the matter which has been hotly disputed and is important as far as the Escrick figure is concerned.<sup>6</sup> However, aside from this debate, other factors can be used to establish the date of the group, (see below).

Undoubtedly the most remarkable feature of the Escrick effigy is the cloth draped over the top of his head. At first sight this appears to be mantling – originally a cloth over the head to offer the wearer some protection from heat and, perhaps, rain. It develops as a heraldic feature in the later 14<sup>th</sup> and through the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, so that when crested helms were used as head rests on effigies, rather than cushions, it is depicted in association with the crest. However, the Escrick figure has cushions so the cloth is clearly not mantling. Similar features are found on five related effigies. They are: two figures at Coverham Abbey (N. Riding); Fountains Abbey (W. Riding); Scarborough Museum and Goldsborough (W. Riding) and probably Routh (E. Riding) The larger Coverham effigy has two angels either side of his head, which are shown holding up the cloth, lifting it from his face.<sup>7</sup> Face cloths (sudaria) were, at least sometimes, laid over the head as part of the burial preparations. When the tomb of Edward I (died 1307) was opened in 1774 it was observed that his face had been covered by a cloth ‘of crimson sarcenet’.<sup>8</sup> This explanation is supported by a detail shown at Goldsborough, where the cloth has been stitched to the upper cushion. The fact that in every case the cloth is drawn back to reveal the face, is highly significant and is likely to symbolise resurrection (on the Day of Judgement) with the angels assisting in the case of Coverham. We are aware of only one other example of a face cloth on a medieval effigy in England and this is the well preserved thirteenth-century effigy of a lady at Wolferlow in Herefordshire. Again she has angels beside her head drawing back the cloth.<sup>9</sup>

### **Comparison with other Yorkshire Effigies**

The group of medieval effigies to which the Escrick figure belongs commences in the later thirteenth century with a lady and a priest at Bedale and runs through the early fourteenth, to

end with the unfinished military figure at Butterwick (E. Riding) of c. 1317. They total some twenty-two effigies spanning about thirty years.<sup>10</sup> The earlier effigies are carved from sandstone (Series A) and the later figures in Magnesian Limestone (Series B). They show changes and development through the period and Escrick belongs to the very beginning of Series B which seems to have occurred c.1300 with three very closely related examples at Scarborough (sandstone), at Fountains Abbey and Escrick (both limestone). There are many differences between them but they all share telling details, particularly the handling of the belts, the set of the heads and the drapery of the gowns. Scarborough is the most complete but is also the most weathered and has undergone some local recutting probably for its reuse in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the head was re-shaped to represent a contemporary figure with a moustache and flowing hair in the fashion of the second quarter of the seventeenth century. New arms appear to have been roughly cut on the shield, presumably as a key part of the appropriation. Although incomplete and badly broken, the Fountains effigy has the best preserved surface detail, which was revealed when it was cleaned and conserved for the Yorkshire Abbeys exhibition in 1988.<sup>11</sup> There is subtle detail on the surface of the face cloth, to represent the material's texture. This may also have originally been the case with Escrick but all such fine detail has been lost. It is quite extraordinary to find this type of detail carved on a medieval effigy because it would normally have been the role of the applied paint to show such an effect. However, something similar can be seen on the veils of a little female figure seated by the legs of the Series B effigy at Norton (Co. Durham) and the Series A effigy of Muriel FitzAlan at Bedale.

### **Dating of the Escrick effigy**

Monumental effigies were expensive items, affordable only by the more affluent. Consequently (and setting aside clerics), most commemorate members of the gentry or nobility. These families sometimes favoured monastic houses for burial but they often chose the parish church close to their own land and their home. Because of this, it is important to understand who owned the manor of Escrick at this period. The situation, as described in the *VCH*, is clear: from 1219 the manor was held by the Lascelles family from the Honour of Richmond.<sup>12</sup> The head of the family in the latter part of the thirteenth century was Roger de Lascelles who died c.1300.<sup>13</sup> His heirs were his four daughters but Escrick itself was held by his widow, in dower, until her death in 1323.<sup>14</sup> By that time, one of the daughters had died and her portion went to her son Ralph by her husband, Ralph FitzRanulph. It was into his hands that three quarters of the manor were consolidate (one quarter having already found its

way to the crown).<sup>15</sup> He adopted the family name, sometimes being called Ralph de Lascelles, and he survived until at least 1342.<sup>16</sup>

Although there is no carved heraldry to help identify and date the Escrick effigy, other figures in the group do have heraldry and can be identified with some confidence. Notable amongst them is the effigy of Brian Fitzalan at Bedale who died in 1306 without a male heir. Sir Richard de Goldesburgh who died between 1300 and 1307 is one of a series of heads of the family of that name but his date is corroborated by the style of the fine canopied arch where he lies, its relationship with the chancel, the presence of grave slab of his wife Eva beside him and the 1330s effigy and tomb chest of his son on the other side of the same chancel.<sup>17</sup> A strong case can be made for the Series B figures at Howden Minster as representing Sir John de Metham (died 1311/12) and his wife Sybil<sup>18</sup> and, although the fine figure just over the Yorkshire border at Norton (co. Durham) has had his shield recut with much later heraldry, clues still remain as to his identity. The small shields on the canopy above his head suggest that he may have been Sir John de Lythegranes who died in 1303.<sup>19</sup> Of the two most closely related figures, there is little to indicate the original identity of the Scarborough effigy but the lion rampant on the shield of the Fountains Abbey figure provides some clue. Many families used the lion rampant as their arms but two cases of burials at Fountains Abbey are recorded during this period. Roger de Mowbray died abroad in 1297 and was brought back for burial at Fountains and in 1314 Henry Percy was interred in the Abbey.<sup>20</sup> Either might have had a Series B effigy but the place of the effigy in the series seems to favour Mowbray as the more likely candidate.

This is a very similar date to that we have already seen for the death of Roger de Lascelles. The next death of a male landholder at Escrick was Sir Ralph, after 1342. The effigy cannot be as late as 1342, so is likely to represent the Sir Roger who died just before 1300. The death of the last of a direct male line was a very significant event and often seems to have prompted the setting up of an expensive monument. A good example is the tomb of Nicholas Martyn at Puddletown in Dorset who died in 1595 and was also succeeded by four daughters.<sup>21</sup> It would not be surprising for Roger to be commemorated by an effigial monument.

In his account of Escrick, I'Anson said that he '...evidently commemorates Sir Thomas Lascelles (*ob.*1324), of Escrick'. However, Thomas de Lascelles did not hold the manor, only a messuage and a small amount of land, so this identification is based on a misunderstanding of the genealogy.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

The Escrick effigy can be recognised as belonging to a series of figures carved by a highly talented Yorkshire sculptor, at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It has a number of special features which, taken together, render it of national importance. Foremost of these is the depiction of a burial cloth drawn back to reveal the face. This is so rare a feature on medieval English effigies that only one further example is known to the authors apart from the handful on others from the same group of Yorkshire effigies. It may have been intended to show the knight's resurrection on the day of Judgement, which would be a very strong religious message. He wears a long sleeved surcoat which is almost as unusual on English military effigies as the face cloth and he is one of the earliest to show the ring method of attaching the scabbard to the sword belt. Whilst there is nothing to indicate the identity of this effigy, a likely candidate is Roger de Lascelles, lord of the manor of Escrick, who died c.1300 without a male heir.

## Notes

- 1 For the descent of the property see Allison, K.J. (ed.) *The Victoria History of the County of York. East Riding*, III (1976) 20. One instance of family patronage of monastic houses is Roger de Lascelles' 1291 licence to grant 100 acres of land in Escrick to the nuns of Thicket Priory, see Black, J.G., Isaacson, R.F. & Morris, G.J. (eds), *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Edward I, 1281-92*, (London, 1893) 427.
- 2 I'Anson W. M., 'The Mediaeval Military Effigies of Yorkshire: Chapter II', *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XXIX, (1927), 22-3 and Fig. 70.
- 3 B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019), Section 4. See also B. & M. Gittos, 'Yorkshire Effigies c. 1300 and their Place in English Sculpture', *Art and Symbolism (Pre-printed Papers from the Conference on Medieval Europe)*, 7, (1992), 209-15.
- 4 Creeny W. F., *Illustrations of Incised Slabs on the Continent of Europe*, (London, 1891), 27 and facing.
- 5 Lindley, P., 'The Medieval Sculpture of Winchester Cathedral', in Crook J. (ed.), *Winchester Cathedral: Nine Hundred Years 1093-1993*, (Winchester, 1993), 97-122, at 106.
- 6 B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019), Section 2b and Appendix A8.

- 7 B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019), Section 5c.
- 8 Ayloffe. J., An Account of the Body of King Edward the First as it appeared on opening his Tomb in the Year 1774, *Archaeologia*, III, (1775), 376-413.
- 9 For a photograph of the Wolferlow lady see RCHM (England), *Herefordshire Vol II-East*, (London, 1932), Plate 126, where she is described as ‘effigy of a woman, c. 1300’. She is also illustrated in Tummers H. A., *Early Secular Effigies in England ; The Thirteenth Century*, (Leiden, 1980), plates 144 and 147. The relevant detail is illustrated in B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019).
- 10 B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019), Section 4.
- 11 B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019), Section 5b.
- 12 For the descent of the property see Allison, K.J. (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of York: East Riding*, III, (1976), 20.
- 13 G.E.C., Gibbs, V. & Doubleday, H.A. (eds), *The Complete Peerage*, VII, (London, 1929), p 448. The editors believed that he probably died soon after his last royal summons in 1296.
- 14 Sharp, J.E.E.S. (ed.), *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, VI, Edward II*, (London, 1910) No. 425.
- 15 Allison, K.J. (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of York. East Riding*, III (1976), p 20.
- 16 Page, W. (ed), *Victoria County History: A History of the County of York: North Riding*, 1, (London, 1914), 258.
- 17 Gittos B. and M., ‘The Goldsborough Effigies’, *Church Monuments*, IX, (1994), 3-32; B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019), Section 3g.
- 18 Badham S., Gittos B. and Gittos M., ‘The Fourteenth-Century Monuments in the Saltmarshe Chapel at Howden, Yorkshire: Their History and Context’, in *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 68, (1996), 113 -55.

- 19 An account of the Norton effigy and its Heraldry is given in Hunter Blair, C. H., ‘Medieval Effigies in County Durham’, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4<sup>th</sup> series, VI, (1929), pp 1-51 & 24-6. He declines to attribute the effigy to any particular person but does identify one of the two original shields on the canopy as that of ‘John of Lythegraynes a great man in the Palatinate in the days of Bishop Bek (1283-1311)’, who himself could be represented by the second shield, bearing a cross moline.
- 20 B. & M. Gittos, *Interpreting Medieval Effigies: The Evidence from Yorkshire to 1400*, (Oxford, forthcoming 2019), Section 5b.
- 21 Gittos, B. & M., *The Monuments of the Athelhampton Chapel, St Mary’s Church, Puddletown, Dorset*, (Puddletown, 2014).
- 22 Sharp, J.E.E.S, (ed.), *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem Vol. VI Edward II*, (1910), No. 547.