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An Inscription at Chedworth

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AN INSCRIPTION AT CHEDWORTH

by BRIG.-GENERAL A. C. PAINTER, C.M.G.

ON one of the south buttresses of Chedworth church is a 15th century inscription which deserves notice, not only on its own account, but also from the fact that although many writers, both ancient and modern, have described it, none has done so correctly.

The stone is discoloured by lichen and its surface pitted by exposure, and for these reasons, and its position, a legible reproduction of the inscription cannot be made either by photography or by rubbing, but it is so deeply cut that it is possible to read it without difficulty and to transcribe it accurately from measurements.

Expanding the contractions and abbreviations, the text reads as follows :—

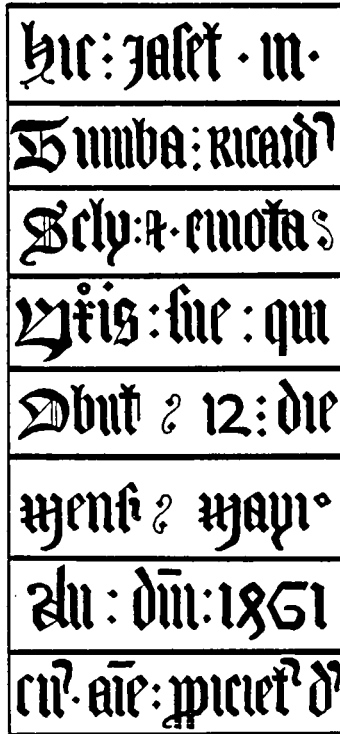
HIC JACET IN
TUMBA RICARDUS
SCLY ET EMOTA
UXORIS SUAE QUI
OBIIT 12 DIE
MENSIS MAYI
ANNO DOMINI 1461
CUJUS ANIMAE PROPICIETUR DEUS

Bigland is the only author who correctly gives the surname as Scly, but he makes the guess of 'Elinora uxor ejus' for 'Emota uxoris sue', quite unjustifiably.

Rudder, except for giving Sely instead of Scly, is the most accurate transcriber, and in omitting the word Emota, and substituting dots for it, he was evidently reluctant to commit himself to a word whose meaning he could not understand.

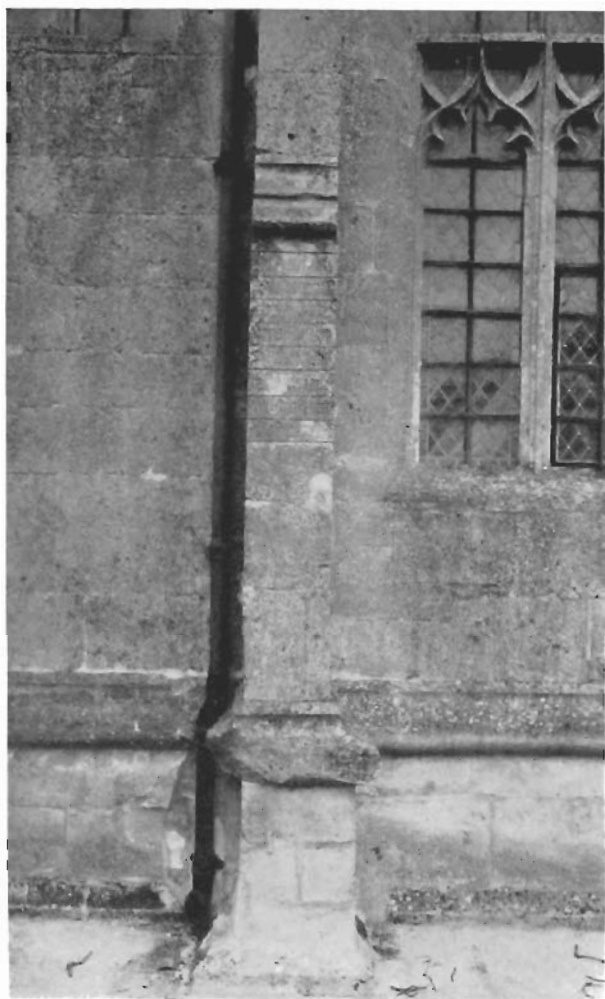
Modern writers agree in avoiding all difficulties by ascribing the memorial incorrectly to 'Richard Sely and his wife', and describe the letters as either 'raised' or 'embossed', whereas actually they are 'sunk'.

Although the word 'Emota' is distinct, its meaning is not at all so, and Rudder's caution is excusable. There



Inscription at Chedworth

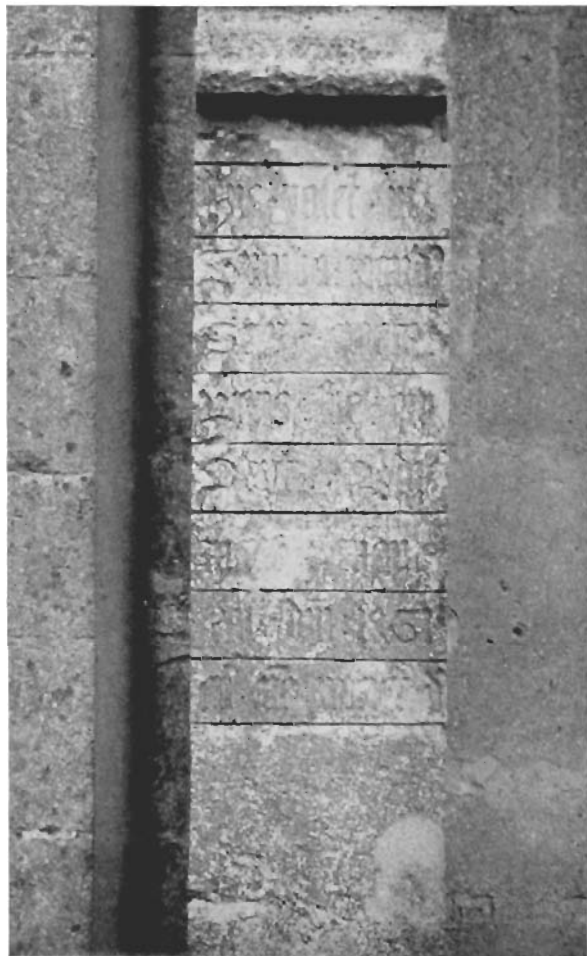
is no doubt that Emot, latinized to Emota, and sometimes spelt with a double 'm', was a female Christian name, in fact I have found two 16th century instances in Chedworth itself and the neighbourhood, but it is evident from the inscription that it commemorates only one



INSCRIPTION AT CHEDWORTH CHURCH
POSITION OF BUTTRESS

facing p. 144

PLATE II



THE INSCRIPTION

PLATE III



DATES CUT ON SOUTH WALL, CHEDWORTH CHURCH

(See pp. 147-8)

person, as all the verbs, etc., are in the singular, and only one date is recorded, so the words Ricardus and Emota must be synonyms. The inscription cannot, therefore, also commemorate his wife although it obviously refers to her. Moreover the word 'uxoris' makes it evident that Emota was not the wife herself but something of which she was the possessor.

As I have not succeeded in finding a Latin scholar who can make a satisfactory translation, I must hazard, for what it may be worth, an explanation of my own. As the literal translation 'moved out' (fem.) makes no sense, the intention must be figurative, and there has always been a tendency to ascribe material burial to an intangible entity or an abstract quality. Thus we have the burial of a soul in Gil Blas, 'Ci-gît l'âme de Pierre Garcias',—'Une âme enterrée!', while Mark Antony says 'The good is oft interred with their bones'. So also this devoted wife may have felt that her love was buried in the person of her husband, her 'sweet heart' where the heart is regarded as the seat of the 'emotions'—and so 'Emota'.

The misreading Sely may be the result of confusion with the Cely family, who, as merchants of the Staple of Calais had dealings with the neighbouring town of Northleach, and who may have had a member of their family there as agent. The *Cely Papers* however only disclose one member of that family named Richard, and as he was living in 1478 and in 1482 (as appears from other sources) he cannot have been the subject of the inscription. The name Sely appears sporadically in various parts of the county from the 14th century onwards, but not in the locality in question. There is, moreover, no reason to suppose that the sculptor made a mistake; if he had done so it would have been discovered at once and easily remedied. The name is therefore definitely Scly.

The surname Sly is met with in Chedworth and its immediate neighbourhood continuously from the reign of Elizabeth to the present day. I think there is no doubt that this Richard Scly was their progenitor, and Nathaniel Aldworth, vicar of Chedworth from 1602, evidently thought so too. His registers have vanished, but many of his transcripts, beautifully written, remain, and they show that after using the spelling Sly for many years, in 1620 he suddenly changed it to Scly, and used that spelling consistently down to at least 1640, when a long gap begins in the transcripts.

As regards Richard Scly himself, I am inclined to regard him as having been brought from outside by the Earl of Warwick, and made bailiff or steward of his manor of Chedworth. He may actually have come from the county of Warwick, as Shakespeare was acquainted with the name, and mentioned Barton on the Heath, a Warwickshire village, as the place to which the family belonged in his day, and he scoffed at their pretensions to ancient lineage.*

An inscription in this position suggests that it commemorates a founder or restorer of the church, and it is quite consistent with all the circumstances to regard Richard Scly as the rebuilder of the south wall under which he lies buried.

This south side of the church consists of a fine range of Perpendicular windows, a turret containing a spiral staircase to the rood-loft and a good doorway with porch. These are all of one date, except that the want of symmetry of one window appears to show that the south doorway and porch have been moved since they were originally built. There are other indications of this,

* *Taming of the Shrew.*

e.g., the disturbance of a mass dial which, as now placed, could not catch the sun's rays at the appropriate hours.

The restoration of this church, amounting actually to the rebuilding of the south side, has commonly been credited to Henry VII, who, having acquired the manor with characteristic astuteness from the old Countess of Warwick, to the exclusion of her own heirs, is supposed to have restored the church as a *quid pro quo*.¹ I think it is doubtful however if even this beneficent act can be ascribed to him with truth, nor does he seem to have been credited with similar benefactions to the many other estates which he obtained from the countess in the same way. The inscription to Richard Scly shows no sign of having been moved since the buttress was built, the date 1461 is definite and cannot have been cut until the wall was, at least, half completed. Henry VII is not likely to have put up an inscription to a man who died a quarter of a century earlier, and the wall is homogeneous except for the doorway.

The date, both day and year, is an instance of the use of so-called Arabic numerals, which, in inscriptions, began in the 15th century, and of which examples are recorded in this county at Northleach (1447),² Rendcomb (1417)³ and Alderley (1458).⁴ If that at Rendcomb is authentic, it is earlier than the earliest previously recorded in England (1445).⁵

There are moreover two more such Arabic dates on this same south wall at Chedworth, making as many instances on this church as, apparently, in the whole of the rest of the county. These dates are 1485, in 3-inch

¹ Rudder, and others.

² Rudder, Bigland, Lysons and others.

³ Daubeny, *Ancient Cotswold Churches*, p. 25.

⁴ Lysons, *Gloucestershire Antiquities*, plate III.

⁵ *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 1847, II, 157.

figures, on the turret of the staircase to rood-loft, and 1491, in figures from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 inches high, on the east jamb of the south doorway. The impression created by these two isolated dates is that they do not refer to the fabric of the church on which they are cut; unlike the buttress inscription they do not harmonize with the design, in fact from that standpoint they are blemishes. They appear rather to be commemorative of events which it was thought should be impressed on the minds of the parishioners. Chedworth was a royal manor under the first three Tudors, 1485 was the date of the accession of Henry VII, and 1491 was the year of the birth of Henry VIII. The latter event would, however, have been of little interest until the death of his elder brother in 1502. Assuming that Henry VII did not legally come into possession of the manor until the death of Anne Countess of Warwick, which is supposed to have occurred 'about 1490'⁶ we may here have a more definite reason for cutting the date 1491. If these two dates are to commemorate Henry VII's accession to the throne and his acquisition of the property, respectively, they may well both have been cut at the same time and at the later date.

The date 1485 was almost certainly not cut in that year. The mason scratched, or cut lightly, on the stone, the date he had been told to inscribe, and then he cut the date finally, in bold figures, to the left of the scratched date, in such a way as partially to overlap it. This scratching, which I think has not been previously noticed, can only be seen in certain lights, and it is not revealed either by photography or by a rubbing. Such a memorandum would not have been necessary if the mason had been told to cut the date of the current year.

The place selected for the date 1491 was a particularly awkward one for the workman, as it is cut in the cramped,

⁶ *Dict. Nat. Biog.*

concave side of a cylindrical surface, and itself shows signs of the difficulty he experienced. It is however just in the position where it would attract the attention of anyone entering the church, being $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet from the ground, and this was probably the object aimed at.

These dates, 1485 and 1491, may have been put there with the intention of supporting the story that Henry VII restored the church, but they are evidently afterthoughts, and the inscription to Richard Scly, being an integral part of the structure, carries the conviction that the credit belongs to him.

Buttress inscriptions are not common, but there is one other instance in this neighbourhood, namely at Preston, where, on the southwest buttress of the church tower, there is an inscription, in Old English characters, which seems to read as follows :—

OR

OF YOORW CHARITE PRAY FOR THE SOTTIS OF

This exhortation, the meaning of which is more obvious than the text, appears never to have been completed.