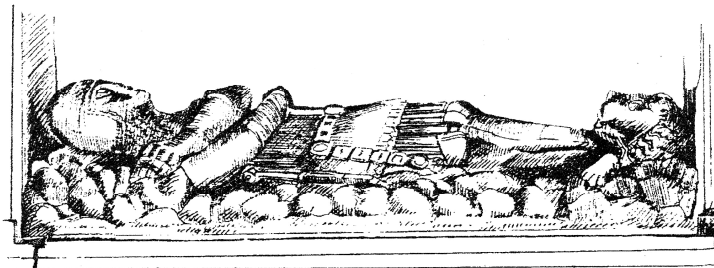


A Hero of Crecy?

Reepham is one of those parishes, mostly to be found in East Anglia, which has more than one church in its churchyard. Reepham is unique in originally having held three churches in the one churchyard. Anyone who wants to follow up the 'shared churchyard' phenomenon is referred to an unpublished thesis by Nick Groves held in the Centre of East Anglian Studies, University of East Anglia¹. This article was intended to be written about the shared churchyard but the subject has been thoroughly explored by Nick Groves in recent years and anything I wrote would be largely based on his work.

Reepham is unique in having not just two but three churches in one churchyard. Such sharing has led to legends about shared inheritances and sisters who did not get on but the real reason for the sharing of the churchyard by Whitwell, Hackford and Kerdiston-with-Reepham is buried in the complex development of both lay and clerical aspects of the parishes. In Reepham's case this may be even more complex as it is possible that there were other churches or chapels in one or more of the three parishes. Grove's view is that Reepham's parochial development may be unique. He suggests that the concentration of churches in one churchyard may be the result of the coalescence of four separate parishes once tenurial holdings had become splintered and intercalated. There may, of course, originally have been something very special, perhaps sacred, about the site which focused the spiritual life of the parishes in this way for so long a period of time.

Another distinction which St. Mary's church, Reepham, enjoys is the presence on the north side of the chancel of a magnificent decorated Gothic box-tomb, said to be of Sir Roger de Kerdeston who died in 1337. On the floor of the chancel is the brass of his grandson, Sir William (d. 1391).



But, is it the tomb of Sir Roger? The identification of the occupant of the tomb seems to have been made some time ago by Blomefield² or Stothard³ and has been accepted in local literature ever since. Certainly, this is the generally held

¹ Anyone wishing to follow up this fascinating topic is recommended to Nick Grave's unpublished thesis; *Two Sisters: Two Churches* which is held in the department of East Anglian Studies at UEA.

² Blomefield, F & Parkin, C. *An essay towards a topographical history of Norfolk* (London: 1805)

³ Stothard, C A. *The Monumental Effigies of Great Britain* (London: 1817)

belief in Reepham and the information published in the church leaflets despite at least one primary source and three learned secondary sources which suggested a different occupant of the tomb.

My attention was drawn to the identity of the occupant of this tomb by a chapter in Curry and Hughes' *Arms, Armour and Fortifications of the Hundred Years War*⁴. Kemp's chapter on church monuments of the time reviews the characteristics of monuments of this period and concludes that, judging by both the architectural style of the tomb and the style of armour which the effigy is wearing, the tomb is too late to be the tomb of Sir Roger. Indeed, the year of his death, 1337, was the year when Edward III fully committed himself to the first campaign of the Hundred Years War.

Kemp's source for the identification of the box tomb is an article by Martindale (1989)⁵ which compares three tombs of similar and unique style, the knights lying uncomfortably, with arms and legs crossed, on a bed of stones. He suggests that the model for the tombs may be a classical statue in Rome which was mistakenly thought, throughout the Middle Ages, to represent Mars. Mars would have been seen as an appropriate inspiration for the tombs of heroes of the French Wars such as Sir Oliver Ingham, Seneschal of Gascony, and Sir William de Kerdeston who fought at Crecy in 1346. The third tomb in the group is at Burrough Green, Cambs. and is much more difficult to identify as it has been moved and greatly altered.

The Reepham tomb is the best preserved of the three, though the Perpendicular canopy is badly damaged and the tomb is now recessed into the wall. All of these tombs, though displaying quality workmanship, had a considerable degree of painting rather than carving, much of which has now disappeared. The back panel of Sir Oliver's tomb at Ingham has been described by Stothard (1817) as still showing the remains of a hunting scene on the back panel whilst the de Kerdeston tomb still held vestiges of light blue and scarlet paint on the inside of the canopy at the time. Unfortunately, the colouring of the heraldic shields has also disappeared.

Other characteristic features of the time which appear on the tomb of this hero, again comparable with features of the Ingham tomb; are the weepers along the side of the tomb chest and the angel high up in the west side, holding a shield, and the elaborate spires of the canopy, now somewhat damaged. Angels began to appear towards the end of the fourteenth century and, in this instance, the angel is intended to represent the transport of the soul of the deceased to heaven. All these monumental details date the tomb to the transitional period between the Decorated and Perpendicular Gothic periods, confirming the suggestion that this tomb is more likely to be that of the Sir William who died in

⁴ Kemp, B. *English Church Monuments during the Period of the Hundred Years War* in: Curry, A & Hughes, M (eds) *Arms, Armies and Fortifications in the Hundred Years War*. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press 1994).

⁵ Martindale, A. *The Knights and the Bed of Stones: A Learned Confusion of the Fourteenth Century*, *J. Brit. Arch. Assoc* CXLII (1989):64-73

1361 than the earlier Sir Roger. The final piece of evidence is documentary and much stronger.

The *Complete Peerage* is a gold-mine for anyone wishing to trace old family histories and contains information on the de Kerdeston family for just this period. It should be pointed out that the family owned lands elsewhere, including at Claxton and others brought into the family by marriage.

The entry for Sir Roger tells us that he was born circa 1273 and fought in the Scottish wars, being knighted with Edward II after a muster in Berwick (1301). In 1324 he attended the Great Council in Westminster as a Knight of the Shire for Norfolk. He acted as a Commissioner of Array, and in 1331/2 was Sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk and Keeper of Norwich Castle and from 1333 was one of the custodians of the coast. (The 'Auld Alliance' was now in existence and there would be enemy ships passing between France and Scotland.) He was summoned once more to attend the King in the north and before his death appears to have been made Lord of Kerdeston. In 1337 he died and, here we have it, was buried in Langley Abbey.

The Annals of Langley read as follows:

Anno domini mcccxxxvii obiit dominus Rogerus de Kerdeston miles et sepelitur in ecelesia Abbatie de Langley juxta matrem suam et ex parte australi eiusdem ecclesie.

Sir William, his son, was born in 1307 and joined Edward III on both of his early campaigns in France and the Low Countries. He was present at the first battle of the Hundred Years War, the naval clash at Sluys in 1340. Two years later he joined the King's next expedition to France with 10 men-at-arms and 10 archers. In 1346 he fought as a banneret at Crecy and was present at the famous siege of Calais at which Queen Phillipa begged for the lives of the burghers of Calais. William was married three times and died in 1361 leaving no legitimate son. He had a number of children from the three marriages but, strangely, only Maud, born in 1324, was born in wedlock. Maud married John de Burghersh and from hereon the legitimate branch of the family moved to Essex.

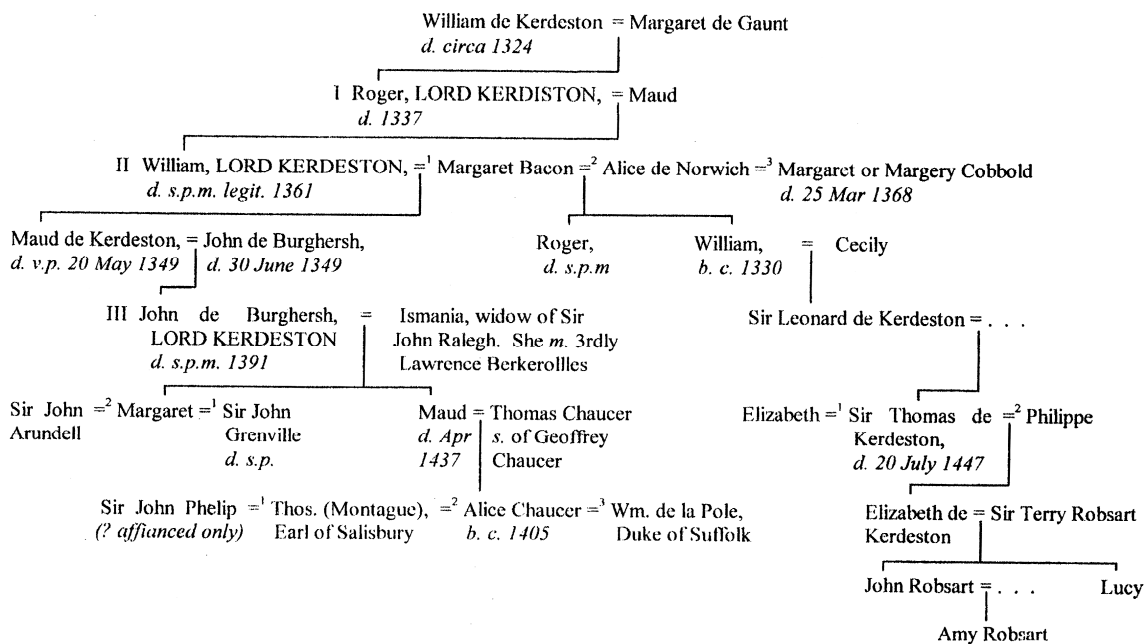
This appears to be the man who is buried in the elaborate box-tomb in Reepham church. He was certainly a hero of the wars and it appears that Norfolk would be all too aware of the war as demands to support both naval and land forces were made on the county. Norfolk churches contain a number of tombs of the leaders who fought in this early successful stage of the war when some of the battles best known in England were won. These two lords of Kerdeston would be the most likely members of their family to receive a local accolade for their services in the French and Scottish wars and the evidence for Sir William has already been explored.

If we accept that the occupant of the box-tomb is Sir William, we then have to identify the knight and his wife represented on the brass in the chancel floor. It is generally accepted at present that the brass is of Sir William de Kerdeston who

inherited the Kerdeston estate from his father despite his illegitimacy. The son of Maud, another John de Burghesh, had been excluded from the Kerdeston lands by his grandfather's will because John had other lands in Essex and Lincoln and his grandfather obviously wished to provide for his other children. John's father died young and he became the King's ward. It was, perhaps, this which led the Burghesh family to continue to claim the Kerdeston lands. They were finally settled on William de Kerdeston's family in 1372.

The brass, putatively dated to 1369, possibly belongs to this illegitimate Sir William. Unfortunately, the 'Complete Peerage' gives us very little on his career except for the details of the inheritance dispute which dragged on into the fifteenth century before the lands were finally settled on the de la Pole family. There is also the possibility that the brass may represent John de Burghesh who fought in France though he appears to have been buried at Hatfield Peverel in Essex.

So far the evidence points to the box-tomb's occupant being Sir William (d. 1361) but whether the brass is that of the second Sir William has not yet been proven. More research is needed. The complications of inheritance through the female line and of second marriages by widows have confused the picture. The documents in the case, however, show some interesting links with well-known families (see also genealogical table).



Maud's granddaughter married Thomas, son of a certain Geoffrey Chaucer. Their child, Alice, married William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk. Once the Poles retained the manor of Kerdeston, their tenant until 1498 was Sir Terry Robsart who had married an Elizabeth Kerdeston, great grandson of the Hero of Crecy. His granddaughter was Amy Robsart. Kerdeston may be a Norfolk backwater now but it was on the edge of great affairs five hundred years ago.