

## THE BAPTIST HICKS EAGLE LECTERN

An appreciation by Michael Smedley





This Lectern has been a fascination of mine since first seeing it with my parents about half a century ago. Lecterns of this form were made in quite a well-defined period, between 1470 and 1530. Opinions by scholars have varied as to where they were made. Certainly Flanders is a strong possibility as it was a brass making centre and foundries were well established there and in North Germany supplying metal wares for example alms dishes, all over Europe.

Charles C Oman, keeper of the department of metalwork at the V&A, in 1930 published a fascinating article in the *Archaeological Journal*, volume 87, in which our lectern is listed of one of the 45 late medieval (strictly speaking early Modern to historians) brass lecterns in England known then to be extant (including some non-eagle). Numbers have fluctuated slightly since then – Oman admitted he hadn't visited all of them – one has since been dismissed as a 19<sup>th</sup> Century copy. The number of Eagle lecterns of this date in England (Wales and Scotland) is thought to be about 40.

From his studies he did however note certain basic models, which could be grouped stylistically, possibly indicating the same place of manufacture. The same wooden moulds were re-used, and plinths and feet also are distinguishable in groups.

Ours he puts in Series III (of IV) – the most prolific with 33 examples – possibly all from a single workshop over a considerable time – the 1470 -1530 period. Within that series he then puts ours in Group III, and lists them as follows

30 Croft, Lincolnshire

31 Wrexham

32 Woolpit, Suffolk

33 Cavendish, Suffolk

34 Upwell, Norfolk

35 Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire

36 Oxford, Corpus Christi College

Rather disparagingly he states 'A conventionalised bird from a poor model and very poorly finished' Of course finish can add detail and other models may have more detailed wings, feathers etc. or considered more 'naturalistic' as in series I or II, but this is perhaps a little subjective.

He notes a very large concentration of these lecterns extant in East Anglia. He also traces foundries in Norwich – the wonderfully named Richard Brasyer for example, sheriff in 1495 and mayor in 1510, and the equally wonderfully named Reignold Chirche in Bury St Edmonds recorded as in his will of 1498 being the second in succession to a prosperous firm of bellfounders. His son Thomas was charged to 'clene the grete lectorn that I gave to Seynt Mary Chirche q'art'ly' Other brasiers are noted in the area about this time in wills.

Another strong argument in the favour of East Anglian manufacture is the river transport system – the Ouse was navigable both for the import of raw materials from the Continent and moving the finished item. Transport however was good enough to enable access anywhere in the country, nevertheless these are very heavy items and the concentration still in the Eastern Counties is striking. Once in place they are likely not to travel far.

Marcus van der Meulen in his book of 2017, *The Brass Eagle Lecterns of England*, revises Oman's article in that a stronger hypothesis of manufacture in Belgium is mooted. Following the sacking of Dinant in 1466, which until then was the undoubted centre for brass foundries along with Tournai, the craftsmen were dispersed, many relocated to Middelburg, and sold their wares in Bruges. King Edward IV was exiled there and in 1471, the year he was restored, granted a certain Pieter Bladelin of Bruges a privilege for the sale of brass objects in England. Kings Lynn would be the port into which they would have arrived.

But did these dispersed craftsmen also find a home in England by the same route? Nothing is still known for certain. So was it the raw materials that came in via Kings Lynn? Or the finished article? Oman's stylistic conclusions still indicate groups from individual foundries – wherever they might have been.

A very interesting speculation then follows about the 'lost period' of our lectern between 1618 when Baptist Hicks presented it, and the previous hundred years or so since it was made. He presumably brought it from London – although very few are noted there.

Van der Meulen notes that in 1581, St Christopher Le Stocks in the City of London sold off their brass eagle. A year later the Earl of Northumberland is noted as having purchased one for the Chapel at Petworth House, which can be dated to Circa 1500. At the time church wardens seem to have been selling off items seen to have been superfluous – so they were 'on the market' at the time or just before.

On the death of Sir Baptist Hicks in 1629 a list of charitable bequests includes 'brass falcon £26'. Whether this is a known cost or the figure of a 'preisir' or 'priser' (the precursor to an appraiser or valuer like myself) is unknown. Other bequests on the list are certainly sums of money - such as the poor of Campden £500. But very probably it was the cost.

The oak pulpit was presented in 1612 – a very busy and presumably prosperous year for him as Campden House Kensington was started then, the Almshouses are traditionally dated to this year, and Campden House itself 1612/1613

So presumably the eagle must have somehow come to his attention a little later in 1618. This was a man clearly acquiring a vast fortune very rapidly. Then as now merchants would be buzzing around him like bees to a honeypot. Who knows – did he seek it out? Or did it seek him out via a third party? Maybe one of those church wardens – or a merchant who had supplied him with furnishings for his London and Country Houses?

But at this point it is worth noting the original placing and use of these lecterns within church buildings – and the volatile first century through which these lecterns survived.

In pre reformation times a contemporary engraving shows a similar eagle lectern facing the altar, and a second lectern, a double sided bookrest, in the centre of the choir, to hold the

choir books. The eagle, the emblem of St John, was undoubtedly suitable for gospel lecterns, as the eagle was once considered the only animal that could look into the sun, and therefore appropriate for carrying the message of the gospel of Christ, the Light of the World. Other scholars mention the eagle as a symbol of Christ himself. Whatever the exact use or symbolism, for the gospel or chants, its position was in the chancel. Originally it would only be glimpsed by the common man, positioned facing away from him towards the altar, firmly behind the rood screen, and he would have heard the bible and chants in Latin, mostly unintelligible to him.

The Protestant reformation of Martin Luther, traditionally dated to 1517, and of course the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII between 1536-1541, saw this status quo turned on its head. In 1539 the Great Bible was presented and a copy had to be displayed for all to consult. The lectern could easily be relocated in the nave for this use.

But much destruction and looting also took place, and records exist that often the most valuable parts of monasteries were its metals – most easily released by burning or melting down (the whole building!).

Then of course the next threat was Cromwell and the Civil War 1642-51. His troops are known to have damaged eagle lecterns – again as idolatrous images.

Wherever our lectern was, it was spared. In the reformation, many records show that favourite items from ‘the old faith’ were hidden, buried, or otherwise rescued. Some lecterns are noted to have been rescued from lakes, where they had been pitched either by iconoclasts or hidden by Papists at either event. The Southwell Abbey eagle was retrieved from the lake of Newstead abbey by Lord Byron when he ordered it to be dredged. Nearby Cropredy’s lectern, noted by Oman as the same model as ours, was recovered from the River Cherwell, also in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I have recently met a Cropredy resident who tells me their lectern came out of the river minus one of the lions feet, which was recast in bronze as the metal had patinated to such a dark colour in the river that it was mistaken as bronze. I look forward to going to have a look at this and other eagle lecterns as soon as everything is open up again!

Jill Wilson in her Civil War notes on the church for the CCHS concludes that St James’s escaped very lightly in the Civil War and a study of the General Accounts of the Church Wardens 1626-1907 confirms this.

*I quote ‘There was no siege so the Roundheads who seized the town had no particular venom to work off – and, notwithstanding Colonel Bard’s reputation – this would have been the Cavaliers’ parish church. (Also you don’t foul your own nest!) In addition much probably depended on the Vicar, William Bartholomew, and Lady Juliana’s steward, William Harrison to try and placate any potentially marauding troops’*

It does crop up in the church wardens accounts a few times – William Cale was paid 1 shilling and 8 pence for ‘mending eagle and finding brass’ in 1629 – so soon after it was presented. William Cale seems to have been a useful man as he he did various other metal work – presumably a local blacksmith.

Then again in 1636 Thomas Lucas was paid for 'mending and scouring the brasse eagle and the standard of brasse'.

In 1639 the eagle was 'scoured again'.

Records are sparse thereafter, fall off during the Commonwealth, but it would seem other treasures were soon back in place and not looted. 18<sup>th</sup> Century records are much less detailed.

Very little is mentioned, but from 1862 the parish clerk was to be responsible for cleaning and 'no future charge was to be allowed'!

Sarah Freeman was nevertheless 'given a gratuity' for cleaning the eagle in 1866.

Whatever condition it was in, by 1881 it seems it needed restoring. The Parochial Magazine of November 1881 records a visit by benefactors, Mrs Mary F. Hiron and her daughter from New South Wales, on the 9<sup>th</sup> October, bearing a cheque for £25 from Mrs Hiron's son, Henry Heron Esq (sic) of Elthan, New South Wales, 'towards the great work we have in hand in the restoration of our church'.

The Hiron family appear to have been prominent Chipping Campden residents from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards— appearing often in church records. A William Hiron is noted as a church warden in 1626. The subject of another study I'm sure. A branch of the family clearly emigrated and prospered.

Following the visit Mrs Hiron wrote 'My dear Sir – My daughter and myself have decided with your permission to get the lectern repaired and we have to request that you forward the lectern and stand to J W Singer and Son of Frome'.

I need scarcely add, the Magazine continues, that the old eagle, nearly 270 years old (370-400 as it actually was then), has travelled to Frome where it will be repaired in the first style'.

The restoration of 1881 is recorded modestly as 'restored November 1881 by MFH' on the lower part of the pedestal. The glass eyes were certainly added then but what else was 'refreshed' is unknown.

One other note to dispel a myth – is that coins were never meant to be inserted through the open beak as alms. Our model and others like it with a notably open beak was contemporaneously nicknamed 'Peter Pence's duck' rather disparagingly referring to its Popish connotations. Any coins inserted would have fallen into the legs! A fascinating thought but any early coins thrust through the beak would presumably be found by the restorers in 1881 – a bonus perhaps?

It is simply open as when cast, a rod was inserted through the body to the tail, where a filled rectangular hole can be seen. The exact method of casting – whether by cire perdue (lost wax) – or casting in hard sand – is still in dispute amongst scholars. Whichever method was used, a carved eagle would form the shape in the mould, and a rod would still be needed through the mould to support the casting.

The wooden platform is noted as having been added in memory of Rebekah Grove, May 13, 1909, and the stone plinth.

We are lucky of course here in Chipping Campden to be steeped in history. As an antiques appraiser during my working life, the thought often occurs 'if only these items could speak what a story they would tell'. Our eagle certainly has a story – some of it lost in the mists of time, but some recorded. And what is more this lectern was specifically made to speak from and has faithfully performed this function for over 500 years.