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Baroque Tomb Sculpture: An introduction to the Myddelton monuments in St Mary's church, Chirk, by Richard Haslam

Figural funerary sculpture has a very long tradition, notably in ancient Rome, and then in Papal Rome where 1500 years later British carvers continued to train; and also in London where such Baroque artists set up workshops in the 1600s and 1700s (before the Neoclassical trade developed in provincial centres). North Wales has examples typical of these trends. Burial chapels of important families were habitually attached to medieval parish churches, a late example being at Llanrwst by the Wynns of Gwydir. Otherwise a church itself served as background to such Classical works of art rather than, to cite the Myddeltons at Chirk Castle, the private medieval chapel there having in later times been used only intermittently.



Sir Thomas Myddleton (1586-1666) & his second wife, Mary Napier (1598-1675).

The solemn white and black marble memorials to members of the Myddelton family in the church of St Mary at Chirk record, for 1675 and 1718 respectively, times of family grief. It seems the older pair were set up as now only in the 1880s, having been moved from elsewhere in the church to somewhat crowd the south nave altar. While there is no evidence of their former positions, this space could have served as the Chirk Castle family burying place, divided from the north or principal nave by walling up its 15th-century arcade. As sculptures they are some of the best in Wales; the two on the east wall, of high quality, are by John Bushnell (1636 to 1701) who had worked in Rome and the Low Countries and then in Venice; and the more grandiloquent one on the south is by the Ruthin carver Robert Wynne (1650s ? to 1731 ?) who had possibly trained with Peter Roberts, a mason in London, and who specialised in the Classical architectural settings in which he placed his figures.



Elizabeth Wilbraham

The subjects are: on the left of the altar, Sir Thomas Myddelton (1586-1666) the Civil War general, and his second wife Mary Napier (1598-1675), represented in two portrait busts of 1676 ?; and on the right, the memorable recumbent figure of Elizabeth Wilbraham (1653-75), first wife of their elder grandson Sir Thomas Myddelton, 2nd baronet. She had died very

young a few days after the birth and death of their son, whom she is represented as trying to suckle.



On the south wall are standing figures of the younger grandson Sir Richard Myddelton (1655-1716), 3rd baronet, and his wife Frances Whitmore (1666-94) with – seemingly an addition to the design – the figure of their son Sir William Myddelton (1694-1718), 4th and last baronet, reclining at their feet since he may have died while this commission was in the making. These once-private works of art now dominate the little church and are a counterpart to the C17 and C18 furnishing of the castle itself – which has been so well restored for the National Trust since 1978 (and I am indebted to the Chirk Castle guidebook for five of my slides).



Sir Richard Myddleton, his wife Frances Whitmore & their son, Sir William Myddleton



Sir Richard Myddleton (1655-1716), his wife Frances Whitmore (1666-1694) & their son, Sir William Myddleton, (16694 -1718).

The interior of St Mary's illustrates the cultural contrast, which results from setting the (then) modern, and European, approach against the homespun late-medieval background to sculpture. These effects were not lost on people at the time; and often consisted less of a battle of the styles than an attempt at harmonisation between them. Many other interesting consequences accompanied this adopting of the Classical tradition. Like its architectural framework and ornament, the figurative inheritance from the Greek and Roman worlds – which is pre-Christian in origin – was rediscovered in the C15 and C16 in central Italy, and subsequently taught as practical arts particularly in Florence and Venice and then in Rome. There were of course persistent political differences, just as there were the institutional tensions between the worlds of Protestantism and of the Counter-Reformation – and yet, people and ideas went to and fro across these invisible borders, poor and rich, believers and otherwise. The common ground was surely much greater than might be imagined now. Fundamental to this was the Latin language, present of course in Wales in its variety of learned uses from the Roman occupation on, and in spoken and written and carved forms. It continued in use (as at late C17 Chirk) with notable fluency and abundance for funerary inscriptions, perhaps written by the clergy, from the early C16 till the mid C18. Then, in a cultural shift which perhaps marks the waning of the Renaissance revival of the Classical world in favour of the rationalist Enlightenment, vernacular languages (in the case of Chirk, English) replaced it.

The artistic forms and motifs of the Classical tradition, in painting and in sculpture, are integral to these developments far away in Italy, and introduce the new European formal and expressive language in representing the human figure. The great paradox is, that such ancient arts became adopted within the patronage of Christianity for its buildings and its aids to worship, as well as in commemoration of lay persons in the religious context. One way of understanding this may be to regard these arts as the indigenous culture all over Italy, whereas in the British islands (and across northern European countries) it is the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages that we look to as our cultural inheritance. The lesser paradox for northerners is that these arts, despite their having evolved close to the seat of the Papacy, were not regarded with much suspicion, and so taking advantage of them was not turned down in the Lutheran and Protestant worlds.

Did any of the Myddeltons go to Rome? Possibly – and they certainly knew people who did. How many of the sculptors went to Rome? Well, for Robert Wynne and very many others, London was the point of encounter with Classical design since sculptors' workshops serving the whole country had grown up there from the early 1600s on. But for John Bushnell the son of a London plumber and a few others, Italy beckoned and he was on the continent for two decades, training in Rome and later working with the best in Venice. And the first Renaissance monument to a Welshman that I know of is actually in Rome, that of Sir John Stradey of Ewenny in the mid C16, a confection of stonework in the church of San Gregorio Magno.

In his portrait at the castle, Sir Thomas Myddelton, born in the reign of Elizabeth like the Royalist Marquess of Worcester who defended Raglan Castle in the Civil War – is shown in armour, perhaps as a Cromwellian commander. Each lost his castle to the other side, but in the case of Chirk the story has a different ending. Myddelton lost belief in his support for Parliament, and changed sides (so his resemblance here to Van Dyck's image of King Charles I is not inappropriate); and he reacquired Chirk Castle before (again, unlike the case at

Raglan) it was rendered totally uninhabitable. Then, in a decision recalling the aged Archbishop Juxon, once reinstated as Primate on the Restoration of the monarchy, recreating the outmoded Great Hall at Lambeth Palace which Cromwell had had destroyed, the aged Myddelton began replacing the demolished east side of his castle in 1664, and within a year has completed the Guard Tower, the Bell Tower and lengths of curtain wall more or less as they had been originally around 1300 – except with thinner walls. In keeping with that perhaps his funeral procession stretched the whole mile from the castle down to the church.

While a respect for medieval tradition thus became identified with the Royalist cause, the Myddelton family were already prominent before the Civil War in the commercial, engineering and contemporary artistic life of London, by then a great centre of these pan-European developments. It was the first Sir Thomas Myddelton who amassed wealth there and bought the Chirk Castle estate in 1595, and his younger brother Sir Hugh Myddelton who was the engineer for the New River Company, the system supplying fresh water into the north of London from springs 20 miles away at Amwell in Hertfordshire – an enterprise reminiscent of the engineering of aqueducts from the hinterland into Ancient Rome to serve that very populous city. At death this Sir Thomas is commemorated (though not at Chirk) by an important Renaissance tomb; that is to say, his superbly-carved effigy in armour lies full-length on a chest, arms raised in prayer, and the head clearly a portrait. While the figure could be paralleled over a long period before that with examples say in France or Italy, the arched recess behind has features distinctive of its date, 1631, which link it to the Roman ambience. The black background carries a long painted inscription in Latin headed by the dedication *Deo Optimo Maximo*, to the Best and Greatest God, as used in Early Christian times in Rome; and this is held by two angels in relief of Late Renaissance elegance.

The defender of Chirk Castle was his son, and when the latter's wife died in 1675 they were commemorated together with portrait busts on the first of the pair of monuments in St Mary's by John Bushnell. The introduction of carved marble busts is another witness to the Classical revival, this having been an art form very popular in the Ancient World. In more modern times, portrait busts were employed by the Florentine artists of the Early Renaissance, for instance in the incomparable polychrome terracotta one of the statesman Niccolo' da Uzzano. This led to the bust or half-length being used in Elizabethan and Jacobean England and Wales for divines and men of learning, an example not far from here being Dr Gabriel Goodman, the Dean of Westminster who was commemorated in his home town of Ruthin in 1601. The Myddelton busts are of moderate quality only perhaps, that of the long-dead nobleman seeming as much caricature as portrait.

The overall effect of these twin works, as now reinstalled either side of the south aisle's east window, is dramatic, if strange. Their black backgrounds against which the white marble carvings are set are a striking feature, being treated as a piece of cloth and incised with a long Latin inscription. In another Romanising touch it is curious to note that the Latin *ager* (or in the ablative *agro*), meaning field or territory, is used for the English "county", an apparent analogy with the countryside surrounding Rome, which is still referred to in Italian as the *agro romano*. The client, grandson and heir of the Civil War commander, had continued with the reinstatement of Chirk Castle begun by his grandfather, adding on the courtyard side of the re-erected curtain wall a first-floor Long Gallery measuring 100ft by 22ft, which is raised on an arcade on the courtyard side very much in the Italian Renaissance way. To judge by its furnishings too this was from the outset a fashionable, metropolitan room, so these contacts,

through the court in London or other south-of-England patrons, must have suitably enabled Sir Thomas the 2nd baronet to choose the sculptor for these monuments to his family losses.

This was John Bushnell, a gifted but uneven artist who about 1650 (as Rupert Gunnis writes in his *Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851*) had fled abroad from his apprenticeship in London after being maltreated by his master Thomas Burman, and who by 1670 was back in post-Fire London, having been persuaded to leave Venice where his work on the Alvise Mocenigo monument in the church of San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti is documented. So he was at ease working with Carrara marble, shipped from the quarries on the west coast of Tuscany. His work mostly falls into three kinds – standing statues in public places including commissions for the monarch and the Royal Exchange, reclining figures for tombs, and portrait busts.

Bushnell's Chirk monuments are unusual in being conceived as a pair, using the Baroque illusion of curtains drawn aside to reveal inscriptions and images. But of course their style and subject matter are very different. The reclining Classically-draped female figure is a motif repeated in commissions of Bushnell's, one example being Dame Mary May's monument at Mid Lavant in Sussex which she commissioned some years in advance of her death. Also carved in 1676, she too rests on her right arm; but since the sculpture was taken down and placed in a vault in 1871, the dark background (if there was one) has vanished. What is startlingly original about the second work for Sir Thomas Myddelton the 2nd baronet, and enhanced by its new, too-public, position, is its emotional directness. This must have resulted from discussion between the patron and the artist, the outcome being that his young wife Elizabeth is shown, alive but with closing eyes, attempting to suckle their newborn son; when in truth he lived only a few days and she died two days after, aged 22. The family archives note that "John Harrys" was paid "for his journey to Weston for my Lady's picture for Bushnell the stone-cutter to draw a pattern to make her monument at Chirk". Notwithstanding that, Bushnell perhaps modelled his female heads somewhat to standard ideals.

The feeling of grief evoked in the beholder, one may observe before leaving this sculptural fusion of Classicism and naturalism, echoes the sense of transience in life which is deep in the imagery and poetry of the Classical world. Whether through myths such as Apollo and Daphne – as revived in a marble masterpiece by the C17 Roman sculptor, Gianlorenzo Bernini, from whose recent religious and secular masterpieces Bushnell must have learned much – or in the earlier Renaissance period in Florence where it coloured so much of the poetry and painting, the expression of pity entered the secular and Christian artistic sensibilities of Italy's cultural centres. By this route the statuary poses of saints in the churches could become adapted to represent mortals at their decease. In the British context, this can also be seen as illustrating the national preference for portraying individuals rather than representing lofty ideas of morality and allegory.

I have so far tried to locate the Myddelton family and their artistic commissions in relation to the culture of Italy, since the latter was a portal to excellence for Europeans of the Renaissance, and for generations after. There is a clear change of approach by British clients in the early-mid C18, as we will see in St Mary's on turning to the more ostentatious Myddelton monument erected there in Georgian times. While still connected with the Classical in its display of architectural detail and skilful figure representation in white marble, the general introduction of contemporary clothes, formal gestures, and a worldliness begun in

the late C17 and then widely employed for family monuments in the C18, place this in a more secular context. The likely explanation is, that Robert Wynne and his peer group of able sculptors, in Britain and all across northern Europe, could adopt imagery of this sort not by having had direct contact and disciplined study on site in Italy, like earlier generations, but from the ever-wider distribution of engravings and architectural books. And the redecoration of the main rooms at the Castle, although done later in the same long era of Georgian wealth and confidence, similarly does not have the cultural vigour of the works that precede them, despite still following Classical precedent.

With the work of Robert Wynne and his clients we are also in closer connection to Denbighshire. The tablet beneath the Chirk monument, in English, explains that the subjects (the 3rd baronet, his long-deceased wife, their newly-dead adult only son and a daughter died an infant) are commemorated by their surviving daughter and heiress, Miss Mary Myddelton, of Croesnewydd Hall in Flintshire – though not that the senior line of the family had thus died out. Husband and wife stand facing forward, either side of a pedestal on which the baby is shown in high relief and which supports a noble urn. It is thought that the 4th baronet (he was 24 when he perished in London from smallpox) died while the monument was being carved since he is shown lying, on a shelf decorated with dragooning, in front of the little aedicule composition with its Corinthian columns. Its lavish effect is perhaps somewhat cheerful for the sad story that it tells, for Mary Myddelton did not marry either. There are records of her sending cut-out portraits to be carved from, and of a final payment in 1721 – of £180 to “Mr Robert Wynne, stone-cutter in Ruthin... being ye remainder of £400 in full for ye monument in Chirk”.

There are comparable monuments of Wynne’s at Ruabon – a signed work of 1719 dramatically representing the family successors to the blind lawyer Henry Wynn – and two more at least, at Llanrhaeadr-yng-Nghinmeirch and at Ruthin, which Edward Hubbard in his excellent Pevsner volume for Clwyd attributes to him. That to Maurice Jones of Llanrhayadr Hall who had died in 1702, but is not signed or dated, was erected long after by his widow Jane Bagot. It has the main figure in a similar elegant pose to the Myddelton reclining one and under a similar Corinthian canopy, but with the addition of four little boys weeping into handkerchiefs. Its inscription below, in the eulogising spirit then in fashion, says “His Hospitality was discreet though public, his Charity unbounded though secret”. The other, in memory of Wynne’s brother the Rev John Wynne, rector of Efneclyd near Robert’s home town of Ruthin, who died in 1725, has a Latin inscription still, and is a minor but handsome Baroque piece.

Further work will perhaps establish more links among Robert Wynne’s patrons, but so far it seems that, minor work at Erddig apart, the principal clients of this notable North Wales artist were local. Of course he may have contributed, anonymously, to other Baroque assemblages of figures in an architectural background for churches further afield, of the by then conventional kind in which he specialised. That would be a search worth undertaking.