

## English Tombs and Larkin

There are not many English mediaeval tombs with the husband and wife clasping hands.

Arthur Gardner lists alabaster tombs with this feature only at the following locations:

**Warwick.** Thomas Beauchamp d. 1371, and Katherine Mortimer. The tomb is probably later and due to his son.

**Elford, Staffs.** Sir Thomas Aderne d. 1391, and Matilda Stafford. Like the Arundel tomb this was much restored in the nineteenth century by Edward Richardson.

**Strelley, Notts.** Sir Samson de Strelley d. 1390 and wife. The tomb is dated a decade or so later.

**Lowick, Northamptonshire.** Sir Ralph Grene & Katharine Malley. Created 1420. This is the only tomb of the kind for which a contract and date exist.<sup>1</sup> The contract did not specify joined hands, but of course there may have been other communication with the sculptors.

**Winborne, Dorset.** Duke and Duchess of Somerset (Beauforts) d. 1444

Later examples are also at:

**Macclesfield, Cheshire, and Warrington, Lancs.**<sup>2</sup>

Crossley includes tombs of other stone than alabaster.<sup>3</sup> But he only specifically mentions one more clasped-hands tomb than Gardner, namely the gilt tomb of **Richard II** in Westminster Abbey, showing hands joined with his wife Anne of Bohemia. This tomb was evidently commissioned by Richard for Anne and manufactured 1396 – 9. Richard died in 1400; the hands are again missing.

There are probably five fourteenth century brasses showing couples with clasped hands.<sup>4</sup> One is of **Sir John Harsick** and his wife at Southacre, Norfolk, and is dated to 1384. **Richard and Margaret Torrington** dated c. 1356, in St. Peter's Berkhamsted is interesting as being of "civilians", rather than of titled or ecclesiastical persons. A

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<sup>1</sup> The contract is quoted in Nikolas Pevsner, *Northamptonshire* under the entry for Lowick.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Gardner, *Alabaster Tombs*, Cambridge University Press 1940, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> F. H. Crossley *English Church Monuments A.D. 1150—1550* Batsford Books 1921.

<sup>4</sup> This is the number given in the authoritative listing of Herbert Haines, *A Manual of Monumental Brasses*, Oxford & London: J. H. & J. Parker, 1861, p. lxi.

particularly fine hand-clasping brass of **Sir John and Lady Joan de la Pole**, at Chishall in Essex is variously dated to 1370 and 1380:



Apart from the brasses there seem to be fewer than five sculpted memorials from the late fourteenth and even the early fifteenth centuries, in which hands are joined, compared with the hundreds of those showing hands clasped in prayer or otherwise disposed.

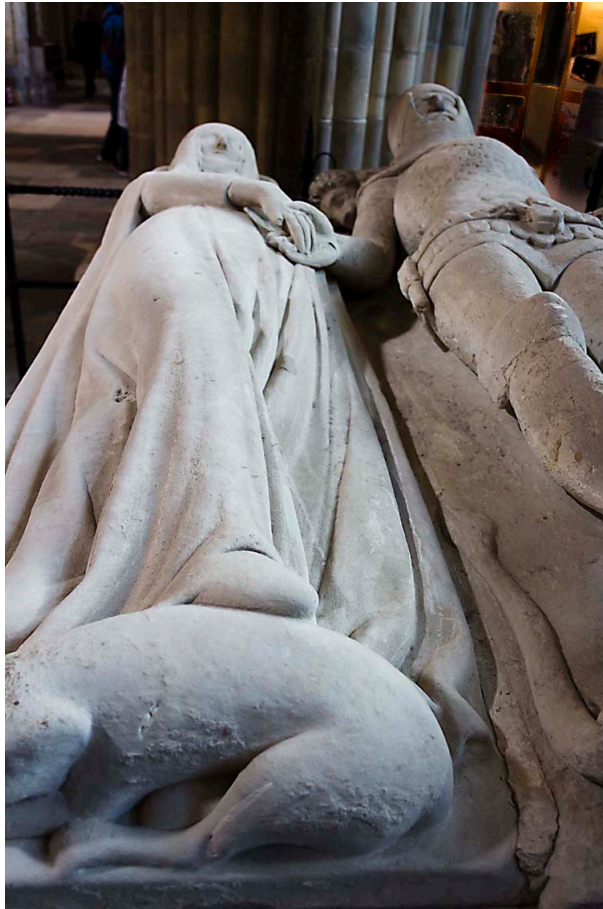
Thanks to Philip Larkin the Arundel tomb in Chichester cathedral is far the most famous of these. It is now generally agreed to be that of Richard Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, and his wife Eleanor of Lancaster, also known as Eleanor Plantaganet. She died in 1372; he died in 1376. Assuming (provisionally, as we shall see) that the tomb is of around those dates, this makes it the earliest English tomb of this kind listed in the normal sources.

The plaque in the cathedral reads as follows:

The figures represent Richard Fitzalan III, 13th Earl of Arundel (ca 1307-1376) and his second wife Eleanor, who by his will of 1375 were to be buried together "without pomp" in the chapter house of Lewes Priory. The armour and dress suggest a date near 1375; the knight's attitude is typical of that time, but the lady's crossed legs, giving the effect of a turn towards her husband, are rare. The joined hands have been thought due to "restoration" by

Edward Richardson (1812-69), but recent research has shown the feature to be original. If so, the monument must be one of the earliest showing the concession to affection where the husband was a knight rather than a civilian.

It is certainly true that Eleanor's sinuous turn towards her husband is rare and, if not due to Richardson, it is in fact unique among the five tombs of the period 1370—1420. It is also unlikely that it is due to Richardson, since it would in effect have meant him creating an entirely new statue, and this is not implied by contemporary descriptions of what he



had done.

There is however one gorgeous early fourteenth century tomb figure of a very mobile lady, at Bedale in North Yorkshire. She is far from the plainness of the pre-Baroque; even the phlegmatic Pevsner describes her as agitated, and this is emphasized by her clutching a long, sinuous girdle, suggesting that her agitation has something to do with dressing, or undressing. Although she is now lying next to a similarly sculpted knight, he is in alabaster and she in stone, so it is not at all clear that they originally made a couple. The figures must have been beautifully executed; the knight even has a little

dragon transfixing, or eating, the bottom of his shield:



Bedale early 14<sup>th</sup> Century

Knight and agitated Lady.

The Chichester plaque seems potentially misleading in supposing civilians to be more affectionate than knights and nobles. None of the medieval tombs listed in these books shows civilians and it seems very unlikely that anybody below the rank of knight (or bishop or other prince of the Church) could have afforded such a monument or would

have been given the right to erect one.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand the one civilian brass already mentioned, of Richard and Margaret Torrington, shows a conventionally stiff couple. There is indeed a lovely suggestion of a turn towards her knight on the part of the lady in one of the later brasses, that of Sir John Harsick and his wife at Southacre:



The Southacre brass

Of course, Sir John was not a civilian and is not dressed as one. This brass is also mentioned in Foster, Brighton and Garland.<sup>6</sup> It is surely later than the Arundel tomb. In any event, since, as mentioned already, Haines states that there are only five hand-clasping monumental brasses of the fourteenth century, there cannot be a significant

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Haines, *op. cit.* p. ii makes this point.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Foster, Trevor Brighton, and Patrick Garland, *An Arundel Tomb*, Otter Memorial Paper No. 1.

number of civilians in that posture, and probably none with added agitation.<sup>7</sup> So it is unclear what the cathedral plaque could mean. Obviously the three-dimensional twist is harder to show in brass than in statuary, but this difficulty is overcome triumphantly at Southacre.

The earliest mention of the Arundel tomb appears to be a description from 1635, which is silent about the linked hands. Brighton is also quite categorical that the tomb had been dismantled during the Reformation, and that the arms of the knight were entirely missing before Richardson's restoration. This may be so, although casual inspection suggests that if the knight's arms were entirely remodeled in the nineteenth-century, the hands must have been replaced yet again, since there are clear breaks around the lower forearm or wrist and especially in the case of the knight a distinct shift of colour and material at that point:



The Arundel hands

Of course, if only the lower forearms were missing, this would confirm the deduction Brighton ascribes to Richardson: “in laying the lady on the knight's right side he deduced that her right arm across her breast would have extended her hand towards his, assuming his original posture had not been one of hands held together in prayer”. If it is this research that the cathedral plaque is relying upon, it is fairer to say that it suggests that the feature was original, rather than that it shows that it was.

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<sup>7</sup> H. Haines, *op. cit.* p. clxv. Haines also states that there are only seven extant representations of women in any posture in brasses of before 1350. Stone effigies of women are relatively common.

Brighton also mentions the much better executed and better preserved tomb at Lowick as a possible model for Richardson's restoration. The original Arundel tomb predates Lowick by up to forty-five years. However Lowick has exactly the trope of the left hand holding the empty right-hand gauntlet, which is much more clumsily executed at Chichester.



The Lowick Gauntlet



The Arundel gauntlet

We now turn to interpretation. The equivalent plaque placed by the church on the tomb of Thomas Beauchamp (Earl of Warwick) and Katherine Mortimer in St. Mary's at Warwick says that "their hands are clasped together indicating the joining of two great families and estates". Inquiry at the church failed to pinpoint the authority for this assertion, although it seems quite probable in itself. Dynastic reasons are, perhaps, more likely to have swayed the medieval aristocracy than the private romantic sentiments more beloved of the Victorians.

It is notable that there could easily have been similar reasons for the Arundel tomb: Richard Fitzalan's marriage to Eleanor of Lancaster is said to have helped to make him one of the richest men in England, but she was Richard's second wife, and they were only married by Papal dispensation. It may be significant that a son, Edward, was bastardized by the annulment of Richard's first marriage, so it might have been especially politic to symbolize the solidity of the later match (equally Eleanor had a son by her first marriage, and the son of that son, John Beaumont, 4th Baron Beaumont (1361-1396) was very much alive at the time, and presumably might have been bothered about his mother's legacy). Richard had left a will specifying that he should be buried "without pomp" in the chapter house of Lewes priory, by the side of his second wife. But it seems not to be known at what date the effigies were created, nor, if this will was expeditiously implemented, when they were brought from Lewes to Chichester. Richard's son, also Earl of Arundel and a Knight of the Garter was, one imagines, well able to do what was necessary to protect his legacy. So it seems at least possible that the clasped hands were a dynastic statement on the part of one of Richard and Eleanor's descendants or heirs. If so it would suggest an irony different from that of Larkin, but perhaps just as poignant, and certainly more defensible historically.

An interesting coincidence connecting three of these earliest tombs is that Richard II was the son of Edward, the Black Prince. Thomas Beauchamp I was also the guardian of the Black Prince at Crécy and Poitiers. Finally Richard Fitzalan was one of the Black Prince's most trusted supporters, and at these same battles was also one of the



principal English commanders. The Black Prince founded the Knights of the Garter, and Thomas Beauchamp was its third entrant. Richard Fitzalan's son was later admitted. Although it might take a Dan Brown to read anything positive into all this, it does seem unlikely that an extraordinarily uxorious disposition connected this trio of heavyweights with their spouses, when it connected so few others at the time.

There are several well-known puzzles raised by Larkin's poem.<sup>8</sup> The Arundel tomb in Chichester cathedral has no Latin around the base. Neither do the two figures have dogs under their feet: the lady has a vestigial lapdog, but the animal under the man's foot is unquestionably a lion



This might suggest that Larkin was confusing two different tombs, or misremembering which one he had seen. However, quite apart from the title there is decisive independent evidence that it was indeed the Arundel tomb that Larkin saw (although the poem "Churchgoing" makes it likely that he also haunted other possible locations). In his biography of the poet Andrew Motion describes how Larkin, together with his close friend Monica Jones holidayed on the Isle of Wight in January 1956, immediately before creating early drafts of the poem, which was completed in February, and eventually published in May that year.<sup>9</sup> Chichester would have been a natural port of call en route to

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<sup>8</sup> A full text is available at <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/philip-larkin/an-arundel-tomb/>

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, New York: Farrer Strauss, 1993, p. 274

or from this destination. Furthermore, there is no other candidate that could be described in terms of an “Earl and Countess” lying in stone, nor ones which have such notably blurred figures (the term is perfect for Richardson’s restoration, which, although admired at the time, is extremely disappointing today. This is perhaps partly due to the soft stone he used, but also perhaps partly due to his much-derided qualities as a sculptor). The matter of origin appears to be clinched when Larkin writes to Monica in May 1964:

The TV men are after the Arundel tomb in Chichester—I hope to God it’s there and I didn’t dream it. They want to know if it’s free-standing or against a wall. I hope all my descriptions are accurate—jointed armours, stiffened pleats, little dogs. I’m quite likely to have invented them. Do you remember it? I expect you do: total recall.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps Larkin was right to be diffident about the accuracy of his memory, even for the few weeks that it took him to complete the poem. As well as the missing Latin and the wrong mammal, it is the right hand of the man that holds Eleanor’s hand, so it is the right-hand gauntlet that is clasped empty in the left hand.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, poets are not expected to be church guides. However, it is interesting that in the letter to Monica Larkin hopes that all the details are right. He is evidently not prepared to shelter behind “poetic license”. This in turn raises a much more interesting question. It is central to the poem that the trope of the clasped hands was not particularly important to the pair who are memorialized, just as it is also implied that it is they (and not for instance their descendants) who commissioned it, like wallpaper, from some sculptor’s pattern book. Larkin imagines it was just “a detail friends would see”, that the Latin around the base was more important, and hence there is the touching irony in this “hardly meant” gesture becoming their “final blazon”. It is not clear why he thought these things, although they clearly deliver much of the poignancy (or cynicism) of the poem. One might suppose that little about an expensive medieval monument would have been casual or “hardly meant”. Furthermore Eleanor’s turn towards Richard, with her right leg crossed over her other, surely belies this imputed nonchalance. As with the lady

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony Thwaite, *Philip Larkin: Letters to Monica* London: Faber and Faber, 2010, p. 334

<sup>11</sup> Larkin confesses to this mistake, which a correspondent pointed out to him. *Selected Letters*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 522–3.

in Bedale, it certainly looks as if she cared; the question is what she cared about.<sup>12</sup>

All in all, then, in spite of this being one of the best-known poems of the twentieth-century, questions remain.<sup>13</sup> Was it just forgetfulness that made Larkin misdescribe the tomb? Why did he assume that the linked hands were “hardly meant”? Why did he ignore Eleanor’s movement? Did Larkin have a glimmer of the dynastic reason that might have lain behind the joined hands, suggested by the motive of “prolonging the Latin names”, although in fact there are no Latin names? And what in any case is the likely significance of these relatively rare gestures in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries?

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<sup>12</sup> I owe thanks to the editor, James Booth, for pointing out that Larkin’s later reservations about this poem may be connected to its unnecessarily emphatic cynicism.

<sup>13</sup> Presumably few of the lovers of the poem are entirely comfortable with Andrew Motion’s view that in a number of poems including this one ‘Larkin transforms a masturbatory impulse and an addiction to solitude into poems of great beauty and sociable truthfulness’. (Motion, *op. cit.* p. 234). The tomb, at least, shows nothing to encourage such impulses or addictions, which were surely outside Edward Richardson’s repertoire.