

The Fytton Memorials

The Fytton family were of the Catholic faith prior to the Reformation and services today are conducted in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the Church of England following the form set out in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

The 17th century Fytton monuments are of great interest – particularly to those visitors who are interested in the Fytton family history. They are all situated in the Chancel area. Considerable damage to the monuments resulted from the 1851 ‘restoration’ – the necessary repairs were completed in the early 1950’s and you can see the result of this work yourselves.

The oldest monument is the table tomb on the south side of the chancel adjacent to the walled-up Patrons’ door – to the memory of **FRANCIS FYTTON, KNIGHT** who was buried at Gawsworth in 1608. It is the earliest example of Renaissance work in Cheshire - a table tomb on which lies the effigy of the knight, his head reposing on a large helm (or helmet). Beneath the tomb is a cadaver (or skeleton) in a shroud, with the skull now missing – a reminder of the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death – **‘MEMENTO MORI – REMEMBER THE DEAD’**. From an anatomical point of view, the spine of the skeleton displays the ribs affixed the wrong way round !

Francis Fytton was the son of Sir Edward Fytton 1(1500 – 1548) and in 1588, he married Katherine, the widow of Henry Percy, the 8th Earl of Northumberland and eldest daughter and co-heiress of John Neville, the 4th Lord Latimer.

The inscription round the edge of the tomb, formerly lying against the east wall, away from the south wall, reads – **Here lyeth Francis Fitton, Esquire – who married Katherine, Contes Dowager of Northumberland - and third brother of Sir Edward Fitton, deceased, of Gawsworth, Kt, Lord President of Cannaught’**. He held the manor of Bosley which he bequeathed to the house of Gawsworth shortly before his death in 1608 in the name of his great-nephew, Sir Edward Fytton 4.

It is interesting to note that Katherine’s father had become the stepson of Catherine Parr, on her marriage to the 3rd Lord Latimer in 1533 – history records that she married Henry VIII ten years later.

The next oldest tomb is that on the north side of the chancel adjacent to the Priest’s door – to the memory of **SIR EDWARD FYTTON 3** (1550 – 1606). This monument was erected in 1626/7 after the death of his widow, Dame Alice, daughter of Sir John Holcroft, with her two sons, Edward (at the front) and Richard and two daughters, Anne and Mary (at the rear). Similar to the Francis Fytton memorial, the tomb originally stood against the east wall, away from the north wall, with the kneeling figures of the children at each corner. St Edward’s effigy is lost and there is no record when it was last in situ at Gawsworth. Note the remodelled head of the second son, Richard.

At this stage, perhaps I could digress and talk briefly about the younger daughter. Mary, a lady of great beauty, became, through her father’s influence, a Maid-of-Honour in the court of Queen Elizabeth in the 1590’s and has been identified by many writers as the ‘Dark Lady’ of Shakespeare’s Sonnets. It seems to be well established by the contemporary evidence that about the year 1600 the lively but frail Mary Fytton became the mistress of William Herbert, later the Earl of Pembroke, who was a Patron of William Shakespeare - it has also been suggested that a friendship existed between Shakespeare and Herbert and possibly therefore with his mistress. In 1601 Herbert was sent to prison for his illicit association with Mary and she was banished from court. She married twice, was left a

widow twice, had two children and died in 1647 aged 69 years. The long cherished tradition that Mary Fytton was the 'Dark Lady' of Shakespeare's sonnets rest on very slender and doubtful evidence and the theory that William Herbert was the person to whom the sonnets were dedicated is equally speculative though without it, the whole possibility of Mary's association with Shakespeare fails.

Returning to the tombs, the memorial at the rear on the north side of the chancel is to the memory of **SIR EDWARD FYTTON 4 – 1ST BARONET** (1572 – 1619) and his wife Anne, daughter of James Barratt. You will recall that the manor of Bosley had been willed to Sir Edward in 1608 by his great uncle, Francis Fytton. In front of the tomb chest are the kneeling figures of their three sons and seven daughters – there were twelve children by this marriage, two died in infancy and are not depicted – there is an additional figure at the front although my research has not come up with an answer to its identity. This tomb was canopied – sadly the canopy was badly mutilated by the 1851 Victorian 'restorers', to obliterate the last visible vestige of Catholicism – and on the east wall behind the tomb are the remains of the canopy. Note the small white shield, displaying a red hand, in the centre of the Fytton /Barratt coat of arms. In the year 1611, King James 1 created the hereditary English title of Baronet with the objective of raising funds to support the troops in Ulster – the 'honour' cost the first recipient the sum of £1095, who were granted the prefix Sir and Lady (or Dame) with precedence above Knights. Baronets have the '*bloody red hand of Ulster*' as the symbol on their coat-of-arms. Sir Edward was made a Baronet in 1617.

The corresponding tomb on the south side of the chancel is in memory of **SIR EDWARD FYTTON 5 – 2nd - AND LAST BARONET** (1603 – 1643) and his first wife, Jane, daughter of Sir John Trevor, of Plas Teg, Co.Flint, who died in 1638. The solitary kneeling figure at the head of the tomb represents their only child, Margaret, who predeceased her parents in 1631, aged 7 years. Sir Edward distinguished himself in the Civil War in the Royalist cause – he was the last of the 'Fighting Fyttons' and died of consumption at the siege of Bristol in 1643 – although it is likely that the tomb was not erected until Sir Edward's remains were brought to Gawsworth in 1663. Again, this tomb was canopied and similarly, following the 1851 Victorian 'restoration', all that now remains is the backcloth with the d'Orreby coat of arms on the horizontal.

All four memorials were restored in 1954.