**THE MEDIEVAL NETTLECOMBE EFFIGIES**

**THE HISTORY**

THE SOUTH AISLE

The recesses containing the effigies lie in the south aisle. This was originally built as a Chantry Chapel which were memorials or buildings dedicated to a person or family. In medieval times it was common for a wealthy patron to give money for a priest to pray for a person or family there. This Chantry Chapel was built following the bequest of Simon de Ralegh, who died in 1440, and was dedicated to St John the Baptist following the terms of his will. Work began in 1443.It would at that time not be accessed from the rest of the church building.

Following the Reformation, when Chapels such as these were abolished, it was supressed in 1548.Sometime following openings were made in the connecting wall into the nave of the church, arches were formed and the Chantry Chapel became the south aisle seen today.

THE EASTERN RECESS

This is the older recess, although the western one was built not long after. This recess has shafts, carrying the outer at the apex of the outer arch is a small fine kings head.

This recess is where the recumbent figure of the cross legged knight lies, temporarily removed for the restoration, which is 1.85m (6ft 2”) in length. His shield is charged with a bend fusilée, the bearing of the Earls Marshal of England, adopted by the de Ralegh family when they became feudal tenants under those lords in 1133. The label that originally lay beside it read Sir Simon Ralegh, Knt ca 1260. However there is no record of a Sir Simon Ralegh dying in 1260. It has therefore been assigned to the first Sir Simon of Wrenchester Castle (Glamorganshire), who inherited the Nettlecombe Estate from his brother Sir Warin, who when he died left only 2 daughters, between 1277 and 1280. He died between 1284 and 1288. It has been suggested that the effigy may have been made in 1260.

THE WESTERN RECESS

This slightly later recess houses the two figures believed to be those of Sir John de Ralegh and his first wife Maud ca 1360. She may have died in 1360 but he remarried and died in 1372. His effigy is 2.1m (7ft) long. It was Sir John’s son (Simon de Ralegh ) who gave the monies for the Chantry Chapel but his mother was Ismania Hanham, Sir John’s second wife. It seems a little surprising therefore that it is Maud next to Sir John but the marked difference in size suggests they were not originally meant to lie side by side.

**THE RESTORATION**

Although Pevsner said these were considered the most remarkable feature of the church the figures had been in obvious need of professional restoration for some while.

There have been previous attempts to restore the effigies, most noticeably on Sir John de Ralegh but they have not been well executed. A report was commissioned in 1992 but unfortunately the £12,250 needed for professional repair was well beyond the means of the Parochial Church Council at that time. A small amount of funds continued to sit in a specific “Effigy Fund” until a few years ago when it became obvious that the deterioration was becoming even more pronounced.

It was agreed by the Parochial Church Council (PCC) to obtain a new report which was undertaken by Torquil McNeilage (of McNeilage Conservation). Following this the search began to find the majority of the monies required, over £30,000, as again it was too great a sum for church funds to contemplate. Additionally the report recommended that the drainage around the south side of the church should be improved before any restoration was commenced.

In late 2014 work began on improving the drainage to the south side of the church. This was already a problem the PCC was aware of, prior to the effigy report, so the £15000 cost was met by church funds as it would improve the overall condition of that side of the church.

Whilst this work was being undertaken various charities were approached to help fund the effigy restoration. This list of those who have contributed is seen on the display and without their help we would not have been able to undertake this project.

**THE CURRENT PROJECT**

June 2016

Confirmation of the Heritage Lottery monies meant the project could begin a this contribution ensured we had a sufficient amount to begin.

It would be around a 2 year project as until work actually began it would be difficult to tell what exactly would be required.

The first work was to be undertaken on Sir Simon Ralegh and he was lifted out of the eastern recess later that month to enable work to be undertaken on the effigy on site and also to ensure the recess was in good state to conserve the effigy for the future.

The plaster was removed from the interior of the recesses and the concrete flooring, of the eastern recess, to allow for drying out.

Autumn 2016

Following the cleaning much more detail was evident on the figure. Finer details of the armour were evident as well as some suggestion of colour.

Winter 2016

All work was complete on the effigy but further drying of the recess was required.

Late spring 2017

Plaster was restored to the inner aspect of the recess and thoughts given as to the base the effigy needed to sit on to best maintain the condition of the effigy.

Consideration had also been given as to the best method of working on the effigies in the western recess. They were not so easy to lift out as Sir Simon Ralegh as they had been set lower into the flooring. There is also considerable concern that the obvious previous attempts at repair contained chemicals that were hastening the decline of the figures. Cleaning of Sir John allowed for more detailed analysis.

**Summer 2017**

**Sir Simon Ralegh**  Although the recess has not completely dried out it is considered sufficiently good plan to the return the effigy, as it will be protected by lead.

When the recess is re floored further earth will be removed and replaced with hard core that will allow for movement and improved drainage to encourage drying.

**Sir John and Maud** This recess still has significant dampness despite the removal of the lower plaster. The cleaning of Sir John revealed the extent of previous repairs and the fact that the surface comprises of 2 different layers. The differing surfaces are not thought to be in any way damaging but the repairs on the leg, hand and neck are gypsum and causing further chemical damage. It is proposed that these repairs are removed and then may best be left incomplete. It is yet to be decided if this effigy is to be lifted out which would allow better access to Maud.

Maud has been partly cleaned and is responding well to this. This effigy lies on a firmer base so consideration will have to be given as to how to best protect from the damp. The crack through the legs may not extend through.

**The external wall of the recesses**.

The persisting damp is not too surprising given the thickness of walls and the probable length of time over which this has occurred, the improvement made in the drainage should continue to improve the situation. The composition of the mortar was investigated and found to be satisfactory.

**March – April 2018**

**Sir Simon Ralegh -**  Permissions finally obtained for the flooring to be laid with new stone and the niche is lime washed. The effigy was returned to the niche when all this was completed. The work on this effigy is now complete.

**Sir John and Maud –** still awaiting written permission to remove the gypsum repairs. It is thought unlikely that either effigy will be moved out. More cleaning has been done to some of the animal figures. Maud’s face has been cleaned, although the mottled appearance may suggest otherwise. Work is temporarily paused until permissions received.

*Historical details have been taken from the Church Guide by Dr J H Crothers. Copies are available for sale in the church.*