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FEATURE ARTICLE

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## The memorial brass of Richard Pygott and his wife in the Church of St Mary and St Nicholas, Compton



The brass is situated in the nave of the church of St Mary and St Nicholas, Compton, in front of the chancel step. It is orientated at right angles to the Nave with the heads directed northward, and depicts a husband and wife, who are named and connected by an inscription beneath them. The figures are half turned towards each other with their hands clasped in prayer. The figures and inscription together measure 23" x 23".

The brass presumably marks the tomb of the named persons, Richard Pygott and his wife Alys, depicted above the inscription. There is no date on the brass but the costumes of the figures, particularly the woman's large angular headdress, suggest that it dates from the fifteenth century. This means that the brass is older than the written records of baptisms, marriages, and burials in the parish registers, so these sources cannot tell us anything of the two people buried in this church tomb. The parish registers for Compton begin about 1553.

Richard is depicted bare-headed with long collar-length hair cut to a straight fringe at the front. He is dressed in long robes with fur-edged collar and sleeves, represented by a texture of short dashes. There is what looks like a pouch hanging from his belt. He is wearing slippers which protrude from beneath the edge of his robe. Alys wears a long robe with a belt and buckle. She wears a large hood. The cuffs of her sleeves are also trimmed with fur.

The inscription beneath the figures reads

*Of yō charite pray for the soules of richard pygott & Alys*

*his Wyf on whose soules & alle cristen soules Jhu have mercy*

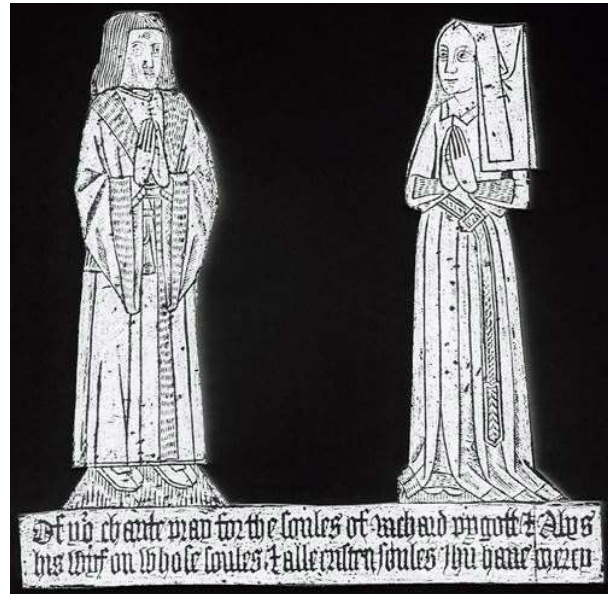
There is a small 's' shaped mark above the second word in the top line which suggests an abbreviation but there is no other punctuation.

**William Hewett**



William Hewett, in his *'History & Antiquities of the Hundred of Compton'*, written in 1843, in which he included his own drawing of the brass, noted that the man is wearing "a long loose gown trimmed with fur". He suggests that the man could have been a brother in some guild. The illustration is naively drawn, anatomically distorted, and differs from the original of which it is plainly a poor representation (The coins shown in the drawing are not related to the figures nor do they form part of the brass.) Although it is clear that Hewett is not an accomplished draughtsman, it should be remembered that he was working under difficulties in the dark interior of the church by such natural light as came in through the windows.

The brass is basically a line drawing incised into metal. There are no tones or shading, though in some places there is an attempt to represent texture, as in the use of short hash marks to depict the fur on Richard's collar and sleeves and Alys's cuffs. Hewett wrongly depicts the fur as ermine which was usually reserved for high-ranking peers and royalty, and clearly Richard Pygott was neither of these.

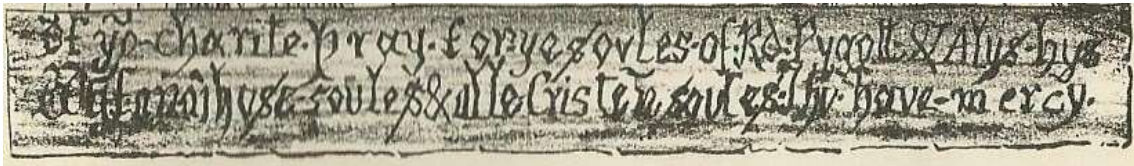


There seems to have been a conscious effort to impose an assumed character by adding embellishments with religious overtones. Hewett's drawing shows both figures with their hands clasped in prayer, as indeed they are on the original. Hewett has given Alys a wimple underneath her hood, and Richard is shown holding a crucifix, neither of which feature on

the brass. Alys's face in the brass is almost serene, smiling across at her husband, but Hewett has added facial lines, and straightened her nose, which give the opposite impression, that of a hard, slightly bad-tempered woman. Having drawn the folds of Richard's sleeves as if the arm is bent at a right angle, his forearms appear to be detached from the rest of his arm seeming to originate in the region below his waist.

Hewett's drawing introduces shading in an attempt to make the figures more realistic. The illustration shows all the signs of having been printed by lithography, which lends itself to lines and soft shading.

The inscription in William Hewett's drawing, which makes little attempt to copy the lettering of the original, reads



*of yō charite pray for ye soules of Rd: Pygott & Alys . hys*

*wyf on whyse soules & alle Cristen soules . Jhu have mercy*

which he transcribes as

*Of your charitie pray for the soules of Richard Pygott and Alys his wyf; on whose soules, and all Christian soules, Jesu have mercy*

So who was Richard Pygott?

### **False Trail**

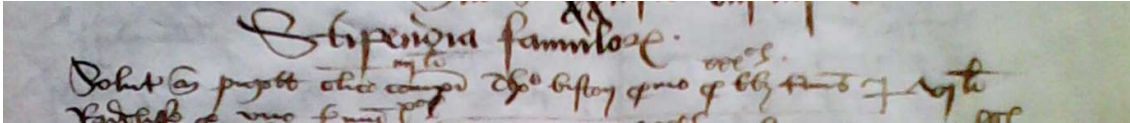
My initial research online found that Richard Pygott was a well-known mediaeval musician and composer who worked for Cardinal Wolsey and later for King Henry VIII. He worked with the likes of Thomas Tallis and Thomas Byrd.

Surely someone so famous could not be buried in Compton!

And of course he was not. His Will reveals that this Richard Pygott died in London in 1549, a man of considerable means. He had property in Greenwich and other places, and there was no mention of a wife or children. He was obviously not the Richard Pygott I was looking for.

## **Magdalen College connection**

I found evidence that a Richard Pygott was employed by Magdalen College, Oxford. The archives there show he was listed as holding the position of ‘Clericus Computi’, or clerk of accounts, in which capacity he would have assisted the President and Bursar. The ‘Libri Computi’, which is a full account of payments made by the college, shows that from 1506 until 1513, he was paid £4 per annum, except for 1509 when for some reason he received £6. This was a considerable sum for the time and perhaps a reflection of his importance.



The Pygott entry in the ‘Libri Computi’, 1509, Magdalen College Archives Oxford.

Another document mentions that a John Claymond with Richard Pygot obtained land in the Parish of Ashbury, (which is about a dozen miles from Compton) on behalf of Magdalen College, one meadow called Purtoken and another meadow called Chapelwyke, estimated at 21 and a half acres, and a pasture and wood called Chapelwick Marsh. This transaction was carried out about 1513 and was recorded later in 1532.

The role of ‘Clericus Computi’ was often held by someone with a legal background, who might well have acted as a sort of land agent for estates held by the College. It is unlikely that he lived in College and so must have had a home elsewhere, where his wife and family lived.

Although it is not definitive proof, it seems highly likely that the Richard Pygott mentioned in these documents was the same person delineated on the brass, who is buried in Compton Church.

## **The Will**

I presumed that someone important enough to have a tomb with a brass memorial inside the church would have also made a Will, and so it proved. The Will, found online after some searching, is without doubt the Will of the same person as the one depicted on the brass, for it contains a request to be buried “*in the Church of Compton..... before the Crucifix there*”. The Will answers several questions. Firstly it is dated 1520 which gives the year of Richard’s death. It mentions his wife, though not by name, and among the many bequests, nothing is left to her, which suggests that she had predeceased him. Neither does he mention any children of his own, but leaves legacies to his ‘godchildren.’ One of the witnesses at the end of the Will is “*my curate of Compton Church*”. This could mean that Richard Pygott was closely connected with the church, though as a married man he would not have been a member of its clergy. However, it adds more credence to the link with Magdalen

College mentioned above. It is likely, in view of other bequests of sheep, cattle, wheat, and barley, that he was a prosperous landowner.

Richard Pygott left varying amounts of money to, The Cathedral Church of Sarum, (Salisbury) and the Churches of Compton, Fyfield, Hampsted, Ilsley, Aldworth, Basildon, Streatley, and the chapel at Ashampsted.

To the Church at Compton he left 12d. for the high altar, 12d. for every light (window) in the church, 13/4d for reparation, and 6/8d as a 'torch price'. He also left 10/- for the making of a rood loft. If a rood loft was ever built, it is likely that it was removed during the Reformation when the Chantry was destroyed. Since the church, apart from the tower, was largely rebuilt in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is amazing that the brass has survived in its original place.

The final request, in Richard's Will, was that "*an honest priest shall sing for my soul in the Church of Compton by the space of three years next and immediately after my decease for my wife's soul and all Christian souls*". This wording is remarkably close to the inscription on the brass.

### **Brass Rubbing**

The illustration below is based on an image which is achieved by means of rubbing a hard black wax on paper which has been placed over the relief surface of the brass underneath. Only the raised parts show black, while the incised lines remain white.

The Pygott brass is usually covered by a carpet for protection. After carefully removing dust and grit particles from the surface it was covered with a sheet of strong white paper which was taped down at the edges to prevent any movement during the rubbing process. In this case it took about 45 minutes to create an accurate image in black of the original.

The finished rubbing was then photographed and the image transferred to a computer, and a good quality print made. To get rid of marks which went beyond the edge of the image, it was carefully cut out with a scalpel, mounted on a clean white surface and copied again. Using computer software, a negative image was then created, making the design easier to see as the black line drawing as seen elsewhere in this article.



### **Historical background**

In 1520, the year of Richard Pygott's death, Henry VIII had been King for 11 years, and this year he attended the famous 'Field of the Cloth of Gold' meeting with Francis I of France. He was married to Katherine of Aragon, and his break with Rome was some years into the future.