

# THOMAS ESSINGTON AT BRIGHTWELL AND THE IDENTITY OF HIS SCULPTOR

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BRIGHTWELL IN COLNEIS Half Hundred is today chiefly remarkable for its small but unusual church dedicated to St John the Baptist (Fig. 130), although from the latter part of the 17th century to 1760 a fine house, gardens and grounds spread over the gently sloping land below the church to the south east. Between the earlier Jermys, Hewetts and Wingfields, and the later Barnardistons, the manors of Brightwell, Foxhall and Kesgrave were owned for just ten years by the Essingtons, a family with Gloucestershire origins. If this was a surprising interruption to the local succession, it was an even stranger interlude in the prosperous career of Thomas Essington, who like his father William was a wealthy and influential member of the third senior City livery company, the Drapers'. Father and son in succession held the lease of part of the premises of the former Drapers' Hall in St Swithin's parish,<sup>2</sup> and both were, in their turn, Warden and Master.<sup>3</sup> Their origins at Cowley, Gloucestershire are shown by William Essington remembering the poor there in his will, and their use of the arms granted by William Segar, Garter, on 28 July 1610 to William and Thomas Essington of Cowley: sable five fusils in cross or.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Essington bought the estates from Sir Richard Wingfield,<sup>5</sup> held his first manor courts in 1653, was High Sheriff of the county in 1657 and returned to London in 1663 or 1664, having sold everything to Sir Samuel, third son of Sir Nathaniel Barnardiston of Kedington. Samuel was created a baronet in 1663, held his first courts in Colneis hundred in 1664, demolished the existing house and built the Brightwell Hall which survives only in the Knyff-Kip bird's eye view engraved in 1707, and a fine show of daffodils each spring.

Born about 1609, in the early 1640s Thomas Essington married Anne, daughter of John I'anson, another London Draper, of Moorfields and Ashby St Ledgers, Northants. They had five sons and two daughters, but only three survived childhood; John, Martha and Samuel outlived their father. John and Martha were christened at St Margaret, Lothbury, in 1645 and 1649 respectively. Samuel was born at Brightwell on 16 December 1653 and baptised that Christmas Day. In February 1654, Essington had to bury his 'shepheard' John, for whom no surname is given. Robert Brownrigg, Esq., estate steward, arranged for extensive and detailed surveys of some of Essington's manor lands in 1656; they and the rentals survive.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Essington lost no time in putting things ecclesiastical in order in the tiny parish of Brightwell. What happened to John Skynner, vicar since 1636, we do not know. He was not ejected, but no registers survive before those begun by Daniel Norris, the Gloucestershire man who came to be vicar of Brightwell-cum-Foxhall from 1653. Later that decade he took the rich living of Tetbury and held it to his death in 1687. According to the Suffolk antiquary Matthias Candler,<sup>7</sup> writing in 1662,

Thomas Essington, Esq., hath repaired, at his owne charge, the almost ruined church, built anew the steeple, and in a comely sort, built seats in the churche and chancel. Under the chancel is a very fair vault, on the mouth whereof lies a marble, which hath engraven on it 'the Essingtons' vault'. In the chancel bee two small monuments of alabaster, exceedingly comely and faire, which were the work of a German, whose ancestors were Italians.

These monuments are for Essington's children Thomas who died in 1656, aged five (Fig. 131),

and Anna who died in 1660, aged seventeen (Fig.132), and each child is quoted *verbatim*: Thomas 'His owne words Christ will rais mee' and Anna 'Her dieing words. My mortall shall put on Immortality'.<sup>8</sup> The ledger-slab over the family vault bears the date 'A' 1662' and two shields with the arms of Essington and I'anson joined by a lovers' bow (Fig. 133). The inscription, after giving details of the Essingtons, continues: 'The south side of the vault in the chancell of this church at Brightwell belong to them and there posterity for a place of buriall to soe many of them as shall desire it.' The Essington children, however, were never joined by their parents, and the Barnardistons marked the entrance to their own vault, leaving the Essington slab on their side of the chancel.

Thomas Essington's work of church building was carried out between 1656 and 1658, a time when the gothic had given way to classical styles, better fitting a godly preaching-box. Pinnacles on tower and gables are plain brick obelisks, and the interior was given a mixture of benches and box pews, and the tall pulpit, plainest of plain, and further west than it is today, with stalls below for the minister and the clerk. The font cover, chalice and paten, and the massively-columned west end are all Essington's doing, and the single bell in the tower is dated 'For Brighwell [*sic*] in Suffolcke, February 5th 1657', perhaps the date of the re-opening in 1658 (New Style).

If this were the whole story, one could not be totally sure about Essington's churchmanship. He could perhaps have foreseen an eventual end to the Interregnum and have been improving what was almost a private chapel on his estate to impress those in authority when the rule of kings and bishops was restored. It is what he did elsewhere in the county that demonstrates his admiration for the sterner sort of Puritan minister: To two of them he erected monuments elsewhere, one to the memory of Matthias Candler (1605–63) and his wife at Coddendam, the



FIG. 130 – Brightwell Church from the south east (by kind permission of Ronald Manning).

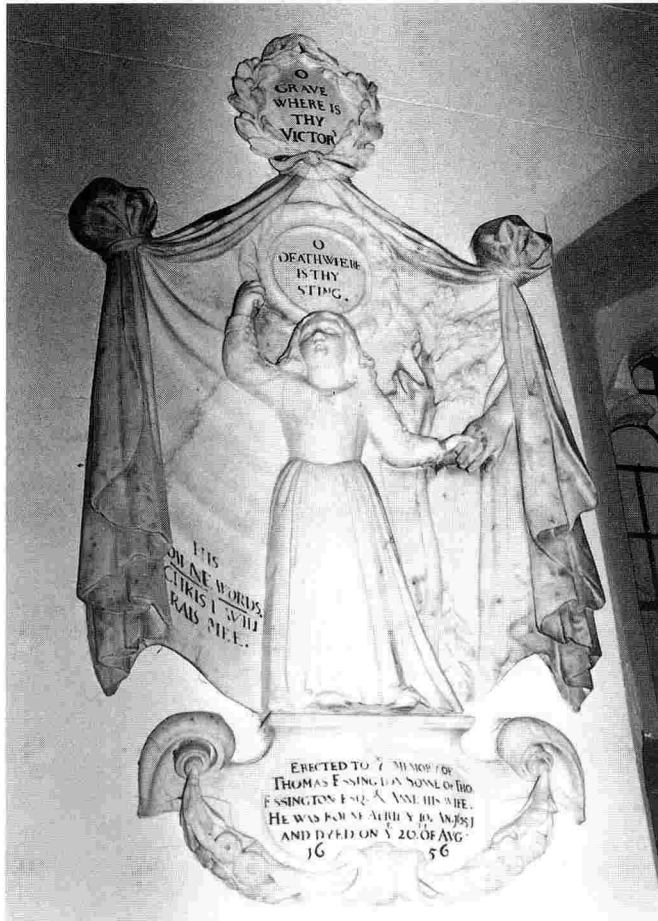


FIG. 131 – Mural monument of Thomas Essington (1651–56) on chancel south wall at Brightwell (photo: J.M.B.).



FIG. 132 – Mural monument of Anna Essington (1643–60) on chancel east wall at Brightwell (Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).



FIG. 133 – Upper part of ledger slab covering the Essington vault on south side of chancel at Brightwell (photo: J.M.B.).



FIG. 134 – Upper part of ledger slab of Matthias and Anne Candler outside the south aisle at Coddenham (photo: J.M.B.).

other at St Clement's, Ipswich, to John Ward (1595–1662), youngest brother of Samuel Ward, the celebrated town preacher who dominated the religious life of Ipswich from four days before the Gunpowder Plot to his death in 1640.

The Candler's were given a dark grey marble slab (Fig. 134), for some reason now fixed vertically to the outside of the south nave wall at the church Candler served from 1629 until his death in 1663; it fell to his lot to christen some of his parishioner William Dowsing's children. Candler was left an ailing widower when his wife died in December 1662; perhaps the Essingtons looked after him at Brightwell, for his will dated 30 September 1663 was witnessed by Thomas Essington and his son and heir John. On the slab the shield with Candler's arms and another with the name DEVREUX (Mrs Anne Candler was non-armigerous) are separated by palm leaves bound with a ribbon. The epitaph reads 'Solid in divinitie, Laborious in's ministry, Heavenly in society, A mirrouer of sound pietie, Here the weary be at rest.'

Ejected from Dennington in 1638 for alleged simony, John Ward moved to Bury before being instituted to the rectory at St Clement's on the presentation of John Brandling in June 1640. Here he served until his death in April 1662, just escaping (as Candler did) the operation of the Act of Uniformity. He was a member of the Assembly of Divines, and the sermon he preached before Parliament in March 1645 was ordered to be printed as *God judging among the Gods*. Ward's mural monument (Fig. 135) is surmounted by a skull crowned with a laurel wreath which rests on a book with a Hebrew inscription on its fore-edge: 'Death is the real victory for the godly'.<sup>9</sup> Similarities with Anna Essington's memorial at Brightwell, particularly the motif of inscriptions on ribbons wound around foliage, suggest this is the work of the same sculptor. The coat of arms: sable (or azure) a cross flory or, with the motto: 'ex cruce flores',



FIG. 135 – Mural monument of John Ward (died 1662) on south wall of chancel at St Clement's, Ipswich (photo: J.M.B.).



FIG. 136 – Chimneypiece at Lamport Hall, Northants.: design dated 1654 (photo: Bruce A. Bailey).



was for Ward of Haverhill and Ipswich. Candler also tells us how well-off the minister had been: 'John Ward . . . married Lydia, sister of John Acton, Esq., of Bramford and widow of Daniel Burrell, gent., and his estate as Minister . . . and by his wife and his own lands and otherwise . . . is thought worth £400 per annum'.

Proof that Thomas Essington returned to the City in 1663 or 1664 comes from a will dated 29 December 1673 which can only be his. It was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury on 19 January following. Thomas, after a lengthy and pious preamble, desired to be buried with his father at St Swithin's, and left a widow Anne, and three children: John, Samuel and Martha, the last married to Daniell Mercer with a dowry of £3,000. On the family's return to London, Thomas resumed his career in the Drapers' Company, becoming Warden in 1663 and Master in 1664.<sup>10</sup> Presumably the Essingtons were left homeless like so many others after the Great Fire of early September 1666, for on the 29th of that month Thomas bought a dwelling house in Bury Street from Peter Blackborow, and on 18 April the following year acquired the lease of a warehouse near Bevis Marks from Abraham Stanion.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, after the disaster it is no surprise that his will discloses far less wealth than did his father's, and a line seems to have been drawn under his Suffolk period; no persons or places there are mentioned. It would be interesting to know what political, economic or domestic reasons led the family to move to Suffolk in the first place, and what made them return to London when they did. Perhaps it was as simple as bringing up the family in the country, returning when it was Thomas's turn to assume the highest offices in the Company.

There is strong evidence, not previously published, that the sculptor Thomas Essington employed to make memorials in Suffolk was Caius Gabriel Cibber, celebrated on account of his later work on the Monument, at Chatsworth, at Hampton Court and elsewhere.

In about 1656 or 1657 Cibber made a chimneypiece for Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire, following a design by the architect John Webb dated 1654 (Bold 1989, 85; Pevsner and Cherry 1973, 287) (Fig. 136). At the very top of this chimneypiece, ornamenting a scroll at the top of a heraldic cartouche, is a singular small motif, not shown on Webb's drawing, which stands apart from the forms of the other non-architectural carving by virtue of its regularity, and which cannot be found in the work of any other sculptor of the period. The motif consists of a diagonal cross of petals set in a square hollow. The motif is also found, unchanged, ornamenting cartouche forms on four church monuments, and its presence on five works suggests that it can be regarded as a personal mark which Cibber used somewhat in the manner of a signature (Fig. 137). The four church monuments in question are the two at Brightwell which are the subject of Candler's description (which gives a *terminus ante quem* of

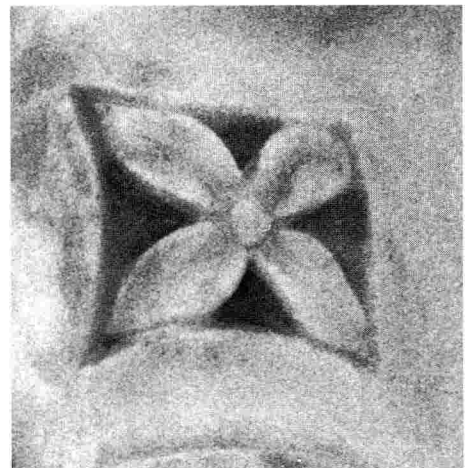


FIG. 137 – Cibber's 'signature'; detail from monument of Anna Essington at Brightwell (photo: J.M.B.).



FIG. 138 – Monument to Nicholas and Elisabeth Breton at Norton, Northants. (Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).

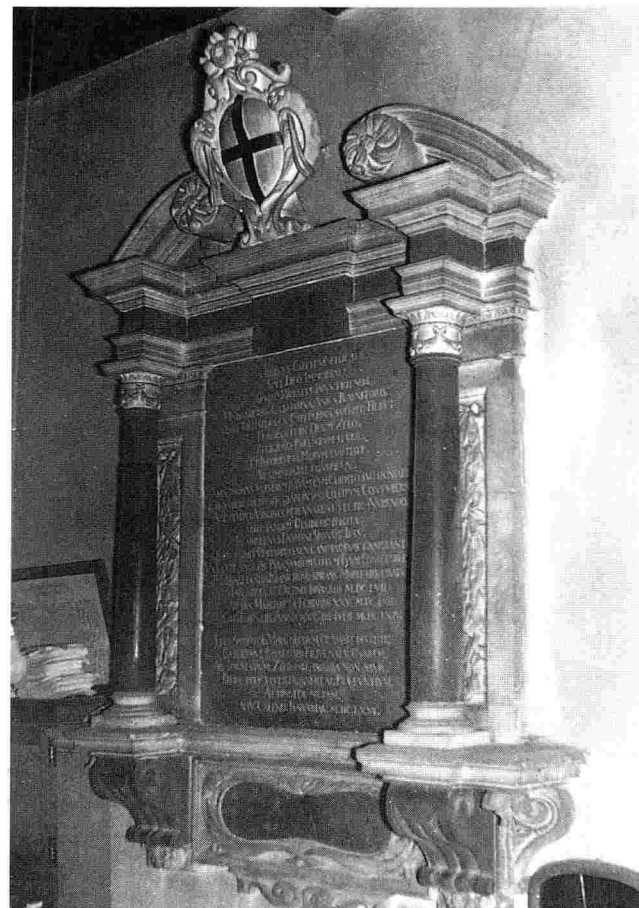


FIG. 139 – Raynsford family monument at Dallington, Northants., erected January 1666/7.



1662 for their making) and two in Northamptonshire – that at Norton commemorating Nicholas Breton, who died in 1658, and his wife Elisabeth (Fig. 138), and that at Dallington commemorating several members of the Raynsford family and erected in January 1666/7 (Fig. 139).

Support for the identification of Cibber as the author of the monuments to Thomas and Anna Essington can be found in Candler's description of the sculptor as 'a German, whose ancestors were Italians'. Cibber was born in Flensburg in Schleswig, then part of Denmark, but Harald Faber considered that Cibber's surname and its variants suggested possible German, as opposed to Danish, antecedents (Faber 1926, 3). Furthermore, having apparently spent time in Italy, Cibber adopted the arms of the famous Italian family of Cibo (Faber 1926, 3 and 18), which implies that he pretended to be of Italian ancestry.

What the form of the 'signature' motif symbolised for Cibber remains, for the time being, a matter for speculation. It is not a reference to the Cibo coat of Arms.

Two additional monuments represent further links in the pattern of authorship and patronage established by evidence already adduced, because they are not only strongly related stylistically to the four monuments bearing Cibber's personal mark but also commemorate persons linked respectively to Thomas Essington and to Cibber himself. The first, at Ashby St Ledgers in Northamptonshire, commemorates Thomas Essington's father-in-law John I'anson and was erected in 1663. The second is at Dodford in the same county and commemorates John Wyrley who died in 1655. In 1670 Cibber married, as his second wife, Wyrley's granddaughter Jane Colley (their actor son Colley Cibber's name is almost as familiar as Garrick's) (Faber 1926, 17). The style of Wyrley's monument suggests that it was made several years before 1670, so it seems likely that Cibber had met Jane some time before they were married, and thus that connections between her family and the I'ansons led to Thomas Essington's patronage of Cibber.

Lettering and other points of style link the slabs at Brightwell and Coddtenham and the Ward monument at St Clement's, Ipswich, to the other six monuments which have been referred to, making nine works in all for which there is compelling evidence of Cibber's authorship. The entire group provides a valuable insight into an early phase of Cibber's activity which will need to be considered in all future studies of his career and of the development of his sculptural style.

## NOTES

- 1 Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.
- 2 The company moved from this Hall to the present site in Throgmorton Street in 1543. William Essington leased a messuage which was part of the old Hall for 31 years from Michaelmas 1626, and, presumably at his death in 1649 Thomas Essington took it over, since on 1 August 1653 it passed from Thomas to Robert Manley: Drapers' Company deeds, A.I. 154, 119 and 126.
- 3 William Essington was admitted a Draper after apprenticeship in 1598, was a member of the Livery 1608–21, of the Court 1621–48, Warden 1629, Master 1633, died in late October 1649 and was buried by his 'last wife' in a vault in the chancel of St Swithin's, Cannon Street. His will was made 16 April, proved (P.C.C. 181 Fairfax) 3 Nov. 1649. Thomas his son was admitted 12 May 1630 by patrimony, Livery 1637–57, and Court 1650–73.
- 4 John, son of William Essington of Slimbridge, gent., entered Magdalen College, Oxford in May 1664 aged 19. He would have been of the same generation as the Essington children at Brightwell. Cowley and Slimbridge are very close together, and Rodborough, where Daniel Norris (*see below*) came from, was also near Stroud. From 1697 to his death in 1740, another John Essington was Clerk to the Mercers' Company. We are grateful to Dr Anne Sutton, Archivist to the Mercers' Company, and to Miss Penelope Fussell, Archivist of the Drapers, for details of Essington liverymen and other generous assistance.
- 5 Sir Richard was the son of Sir Anthony Wingfield, 3rd Bart., of Letheringham, who died in 1638.
- 6 S.R.O.I. HB 8/1/937 is the survey and HB 8/1/935 the rental.
- 7 F.H. Turnor Barnwell wrote about Brightwell in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1829, ii, 209–10, but mistakenly attributed Candler's notes to Robert Ryece of Preston. He had consulted the volume presented

to the College of Arms by Lord Thurlow in 1803, for long thought to be Ryece's Suffolk collections. The version in B.L. Add. MS 15,520 is almost identical, and that is certainly Candler. The reason for the Coddenham vicar's interest in the Essingtons will become clear.

- 8 At the top is inscribed *1 Cor. 15.52* ('In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . .'), and at the bottom *Ecc. 7.1* ('A good name is better than a precious ointment: and the day of death is better than the day of one's birth.'). Two more references to Scripture reside in the foliage which grows around the portrait frame. On the left hand side: *John 15.5* ('I am the vine, ye are the branches . . .'), above *Gathered Sep: 11*. On the right: *1 Peter 1.24* ('For all flesh is as grass, . . .'), above *Sprung forth Mar: 25*.
- 9 It is Candler in his notes on St Clement's, Ipswich, (B.L. Add. MS 15,520, pp.15–16) who states that the Essingtons provided John Ward's memorial. We are grateful to the Revd Nicholas Cribb for his English translation of the Hebrew.
- 10 Essington probably lived in Aldermanbury from his return until the Fire. This is implied by the Fire Court proceedings for 20 December 1667, when it was stated that he had taken a lease on a messuage there (already in his occupation) on 9 June 1664. See Jones, P. E., 1966, I, 130–31.
- 11 All the factual information comes from the will: P.C.C. 1674 f. 7. We thank Dr Stephen Porter at the Survey of London for discussing with us the economic consequences of the fire for someone in Essington's position. The fire losses of private individuals were not insured, and government grants went mainly to the poor. The value of Blackborow's standing house will have soared and the rent Stanion could charge for his warehouse likewise, but if Thomas Essington's wealth was comparable with his father's, his expenses of relocation will not have seriously extended him. See also Reddaway 1951, 30.

#### REFERENCES

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#### Abbreviations

- B.L.            British Library.  
 P.C.C.        Prerogative Court of Canterbury.  
 S.R.O.I.      Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.