

# INSCRIBED TILES AT THE CHURCH OF ST MARY, IXWORTH

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IN 1967 MEMBERS of the Parochial Church Council of St Mary's, Ixworth became concerned at the progressively deteriorating state of three 15th-century inscribed tiles embedded in the outer flintwork of the tower and they applied successfully for a faculty for their removal. The intention was to re-site them on an inner wall of the tower, but this was not in fact done until the spring of 1980, in the course of work to convert the base of the tower into a parish room. During the intervening years the tiles were for a short time on display at Moyses Hall Museum in Bury St Edmunds, and were subsequently returned to Ixworth, where for some while they were in the care of the writer.

## THE 'THOMAS VYAL' TILE (FIG. 9)

This tile was embedded in the flintwork of the lowest stage of the tower, to the right of, and at the same level as, the springing of the arch for the west doorway. In this sheltered position, protected from the full force of the weather, it remained in a good state, clearly legible, with the surface only slightly pitted. Its original glaze was light and almost colourless, but on arrival at Moyses Hall it was sprayed with polyurethane, which fixed the surface but has given it an unnaturally glossy appearance.

It is a substantial tile with slightly bevelled edges, measuring  $9\frac{1}{4}$ in  $\times$   $9\frac{1}{4}$ in (23cm  $\times$  23cm) on its top surface and  $8\frac{3}{4}$ in  $\times$   $8\frac{3}{4}$ in (22.4cm  $\times$  22.4cm) on its underside. It has bowed a little during firing, and varies in thickness from  $1\frac{1}{2}$ in (11.4cm) on its right edge to  $1\frac{1}{4}$  (11.3cm) on its left. It is made of well-worked clay which fired to a medium red, and has an inlaid inscription in light grey clay painted over with a yellow ochre slip. It reads: 'thome vyal gaf to the stepil iij li'. The lettering is robust and somewhat irregular, with a mildly ornamental treatment of the 'v' and crudely-formed starred heads to the 't's.

The background to this tile is well known. Thomas Vyal was a prosperous local carpenter with a certain amount of property, in whose will six marks (£4) was bequeathed for the work on the new 'stepyl'. The will was made in October 1472 and proved at the end of December. It is written in English, and was amongst those transcribed by Samuel Tymms (1853, 103-04). Thomas Vyal's gift to the tower was one of a number of bequests which he made, either in money or in kind, to local churches and religious houses. The will also gives details of the tools which he was leaving to his son, and directs that his 'masshyngfatte', a large brewing vessel, should be passed on to the local guild of St Thomas, provided that 'myn wyffe and John myn Brother have the keypyng therof ther lyfe'.

According to surviving records, Thomas Vyal's bequest was the largest which had been made at that time towards the building of the tower, and this, combined with his position as a leading local craftsman, may well have led to the decision to commemorate it in lasting form. An inscribed tile would have been cheaper and easier to produce than the more usual stone block; the general quality of the finished product suggests a local tile-maker not greatly experienced in decorative work.

Because of the survival of his will, and even more because of the existence of the tile, Thomas Vyal is probably still the best-known inhabitant of 15th-century Ixworth. The antiquarian Thomas Martin of Palgrave (d. 1770), who visited the church at an unspecified date, recorded in his notes: 'On the same side an Image in a Nich with the head broken off

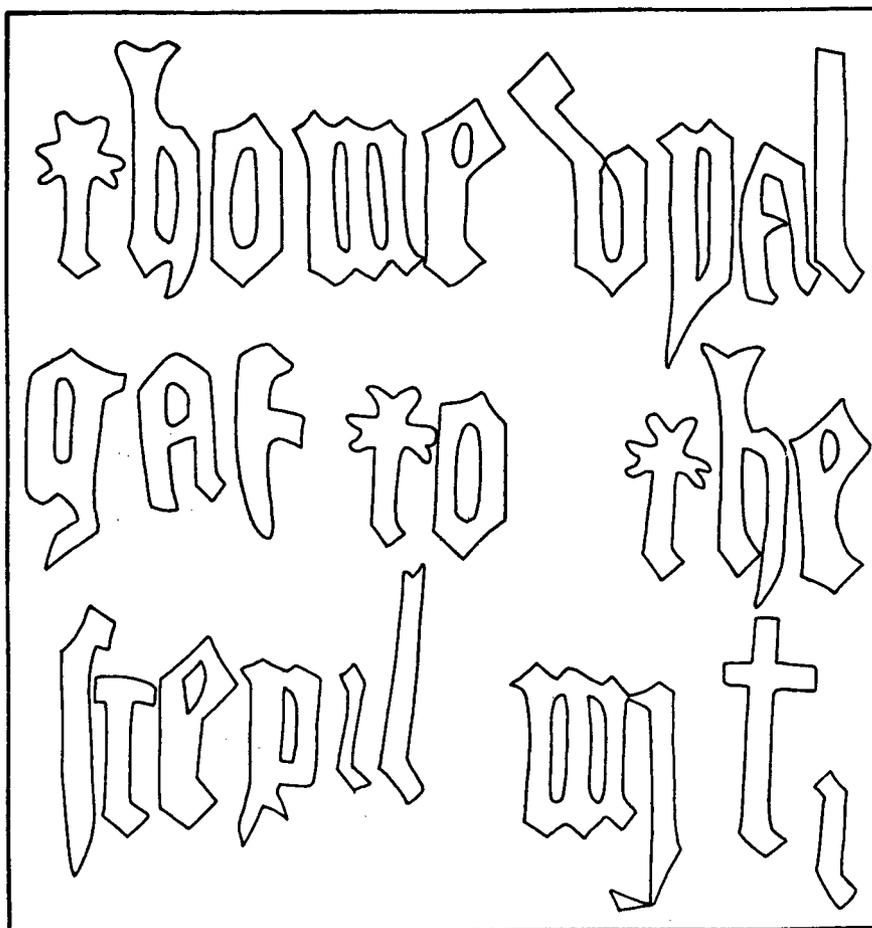


FIG. 9 – The 'Thomas Vyal' tile (scale 1:2; drawn by David Sherlock).

(the people call it Old Vyal but 'tis ye Effigie of Some Saint)'. The 'effigie' is no longer within the niche over the west doorway, and there appears to be no pictorial record of the tile *in situ*.

#### THE 'WILLIAM DENSY' TILES (PL. II)

These two tiles were embedded in the flintwork of the lowest stage of the tower on the south side. No drawing of the tiles *in situ* is known to the writer, and the only photographic record appears to be a colour slide taken some thirty years ago by Mr Douglas Compton. This slide (from which Plate II is reproduced) shows them set off-centre in the wall with a small block of stone immediately to the right of them. They are of identical size and were designed as a single unit with the inscription, which is in Latin, running across from one to the other. Unlike the Thomas Vyal tile they were in a position vulnerable to the full force of adverse weather and they have been in a seriously damaged condition for a long time.

Each tile, almost imperceptibly bevelled, measures 11in × 11in (28cm × 28cm) on its top surface, 10½in × 10¾in (26.3cm × 27.1cm) on its lower surface, and is 1¾in (4.6cm) thick. Their surface is deeply pitted, and much of the glazing and lettering has flaked off. They were sprayed with polyurethane, like the Thomas Vyal tile, on arrival at Moyses Hall Museum, and this may well have fixed some of the shifting fragments in the wrong places, making it even harder to decipher the words. Unfortunately, it has proved impossible to trace off what remains of the lettering satisfactorily. Nevertheless, without using some sort of fixative, the whole inscription might by now have fallen off.

These tiles are made of clay which fired to a pleasant light red, very similar to that used for the Thomas Vyal tile. They have scarcely warped during firing, but various cracks and marks which developed on the bottom surface suggest that the clay had not been particularly well worked. By contrast, the lettering, in yellow ochre slip, was made with precision and delicacy in Gothic script and only lightly incised.

There are traces of the original salt glaze over parts of the surface. This glaze had been applied thickly over a layer of copper oxide, so that when first made the tiles would have had a deep green surface with the lettering showing through in a lighter yellowish-green. The impression that the letters and interwoven background decoration are outlined in a darker colour is probably the result of the copper oxide's drying more thickly along the edges of the incisions. Part of the left-hand tile is taken up by an ornate but indecipherable capital letter surrounded by an intricate pattern of interwoven strips. This pattern may have formed a border to both tiles. Where words can be made out they are often abbreviated, and the whole treatment closely resembles a medieval manuscript.

The first record of the inscription is in the church notes of Thomas Martin:

At the lower part of the South side of the Steple ab<sup>t</sup> 6 foot from ye Ground on a glaz'd Brick this Inscription

dni Willmi  
Densy prioris Anno dni  
Millesimo CCC Septuagesimo ij.<sup>1</sup>

This part of the inscription, on the lower part of the right-hand tile, is still legible. Curiously, Tom Martin makes no reference to the other tile, or to the other parts of the inscription which he was evidently not able to read.

David Elisha Davy visited Ixworth church several times, and in 1832 he wrote amongst his copious notes:

On another large brick [perhaps there were originally two] in the S. Side of the Steeple, about 6½ feet from the ground, which was glazed, and the letters previously cut in and filled up with some white substance; the glazing, which appears to have been the effect of fire, is much worn and the centre of the brick on a division of the two, has been broken away, so that the inscription which was upon it is not very legible; what I could make out was as under

Fudamentum . . . strun  
newt fuit tpe dmi Willmi  
Densy prioris anno Dni  
Millesimo . . . septuagesimo.<sup>2</sup>

This reading of the tiles made at least seventy years after Tom Martin's attempt, suggests words which Tom Martin was evidently not able to identify, but fails to read as accurately

as he did those parts of the tiles which are still legible today. The broken section between the two tiles is not very large, and could only have accounted for about two missing letters. It would be quite impossible now to interpret the first word as *fundamentum* (foundation); perhaps the word was suggested to Davy by the position of the tiles and the probability that they did refer to the start of work on the tower.

These tiles are altogether more problematical than the Thomas Vyal tile. Nothing whatever seems to be known about William Densy (or Dense, as *V.C.H. Suffolk* has it) except that he became Prior of the house of Augustinian Canons at Ixworth in 1467 and was succeeded by John Ive in 1484. It has always been assumed that the tiles record a gift from the Priory towards the building of the tower, as indeed they may, but in so far as it can be deciphered the inscription makes no reference to a gift or to the tower. All that is apparent is that something was done in 1472, while William Densy was Prior, which it was felt merited recording. But such a precise statement of date is a rarity in the 15th century, and the remarkable coincidence with the date readily deducible from the Thomas Vyal tile has understandably lent weight to the conclusion that work on the tower at Ixworth was started early in the 1470s.

There is another piece of evidence which leads to the same conclusion: a stone panel half-way up the second stage of the south-east buttress of the tower bears the crown and arrows saltire of St Edmund and the inscription 'Mast Robt Schot Abot'. The advowson of the church was held by the Benedictine Abbey of St Edmund, and Abbot Robert Schot is thought to have come from Ixworth: in the list of abbots (*V.C.H. Suffolk*, II, 72) he is called Robert Ixworth, although, to add to the confusion, Tymms (1853) gives his name as 'Coote'. His abbacy was brief, from 1469 or 1470 to 1474; this again confines the start of work on the tower to a narrow date-range.

The decorative treatment of Ixworth church tower is lavish, with a degree of ornamentation not necessarily to be found in a rural parish. It is hardly to be expected that the inhabitants of Ixworth, in planning to build a tower, would have failed to refer to the Abbot for approval, and perhaps financial help with the project. The prominent naming of Robert Schot may well have been meant as a record of that help, although to later generations his short period in office made the dating implications of greater significance. Perhaps, too, we can detect some personal rivalry as well as a coincidence of date in the connection between the stone block and the tiles. Did the Prior of Ixworth's modest Augustinian priory wish to place on record that work on the tower began while he also was in office? If so, it may well have been the example of two significant local names commemorated on the tower which prompted Thomas Vyal's family or friends to record his own generous gift as well.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Mr Robert Wheeler for expert advice on the composition and making of the tiles, and Mr Douglas Compton for allowing the use of his unique slide of the 'William Densy' tiles. Messrs John Cross, David Dymond and Peter Northeast all attempted unavailingly to decipher the damaged parts of the inscription.

#### NOTES

1 S.R.O.B., E2/41/8B, f. 325.

2 S.R.O.B., J 534/1, f. 243 (microfilm of the original in B.L. Add. MS. 19 079).

REFERENCES

- Tymms, S., 1853. 'Wills and Extracts from Wills Relating to Ixworth and Ixworth Thorpe',  
*Proc. Bury and West Suffolk Archaeol. Inst.*, 1, 103–20.  
*V.C.H., Suffolk*, 1907. Victoria History of the Counties of England, *Suffolk*, II. London.

*Abbreviations for MSS*

B.L. British Library.

S.R.O.B. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch.