

## SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

### THE FLINT-WORK INSCRIPTION UNDER THE EAST WINDOW OF BLYTHBURGH CHURCH

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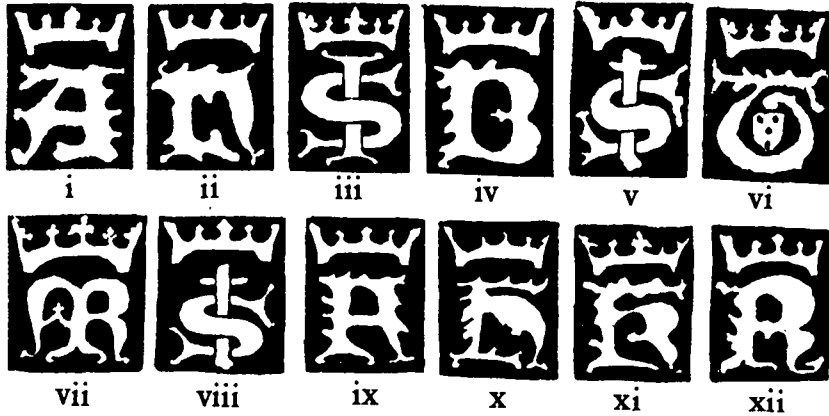


FIG. 18 – Blythburgh Church: the Lombardic letters of the inscription (in the actual inscription they run in a continuous line, six on either side of a blank central stone).

In the Institute's Newsletter No. 13 (Autumn 1981) a request was made by the Editor for a solution to the puzzling 15th-century inscription on the east wall of Blythburgh church. This inscription consists of twelve letters in Lombardic script (numbered i–xii in this paper and the accompanying illustration), with a blank stone in the middle. The letters are abbreviations of Latin words, and the meaning of six of them is immediately clear, since they frequently occur elsewhere:

- iii, iv: *Jesus Beatus* (iii is a monogram of J and S);
- v, vi: *Sancta Trinitas* (v is a monogram of S and T, vi is a T enclosing a shield, symbol of the Trinity);
- vii: *Maria* (a monogram of all four letters in her name);
- viii: *Sancta* (as v).

This series of names makes it clear that the inscription is a dedication. The church is dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and there were two side-chapels, at the east end of the north and south aisles, one dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and the other to her mother, St Anne. This suggests the meaning of ix as Anna (probably a monogram of AN, unlike A<sup>1</sup>).

So we have the names of four dedicatees – Blessed Jesus, Holy Trinity, Mary, St Anne. What was being dedicated? The inscription is on the east end of the church. Between 1442 and 1473 seven wills survive in which bequests were made for the rebuilding of the chancel (e.g., in Gardner 1754, 123: 'Lego fabricae Cancelli Ecclesiae de Blythborough, si voluerint illum de novo fabricare, 10 marc.' – 1442). It seems likely, then, that the last letter, R<sup>xii</sup>, stands for some such word as *Reconstructus* (*reaedificatus*, *refectus*, *renovatus* or *restitutus* are possible alternatives), meaning 'rebuilt' and referring to the new chancel.

Sir W.R. Gowers interprets the inscription as follows (Gowers 1901, 56):

*A<sup>i</sup>d. Ni<sup>ii</sup>omina J<sup>iii</sup>esu B<sup>iv</sup>eat<sup>i</sup> S<sup>v</sup>anctae T<sup>vi</sup>rinitatis [Beatae] M<sup>vii</sup>ariae [et in] H<sup>x</sup>onorem S<sup>viii</sup>anctarum A<sup>ix</sup>nnae [et] K<sup>xi</sup>atherinae [hic Cancellus] R<sup>xii</sup>econstructus,*

meaning 'To<sup>i</sup> the names<sup>ii</sup> of blessed<sup>iv</sup> Jesus<sup>iii</sup>, the Holy<sup>v</sup> Trinity<sup>vi</sup>, [blessed] Mary<sup>vii</sup> [and to] the honour<sup>x</sup> of St<sup>viii</sup> Anne<sup>ix</sup> [and St] Katherine<sup>lx</sup>, [this chancel] has been rebuilt<sup>xii</sup>.'

Mr Norman Scarfe (in a letter to me) writes of Gowers's 'instinctive understanding of mediaeval inscriptions'. I wish to suggest that here too, although he has misinterpreted letters H<sup>x</sup> and K<sup>xi</sup>, and possibly N<sup>ii</sup>, he has nevertheless grasped the sense of the whole.

First, K<sup>xi</sup>: Gowers writes (p. 55): 'Since the inscription is obviously an indication of Latin words, this can only be a proper name' – a fatal blunder. In mediaeval Latin, initial Ka and Ca were freely interchangeable for all words, not just proper names (*Katherina*, *Karolus*). Even as early as Quintilian's time, some grammarians thought it proper always to write K for initial C before A (Butler 1970, 1, 7, 10, '... quidam eam [K], quotiens A sequatur, necessarium credunt', c.f. Lewis and Short 1880, 1022). This particularly applied to abbreviations ('K... in nullis verbis utendum puto nisi quae significat ita ut sola ponatur...') (Butler 1970). In classical Latin K. or Kal. is usual for *Calendae*, but KA is found for *capitalis*, KK for *castrorum*, K.S. for *carus suis*. In mediaeval Latin the practice became much more widespread, K also being used to stand for *calumnia* (K.K. = *calumniae causa*), *candidatus*, *caput*, *casa*, *castellum*, etc., and even for *centurio*, *cohors*, *coniunx*, *corpus* (Cappelli 1967, 195–97, 472). That *Cancelli* (or *Cancellus*) was often spelled with a K when abbreviated is clear from *T.L.L.* III, 228: 'cancelli, -ae: Gloss IV, 531, 46 -ae: *cai vel kai* (V, 602, 39). c.f. Holder, *Altcelt. Sprachschatz*, 684'; c.f. *T.L.L.* III, 116: 'ca(i)i: cancelli (-ae) Gloss IV, 103, 8. 531, 46 (utraque *kai*). *Scal.* V, 602, 37 (*kaii*). 602, 39 (*kai*).'

Gowers (1901, 55) takes K<sup>xi</sup> to stand for *Katherinae*, 'because St Katherine was often associated with St Anne... and it seems reasonable to regard her name as indicated'. But there is an 'Uncle Tom Cobbley and all' feeling about his list of dedicatees. Mary and Anne are there, as he rightly points out, 'since to no other saint besides the Virgin and St Anne was a chapel dedicated'. But no such argument can be advanced to justify St Katherine's inclusion. She is only there because her name happens to start with a K.

H<sup>x</sup> he takes to stand for *Honorem* (p. 56), because 'there are few saints whose names begin with this letter... It seems, therefore, reasonable to interpret it as the word *Honore* or *Honorem*, so frequent in dedicational inscriptions' (p. 55). But if so, why is it sandwiched between his *Annae* and *Katherinae*, instead of preceding them?<sup>1</sup> In his interpretation, he illicitly moves it forward and supplies it with its own preposition: '... [et in] *Honorem*<sup>x</sup> *Sanctarum*<sup>viii</sup> *Annae*<sup>ix</sup> [et] *Katherinae*<sup>xi</sup>... ' (p. 56); but in fact it would have to be governed by *Ad*<sup>i</sup>, from which it is separated by an intolerable distance. In the ablative (*Honore*) it would be left hanging even more precariously without its own preposition (*in*) being specified to indicate the change of construction.

Yet Gowers himself supplies the correct interpretation of H<sup>x</sup> K<sup>xi</sup> R<sup>xii</sup> without knowing it. To complete the sense of his version of the inscription, he inserts *hic cancellus* before *Reconstructus*<sup>xii</sup>. He need not insert it, however, for it is there already: H<sup>x</sup> K<sup>xi</sup> = *hic cancellus* (or, *haec cancella*), the subject of *Reconstructus*<sup>xii</sup> [*est*].<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, there is the initial A<sup>i</sup> N<sup>ii</sup>: A<sup>i</sup> = *Ad*, as usual at the beginning of a dedicatory inscription (e.g. A. M. D. G. – *Ad maiorem dei gloriam*). But what about N<sup>ii</sup>? Gowers takes it as standing for *Nomina* ('To the names<sup>ii</sup> of...'). This makes sense, but A. N. is nowhere else found with this meaning. It only occurs as an abbreviation of *Anno Nativitatis [Domini]* followed by a date (Cappelli 1967, 16). The abbreviation of *Ad nomina* + genitive does not occur because (unlike the very common *In nomine* + genitive, meaning 'In the name of' – Cappelli 1967, 181, 470) it simply is not a Latin idiom. Gowers accepts it in view of the 'conspicuous artistic originality' of the inscription, which excuses it from 'slavish dependence on precedent' (p. 57).<sup>3</sup> But there is another possibility. A. H. (= *Ad Honorem*...) is a stock dedicatory abbreviation (Cappelli 1967, 433). Now Lombardic H and N are in form very similar. In the inscription only a thin line of flint mosaic distinguishes N<sup>ii</sup> from H<sup>x</sup>. As Gowers points out (p. 52), 'the disintegrating influence of weather, rain and frost tends in time to loosen the flints. Thus many

of those in the inscription have fallen away'. Is it possible, then, that an original H<sup>ii</sup> has gradually, through decay, turned into something like N<sup>ii</sup> (but before 1745, when Gardner read it as N) and been 'restored' accordingly? If so, we have another example of Gowers's intuition, for his interpretation includes *Honorem* (but wrongly, for H<sup>x</sup>).

The whole inscription, then, I suggest runs as follows:

A<sup>i</sup>d H<sup>ii</sup>onorem. J<sup>iii</sup>esu B<sup>iv</sup>eati S<sup>v</sup>anctae T<sup>vi</sup>rinitatis M<sup>vii</sup>ariae [et] S<sup>viii</sup>anctae A<sup>ix</sup>nnae H<sup>x</sup>ic  
C<sup>xi</sup>ancellus R<sup>xii</sup>econstructus

('To<sup>i</sup> the honour<sup>ii</sup> of blessed<sup>iv</sup> Jesus<sup>iii</sup>, the Holy<sup>v</sup> Trinity<sup>vi</sup>, Mary<sup>vii</sup> [and] St<sup>viii</sup> Anne<sup>ix</sup>, this<sup>x</sup> chancel<sup>xi</sup> [has been] rebuilt<sup>xii</sup>.')

### Notes

- 1 Mr Peter Northeast (*Newsletter* No. 15, Autumn 1982) makes the same objection: '... "in" or "ad honorem" would not be inserted between the two saints' names'.
- 2 C.f. Mr Northeast (*op. cit.*): '... even if "hic cancellus" had been omitted, it seems likely that some word would have been called for'.
- 3 But the inscription is not unique. Another in the same style (but less abbreviated), with each letter crowned and a blank stone in the middle, is to be found on the west wall of Southwold's tower: 'SCTEDMUND ORAPNOBIS'.

### References

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- Gardner, T., 1754. *An Historical Account of Dunwich . . . Blythburgh . . . Southwold . . . with Remarks on some Places contiguous thereto*. London.
- Gowers, Sir W.R., 1901. 'The Flint-work Inscription on Blythburgh Church', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XI, 51–58.
- Lewis, C. and Short, C., 1880. *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford.

### Abbreviations

T.L.L.            *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (Leipzig 1900–).