

The *Bruce* or *Ailesbury* mausoleum – the story in brief

The **Bruces** were a noble Scottish family, descended from Robert the Bruce, victor over the English at the battle of Bannockburn in 1307. They were loyal supporters of the Stuart kings in the 16th and 17th centuries, and lived at Houghton House between about 1624 and 1738.

In 1656, after the death of his second wife, Diana Countess of Oxford, Thomas Bruce, first Earl of Elgin, built a special family tomb in the churchyard at Maulden. This **mausoleum**, one of the earliest of its kind in England, was a building for memorials standing over a crypt which held coffins. Diana's monument had an unusual half-length statue showing her in an open shroud, ascending to heaven on the Last Day of Judgement.

Thomas Bruce died in 1664, the year after his grandson Edward. Robert, Thomas' son and Edward's father, placed portrait busts of them in the mausoleum. The same year Charles II created Robert Earl of **Ailesbury**.

The crypt was reorganized in 1770. The coffins were put into rows of niches behind a wall, their mouths sealed with an inscribed marble tablet. In 1859 the mausoleum was rebuilt when the parish church was restored, but thereafter no more coffins were added to those already in the crypt.

In the later 20th century the mausoleum fell into disrepair, but its special architectural and historic interest was also recognised by listed status. In 2001-2002 Bedfordshire County Council acquired it and conserved it as a monument.

Countess Diana

Thomas put up a monument to his Countess, including an unusual portrait bust. The moulded top slopes up to a stylised urn-shaped bowl supporting a half-statue. It is the Last Day of Judgement and she is shown in her shroud, with her left hand pointing upwards, ascending to heaven. Some contemporaries found the ensemble highly commendable; others regarded it as absurd. Irreverent locals called it the 'Lady in the Punch-bowl'. Experts consider the unsigned portrait bust was probably carved by Thomas Burman, a sculptor working after the Restoration of 1660.

Three cartouches or ornamental shields are attached to the heavy base. Two on the short sides have coats of arms. On the front is her obituary inscription: a translation by John Pomfret, Rector of Maulden from 1695 to 1702, reads:

DIANA, COUNTESS OF OXFORD AND ELGIN

*Who from a Race of Noble Heroes came,
And added Lustre to its ancient Fame:
Round her the Virtues of the Cecils shone,
But with Inferior Brightness to her own;
Which she refin'd to that sublime Degree,
The greatest Mortal could not greater be.
Each Stage of Life peculiar Splendour had;
Her tender Years with Innocence were clad:
Maturer grown, whate'er was brave and good
In the Retinue of her Virtues flood:
And, at the final Period of her Breath,
She crown'd her Life with a propitious Death;
How to be great and humble, chaste and good,
Her soul, for Earth too excellent, too high,
Flew to its Peers, the Princes of the Sky.*

The original mausoleum

Countess Diana, widow of the Earl of Oxford, became the second wife of Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin. She died in 1654 aged 58. He wrote:

“the bodie of my late dearly beloved wife lyeth interred in a chapple annex to the church”.

The mausoleum built by Thomas Bruce in 1656 just north of the parish church was her memorial and also a family tomb. It originally had three elements: an **underground vaulted crypt** held coffins; an **octagonal building** over it contained memorials; a **corridor** to the north aisle of the church protected steps going down into the crypt. In 1859, the octagonal building was replaced and the corridor demolished.

The original octagonal building appears in a watercolour painted by Thomas Fisher about 1810. Its north and south walls seem shorter than in the rebuilt version. There were high oval moulded windows, a moulded cornice and a hipped roof with two finials. It was probably made of the local sandstone, with clunch (chalk) dressings and a red clay tile roof. The corridor had similar materials and detailing.

The vaulted crypt under the building is part of the original 17th century scheme; it is not an earlier medieval construction as has been suggested. It too is octagonal and is directly under the site of the original building. Its vaulted roof is supported on two thick columns, giving a plan of three by two bays. Originally, coffins were placed on the floor or leant against the walls.

Despite the later alterations, the mausoleum is historically and architecturally significant as one of the earliest surviving examples of its kind in England.

The burials in the crypt

The 1770s reordering provided 27 niches arranged in three rows. At that time, 18 niches contained the remains of a total of 24 individuals. All nine niches on the ground floor were filled. Four were left vacant for future use in the middle row, and five in the top row.

By 1836, only one niche was unused after the last burial, of Henrietta, infant daughter of Lord Ernest Brudenell Bruce. Today three are empty. In 1857, the coffins of Henrietta and Henrietta-Maria, Marchioness of Ailesbury (died 1831), were removed to the family vault at Great Bedwyn in Wiltshire.

The relatively large number of child burials reflects the high rate of infant mortality in earlier centuries, affecting even the aristocracy.

The coffin niche for Elizabeth, first wife of the exiled Thomas second Earl of Ailesbury also holds two urns. These contain the hearts of Thomas and his second wife Charlotte. Both were buried in Brussels, he in 1741 and she in 1710.

There are one, possibly two, outsiders. Henry Roll, a friend of the family, is placed with a child burial of 1664, that of Henry son of Robert Earl of Elgin. There is a memorial slab on the floor to one Thomas Bowlby Esq who died in 1795 aged 75, but it is not known whether his coffin lies underneath it.

Notes on the Monument to Diana, Countess of Oxford and Elgin and the Elgin Mausoleum at Maulden.

Diana Cecil, Countess of Oxford and Elgin (c.1603-1654), twin daughter of William, 2nd. Earl of Exeter,

m. 1) Henry Vere, Earl of Oxford (d. 1625)

2) Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin (d.1663).

She had no children by either marriage.

She was co-heir, with her two sisters, to her father, which made her one of the great heiresses of the age. Her beauty is attested by several portraits, including one from the Suffolk set at the Ranger's House. On her second marriage she became stepmother to the son of the widowed Lord Bruce of Kinloss, created Earl of Elgin.

On her death, Lord Elgin erected a mausoleum at Maulden, Beds., the church closest to his house at Houghton, which he had acquired after the death of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, containing a large monument showing the Countess in her shroud rising from a basin, probably representing the font of her second baptism (by death) and indicating the way to heaven by her upraised hand. The font itself was placed on top of a sarcophagus, probably symbolising the death of the earthly body. The inscribed cartouche, half-figure of the Countess and two shields of arms are now at Deene.

Two busts, both also now at Deene, stood in niches to the south west and east, their gazes directed at her. These represent her husband and his grandson, both of whom died in 1663, and they were erected by the Countess's step-son, the second earl of Elgin. On the pedestal of his father's bust the second earl explains that he has followed his father's wishes in burying him with his second wife. Presumably the second earl was carrying out his father's conception, although this may have been modified when the grandson also died - if not, perhaps the Countess's two husbands were originally intended to occupy the niches. The busts have been attributed to Bushnell, which ties in with his having done the Ashburnam monument in Sussex, as the Ashburnams were busy building next door to the Elgins' Houghton House, and could therefore have known the Elgin busts.

It isn't clear from the mausoleum whether it was intended as an Elgin dynastic repository, in which the whole family were to have the way to heaven pointed out by the Countess (parallel with the Sackville chapel at Withyham, centred on the monument to Thomas Sackville, and the monument at Culford on which Lady Bacon, her first husband and her deceased child and grandchildren are presented so as to survey the remaining members of the family) or whether it was actually an English version of the Taj Mahal, a romantic love-temple. Clearly the Countess arising from a basin which is based on a Roman sarcophagus must suggest, as well as the waters of baptism, Venus arising from the foam.

If the present form of the mausoleum is an accurate reflection of its original conception, then there are parallels with other cavalier-

gothic works of the period, notably Bolsover Castle and the church buildings and castle restorations done by lady Anne Clifford from 1650 onwards. The revived medievalism of this period does seem to be associated with royalist sympathisers. (~~Shakespeare~~ (Shaunton Handled too))

The Countess's monument itself forms an interesting companion to that of the Earl's first wife, Anne Chichester, Lady Bruce of Kinloss, d. 1627, at Exton in Rutland, where she was buried because it was the home of her mother, Frances Harrington, whose sole heir she was. Lady Bruce has an epitaph as eulogistic as that of the Countess of Oxford and Elgin, and a very high-class tomb surmounted by a beautiful shrouded effigy. ??Is this a good Marshall, which would tie in with the suggestion that the C of O & E is by Burman - Elgin was clearly uxorious, and liked the motif of the shrouded figure, though he was more optimistic about the fate of his second wife than that of his first, judging by the iconography of their monuments.

Another interesting connection is to the 1650 monument to the two wives of the Earl of Donegall at Eggesford, Devon. Donegall was the first cousin of the father of Anne Chichester, so a closeish connection of Elgin - does his monument fit into the Marshall/Burman/Bushnell group?

The monument is important enough for its current fragmentary state to be deplored, but the mise-en-scene is important as a whole and ideally should be restored, even if prudence suggests that the busts of the First Earl and his grandson might be replaced with casts.

J.L.Wilson June 1997