

Fleet Old Church and its Brasses

Rev. W. Miles Barnes

Hutchins derives Fleet from "Fleot, Flot, which, in Anglo-Saxon, signifies a bay, or gulf, or place where the tide or float comes up; hence Fleet Ditch and Fleet Street, London". The name is a fitting one, for, on the memorable 23rd of November, 1824, the tide came up with terrible force and swept away five houses and the greater portion of the church.

Old Fleet Cottages - the remnant



A few minutes ago I met in the churchyard the old clerk, James Bowering, aged 87 – possibly he is here now. He is the only man living who saw the wave come up. At six o'clock on the

morning of the 23rd he was standing, with other boys, by the gate near the cattle pound when he saw, rushing up the valley, the tidal wave, driven by a hurricane, and bearing on its crest a whole haystack, and *débris* from the fields below. They ran for their lives to Chickerell, and when they returned they found that five houses had been swept away and the church was in ruins. Three years later the new church was commenced. In the tower of the new church is a little tablet recording the destruction of the old church and the building of the new in these words :— "The church of this parish, having been destroyed by a violent storm on the 23rd of November, 1824, a new site was selected and this church erected thereon by and at the sole expense of the Vicar, the Rev. George Gould, M.A. The first stone was laid by the Rev. The Vicar on the 25th April, 1827, and the church was consecrated by the Right Rev. Robert Gray, D.D., the Lord Bishop of Bristol, on the 25th August, 1829".

The old church was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. As you will observe there is little of interest in this fragment of it except the brasses. The roof principal looks ancient, but it is not. It may be, however, and probably is, of the same pattern as the old principal, and there may be some of the timber of the ancient principal in it. A ladder would be required to examine it properly; we will therefore turn our attention to the brasses. Dorset possesses few of the three or

four thousand brasses which are still preserved in the churches throughout England out of the innumerable number which they once contained. According to Haines there are but 33 brasses in the county, distributed over 24 churches.....

These two are almost the latest of the Dorset brasses, not the very latest, for there is one to Mrs. Dorothy Williams in Pimperne Church dated 1694, and another to Mary Williams at Woolland dated 1616, and to Thomas Brown at Puddlehinton dated 1617. These two to the Mohuns come next.

The earliest Dorset brass (the brass has disappeared though the matrix remains) was in St. Peter's Church, Dorchester, in memory of Joan de Somer. A.D. 1436 is its date. This is by no means early for a brass. There are fine brasses of the 13th century; the date of the earliest recorded in 1208. But the work of the brass engraver reached its highest excellence a century later, when some were of great size and very finely executed. The plates for all the earlier brasses were manufactured abroad. They were imported mainly from Cologne; whence they were called Coln or Cullen plates. The material was called laton, or latten, and was an alloy of copper and zinc. Laton was largely used in medieval times in the manufacture of lamps, crosses, incense-boats, candlesticks, and other ecclesiastical metal work. Articles of laton are mentioned in most of the inventories of church goods in Dorset taken by the Church Commissioners in Edward IV's reign.

There is no evidence that brass was manufactured in England before the 16th century. Late in that century – namely, in 1585 – brass mills were set up in the West of England. In Somersetshire there were more than one, and possibly the brasses before you were engraved on plates manufactured in that county; they are certainly not Cullen plates. The brasses are dated and they answer generally to the description of brasses of the period, being on



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quadrangular plates set in a framework of stone. The brasses are good of their kind, but there can be no sort of comparison between them and the magnificent work of the earlier centuries.

From the 14th century the art had gradually declined,

and at the time these brasses were executed the art was approaching its lowest ebb. The brasses are inscribed, the one on the north side of the window (see photograph on previous page) to the wife of Robert Mohun (Margaret), who is described as the happy mother of 17 children, all represented on the plate – nine sons and eight daughters. She lived to the good old age of 90. The second is inscribed to Maximilian Mohun, son of Robert Mohun, whose 13 children – five sons and eight daughters – are also represented. He died in 1612.

For the description of the armorial bearings I must refer you to Hutchins' "Dorset", where they are described very fully. The curious little description on the south wall is not a brass, but an inscription on marble let into a framework of stone as a brass would



be. It is also inscribed to a Mohun – Francis Mohun, son of Maximilian Mohun. He died February 25th, 1711-12, in the 84th year of his age. From the "patriæque ruentis fidus amor" in the lines beneath, we gather that he was a staunch old Jacobite, who regarded the incoming of the Hanoverian dynasty with a feeling akin to despair. He would have been much comforted if he could have foreseen this Jubilee year of Her Majesty the Queen.

To Francis Mohun

Francis Mohun, son of Maximilian, was the grandson of the Maximilian Mohun to whose memory the latest of the two brasses is dedicated. His father was Robert Mohun, who married Margaret Hide, to whom the earliest is inscribed. Francis Mohun left a son Gilbert, who married Sarah, daughter of Thomas Cooper, of Sherborne; they had a son Robert, also of Fleet, who died in 1758 leaving no children.

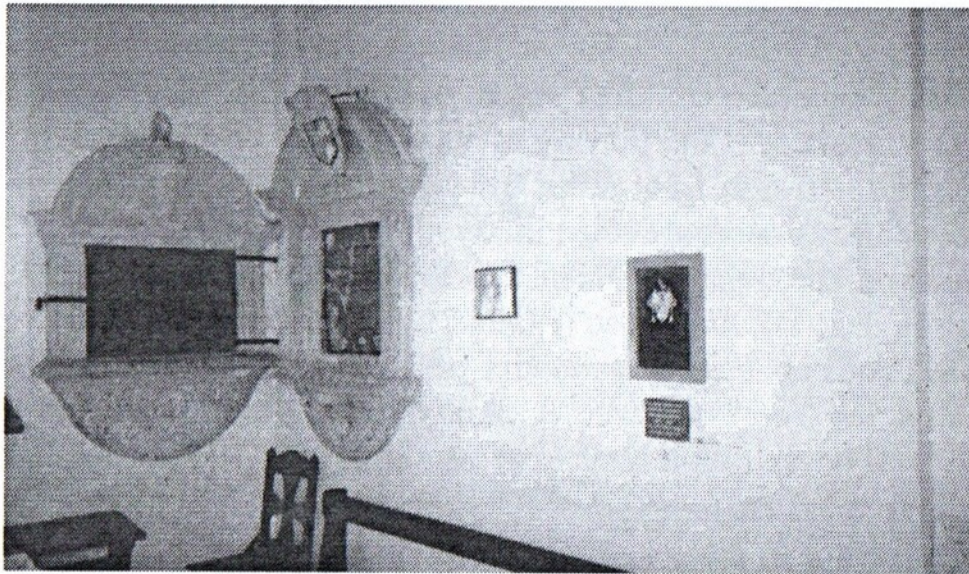
At the conclusion of the paper the Rev. F. W. Weaver, with references to the brasses, said:– The Mohun family came from Moion, in Normandy, and at the time of the Domesday survey William de Moion was sheriff of Somerset. He was succeeded by his son William, who was Earl of Somerset and the founder of the Bruton Priory; he was living in 1142. They were lords of Dunster Castle, and an excellent account of them is given in "Dunster and its Lords" by Sir Henry Maxwell-Lyte; the same book contains five pedigrees of the family:–

1. Of Dunster
2. Of Ham-Mohun, co. Dorset
3. Of Tavistock
4. Of Baunton and Fleet, Dorset
5. Of Cornwall

It is not uncommon in Somerset and Dorset to meet with the name Moon, and it is quite possible that this is a direct descendant of that noble name which we meet with under the forms Moion, Moyon, Mohun and Mouné.

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**Maximilian Mohun's brass on the east wall
 Francis Mohun's marble on the south wall
 and an
 Armorial plaque to John Meade Falkner
 below which is a
 slate tablet erected by
 The John Meade Falkner Society
 8 May 2001**