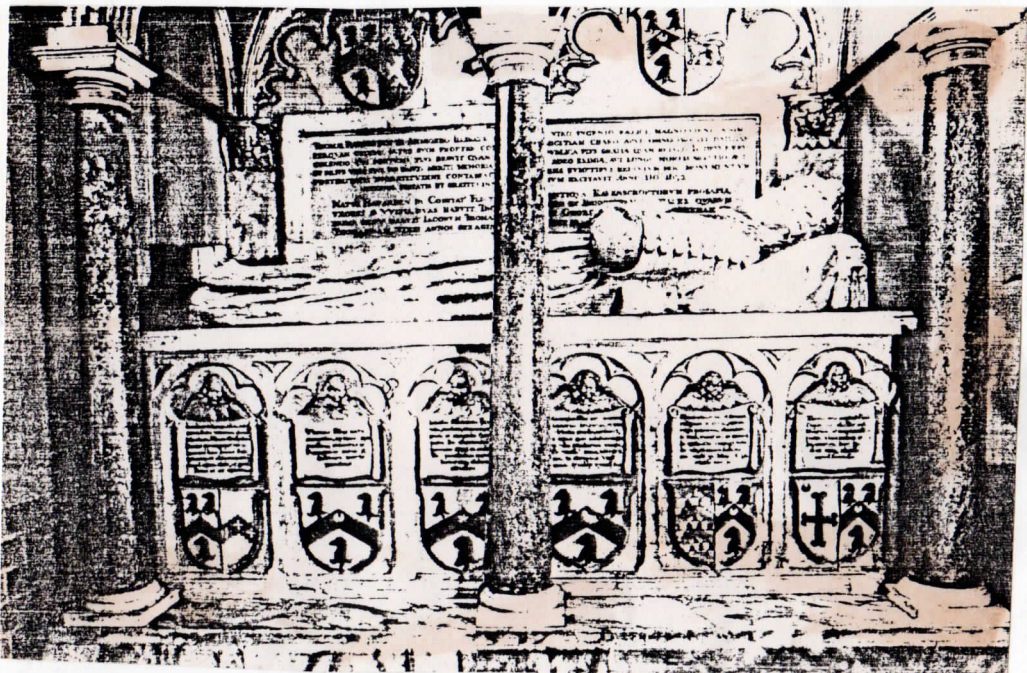


# *Barnet & District Local History Society*

## RAVENSCROFT – PAST AND PRESENT

Bulletin No.29

1991



The Ravenscroft Chapel was built in Barnet Parish Church in 1875 when the church was enlarged by William Butterfield, a well-known church architect of the time. All but the two aisles to the north is new.

Thomas Ravenscroft was born in 1563, was 53 when Shakespeare died, and died himself in 1630, aged 67.

Before the church was enlarged, his tomb was in the old chancel, where the organ loft is now. When it was dismantled for removal, Thomas' skeleton was found complete and transferred to its new resting place, within its altar-tomb.

The tomb was first erected in 1632 and paid for by James. It is an elaborate monument, with (one would think) no expense spared. Thomas' effigy in alabaster reclines on top, within a canopied and columned recess, richly decorated. His coat of arms is shown, also a cap of dignity. His motto was "Deus pascit cornutos" – God feeds the horny beaks? A play on ravens?

Behind the effigy is a long epitaph in Latin eulogising the dead man and surely composed by his "dutiful son" James. A translation is as follows :-

*To THOMAS RAVENSCROFT Esquire, a man of unblemished honesty, and happy temperament, extremely renowned for magnanimity, beloved in his own circle for enduring friendship, and to the world at large for his love of justice; a man to whom fortune owed more than she bestowed, and his countrymen more thanks than they acknowledged; James, his rightly dutiful son and heir (lest the memory of such great merit and outstanding qualities should fade away, either in the long silence of death or by the ingratitude of posterity) has erected at his own cost this permanent monument as witness filial piety and gratitude A.D.1632.*

*Born at Harwarden in the County of Flint, offspring of the ancient stock of the Ravenscrofts, he had two wives, if it please you, THOMASINE SMITH and BRIDGET POWELL, by the first of whom he had sons, JAMES, THOMAS, JOHN and GEORGE, and daughters ELIZABETH and THOMASINE. he lived to the age of sixty seven and died the 12th day February in the year of salvation 1630.*

In front of the altar-tomb are six shields of arms surmounted by scrolls, in memory of his six children, each with its epitaph in Latin. Translations are as follows:-

*JAMES, his first-born married MARY, daughter of WILLIAM PECK, Esquire, before his father's death. It was a supreme solace and comfort in his grief that the life he lived was both pleasing to his father and in accordance with his wishes.*

*THOMAS his second son, a most agreeable boy of the highest promise, succumbed to an untimely death at the age of five years.*

*JOHN was his third son, whose life, conduct and manners brought just so*

*much pleasure and delight to his father as the death and loss of that very dear parent brought sorrow and grief to a most dutiful son.*

*GEORGE, his youngest son, most diligent in pursuits of books and learning and true excellence, a young man of great promise, in the mid-course of his studies and the flower of his youth was snatched away by untimely death. He reached the age of 17 and died 27 May 1628.*

*ELIZABETH, as daughter and as woman was notable for devotion to God, piety to her parents, affection to those around her, and courtesy to all, whose short life as a wife was followed by a happier death on 31 May 1630 in her 28th year.*

*THOMASINE, wife of THOMAS COPLEY, of Skelbrook, York, Esquire, her father's dear and surviving daughter, ever dearer to her family because more fruitful.*

A memorial to James, erected by his son George, naming his seven sons and four daughters, remains in this area. It was almost hidden from sight inside the organ chamber and was brought out during the rebuilding in 1986 and placed behind the organ console. In translation, it reads :-

Here lies  
JAMES RAVENSCROFT, Esquire,  
from the ancient stock of the Ravenscrofts  
of Bretton in the County of Cheshire descended  
born in London to THOMAS, Esquire, father,  
and THOMASINAE his wife, mother.  
He had as partner MARY, (daughter  
of WILLIAM PECK of Spixworth in the County  
of Norfolk, Esquire) who survived him,  
sons, THOMAS, GEORGE, JAMES,  
JOHN, ROBERT, FRANCIS, and  
EDWARD, and daughters, THOMASINA,  
ELIZABETH, MARY, and CATHERINE.  
He lived to the age of 85  
Died 10 Dec 1680

When for a long time he had observed

the changing fortunes of mankind and his fatherland

In memory of a very dear father,  
GEORGE his son erected this.

A Memorial to Thomasine, wife of Thomas was also discovered. This was moved into the chapel, and placed beside his memorial. It reads:

*IN MEMORIE OF THOMASINE  
RAVENSCEFTE, THE WIFE OF  
THOMAS RAVENSCEFTE ESQ  
SHE DIED Ye 12th OF DECEM: 1611  
WHOM NATURE MADE A LOVELYE MODEST MAYDE,  
AND MARYADGE MADE A VERTVOVS LOVINGE WIFE  
HER DEATH HATH MADE A CORPS, & HERE HATH LAID  
AND GOD A SAINCT IN EVERLASTINGE LIFE.*

*BLEST IN HER CHOICE A HVS BAND TRVE AND KIND  
BLEST Wth THREE SONNES TWO DAUGHTERS LEFT BEHIND  
BLEST IN HER LIFE, WHILST LOVD OF EACH DEGREE  
BVT NOW MOST BLEST IN SOVLES FELICITYE.*

*THEN WEEPE NOT (YOV HER FRIENDS) FOR HER  
FOR SHE AMONGST THE SAINCTS DOTHS SINGE  
AND PRAY TO JESVS CHRIST THAT HEE  
WILL YOV TO HER IN HEAVEN BRINGE*

It is thought that James would approve of the present use of the Chapel for Morning and Evening Prayers for clergy and lay people every day, for small Communion Services, Meditation Groups and for Healing Services. The present altar was made by a local craftsman, out of some old pews which were no longer required, at the same time as the Chapel was refurbished with chairs, curtains and a new carpet, and reorientated to face south rather than east.

On the south wall of the chapel there are also large memorial wall panels of slate with a white surround, and with small busts of

James and Mary Ravenscroft above. These were copied in 1910 from the life-size originals which used to be in one of the original Wood Street almshouses but are now in the communal room of the Ravenscroft charity office in Union Street. (There is a painting of James Ravenscroft's bust in Barnet Museum, also a wooden shield with his motto and crest.)

The four wall-panels commemorate, in left to right order, George Ravenscroft, James' second son, James himself, Mary his wife, and John, James' brother.

Their individual epitaphs are as follows, the briefest of all to James. His wife Mary was the last to die (in 1689). She may have composed or approved them. She would know that her son George had already written his father's epitaph, the one behind the organ console. He died six years before she did, which explains why the date of her death is left blank on the bust George commissioned.

*Here, next to the tomb of his grandfather, lies buried GEORGE RAVENSCROFT, second son of JAMES RAVENSCROFT Esquire, died 7th June A.D.1683 AGED 51, survived by his wife Mistress HELEN APPLEBY, but not by his children, JAMES his son and MARY and ELIZABETH his daughters, who were carried off by death before his own.*

*May he rest in peace.*

*JAMES RAVENSCROFT, Esquire, aged 85 years, died 10th October 1680.*

*Here beside her husband JAMES RAVENSCROFT lies MARY daughter of WILLIAM PECK of Spixworth in the County of Norfolk, Esquire, a pious woman, gentle and warm-hearted, who died 24th November 1689 aged 86.*

*May she rest in peace.*

*To God the best and greatest, and in memory of JOHN RAVENSCROFT, son of THOMAS RAVENSCROFT, Esquire, in whose piety and faith this whole family of the RAVENSCROFTS is strongly bound together. He died unmarried 24th November 1681 after living nearly 75 years.*

*May he rest in peace.*

Though buried in Barnet's Protestant church, James was a Recusant, more Roman Catholic than Protestant by conviction.

Four of his seven sons were educated at Douai, a Catholic college in France, and one of them became a priest. And of his four daughters, one became a Franciscan nun.

James was a pious man who must have kept his fingers crossed when buried in Barnet Church. He called his almshouse charity not by his own name but that of Jesus – the Jesus Hospital.

Pious and modest he may have been, but he is commemorated in Barnet by having a school, a park and a road named after him.

James is known as Barnet's "Great Benefactor". He inherited Fold Farm in Galley Lane, Arkley from his father who had acquired it in settlement of a debt. The original house has gone but the moat is still there. By profession he was a lawyer operating from Holborn (but not, presumably, commuting daily). He also shared business interests with his son George, notably in Venetian glass.

One way and another, he became wealthy enough to establish and endow two charities, both established in 1679, only 20 months before he died, aged 85.

Both charities still flourish. One, called the Chancel Estate, provides funds to keep his father's tomb in proper condition, and for any other purpose relating to the upkeep of Barnet Parish Church. In fact, it paid for the enlargement of the church in 1875; and for the building of two other local churches: St Mark's, at the corner of Meadway and Potters Road, and St Stephen's, at the bottom of Bells Hill. It also paid for the bells and for carvings on the pew-ends, said to be the finest of their Scriptural kind in the kingdom. It paid for the Church House and for Bells Hill Burial Ground.

The other charity, Jesus Hospital, builds and endows almshouses. The originals are still in Wood Street. They were built and lived in by 1672 but not legally founded by indenture until April 28th 1679, which is surprising, seeing that James was a lawyer and could have expedited matters. We must suppose procrastination came naturally to him, as a lawyer.

In 1679 there were 6 almshouses. Today, the Jesus Hospital charity is responsible for no fewer than 55, which includes nine set up by two other, less well endowed charities: John Garrett's, also in Wood Street, and Pagitts' in Monken Hadley.

Besides the six original almshouses in Wood Street, 15 have been built in Potters Lane, 14 in Grasvenor Avenue, two more in Wood Street named after Mary Ravenscroft, which would doubtless have pleased James, six adapted houses and flats in Coe's Alley and Union Street, and three more flats in Union Street, over the administrative office of Jesus Hospital charity. With the 6 John Garrett almshouses in Wood Street and three of Pagitts' in Monken Hadley, it comprises the 55.

How did Ravenscroft, albeit a lawyer and astute businessman, provide the Chancel Estate and almshouses on what is now such an impressive scale?

The answer, briefly, lies in property. The Wood Street almshouses were endowed with a small piece of land adjoining which was let as a garden for ten shillings a year.

What brought in more substantial rent were 14 acres of pasture land in Stepney, now part of Tower Hamlets, 10 and three-quarter acres of which James granted to Jesus Hospital, the balance being granted to his other charity, the Chancel Estate. In the 1670's the rent was £34 a year. In 1823 the land was let on building leases and ground rents thereafter increased. From 1923 onwards, 358 properties, shops, houses etc. brought in income amounting to thousands of pounds a year. But being ground landlords, the Jesus Hospital charity had increased outgoings as well, so in 1980 the trustees sold the freeholds for £1.2M and invested the capital to continuing advantage financially and greater convenience administratively. Investments are now (1991) worth about £3.5M.

Ravenscroft Trustees are called Visitors. Their clerk for the last 21 years has been Laurie Adams, whose knowledge of local almshouses and business acumen in serving their best interests is unrivalled. Over the years he has given about 50 illustrated talks, some as far afield as St Albans, Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield.

Ravenscroft benefactions range over a wider field than the 55 almshouse units, most of which have been modernised. About £30,000 is disbursed annually to a variety of causes, some to groups, some to individuals, in cases of need not covered by state benefit. For instance, ambulances and minibuses have been provided where the need is shown and no other funds are available. £400 is given every year to Queen Elizabeth's Schools'

### Endowment Fund.

As for the almsladies themselves, they pay nothing in rent, heat or light or maintenance of the property they live in. By special dispensation of the Post Office to all occupants of approved sheltered housing, they pay a television licence of only £5 a year instead of the normal £72. But they pay their own community charge.

If you're thinking of applying for a place, you must be a woman to begin with (Ravenscroft made no provision for men). You must be a poor widow or spinster, not less than 50 years old and unable to maintain yourself. In fact only pensioners are now admitted.

Ravenscroft's "six ancient women" (as he called them; they are named in the original document) had to be "neither common beggars, common drunkards, backbiters, tale-bearers, slanderers, common scolds, thieves, or other like persons of infamous life or evil name or repute, or vehemently suspected of sorcery, witchcraft, or charming, debauchery, incontinency or other like grievous crimes or an idiot or lunatic, or infected with contagious, loathsome, foul disease". They had to be "poor and impotent, of good report, holy life, and virtuous and innocent conversation".

If accepted, they could still be dismissed "if guilty of any of the crimes mentioned, or shall marry, keep an ale-house, strong water house, victualling house or tobacco shop ... neglect their duties ... or misbehave themselves towards the Visitors". If not dismissed, at least fined.

The outer gates were locked at eight every night in winter, at nine in summer, and were open at half-past-six every morning, winter or summer. A strict regime? But their reward, in an uncaring age, was security.

W.H.GELDER  
April 1991

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