

THE LOST HERALDRY ON THE BERNAK TOMB IN ST REMIGIUS'S CHURCH, HETHERSETT

by John Alban

In our LADY's chapel, at the east end of the south isle [*sic*], is an altar tomb, having the portraitures of a knight armed cap-a-pié, with a sword hanging from his head, which lies on a cushion, his spurs on, and a lion at his feet; he is in a surcoat of his arms, and hath his shield of them, *viz.* BERNAK, *ermine* a fess *gules*. By him is his lady with a dog at her feet, and on her mantle are the arms of BERNAK, impaling DRIBY, *argent*, three cinquefoils and a canton *gules*. The inscription is lost, but was this,

Obitus Domini Willi de Bernake M^occc^oxxxix^o. vi^o Mensis Aprilis.
Obitus Domine Alicie de Bernake M^occc^o xli^o. xii^o die Aprilis.

So wrote Francis Blomefield in his description of St Remigius's church, Hethersett, in the eighteenth century.¹ His comments were repeated by John Sell Cotman in the 1830s,² while the Suffolk artist, Cornelius Jansen Walter Winter (1821-91), executed an undated brown ink and wash drawing of the tomb, which he entitled 'Stone effigies in Hethersett Church, Norfolk'.³

Although Norwich Castle Museum's catalogue identifies the effigies in Winter's drawing as 'Sir R. Berney and his wife', the figures represent Sir William de Bernak (1278-1339) and his wife, Alice de Driby (c. 1284-1341). Blomefield added that 'This Sir *William Bernak*, Knt. and *Alice* his wife, daughter and heiress of Sir *Robert de Driby*, Knt. were buried in the midst of the dilapidated chancel, from whence this monument was removed'. The tomb still remains in the church (*Fig. 1*), although it is not publicly accessible and is now completely hidden from view behind an organ screen,⁴ to where it was relocated in the nineteenth century. Sadly, nowadays, it is in an extremely dilapidated condition, although this was



Fig. 1. Effigies of Sir William de Bernak and his wife, Alice de Driby, in Hethersett church.
(Photo: J.R. Alban)

¹ F. Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk* (11 vols, London, 1805-10), v. 30. The Latin inscription translates as 'Sir William de Bernake died 1339, 6th of the month of April; Lady Alice de Bernake died 1341, 12th day of April'.

² J.S. Cotman, *Engravings of Sepulchral Brasses in Norfolk* (London, 1838), p. vii.

³ Norwich Castle Museum, NWHCM:1951.235.B98. The catalogue entry describes the item as 'Stone Effigies in Hethersett Church of Sir R. Berney and his wife (drawing)'.

⁴ The tomb is in a confined area of the church, closed to the public, so I am most grateful to the rector, Revd Derek McClean, churchwarden Michael White and John Head for affording me access to it and for their help.

perhaps not the case in Blomefield's time, when it was also in a more prominent position within the church. Both effigies have been badly damaged: the lady is missing her hands, while the knight lacks his right arm, left hand and both legs. These elements are also missing in Winter's drawing, although it does depict parts of both his feet, clad in sabatons and resting on the head of an animal, which may be a lion, as Blomefield described. However, these components are now missing. Both effigies also look badly weathered, which may imply that they were outside the church at some point in time, although Blomefield suggested that there had been 'a covetous desire', in the sixteenth century, to remove the lead from 'the dilapidated chancel' where they were buried. The features on both faces have disappeared and the shield on the knight's left arm is now only fragmentary. Nevertheless, sufficient detail remains to show that he is wearing armour typical of the early 1340s, with an egg-shaped bascinet with a mail aventail, and a short surcoat, to the lower left side of which traces of a sword scabbard remain.⁵ It is possible that the chest tomb on which the effigies now lie may not have originally been associated with them, as it differs in style; it may be the 'fair raised tomb' which Blomefield noted was also in the church. Moreover, the effigies actually lie on separate slabs atop the tomb and possible evidence of their having been moved at some time is seen in Winter's drawing, where the lady is shown reclining on the knight's left side, whereas today she lies to his right.

The heraldry which Blomefield suggested that he had observed is no longer visible, neither on the surcoat and the shield, nor on the lady's mantle. However, medieval examples of the Bernak and Driby arms are still to be seen elsewhere, for example, at Tattershall Castle in Lincolnshire (Fig. 2), which was rebuilt in brick between 1430 and 1450 by William and Alice de Bernak's great-great-grandson, Ralph, 3rd Lord Cromwell (c. 1393-1456), who was himself also lord of the manor of Hethersett Cromwells.⁶



Fig 2. Arms of Bernak (l.) and Driby (r.) on a fireplace at Tattershall Castle, Lincolnshire (Photo: S.M. Maddock).

The family's link with Tattershall was a long one. The Hethersett manor had originally come into the possession of the Bernaks through the marriage of Sir William to Alice de Driby. Alice was the daughter and heiress of Sir Robert de Driby (d. c. 1306), of Driby and Tumbly, Lincolnshire, who had wed Joan de Tateshale (c. 1266-1329), heiress of Sir Robert de

⁵ He is appropriately clad in armour because he was a *miles strenuus*, an active knight who had undertaken military service. For example, he was in the retinue of William de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, at Cambrai in 1296, when de Valence was wounded in a skirmish with the French and subsequently died (*CPR, 1292-1301*, p. 177; H.W. Ridgeway, 'Valence [Lusignan], William de, Earl of Pembroke (d. 1296)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29481>), while during the War of Saint-Sardos in 1324 he acted as a commissioner of array for Norfolk, responsible for supervising 'the array ... of the men of that county in defence of the realm, especially now that the king of France is gathering a great army against the king ...; and to certify the king the number of horse and foot to be armed with steel armour, and of the residue of fencible foot' (*CPR, 1324-7*, pp. 8-10).

⁶ For information on Cromwell, as a manorial lord in Norfolk, see J.R. Alban, 'The Wymondham Market Charter of 1440 and Ralph, Lord Cromwell', *The Annual. The Bulletin of the Norfolk Archaeological and Historical Research Group*, xxvi (2017), 24-34.

Tateshale (c.1223-73), whose family held extensive estates in Lincolnshire and Norfolk. As a consequence of this marriage, the manor became known as Hethersett Bernaks. After Sir William and Alice de Bernak's days, the family's estates descended to their son, Sir John de Bernak (c. 1309-46), and then to his daughter and heiress, Maud⁷ (c. 1337-1419), who married Ralph, 1st Lord Cromwell (c. 1335-98), in around 1360. The manor was then renamed Hethersett Cromwells and thereafter descended within the Cromwell family until the death of Ralph, 3rd Lord Cromwell in 1456.⁸

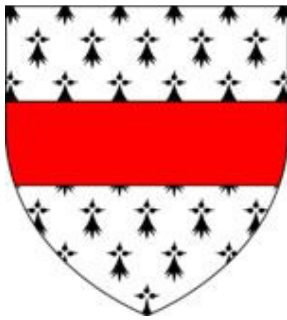


Fig. 3. Bernak: Ermine a fess Gules.

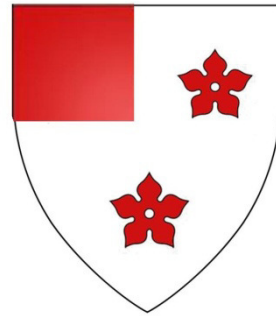


Fig 4. Driby: Argent, three cinquefoils and a canton Gules.

⁷ Maud's two brothers, John and William, predeceased her.

⁸ Alban, 'The Wymondham Market Charter', p. 30; Blomefield, *Norfolk*, i. 373-4.