

FACT SHEET 343**The Medieval Choir Lectern at Southwell Minster – Fact and Fiction****Dr Allan Barton FSA****Pepperpots, Spring 2024**

In the heart of the choir of Southwell Minster is a glorious late medieval eagle lectern that tradition says was discovered at the bottom of a lake in the grounds of Newstead Abbey, the former home of the poet Lord Byron. In this article, I will explore anew the history of this beautiful object, reassessing the evidence of its provenance and its patronage before looking briefly at its original purpose.

The eagle lectern is made of latten, a type of brass alloy, and is one of around thirty or forty surviving lecterns in England from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. They are primarily of identical design, though they vary in size - an eagle with outstretched wings perching on a globe supported on a stem and with a base resting on three lions. The majority are to be found in East Anglia, and it is thought they were either made in that region or, more likely, imported from the Low Countries. The area between Tournai and the Meuse Valley was a significant centre of sand casting and brass finishing in this period, and the various elements were sand cast. There was a considerable import trade along the east coast of England of metal goods of this sort for church use.

We know precisely how the lectern came to Southwell. It was sold in 1775 to a clergyman, the Revd Dr Richard Kaye, by the fifth Lord Byron of Newstead. At the time of the sale in 1775, Byron, known for posterity as the 'wicked lord', was in considerable financial trouble. Newstead Abbey was falling around his ears, and the sale of the lectern and other goods was probably undertaken to offset his rising debts. Dr Kaye is a fascinating character who had a successful career as a churchman and was a noted antiquary. In 1783, he inherited his family's baronetcy and became The Very Reverend Sir Richard Kaye. He was a pluralist on a grand scale, preferred to many wealthy livings. For over twenty years, he served simultaneously as Vicar of Kirkby-in-Ashfield in Nottinghamshire, Marylebone church in London, and as Archdeacon of Nottingham and Dean of Lincoln. In 1783, the year he became Dean of Lincoln, he was also presented to the prebend of North Muskham in the chapter of Southwell. Kaye's substantial income allowed him to indulge in his many and various academic interests, and he was a fellow of both the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society. It also gave him the means to collect curios, and the lectern was just the sort of object he liked to purchase. In April of 1805, a few years before his death, he gave the lectern to Southwell Minster.

The story often repeated is that the lectern was found in the lake at Newstead Abbey, a tale that seems to appear fifty years after Kaye had bought it. This idea was first related in print by the American writer Washington Irving in his 1835 work 'Newstead Abbey'. All subsequent references to this story are based on his account. 'Newstead Abbey' was Irving's recollection of a jolly three-week visit to Newstead at the invitation of Colonel Thomas Wildman, who, in

1815, had bought the Abbey from the poet Lord Byron. Irving was a great fan of Byron, and there is no doubt that the visit fired his already vivid imagination, and the work is littered with anecdotes and romantic impressions.

Colonel Wildman seemingly told him the lectern was discovered in the deepest part of the Newstead Lake. Irving does not relate the date of its discovery, but he does say that having been underwater for some years, the lectern needed cleaning when it was recovered and was sent off to a brazier. During the work, he relates, the brazier unscrewed the component parts of the stem and several parchment deeds and documents relating to the medieval monastery bearing the seals of Edward III and Henry VIII were discovered concealed within it. Irving lets his imagination run riot with this. He concludes that these documents were hidden intentionally in the lectern by the canons (he calls them friars) just before the Dissolution of the Monasteries and that the 'great brazen eagle' was then deposited in the lake to preserve the documents so that one day they might be retrieved and 'substantiate the friars' rights'.

Irving writes that one of the documents discovered was an 'indulgence' granting 'plenary pardon' to the 'friars' for various crimes, including 'the most gross and sensual.' Like many men of his time, Irving didn't have a high opinion of the monastic vocation!

Irving says the documents were still in Colonel Wildman's library in his time, though he doesn't mention if he had seen them. Now, in Nottinghamshire Archives are five documents found in Newstead in the nineteenth century, two date from the seventeenth century, and three are medieval and relate to the priory. Two of the documents are deeds of gift relating to minor parcels of priory land. One from the thirteenth century is a small grant of lands in Essex by Roger de Cantilupe to the canons. The other, dating from 1341, is a deed in which Henry of Edwinstowe grants the manor of North Muskham to the priory, out of the proceeds of which the canons are to create a perpetual chantry to pray for his soul. The third document is a letter patent from King Henry V dating to October 1415 that grants a general pardon to the prior and convent of Newstead for any crimes they committed before the 8th of December 1414. It states that they are pardoned of 'any breach of peace, for all kinds of treason, murders, rape of women, rebellions, insurrections, felonies, conspiracies, trespasses, offences, negligence, extortion, misprision, ignorance, contempt, concealment and deception.' This is probably the 'indulgence' that Irving speaks of, and these are presumably the documents alleged to have been found in the lectern. Incidentally, the pardon does not, in any respect, cast a shadow over the behaviour of the medieval canons of Newstead. The granting of such pardons to monasteries and individuals was routine; it was a way for a king to raise money for military campaigns without resorting to parliament. In 1415, Henry V was fighting his war with France and was short of cash.

The folklore tradition at Newstead that is recounted in guidebooks to the Abbey in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has a slightly different spin on the story. They all claim that rather than being found in the lake, the lectern was discovered in a shallow pond that to this day is called the 'Eagle Pond', and it was into this that the canons cast it. There is a significant problem with this theory: The Eagle Pond is a post-dissolution water feature that

the fourth Lord Byron created at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and it was dug on the site of the east end of the priory church.

We will never know how and where this lectern was discovered if indeed it needed to be discovered at all. The condition of the lectern is not dissimilar to that of other examples from this period. Latten, primarily a copper alloy, is badly affected by water exposure; had the Southwell lectern been underwater for centuries, you'd expect little of it to remain. I suspect that the story of the watery deposition of the lectern was invented sometime in the late eighteenth or even early nineteenth century to explain the survival of the documents. The most likely but less romantic explanation for the lectern's survival is that it continued in use at Newstead after the dissolution of the monasteries and was part of the chapel goods of the domestic chapel of the Byron family established in the former monastic chapter house.

Even if we weren't aware of Kaye's purchase in 1775, the lectern provides us with an unambiguous Newstead provenance. Engraved on the large knob that divides the stem into two sections, is a Latin inscription that reads "Orate pro Animabus Radulphi Savage et pro Animabus Omnium Fidelium" - "Pray for the soul of Ralph Savage and all the faithful departed". Ralph Savage, here commemorated, was without question the donor of the lectern, but who was he? I have read in various places that Ralph was prior of Newstead, but that is not the case – there was no prior of that name. Savage wasn't part of the monastic community but was a layperson resident within the precincts of the priory; he made his will and died at Newstead in 1505. We can be sure he was a layman, as monastics owning no property made no will.

Ralph Savage was a minor member of a significant landowning family - the Savages of Stainsby in Derbyshire and Clifton in Cheshire. Thomas Savage, Archbishop of York, was also a member of that family and a cousin of Ralph. Ralph's father, Arnold or William Arnold, was a younger son of Sir John Savage, a prominent knight in the reign of Henry V, who had been knighted in 1415 at Agincourt. Ralph and his father's coat of arms were once blazoned in the windows of North Wingfield church in Derbyshire, a few miles from Stainsby, where they appear to have lived on a small estate. Arnold's coat of arms was differentiated from his father's by using a crescent, indicating he was Sir John's second son. Ralph's coat of arms was slightly different from that of his father, Arnold, as it had what is called a bend sinister across them, which indicated that he was the illegitimate son of his father.

In 1488, Ralph Savage, with a friend, John Babington of Dethick, founded a chantry in North Wingfield church, endowed so that a priest would pray perpetually for their souls. The foundation charter also requested the priest to pray for living relatives, including Ralph's cousin, Sir John of Savage of Stainsby. There is particular provision for prayers for Ralph's 'ancestors', including Arnold and two women, Agnes Leversage and Helen Orston – one of whom was probably his mother. It is through the foundation of this chantry that we know that the Ralph Savage of North Wingfield is the same man who was living in Newstead – for in Ralph's will of 1505, he bequeaths to 'his chantry priest of Winkfield' four broad yards of 'mustdevellers' cloth and ten shillings and sixteen pence'.

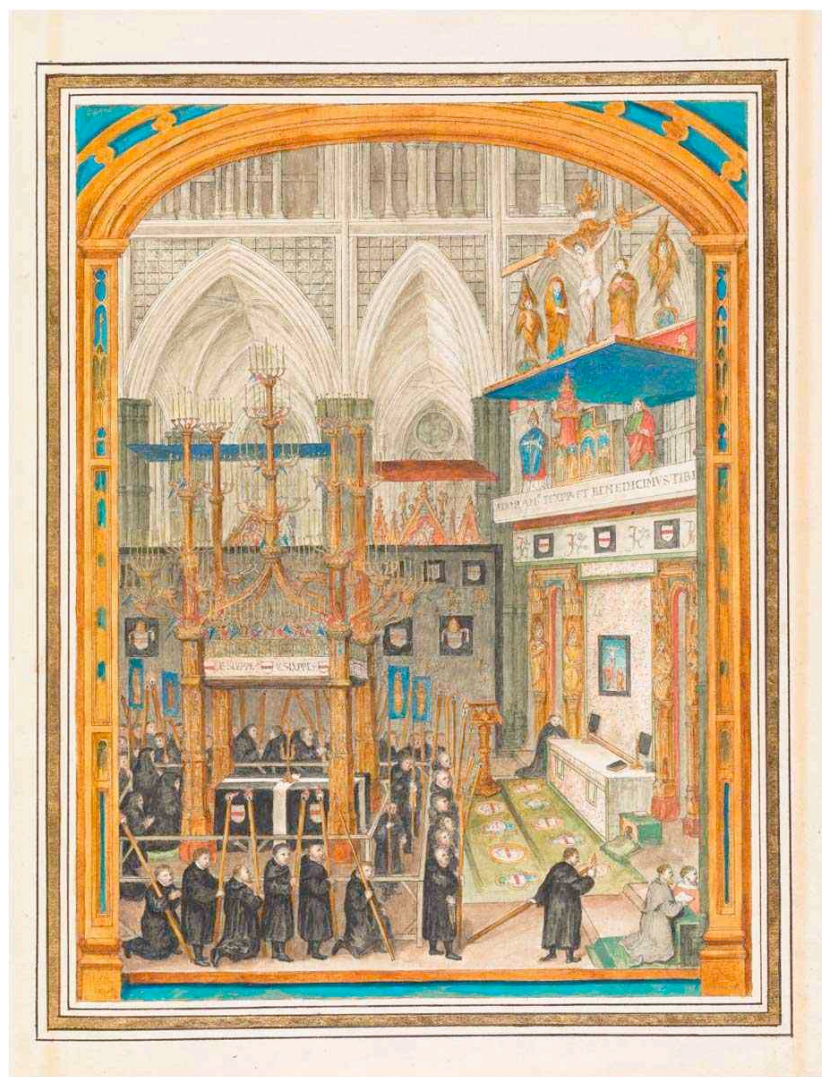
Ralph's will made at Newstead is a fascinating and insightful document. He requests that his body be buried 'by our lady in our lady choir', in other words, before the image of the Virgin Mary within the monastic church at Newstead. Now that spot is very likely where the eagle pond is now - so it is more likely that Ralph, rather than the lectern, was exhumed when the pond was created in c.1700! Ralph leaves to the prior and convent his entire flock of sheep so that they will pray for him and make compensation for the 'things' the canons had given him. He leaves the residue of all his other goods to be divided between William, the prior of Newstead, and his relative Peter Savage, who are to use the proceeds for his soul's health. It is pretty likely, I think, that this flock of sheep, or this estate residue, was used to pay for the Southwell lectern.

There is another exciting dimension to add to this that brings Ralph to life rather vividly. Just down the road from Newstead is Papplewick, one of the churches that the priory held in the Middle Ages. In the Georgian church are several panels of late medieval stained glass that are said to come from the priory – the most probably do. The panels include a figure of St Peter holding his keys, a row of kneeling Augustinian canons in their habits, and an image of a man in armour kneeling at a prayer desk (see front cover). The man in armour wears a heraldic surcoat, and the coat of arms portrayed are those of Savage. Furthermore, on the man's sleeve is a crescent, the same mark used by Arnold Savage in his coat of arms at North Wingfield. This glass almost certainly represents either Arnold or even Ralph himself – although the bend sinister of bastardy is missing. If it is Arnold, the glass was presumably provided for Newstead by his son Ralph Savage.

What was Ralph, a layman, doing living in Newstead priory? It was common for laymen to live in monasteries in the century leading up to the Reformation. In 1535, when the Valor Ecclesiasticus was taken valuing the assets of the English church, Newstead Priory was worth a little over £167 a year. It was among the poorer monasteries in the Midlands. Many monasteries of this size were asset and resource-rich but cash-poor and, with declining communities, had lots of space. One of the ways of dealing with the lack of ready money was to sell something called a 'corrody' to laypeople. This was a type of pension scheme in effect, where, in exchange for cash, the monastery would provide the layperson with accommodation and bed and board for a set period of years or the rest of their life. Those who entered monasteries as corrodians were often men of Ralph Savage's social rank, members of the lower gentry. Although we cannot be sure, the reference in Ralph's will to 'things' he had from the house that needed recompense may suggest that he was a corrodian at Newstead. Having looked at the provenance of the Southwell lectern, I want to look very briefly at how it was initially used when made. These medieval eagle lecterns were not designed to support a Bible or to be employed to read the lessons during the daily offices of the monastic round. They were invariably made as gospel lecterns and were part of the liturgical furniture of a medieval high altar sanctuary. This lectern, when first commissioned by Savage or in his memory, would probably have been placed beside the high altar of Newstead, just below the altar step, and would have been the place where the deacon would have sung the liturgical

gospel at mass. The eagle was an emblem of the evangelist St John and was an appropriate symbolic form for a lectern used for this liturgical purpose.

Numerous medieval sources provide evidence of using eagle lecterns at the mass. In a document called the Rites of Durham that describes the furnishings and liturgical arrangements of Durham Cathedral at the eve of the Reformation, next to the north end of the high altar 'was a goodly fine lectern of brass' and on the 'wings spread abroad' was laid the book called 'the text' that the monks used for the singing of both the epistle and the gospel at mass. A manuscript in Westminster Abbey called the Islip Roll includes a vivid full-page image of the funeral of Abbot John Islip before the Abbey's high altar. We can see an eagle lectern depicted in this, just below the top step of the altar. It is placed facing north, as it was the liturgical custom in the medieval period for the deacon of the mass to face towards the north and not towards the people as he proclaimed the gospel. It is quite likely that the Southwell lectern was positioned and used in much the same way as this at Newstead before the Reformation.



The Islip roll, showing the high altar of Westminster Abbey at the eve of the Reformation.

The Editor writes

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Whilst we mostly speak of the 'Quire' at Southwell Minster, I wanted to keep Allan's (equally correct) use of 'Choir' for this article.