

THE WALSINGHAM FAMILY by John Reed

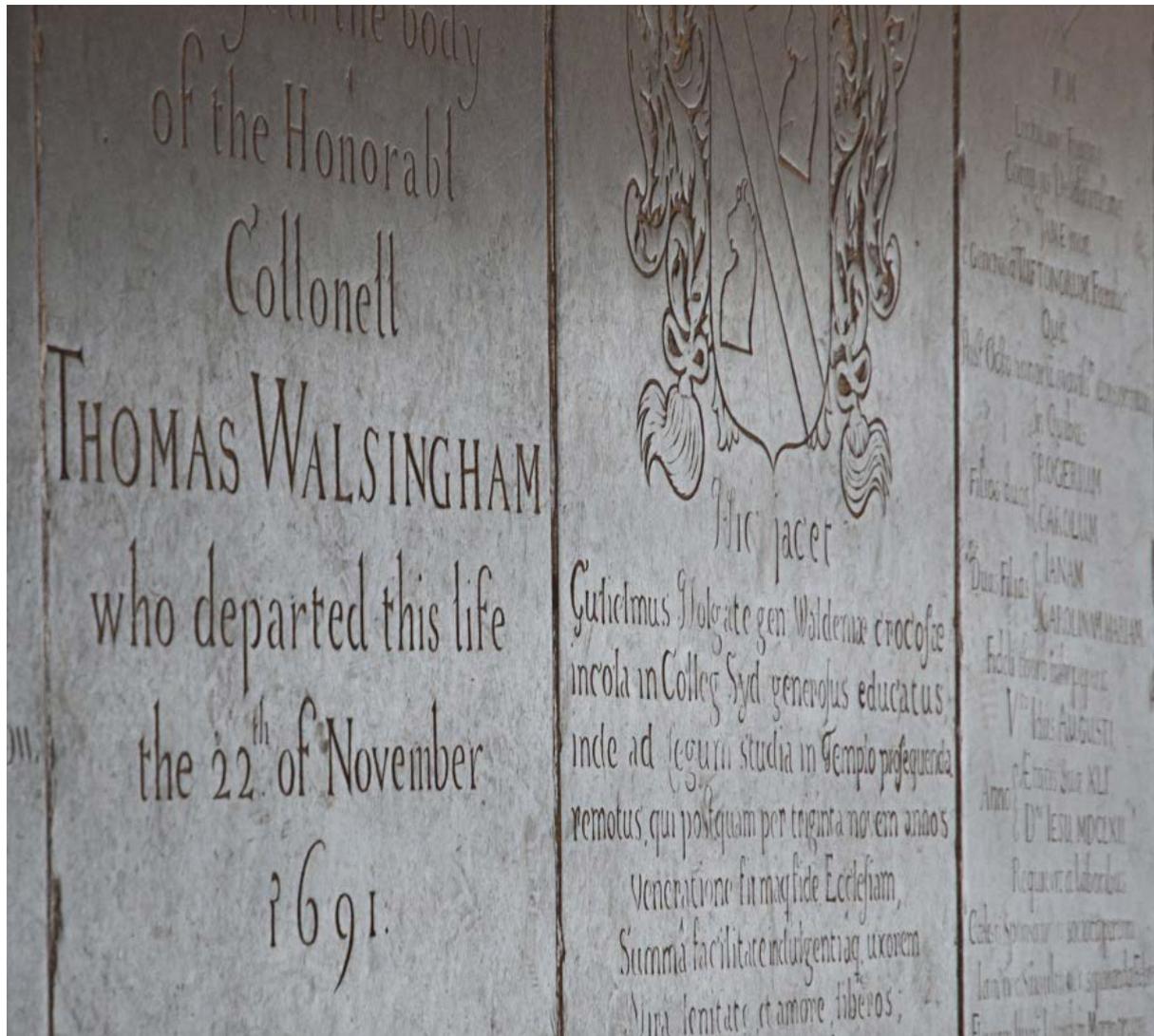


Photo by Dominic Davey

As you enter the church through the west porch, one of the first things you see is the ledger stone to Colonel Thomas Walsingham, who died in 1691. A frequent query from parishioners and visitors is whether Colonel Walsingham was related to the famous Sir Francis Walsingham, a Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth from 1573 until his death in 1590, and popularly known as the Queen's spymaster.

Colonel Walsingham's ledger stone was originally sited in the chancel. To be buried in the chancel close to the High Altar was a great honour reserved mainly for those of wealth or important connections, and Colonel Walsingham, as a son-in-law of the Earl of Suffolk, had the right connections. His wife was Lady Anne Howard, a daughter of the 2nd Earl, and when she died in 1695, she was buried in the Howard Vault below the chancel, seemingly an even more prestigious location. A son, who died in 1679, was also buried in the Vault. Both of them had Howard blood in their veins, whilst Colonel Walsingham did not, and this must surely be why he was buried in the chancel rather than the Vault. Ironically, it is now Colonel

Walsingham whom we are reminded of as we enter the church, rather than the Howards, who are locked away in their Vault which was closed in 1860.

Colonel Thomas Walsingham and Lady Anne had two known surviving children. One was Elizabeth (1647-1734), who married the Irish baronet, Sir John Osborne. She and her husband are also commemorated in a ledger stone now sited at the west end. As I mentioned in an earlier article, the hereditary Osborne baronetcy still survives and the present baronet is the father of George Osborne, former Chancellor of the Exchequer. George Osborne is the heir to the title.

Their other known surviving child was James (1646-1728), who lived in Little Chesterford, and it was he who provided the answer to the question of where Sir Francis fits in to the family tree. In the seventeenth century genealogical research was popular among the county families, especially in connection with their entitlement to arms. Correspondence has survived in the Essex Record Office between James Walsingham and a genealogist named William Holman from Halstead, who was doing research into Essex county families. In answer to Holman's enquiry, James said that his great-grandfather was Sir Thomas Walsingham, and that Sir Francis was Sir Thomas's younger brother. He also stated that his father (Colonel Thomas Walsingham), had had to sell the family estates at Chislehurst and Fooks Cray in Kent, to pay off debts incurred by his grandfather.

In this letter, James is clearly upset at the loss of the family estate at Scadbury in Chislehurst, where he and his sister had both been born, and talks of his "broken family". Even so, when he died, his sister Elizabeth Osborne, who was very close to him, paid for the enormous marble monument to him in Little Chesterford church. The monument features a reclining effigy of James in front of a doorway with elaborately decorated carvings, and occupies the entire wall space to the right of the altar. It is well worth a visit to this little church to see the monument, which is far more impressive than any in St Mary's. Elizabeth Osborne was the main beneficiary of James' will (he appears to have been unmarried).

In conclusion, a few notes about the most famous member of the Walsingham family, Sir Francis. He was a protégé of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and served as Ambassador in France, where he was involved in unsuccessful negotiations to marry the Queen to the Duke of Anjou, a member of the French royal family. He was also involved in promoting the case against Mary, Queen of Scots, and provided the evidence to convict her of plotting against Elizabeth, for which she was executed. He was a close associate of Sir Thomas Smith, with whom he shared the position of Secretary of State to the Queen, and who was of course from an important Walden family. (Jeremy Collingwood is the author of a biography of Sir Thomas Smith).