



ALABASTER

Ray State — Ratcliffe on Soar

What is alabaster?

- A member of the limestone family which includes marble and gypsum - it comes in two forms



The material of the ancients

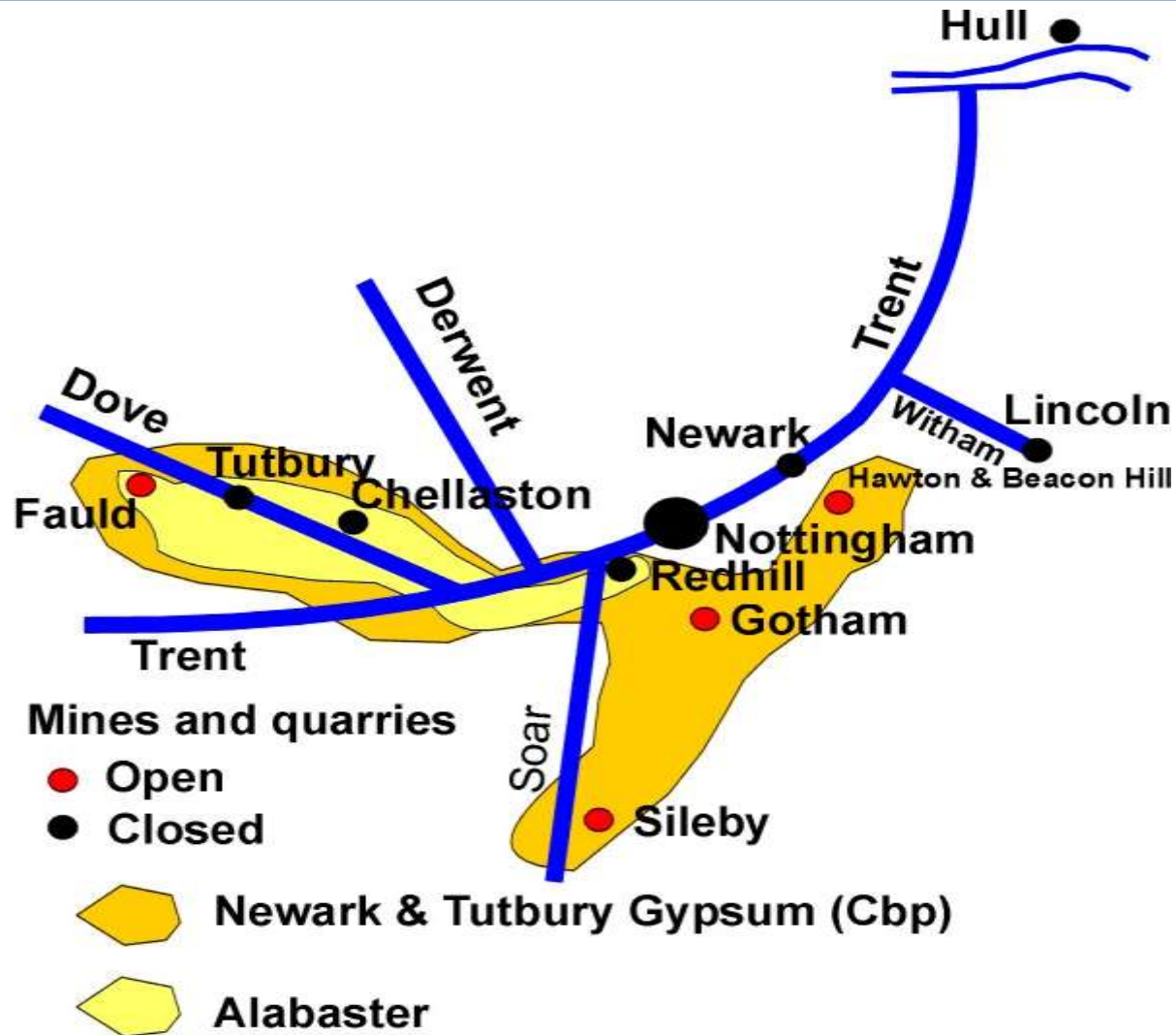
- Hydrated Calcium Carbonate (calcite) – otherwise known as onyx
- Mined in Egypt from about 2000BC and still is. Now also found in Mexico and USA
- Mohs hardness 3
- Honey coloured



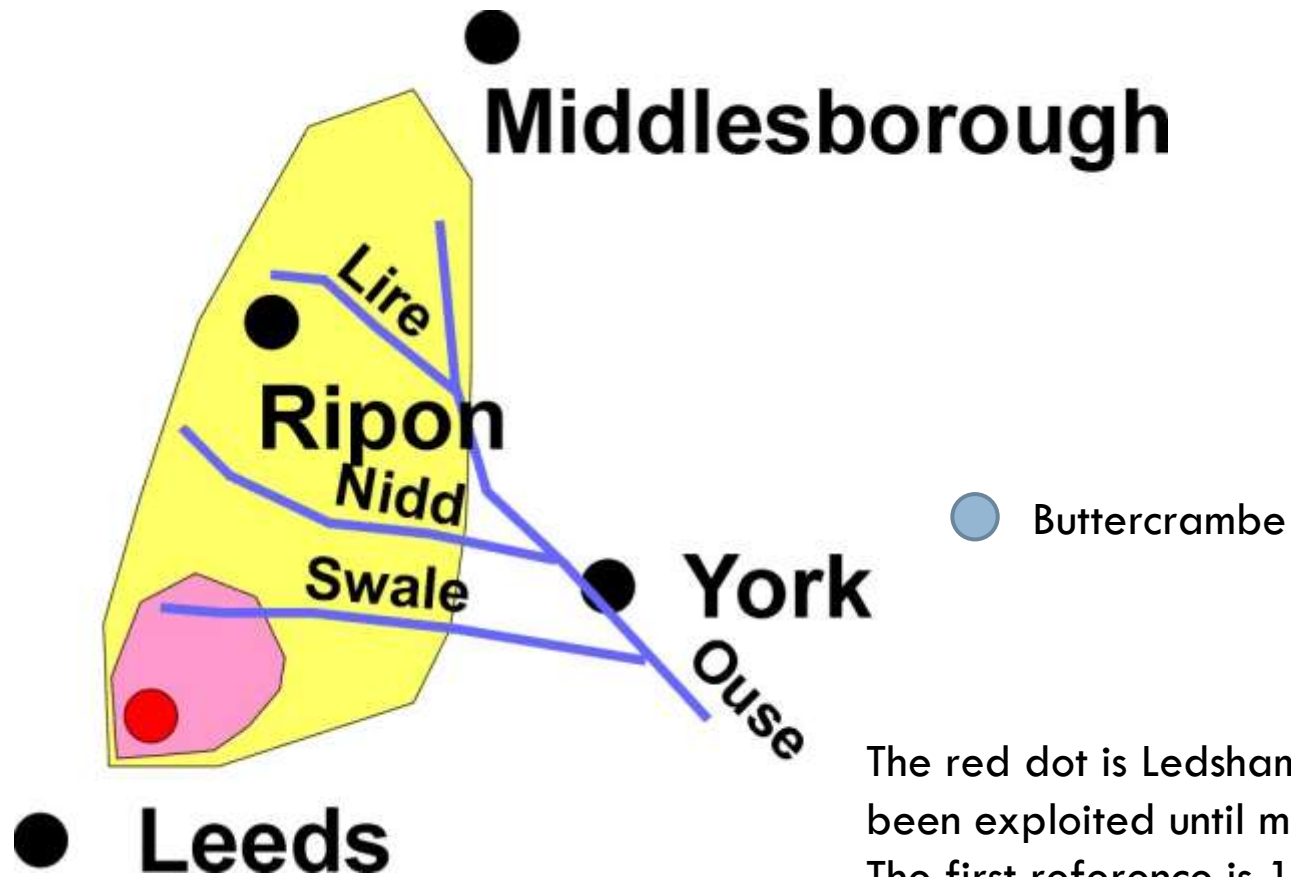
The Normans to the Stuarts

- Hydrated calcium sulphate – a crystalline form of gypsum
- Mohs hardness 2 – can be cut with a knife and therefore carved
- Was mined in the East Midlands, in Somerset and in Leeds - now found in Italy near Florence
- Generally translucent white but can be found stained with iron oxides giving darker colours
- It is this material which is covered by this paper

The mining areas 1 - Midlands



The mining areas 2 - Yorkshire



The red dot is Ledsham which may not have been exploited until mid 16th century. The first reference is 1600 which reports “the alabaster quarry is in full production”

Alabaster in churches

- Any pre-Norman artwork is almost certainly in free-stone
- Post-Norman effigies in free-stone or Purbeck marble to about 1299
- In the 12th century alabaster was found close to the surface at Tutbury in Staffordshire
- Tutbury church has an entrance arch in alabaster (1160) but little or no other carving was made before 1330.

Church artefacts 1300 to 1530

- Carved images
- Retables
- Reredos
- Floor slabs (occasionally graveyard slabs)
- Chest tombs with or without effigies
- Mural monuments
- Other furniture such as fonts, pulpits and floors

Note – monuments are often formed from more than one material

Reformation 1530 to 1553

- Henry VIII not anti-catholic and few churches suffered
- Edward VI (1547-1553) however had commissioners to oversee removal of images and retables (and some reredos) Effigies were left alone (but see later)
- Almost all religious images disappeared from English churches – but see Flawford
- Most were destroyed but a significant black market in looted images existed

Commonwealth 1649 to 1660

- Religious symbols on tombs attacked
- Hands sometimes cut off

Flawford (1)

- An abandoned village between Ruddington and Tollerton Notts
- Church demolished 1773 during which three images were found under the chancel floor
- Now in the Castle Museum

Flawford (2)



How many of our churches have images under the floor?

“Our chancel floor is uneven where things have been buried”

Churchwarden report to the Bishop May 1595

Retables – The Swansea artefact



The V&A “Swansea” retable recovered from Germany. Carved circa 1470 -1490
- Made in Nottingham. Hinged to close – stood on altar. Most panels were carved in Nottingham with alabaster mined in Chellaston, Derbys

Reredos

- Behind the altar usually on the wall.
- Many destroyed by Edward VI but resurgence in Victorian times with the Gothic revival.



Many Victorian reredos in Italian alabaster (Thrumpton) or inferior locally mined (Kingston) or in marble or freestone (Barrow on Soar) – saints or last supper

Floor slabs – 2 of Ratcliffe's 17 slabs



Thomas Finderne and his wife
Elizabeth Sacheverall 1525



John Prescott – priest 1497

Source of slab data

- From Notes taken by F A Greenhill MA, FSA, FSA A Scot (1896-1983)
- In Custody of John Coales FSA, Somerton, Somerset (1931 – 2007)
- **Incised Effigial Slabs – A Study of engraved stone memorials in Latin Christendom 1100 to 1700**

By: [Frank A. Greenhill](#)

ISBN: 0571107419

Publisher: Faber and Faber - 1976-03-08

Format: Hardcover

Tombs and effigies

- Gothic period 1300 to circa 1547
- Intermediate period 1547 to 1560
- Renaissance period 1560 to 1613
- Mural period 1613 to 1667
- From 1670 few monuments in alabaster

Gothic (to 1547)

- Population – no more than 400 nation-wide
- Of which some 107 are in the East Midlands – most by EM carvers
- 40 are of the York school (under review)
- Others carvers Norwich (10), London (7)
- Of the rest (approx 230) most show EM features but await positive identification
- The EM carvers most prolific – Chellaston, Tutbury, Burton (later Coventry)
- Carvers – Sutton, Prentys and Royley but much work remains to be done

The first alabaster tomb



Hanbury in Staffordshire.

A crusader Knight of sated as 1300 with crossed legs believed to be Sir John de Hanbury (but may be 1340).

Only two such effigies exist.

Hanbury is barely a mile from the Fauld mines.

The pulpit, font, nave floor and plain reredos as well as 3 other renaissance tombs are all carved from alabaster.

Gothic tomb (2)



Intermediate period

- Population no more than 20 (much work to be done here)
- Mainly Gothic tomb chest with Renaissance effigy



Arundel – unusual
with a skeleton
beneath

Renaissance

- Population uncertain – likely to be about 200
- Tomb chest has “weepers” which relate to the family and inscriptions either in Latin or English

Archbishop Sandys in Southwell
circa 1590 and probably of the
York school with Yorkshire
alabaster.

Weepers evident



Murals



Ratcliffe on Soar's renaissance tomb with mural monument above. These were probably constructed at different times. Henry Sacheverall (1625) and his three wives.

The mural monument style appeared about 1613 and may be attributable to Nicholas Stone a London carver who was influenced by the Dutch but may be Hendrik de Keyser

Other mural monuments include Ordsall and Gotham (review in hand)

Likenesses and decoration

- The form of decoration was more important than likeness to the end of the 16th century
- Bishop Sandys effigy bears close resemblance to his portrait
- Study of the decoration is well worthwhile



Armour and collars

- Some 13 ladies and 102 men display the Lancastrian collar (known as the collar of esses or SS collar)
- Some 12 (all men) display the Yorkist collar (suns and roses) of Edward VI and Richard III
- Many different pendants are shown and these are currently being analysed
- These were awarded for special services to the monarch and are worthy of note

Collar



The tomb of Sir James Goushill at Hoveringham circa 1403 showing the SS collar from which the pendant has been removed. This has been much mutilated by the Victorians have been moved to an alcove too small for the chest tomb

Damage and vandalism

- Alabaster is adverse to water and many display water damage
- In addition the soft stone is attractive to those who wish to carve their initials (examination of these can sometimes give a surprise)
- Those with a Yorkist collar seems to have attracted most attention. It is most likely that Tudor sympathisers sought out Yorkist monument for destruction. (St Annes, Sutton Bonington and Minster-in-Sheppey and the Newarke, Leicester)

Armour and clothing

- Carvers appear to be more up to date with ladies fashion than with men
- Armour seems to lag behind fashion by some 50 years reflecting the fact that carvers rarely saw knights in armour whereas ladies fashion could be seen
- Effigies may also have been “off the shelf”

Furniture

- Unusual for other artefacts but Hanbury church has it all

The fine alabaster font in the side aisle at Hanbury



The contribution for the Historian

- The alabaster work is worthy of more attention than it has received
- The period to the 16th century was more “arts and crafts” than classical sculpture
- The analysis of your monument in relation to the decoration, clothing and attendant figures allows the story to be told in greater detail

Further reading

- Greenhill – alabaster slabs (see earlier)
- Arthur Gardner 1940 – Alabaster Tombs (deals only with Gothic)
- Francis W Cheetham – Alabaster carvings in the Castle Museum
- George Fellows 1907 – selected churches in Nottinghamshire
- William St John Hope and W L Spiers writing for the Walpole Society

Questions



Blocks of alabaster some weighing 15 tons being carried to Liverpool and New York for the mansion of Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1894. they were mined by Staton and Co at the Fauld mine in Staffordshire. The Fauld mine has been in production for some 500 years being opened by John of Gaunt in the 14th century