The Tomb, the Palace and a Touch of Shakespeare: The Memory of Sir John Crosby

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In his *Memorials of the Wars of the Roses*, W.E. Hampton listed all of the surviving monuments to those who had fought in, and been associated with, the Wars of the Roses. One such monument was that of Sir John Crosby (died 1475), grocer, alderman and former sheriff of London, merchant of the Staple of Calais, diplomat, and one of those who rallied London in the defence of London Bridge against the assault led by Thomas Neville, the Bastard of Fauconberg, in May 1471. His tomb lies in the parish church of St Helen's Bishopsgate in London and is one of only a small number of medieval tombs in the city of London which has survived into the twenty-first century. He is also the man who built Crosby Hall, the London residence of Richard, Duke of Gloucester in the period of his Protectorship of April to June 1483. This association has, as a consequence, aroused much interest both by chroniclers and historians of the period and ultimately William Shakespeare who refers to Crosby Place in *The Tragedy of Richard III*. The purpose of this article is to look at the measures Sir John took during his lifetime to arrange commemoration for himself. It is also intended to look at how his memory has survived through the work of others and how they have used his name in a series of events and incidents which have left a lasting legacy particularly in the history of Richard III.

The life and career of Sir John has received much scholarly attention. His origins have, like those of Richard Whittington and his cat, become associated with mystery and the legend of his being found by a cross, hence the name ‘Crosby’, was popular in the late sixteenth century. This legend is of unlikely veracity given the long-standing tenure of the manor of Hanworth, Middlesex, by members of the Crosby family from whom Sir John inherited the manor. His career in London began with his apprenticeship to the grocer, and Yorkist supporter, John Young (died 1481). After becoming free of the city in 1454, Sir John not only managed a successful and profitable business, but also entered civic life. He served as auditor of the city and Bridge House in 1466 and in the same year was elected member of parliament for the city. He became an alderman of Broad Street ward in 1468 and served as sheriff in 1470 before becoming mayor of the Staple of Calais. His knighthood on 21 May 1471, following the city’s successful defence against Fauconberg’s attack of London Bridge, not only reflected Edward IV’s largess in rewarding those responsible but also reflected Sir John’s prominence within the Yorkist regime. He continued to serve the Yorkist interest as an ambassador to Burgundy, publicly to solicit support for an invasion of France, but secretly to meet with representatives of Francis, Duke of Brittany, and secure Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond. He died January-February 1475 leaving an estate valued at over £3,200

I am grateful to Miss Sally Badham for her very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and also to Dr Hannes Kleineke, Dr Jessica Freeman and Mr Stephen Freeth for their assistance in providing references for this article.

2 Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Simon Bradley, *London I: the City of London*, London 1997, provides the most useful account of the monuments which survive in the City of London.
in monetary bequests together with his property and interests. He was buried in St Helen's Bishopsgate adjacent to Crosby Place.

The survival of the tomb to Sir John and his first wife, Agnes (died 1466) is one of the accidents of history for which we remain ever thankful. Huge numbers of monumental brasses, incised slabs, effigies and altar tombstones in London were lost during the religious iconoclasm of the Reformation and Civil War, but the majority were lost during the Great Fire of 1666, including all of those in the old Cathedral of St Paul's. Later, the rebuilding of a number of parish churches in London during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in those medieval monuments which had survived being removed and replaced. The bomb damage in London during World War II and later terrorist attacks have caused further harm to London's remaining medieval fabric. The 1992 IRA attack in the city resulted in significant damage to St Helen's Bishopsgate, completely destroying its stained glass windows. However, the tomb of Sir John and Agnes was unaffected by the blast.

The Crosby tomb lies in the chapel of the Holy Ghost in the south transept of St Helen's Bishopsgate surrounded by railings. This contains the effigies of Sir John and his first wife Agnes, lying recumbent with their hands at prayer. In spite of being a commercial man of business and member of the civic elite, Sir John is displayed in armour, with a mantle over, reflecting his knightly status rather than that of an alderman of London. He rests his head on a helm with his feet on a griffin. He wears rings on his fingers and his hair is cropped and parted, designs typical of mid to late fifteenth-century monuments. There is little damage to the effigy other than the thumbs of both hands which have been broken off. His wife Agnes is dressed in a veiled head-dress with a frontlet and wearing a mantle and gown, with an elaborate necklace and rings reflecting her status as a lady. Her head rests on a cushion supported by angels, while her feet rest on two dogs, one of which is damaged with the head missing. As with the effigy of her husband the thumbs on both of her hands have been broken off. It is of particular interest that both Sir John and Agnes are shown wearing the collar of suns and roses which identifies their allegiance to the Yorkists and the favour of Edward IV. This collar can be seen on several late fifteenth-century monuments including the alabaster tomb at Minster Lovell, Oxfordshire, probably commemorating John, Lord Lovell (died 1465), the father of Francis, Viscount Lovell, KG, and a favourite of Richard III.

The effigies lie on a free standing tomb chest with a series of heraldic coats of arms surrounding the base. These were originally carved with the arms of the Staple of Calais on the east end, that of the Grocers' Company on the west end and with the arms of Crosby on the south and north sides of the tomb. On either side of each coat of arms are two niches one above the other and it is possible that they may have once contained painted images. The heraldry is now in poor condition but it is likely that it too was originally painted, as may have been other elements of the tomb, such as the images of Sir John and Agnes, but no trace of this survives. Nor does the original inscription survive. Fortunately, John Weever noted the inscription:

Orate pro animabus Iohannis Crosby Militis Ald. atque tempore vite Maioris Staple ville Calais; & Agnetis uxoris sue, ac Thome, Richardi Iohannis, Iohannis, Margaret & Iohanne liberorum eiusdem Iohannis Crosby militis ille obiit, 1475 & illa 1466 quorum animabus propitietur Deus.

(Pray for the souls of John Crosby, knight, alderman and during a portion of his life Mayor of the Staple of the town of Calais, and of Agnes his wife, of Thomas, Richard, John, John, Margaret and Johanna, children of the same John Crosby. He died in 1475 and she in 1466, on whose souls may God have mercy)

The inscription's standard format requesting prayers for the dead made it vulnerable to destruction after

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7 TNA PRO, PROB 11/6, ff. 182r-88v.
8 The lack of surviving medieval monuments in the city of London is shown in Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (RCHM), An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, vol. 4, The City, London 1929. Many parish churches, which had survived the 1666 fire had few medieval monuments surviving, see, for example, St Andrew Undershaft pp. 5-7, St Bartholomew the Less, p. 5 and St Olave Hart Street, pp. 181-83.
10 I am grateful to Sally Badham for drawing my attention to this reference.
the Reformation. That it was still in existence in 1631 when Weever saw it suggests that Sir John’s legacy and influence in St Helen’s Bishopsgate – and perhaps in the city itself – was still sufficient to protect this inscription from destruction during the Reformation. Though the date of its defacement is not known, it is probable that this took place during the Civil War when significant damage was caused throughout the country, including London. In spite of this, the tomb escaped destruction and it is the only surviving monument in the city of London today reflecting this type of design and structure from the late fifteenth century.

It is not always possible to identify the instructions given to and the influence exerted on the craftsmen who made tombs, as few contracts have survived. Moreover, it is often not clear whether the commemorative ‘drive’ was that of the deceased or exercised by a member of their family or executor. In the case of Sir John’s monument, there is evidence that it was provided after his death by his executors, following directions in his will of 6 March 1471. Concerning his burial this was to be in the chapel of the Holy Ghost in St Helen’s Bishopsgate in the grave of his first wife, Agnes. In addition to his burial, his executors, Thomas Rygby and William Bracebrigge were to commission an honest tombe of marble to stande over the bodies of me and of the said Anneys late my wife with scriptures and Images of me my said late wife and my children to be made therupon making mencion of our persons and of the day and yere of my decease and with all other things according unto our degrees as shall seme to my saide executours honestly and conveniently by their sadde discreesione to be doen.

Rygby and Bracebrigge met all these requirements, not only the tomb being made with images of Sir John and Agnes as required, but also including the inscription with reference to his children. The inscription is particularly interesting in that it went a stage beyond what Sir John required and referred to his children by name, they being Thomas, Richard, John, John, Margaret and Joan. The tomb was positioned in the chapel of the Holy Ghost in the south transept of St Helen’s Bishopsgate and it appears that, in spite of various restoration works in the church, the tomb still lies in its original position. As well as arranging his tomb, Sir John was aware of the possibility that he might die overseas, a characteristic commonplace of late medieval wills. He therefore also provided a set of instructions to Rygby and Bracebrigge should he die abroad. He required burial wherever it pleased God and that a tomb was to be laid over his grave with his image and an inscription to him. Should this occur, he instructed that an additional tomb be commissioned and laid over the grave of Agnes with her image and an inscription to her and to their children. Religious commemoration to both was again left at the discretion of his executors. His will also included various acts of charity, typical of late medieval testaments. One of these was a bequest of £100 towards repairs at Bishopsgate Gate and the adjoining walls which, according to later accounts, were carried out and with his coats of arms displayed on them. His arms were also displayed prominently within St Helen’s Bishopsgate and not limited to those that adorned his tomb. His bequest of £500 towards repairs together with an additional bequest of £40 for the specific glazing and garnishing of the chancel resulted in further displays of his heraldry, ‘a chevron ermine betwe crosses: identifying iconoclasm outside the Journal’ in Co...
John’s heraldic identity being displayed where Londoners could see them and be reminded of him and perhaps offer up a prayer for his salvation. Sir John did not specify any displays of heraldry either on the walls of the city or in St Helen’s, and it is likely this was the result of decisions by Rygby and Bracebrigge. This mirrors the discretion they had exercised when including the names of his children in the inscription on his tomb. Whether or not Sir John had discussed this with them and they acted on verbal instruction we have no way of knowing. They may well have been following a traditional and established practice that discretion given to executors automatically expected them to perpetuate the memory of the deceased. Rygby and Bracebrigge are also thought to have taken some initiatives. In 1598 John Stow noted that Crosby’s executors had repaired the library in the parish church of St Peter Cornhill where again Sir John’s coat of arms were recorded on the south wall. Elsewhere, at the parish church of All Saints, Theydon Garnon, Essex, an inscription on the outside of the west tower records a contribution made from the estate of Sir John Crosby for the building of this tower:

[Pray for the souls of] Sir John Crosbe, knyght, late alderman and grocar of London and [also], of dame Anne, and Annes, his Wyfis, of Whos gudys was gevyn l li toward the makyng of thys stepyll [several words missing] anno domini 15xx [1520].

A drawing made circa 1800, reputedly by Thomas Fisher (1772–1836), shows that the opening line had been deliberately erased and it is probable that this was because of the requirement for prayer. Today, although slightly worn, the inscription remains and is flanked by the arms of the Grocers’ Company and Sir John’s.

There is no known association between Crosby and Theydon Garnon and it is unclear why funds were provided for building the tower and who was responsible for this. In her will, proved in 1487, Sir John’s widow, Anne, made no request for any charitable work at Theydon Garnon and her only reference to Sir John was a requirement to be buried with, or near, his body in St Helen’s Bishopsgate. Their son, John Crosby, died comparatively young and his will proved in 1501 similarly makes no reference to Theydon Garnon. Of Sir John’s executors, Rygby had died in 1486 and Bracebrigge in 1499 and neither gave a legacy to Theydon Garnon.

Sir John Crosby’s tomb, charity, and heraldry were all intended to perpetuate his memory. He and his executors went to great lengths to show what a great man he had been and his wealth allowed them to do this. This public show went with the private need, reflected in his will, for memory and salvation through prayer. Sir John’s will is typical of many from the fifteenth century in requiring a series of intercessory services to aid his journey through Purgatory. Legacies were left to various religious houses, including the friaries, in London to pray for him; similar bequests were made to the hospitals. Specific individuals also received generous legacies, such as Master Goodard of the Grey Friars in Newgate who received 100 shillings to pray for his soul. Lastly he founded a forty-year obit with 400 marks. These charitable bequests, the series of arms located on his tomb, in St Helen’s Bishopsgate, elsewhere in the city, and outside it, would have made Sir John memorable. This was in part deliberate, his instruction for his tomb was specific and it was to be commissioned irrespective of where he died, and the activity of his executors, Rygby and Bracebrigge, augmented his intentions.

Yet, despite all this effort to remind us of Sir John, it is Crosby Place that has preserved his memory most effectively. The land upon which it was built was leased to Sir John in 1466 by the priory of St Helen’s Bishopsgate for ninety-nine years. He built one of the most sumptuous and magnificent mansions

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24 I am grateful to Sally Lynch, Reader in Charge, All Saints, Theydon Garnon, for her help in locating this inscription and for taking various photographs of the inscription. I am also grateful to Mrs Wendy Jonas for her comments on Sir John and the inscription at Theydon Garnon.
25 TNA PRO, PROB 11/8, f. 22r-v (Anne Rogers formerly Crosby); TNA PRO, PROB 11/12, f. 166v (John Crosby); Guildhall Library, MS 9171/7, f. 76 (Thomas Rygby); TNA PRO, PROB 11/11, ff. 299v-300v (William Bracebrigge).
27 TNA PRO, PROB 11/6, ff. 182r-88v; Clive Burgess, *Longing to be prayed for: death and commemoration in an English parish in the later middle ages*, in Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall eds, *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2000, offers a good discussion on death, commemoration and salvation at All Saints’ Bristol.
28 The most detailed account is Goss, *Crosby Hall*.

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in the city of his time. At his death, his widow Anne resided here, but by 1483 Richard, Duke of Gloucester, had taken a lease and made it his London residence. In their chronicles, Fabian, Hall and Holinshed all recorded the duke’s occupancy here and it was at Crosby Place, according to some accounts, that he was offered the crown. As one of the city’s most impressive residence, Crosby Place was used to lodge the Burgundian embassy of 1495 and, during the tenancy of Sir Bartholomew Rede (died 1507), it was used to entertain Princess Katherine of Aragon shortly before her marriage to Prince Arthur in 1501. It is, perhaps, an irony of history that one of the most significant critics of Richard III should himself come to occupy Crosby Place, Sir Thomas More being tenant circa 1516-24.

The commentary on Richard’s reign made by More in The History of King Richard III and in the chronicles ultimately influenced Shakespeare who also came to immortalise Crosby Place through his play the Tragedy of King Richard III. In act 1 scene 2 Richard, as Gloucester, undertakes his wooing of Anne Neville beseeching her to come to him at Crosby Place. Though clearly historically inaccurate, Sir John and Lady Crosby being in residence at the time, this continues the tradition associated with Richard and Crosby Place. It is again to Crosby Place in act 1 scene 4 the murderers of George, Duke of Clarence, are summoned to report on his death. Finally in act 3 scene 1, Richard bids Sir William Catesby to come to Crosby Place and report to him and the duke of Buckingham on the loyalties of William, Lord Hastings.

A contemporary playwright of Shakespeare, Thomas Heywood, went a stage further and used Crosby as one of his characters in his play Edward IV. He mistakenly identifies him as lord mayor of London for 1471 during Fauconberg’s attack, and gives Sir John some stirring lines in encouraging Londoners to defend their city:

Why it is well brothers and Citizens,
Sticke to your Citie as good men should do,
Thinke that in Richards time [Richard II] even such a rebell,
Was late taken by Walworth the L[ord] Maior of London,
Stabd dead in Smithfield:

The[n] shew your selves as it befits the time,
And let this find a hundred Walworths now,
Dare stabbe a rebell were he made of brasse,
And Prentices sticke to your officer,
For you may come to be as we are now
God and our King against an arrant rebell,
Brothers away, let us defend our walles

Though this is theatre and not history, the use of Crosby as mayor in Edward IV and of Crosby Place for scenes in Richard III again illustrates how the memory of Sir John has continued. In retaining his name, Sir John’s home served to immortalise the name Crosby and through the residency of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, came to be closely aligned with his actions during the feverish period of April to June 1483.

Crosby Place continued as a residence for the wealthy and the elite in London, including Alderman William Bond (died 1555) and Sir John Spencer (died 1609), both of whom were also commemorated by surviving monuments in St Helen’s Bishopsgate. A fire of 1672 destroyed most of the buildings although the great hall survived. By the eighteenth century the hall had become a Presbyterian Meeting House and was later used by Messrs Holmes and Hall as a warehouse. By the close of the nineteenth century Crosby Hall was a restaurant before becoming the site for the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China. As a result of expansion the Hall was threatened with demolition and an effort to save this resulted in the systematic removal of the Hall to a new site in Chelsea near to the former riverside home of one its residents, Sir Thomas More. Today the Hall, following a multi-million pound restoration building

30 Goss, Crosby Place, pp. 44-51.
32 Ibid., lines 344-49.
33 Ibid., lines 187-90.
programme by Christopher Moran, Crosby Hall forms part of a replica Tudor palace overlooking the River Thames.  

The tomb, the palace and Shakespeare, have all in their own way managed to preserve the memory of Sir John Crosby. Although some of the trappings of his memory have now gone, such as his display of arms in the library at St Peter Cornhill, a remarkable amount has survived into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Given the importance Sir John evidently placed on preserving his memory one can say, with some certainty, that he would have been utterly delighted to be remembered 530 years after he died.

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36 The Evening Standard, 6 October 2003.