

The Hatchments of All Saints Church, Hawstead, Part 1

In the December 2010 issue of the Hawstead Journal, Bill Crockford wrote an account of the restoration of the five Hawstead hatchments and of their relocation on the Chancel wall of the church. Since then, in May of last year (2012) we had an evening in the church when Clive Paine explained the history of hatchments and ours in particular. Following this, and with a little bit of reading around the subject, I have written this short account, and plan to follow on in future issues of the Journal with a bit more detail on the individual hatchments.

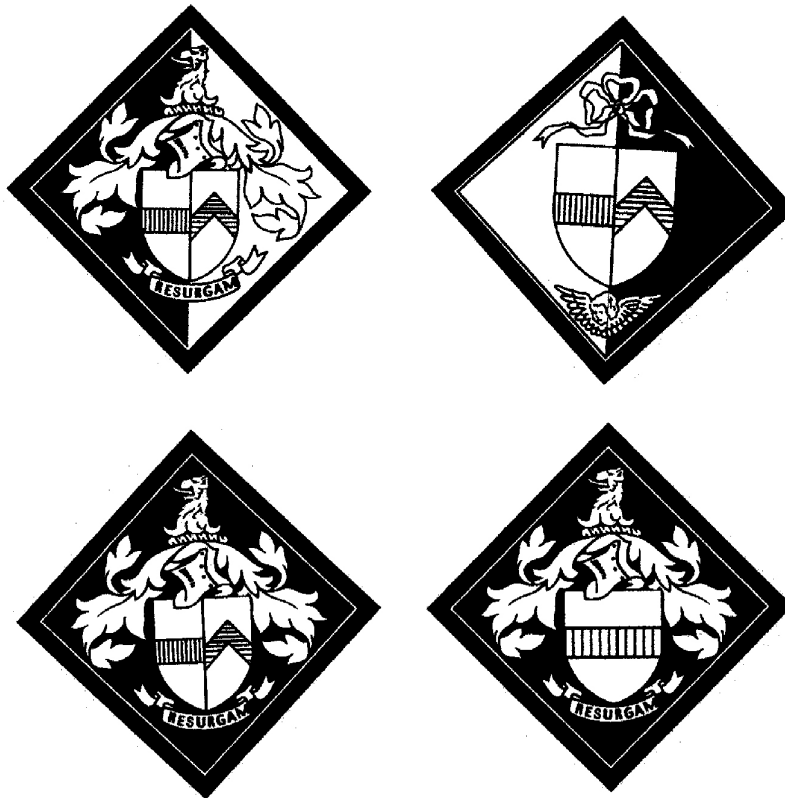
The word 'hatchment' is a corruption of 'achievement' and in heraldic language this refers to 'the complete display of armorial bearings'. Physically it is a 'mourning board', carried in a funeral procession and then either displayed in the church or taken back to the person's house for display over the main entrance for a period of mourning prior to returning to the church. Because of the heraldic association, the use of hatchments naturally tends to have been confined to the nobility and other well-off persons – ie those with family coats of arms and the associated trappings.

There are approximately 4500 hatchments in English churches. The earliest are from the early 17th century, but the use of hatchments was most popular during the late 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries – exactly the time of the five Hawstead hatchments. Whilst there are some exceptions – two churches in Shrewsbury have 20 and 21 respectively and at Stamford in Northamptonshire there's a church with 17 – it is normal for a church to have just one or two, if any. So our collection of five at All Saints Church, Hawstead is quite respectable!

From the background of the hatchment and the composition of the arms, it is possible to work out the sex and marital status of the deceased. For a single person (bachelor, spinster or widow(er)) the background is all black. Where no marriage has existed a shield (for a man) or a lozenge (for a woman) bearing the patrimonial arms is shown. In the case of a bachelor the helm and crest also appear. As the diamond-shaped lozenge is thought a somewhat plain shape, it is sometimes accompanied by a decorative bow.

Things become more complicated when a marriage has been made. When one of the couple survives, the background of the hatchment is divided vertically black and white, with black – the colour of mourning – behind the deceased's side of the arms and white behind the survivor's half. When a wife dies before her husband, her hatchment bears a shield with no helm or crest and the right-hand half of the background is black. If the husband dies first, the whole achievement is shown, with black behind the left half. If the hatchment is for a widower an all-black background is shown with shield and crest and marital coat of arms. If it is for a widow, the marital coat appears on a lozenge. These are the simplest cases and there are many hatchments whose composition taxes the onlooker and can prove hard to interpret: in the case of a man who has married several times, for instance, the arms of all his wives may appear, with separate backing for each marriage.

Here are four stylised examples representing people of differing marital status who have died:



1. Top left: a married man. That it is a man is shown by the helmet and crest. On the shield, his coat of arms is on the left and the left side background is black (=death) whilst the right half, being white, indicates that he is survived by his wife. ('Resurgam' = 'I shall rise again')
2. Top right: a married woman. There is a decorative ribbon rather than a helmet: the shield is split, as is the background, and as the right side is black we know that it is the wife who has died (and her husband is still alive).
3. Bottom left: a widowed man. The shield is split with the two coat of arms indicating that he had been married but as the background is fully black we know that his wife has not survived him.
4. Bottom right: an unmarried man. The background is completely black and the shield displays a single coat of arms.