

THE SOMERSET MONUMENT

Dominating the south wall of the nave is a large plaster monument dedicated to John Somerset, who died on the eighth of January 1663 [1664 by our calendar]. Pevsner referred to it as “*this big and naive monument*,” whilst Collinson believed it was “*a sumptuous mural monument*,” [Rack’s original adjective had been “*magnificent*.”] Amongst all of the objects in the church this is probably the one which most polarises opinion. People either love it or hate it. Whichever is your option (and I admit that I rather like it), you certainly cannot avoid it.

Surprisingly, in view of its dominance, very little is known about the gentleman who is portrayed here. Wickham describes him in the following terms, “*He was evidently a yeoman farmer rather than a cavalier. The house, rebuilt in the next century, since called Somerset Court, and which now houses a boys’ school, was then called Somerset Farm. On his death on January 1st 1664, his estate was rich enough to provide this expensive memorial of good local work, probably made in Bristol.*” Note that the date of his death is given here in the modern version and the boys’ school has long since gone, to be replaced by a residential home run by the National Autistic Society.

Collinson’s continues his description of the monument, noting that “*on the north side of the aisle (sic) is a sumptuous mural monument, whereon are the figures in stone of a gentleman and two ladies in the dress of the time of Charles I and four children, three in a kneeling attitude, the fourth a babe in swaddling clothes.*” However, now that Rack’s original survey has been published (Edmund Rack’s Survey of Somerset edited by Mark McDermott and Sue Berry, SANHS 2011) we can see that Collinson omitted a large part of what Rack actually noted. He started by stating that, “*On the north side of the north aisle is a magnificent mural monument of stone, 15ft by 12 (4.572m by 3.6576m), consisting of three parts. Two black detached twisted columns, the capitals a mixture of the Ionic and Corinthian orders, support an arched divided pediment and entablature, on the top of which are the arms.*” As the monument is now on the wall at the south side of the church, this suggests that Rack made a mistake, possibly transcribing his own notes incorrectly, which was then copied by Collinson. Looking at the north wall of the north aisle it is immediately apparent that no monument of this size could possibly be fitted there without major structural changes to the windows. Curiously, Glynne does not mention the monument at all. As it seems unlikely that any monument of this size would have escaped his attention, it is possible that it was being restored at that time. There is a record in Kelly’s Directory for 1872

which states that (the church), “*was thoroughly restored about 15 years ago.*” As Glynne’s report on South Brent Church is dated 21 May 1855, that possibly could mean that it had been removed in preparation for some restoration. An alternative explanation could be that he was not a great fan of the monument and chose to ignore it.

In view of the huge difference in the style of clothing worn by the two ladies, it is surprising that Collinson/Rack should assign both to the period of Charles I. Somerset himself died shortly after the Restoration of 1660, when a similar style to that of Charles I was fashionable once more, but it seems likely that both his wives pre-deceased him (a matter that will be discussed in more detail later). This would mean their dress reflects the styles popular in either the time of Charles I, or of the Commonwealth and, in this case, the flamboyance of the one to the right does seem to fit with the court styles of Charles I, whilst the sombre fashion of the one on the left appears to have much more to do with the Commonwealth period. In general, although it is popularly supposed that the Roundheads and Cavaliers had little in common with regard to fashion, as to almost everything else, dress historians have recently proposed that social status had as much to do with style as it had with religious belief. Royalists did tend to belong to the Church of England and emulated flamboyant French court fashion. Parliamentarians did tend to favour emergent Protestant faiths and dress in austere styles derived from the Flemish. Yet there was a considerable overlap between the two, both in terms of their religious beliefs and of their apparel. This was particularly true amongst the aristocrats and gentry, so one may expect that those with differing persuasions may well dress as the political fashion dictates. Lower down the social scale, where there was less wealth there was, consequently, less choice and more practicality in the choice of dress.

Above the central figure of John Somerset and to his right is a suit of armour, with pikes and guns, and, to the left, a helmet behind which are some more pikes and from which cascades a ribbon, knotted at the top but free flowing below. Below, at bottom right, drums are accompanied by pikes, guns and knotted ribbons, whilst to the left is a banner. These make it obvious that John Somerset wished to be seen as a military figure and that he supported the Royalist cause, though that may well have been tried and tested by some travails related below. He is sometimes referred to as Captain Somerset, due to a commission he was given by Windham, “*to be a capteyn of a troop of horse under my Command [as] his Colonell, for suppressing of plundering & idle souldiers in ye country & for the assistance of my garrison and noe otherwise. And yt he never had free quarters for any man, nether reed any pay for himself or his souldiers, yt he always paid his contributions & yt he delivd his Comission to me wt a list of his troope in Dec last, & I thereon discharged him of his command long before he was commanded to be a Capt under lieut Colo Tynte.*”

This quotation is taken from some papers which are discussed in more detail below, including the episode concerning lieut. Colo Tynte, and makes it clear that this was a very limited commission. However, there was also an attempt to suggest that there was “*a Commission found in a chest of John Somerset [from] Waller to authorize him to raise a troope of Drag[oons and a] halfe*” As Sir William Waller was a prominent Parliamentary leader, this was potentially serious stuff. Somerset’s loyalty to the Royalist cause at this time, however, does not seem to have been affected by this accusation, though other matters did cause him considerable difficulties.

John Somerset’s pose, apparently gazing slightly upwards, rather than looking directly at the viewer, gives him an apparently rather austere, or even pompous, look. This does not seem to tally with the description included in the inscription below him on the monument (see next page), though it could have been intended to impress with a military demeanour. On the other hand, it may also mean that a false impression is given due to the fact that the monument has been raised somewhat. Try looking at the monument from the other side of the church, or from a raised position, and it does seem to offer a rather more benign aspect to his face.

Above Somerset is a coat of arms, described in some detail by Collinson/Rack, though Collinson did modify some of the description given by Rack. The final version became, “*Or, on a bend vert, three mullets of the first; impaling, argent, a lion rampant guardant. Crest, a dove proper.*” Rack’s original version had read, “*An*

Escutcheon parted & pale, 3 Mullets Or on a Dexter bend Sable in a field Or & Sinister side a Lyon Rampant Guardant on a field argent, Crest A dove Argent with a Ring & Bill Gules,” Rack also described the top of the cornice, where, “stand two small cherubs, the one holding a Lachrymal, the other a skull with his left arm resting on a spade.”

On either side of Somerset are his wives, each surmounted by a cherub and having a scallop shell below. Pevsner referred to them as “*sweet figures..., the younger one with a large and becoming hat.*” That hat is rather interesting. Rack suggested it resembled, “*those worn in the days of Oliver Cromwell.*” Collinson originally crossed out that reference to Oliver Cromwell and modified it to say, “*worn in those days,*” before deleting the passage entirely. We tend to think of the Commonwealth period as being one of austere fashion and it is certainly true that similar hats were in fashion well before then and continued in use after the Restoration. The laced coif under it and the whisk, tied with a red bow, are features which appeared from the reign of Charles I through into the reign of Charles II.

When seeking information about the dress of the period, I perused “*Handbook of English Costume in the 17th Century,*” by C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington (Faber & Faber 1963), where I was delighted to find that one of the examples used to describe the fashion of the period was this model of the first wife of John Somerset. What was frustrating initially, was that she was quoted as an example of the fashion in 1663. That was the year of John Somerset’s death, not hers, and I assume that this wife was adorned in the fashion she wore whilst she was still alive, which certainly seems to be the case with his second wife, who was married to him during the Commonwealth period and whose clothes are much more sombre, reflecting the fashion of that time. However, it may not be quite so surprising, given the fact that Charles II was now on the throne and the Cavalier style back in fashion.

This first wife obviously died quite young; she retains a very youthful countenance, though she was old enough to have had four children. Her name may well have been Joan, or Joane, for, in the papers at the Somerset Heritage Centre, referenced earlier and discussed in more detail below, is a transcript of letters from John Somerset. These were sent when he was imprisoned in Bristol and referenced his, “*loving wife Joane.*” He and his fellow prisoner, Thomas Gilling, sent their love “*unto you both wt or [with our] family and servants and the rest of our good friends.*”

In the panel below the first wife are the children of that marriage, as mentioned in that letter. There is an older son, followed by an infant death (Orbach’s revision of Pevsner records this as “*a swaddled infant with skull.*”) and, finally, two younger daughters. All of them appear to be in order of their age, from the tallest to the shortest, except for the baby, who has that skull on the cushion beneath his head. The eldest son kneels at the altar, as do the daughters, but the second child appears to have died either at birth, or very shortly after. Some people have suggested that this baby demonstrates that its mother died in childbirth, but, as this almost certainly is the second of four children, that is not a safe inference.

Although the infant has a plaster skull resting on its pillow, all of the other children have skulls painted above their heads, which is curious. There is a skull set above the mother, as well as the baby, and the second wife also has a skull above her head. All these presume that both wives and the baby pre-deceased John Somerset and, in fact, the inscription beneath John Somerset does witness this:

*In Memory of John Somersett Gent. who
died the 8th day of January 1663
His county gave him name, and ‘s name exprest
In what his ancestors and ‘s selfe were blest:
hence his first years the best improvement knew,
which happily what’s great and good pursue.
nor did his thinking age shame his first years,
he knew noe mean delight, nor sordid cares;
in short, his hopeful ofspring orderd hence*

*to heaven in their baptismal innocence;
the needy here on earth he chose to be
his care, evn his adopted Progenie.
such were his thoughts, and thus his actions strove,
while he remaind below, to live above;
and when th' Almighty found him fit for bliss,
he calld him to his proper happiness.*

The reference to “*his hopeful offspring*,” who were “*ordered hence / To heaven in their baptismal innocence*,” seems to offer conclusive evidence of their youthful demise (though I am uncertain whether the oldest boy could rightly be said to be in his “*baptismal innocence*.”) Additional proof comes from the reference to the needy as “*his adopted progenie*,”

So why do these children not have plaster skulls as well? It is possible, though unlikely, that they did have them originally but that they broke off and, instead of them being replaced, a cheaper option was adopted, and they were painted in. However, it seems strange that all three, and only these three, should have suffered such a fate. Or it could be that, at the time this memorial was initially being developed, they were still alive, and that they died when it was nearing completion, but after that particular panel was finished. If so, the painted skulls may be a way of recording this without having recourse to a reworking of the entire panel. This would imply that the children outlived their mother and their step-mother, but that all three died around the same time. This was presumably prior to the death of their father, however, as the inscription categorically states that he adopted the needy as his progeny after their death. Did they die from an epidemic? Perhaps they were victims of the plague. It was only a year after the death of John Somerset that the Great Plague of 1664 ravaged through London and elsewhere in the country. Unfortunately, it is not possible to check the details, as the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials prior to 1678/9 have all been lost and so it is not possible to check when they were baptised or buried. What is certain is that the family did not live on in the village.

John Somerset’s second wife is shown on his left (our right). She looks rather older than his first wife and the colours of her clothes are rather more sombre. She wears a black chaperone and a dark orange neckerchief over a black dress with full sleeves. It is tempting to suggest that this is a typical costume from the Commonwealth period, but, as we have already mentioned, any type of apparel could be worn both before and after that time. Nevertheless, assuming she died before her step-children, who died before their father, who died in 1663/4, it is probable that she was dressed for that period.

Below her is another panel, or “*relief*” as Pevsner called it, in which, he concluded, “*he [John Somerset] is seen rising in his shroud from his tomb, just like George Rodney at Rodney Stoke in the monument of 1651, done probably by the same workmen (cf, As an even closer parallel Sir Edward Rodney d 1657). Twisted columns between the three niches (cf. Sir Thomas Bridges d. 1661, Keynsham), and open segmental pediment at top.*” Rack noted the figure as “*a lady [who] sits in a suppliant posture, clothed in white drapery, with a skull and cross bones before her.*” Unfortunately, he then goes on to say, “*above is a cherub blowing a trumpet, from which issues a label on which is written, ‘For the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised.’*” Unless this message has changed over the years, he also got that wrong, for it clearly states, “*Ego sum resurectio et vita*” (I am the resurrection and the life).

Although the parallel with George Rodney, as mentioned by Pevsner, is notable, yet, in this case, there seems to be a good argument that it is not John Somerset himself who is rising from the dead but his second wife. It is true that the picture is ambiguous, but it strikes me as being a woman rather than a man. Taking the panel below his first wife, it is fairly obvious that it represents the family she and John shared. There appears to be no family deriving from his second marriage, but it would seem reasonable to suppose that the panel below her represents something about their relationship. So, his first wife is remembered for the family she mothered and the second is remembered for her virtue, perhaps. That would explain her being resurrected from the dead on the day of judgement. Of course, if that is so it would seem likely that John Somerset conceived the major part of the memorial whilst he was still alive, for he would be the most likely person to assign such attributes. That is something which will be explored further below.

So far there has been little discussion about John Somerset himself. Who was he? As mentioned earlier, little is known about his life, except, that is, for a particular incident recorded in a transcript owned by the Somerset

Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS). Under the title “*A By-Path of the Civil War*,” a series of documents were edited by Henry Symonds and partially published in the Proceedings of SANHS for 1919, whilst the original documents can be found amongst the Somerset Heritage Trust records as DD/SAS PR450 and are an early nineteenth century copy of some lost originals. Originally found at Sand Hall in Wedmore, they were documents compiled to answer a charge brought by a Civil War Royalist officer, Lt. Col. Ascough, and others, against John Somerset and another resident of South Brent named Thomas Gilling.

It was the spring of 1645 and the Civil War had been raging for three years. Already Clarendon, in his “*History of the Great Rebellion*,” had stated that, “*the country being so disaffected...only force could bring in any supply or relief*.” Sir William Waller, over a year later, commented upon, “*the desolation and utter ruin which falls upon all sorts of people when armies come*.” [‘*The Civil War in Bath and North Somerset*,’ by John Wroughton]. Things were not going well for the Royalist cause in the country as a whole and the West was one of their last strongholds. Only Taunton, which was being besieged, was not in their possession. For the Parliamentarians, however, Waller was arguing that. “*the people being universally disposed to receive us*,” it was only necessary to have a powerful enough force with him to reassure the people he meant to stay and all would rise in Parliament’s favour [ibid].

Bristol was under the control of Ralph, Lord Hopton and Bridgewater (it still often had its middle ‘e’ then) was held by Col. Edmund Windham (or Wyndham). Around the 10th or 12th of March a band of twenty or so soldiers arrived in the South Brent area and quartered themselves in the surrounding villages. Presumably they were preparing the way for the main body of sixty horsemen, who arrived on the twenty-fourth of that month. This band was from a cavalry regiment organised by a Lt. Col. Tynte, who probably came from Chelvey. In view of Clarendon’s comments, it may not come as a surprise to reveal that they resorted to plundering the neighbourhood. Eventually, the locals had had enough and attempted to forcibly resist the soldiers. Somerset and Gilling were arrested and accused of leading this riot and the Civil War papers specify the case for their defence.

Thomas Gilling appears to be in trouble even though, as vouched by someone named Thomas Moore, he “*labored to pacifye*” the outraged citizens. It was only when “*his neighbours came and tould him that his House was like to bee set on fire*,” that he “*went home to his owne house & came noe more among them*.” Unfortunately, it was then that a Lieutenant Browne “*being dangerously hurt by ye common people...did desire of Tho Gilling that he might be pected in his house or in the back side of his house from the violence of the mutinous & tumultuous people. Gilling wanted nothing to do with him and told him, “be gonn, be gonn,” even though Browne claimed he was “shott through the theie [thigh] wt one musket shott and seven smaller shott whereof he yet languisheth*.”

Four charges were brought against John Somerset:

1. That he created the disturbances in an attempt to avoid Lord Hopton’s orders to enlist him into Col. Tynte’s regiment.
2. That he was kinsman to Philip Creech, who was accused of offering drunken challenges to some of the soldiers and leading the insurrection.
3. That the local parishioners, of both Brent and Burnham, not wishing to suffer from his misdeeds, had certified that he alone instigated the riot, and encouraged a man named Sheppard to lead it
4. That he did nothing to stop his servant from violently assaulting a soldier at the Lady Day Fair in Axbridge.

Somerset wrote to Lord Hopton complaining of his imprisonment, then “*above a month*,” and responding to the charges. Against the first charge he stated that he “*was ignorant that Leiftent Ayscough had any order from your Lordship to bring him or his troope into Collonell Tynyt’s Regiment*,” Annexed to this document was a “*Certificate of the Governor of Bridgewater*,” which noted that “*Leuit. Col. Ascough was qrtered in his house for 14 days & that Capt. Somsett was often in his Company during that tyme & might have apprehended him for that often before the rysinge*.”

In answer to the second charge he “*hopes your Lship will not punish him for the words or actions of Creech*,” and implies there was little truth in a sworn statement Creech supplied, wherein a Richard Swayne swore Creech was with him in East Brent and “*not in the tumult*.” Creech himself, in another document, petitioned Lord Hopton to release him, saying he was held, “*upon a surmise that he was active in the late opposing of*

certain plundering souldiers,” but “hath by sufficient testimony upon oath (the testimony of Richard Swayne presumably) ...fully cleared himself, he beinge but a stranger in these pts.”

John Somerset points out that, though the third charge alludes to local parishioners, they are “*inhabitants of townes where no one man is named.*” In contrast, he informs Hopton, he has a Certificate which does have many names attached to it, verifying that he took no part in the tumult. In fact, he had four such Certificates. Fifty six people from South Brent, twenty seven from Berrow, fourteen from Burnham and twelve from East Brent signed similar documents stating, “*These are to certifie by us the Inhabitants of....whose names are hereunder written That we never knew that John Somersett nor Thomas Gillinge of South Brent had any hand in raysinge the County in Armes against his Maties souldiers, but have heard that John Somersett and all his servants remained in his own house it being a mile from the tumult, and have likewise heard that Thomas Gillinge did the uttermost of his endeavour for the appeasing of the tumult after it was raysed, And we do verily believe that the abuses and plunderings wch were outrageously committed by Lieutenant Col. Aschen his souldiers was the onely cause of raysinge the Country.*”

Finally, the fourth charge was between “*Lord Hawleys*” soldier and someone named Rogers. This did not take place “*in the petnrs [petitioners] presence*” and Rogers “*is noe servant to your petnr nor ever was, but a mere stranger.*” A deposition, signed by Anthony Isgar and endorsed by Richard Swaine and Thomas Moore, claimed that John Somerset had been drinking, with Anthony Isgar and others, at the Kingshead in Axbridge (now King John’s Hunting Lodge), on a day when the fair was in the town, It was the soldier, Williams, who drew his “*sword or hanger,*” when an “*upprore*” ensued after they had quarrelled. Rogers only had a “*Staffe,*” but managed to “*brake ye sd hanger.*” Williams, who had been mounted, jumped off his horse and, using his broken hanger, “*cut the sd Rogers very dangerously over the Head.*”

Nowhere does it suggest a reason why the fight commenced and one does wonder why, if his testimony concerning Philip Creech is considered so unreliable, Richard Swaine (or Swayne) was asked to endorse this deposition. However, Richard Swayne’s earlier testimony is particularly interesting because of his comments regarding the location of John Somerset’s home. He states, “*he with Phillip Creech [was] goeing from Capt Somsett his house situate at Lowham (?) wthin the pish [parish] of South Brent.*” Swayne was likely to have been a native of South Brent, as he mentions his father’s house being there. His reference to Phillip Creech departing from, and later returning to, John Somerset’s house, is the only specific identification of where Somerset actually lived. The name ‘Lowham’ has a question mark after it, which implies that the scribe who copied the original document had difficulty deciding what that document actually said, probably because there was considerable wear and tear on the original. It is likely that he tried to copy what he saw quite literally. So, it may not have been ‘Lowham’ in the original, but some variation.

Checking through the Tithe Map there was no Lowham mentioned anywhere in Brent Knoll, but there are a number of fields which do have the word ‘Ham’ in them. ‘Coxham,’ for instance, and ‘The Late Hams,’ ‘The Ham three acres,’ ‘Barb Ham,’ ‘Hill Hams’ and ‘Ham five acres.’ Perversely, there do not appear to be any names containing the word ‘Ham’ in any of the fields in the area known, then and now, as Ham. Of the hams mentioned above, ‘Coxham’ is situated at a junction, just past the hamlet of Vole, where the road divides to go to Rooksbridge and to Mark; ‘The Late Hams’ is a small field off the road to Lymphsham; ‘Barb Ham’ and ‘Hill Hams’ are both immediately on the eastern side of what is now the A38 and they, together with ‘The Ham three Acres’ and ‘The Ham,’ all belong to the estate of George Barons Northcote, who happened to be the owner of Somerset Mansion (as it is named in the Tithe Map of 1842). He was the son-in-law of Gabriel Stone of Wedmore, who won the Lottery and bought Somerset Farm, which he rebuilt as Somerset Court. In other words, it is quite probable that the ‘Lowham’ identified could well be part of the area around Somerset Court, rather than in modern Ham.

This assumption is strengthened by a reference to Phillip Creech and John Swayne going from Somerset’s house in Lowham along the causeway leading to East Brent whilst there was an insurrection in South Brent. This could either be what is now the A38 or Burton Row, but, if they are attempting to avoid the insurrection then the A38, which avoids most of South Brent, would be rather more likely. There is a reference to John Somerset living a mile from the tumult, though no specific location is mentioned. Thomas Moore, of South

Brent, is recorded as witnessing that, "*Troops under Capt. Pauling...had been at Lympsham & Berrowe plundering of Horses & Mares & other things, and thereupon there was greate difference fighteing & violence between ye sd Inhabitants of Lympsham and some of Mark,*" which is presumably the insurrection in South Brent and Somerset Court is one of the few places which could be said to be a mile from any spot inside South Brent where the fighting took place.

During the previous century Abbot Beere had commissioned a Terrier of Glastonbury Abbey estates (Somerset Record Office T/PH/Wat 1(9)). This was in 1515-16 and it included some land for "*Willms Somsett,*" who held land from Lord Daubenny, Archdeacon of Wells, comprising two acres at "*Welefold [or Whelefold] of Manor of Brent.*" An interesting name, which possibly implies a fold, as in a pen (sheep-fold), where wheels are kept. This entry certainly suggests that the Somerset family held land in South Brent prior to the Reformation. In fact, John's father was also a John, but his grandfather was a William, so it is a family name. That William married Maude, daughter of Thomas Brent of Huntspill, whose family held extensive estates in South Brent from the Abbots of Glastonbury, so that may be another reason why the family acquired a fairly sizeable estate in the village.

In July 1893 the Cornhill Magazine published some texts and mottoes, "*which are to be found inscribed on old mansions and farm-houses.*" They specifically referred to one which was at Somerset Court, South Brent. This was picked up by the Shrewsbury chronicle in September 1906, where it was also stated that the following texts were found on a beam in that house,

*"I wrong not the poor, I fear not the rich,
I have not tooe littel, nor I have not tooe much,
I was set up right and even."*

And on the other side of the beam was:

*"Be you merry and be you wise
And doe you not noe man despise."*

Somehow this does seem to be written by the same person, or at least, the same family, that wrote the inscription on the memorial in the church.

Just before discussing another major aspect of the memorial (who had it built) there are some further comments relating to the period of Somerset and Gilling's imprisonment which tell us a little more about John Somerset and his family. One of the most important documents was from the Governor of Bridgwater, William Morgan. He appears to have been a good friend of both Somerset and Gilling, for, not only does he offer valuable evidence, but he also sets out a some useful advice: "*...if you expect your freedom by a Council of Warr you must pve (prove) all or most of the greatest abuses dome by the souldier who caused the mutiny, as the breaking of houses, takin away by force the goods therein, the stealing of horses, then threatening to burn houses and Villages, then murder and threats to kill women and children, which I believe you have not proved. You are also to make exhibits of your Certificatts that they may be authenticke in the Courte.*"

This sound advice is presumably the reason why all these documents were gathered together, with sworn statements and accusations from as many as possible of the wounded parties. It was the result of a desperate appeal, sent via their wives. "*Wee have emboldened ourselves to write unto you to desire you to assist us in extremetie having noe other friend to rely on,*" they said. Largely, this was due to the Commission from Waller mentioned earlier, "*whereupon they ass wt held their hands.*"

Somerset and Gilling wrote, "*To our loving wives, Joane Somsett & Joane Gillinge, Southbrent.*" Being yeomen farmers, they were naturally concerned about the state of their farms, but also believed they should help themselves by placing gifts in the right places. "*I would have my wife, Joan Somsett, p'sent the partridges that are lefte to the Governor of Bruidgwater being the prince is there. I have likewise sent a letter to the Governor. I would have Willi Venn to handle my sheepe and send me word how they are. I would likewise have you goe on with the ploughing and husbandrie according to the time of the yeare; pray send me word what Mares I have left. If you can pvail (prevail) at Bridgwater send us word as soone as may be; you must likewise pay the messenger Rich Verbie a man wch we think very fit to carry a letter for you at any time; wee*

would likewise have you be merry and comfort yourselves w^t w^ht is left (a number of documents list the items plundered, including £100 lost by John Somerset and £40 by Thomas Gilling. South Brent claimed £255 in total, Berrow £49. 10. 0, Burnham £86. 13. 4. And Lymphsham £200) & *drinke a cup of sacke as we doe here. Trusting in God, who wee make noe doubt but will deliver us shortly, so w^t or loves remembered unto you both w^t or family & servants & the rest of our good friends, in haste wee rest & remaine yr loving Husbands to the end.*”

Wickham summarises the likely outcome of all this when he concludes, “*It seems probable that they were released at Hopton’s order, and probable too that they received no compensation. Their sufferings at the hands of the Royalists won them no sympathy with the other side, for in 1652 poor John Somerset had his estate seized on the charge of having raised men and money for the King and is found begging for relief again...The letters from which I have quoted...lift the veil of three centuries from the character of the real man. His friend and fellow prisoner, Thomas Gilling, who died in 1658, is commemorated by a humbler slab which stands much worn against the south wall of the vestry. One thing more we know of him; the second bell in the tower bears the inscription “John Somerset, gentleman 1635,” words which are eloquent of his pride, his generosity and his affection for the church, which was also the pride of his village, as all those around are of theirs.*”

That final sentence may well be true, although his date of birth is not known, nor is the date of the death of his father, who was also named John, so we cannot be certain which of the two men actually donated the bell.

One of the mysteries concerning the Somerset memorial is who was responsible for having it made. A booklet in the church suggests that his first wife “*died soon after the birth of the baby shown in swaddling clothes – possibly in child birth – and that John then married the lady on his left, who was the “loving wife Joanne” of the letter, here shown in widow’s weeds, and who survived him and was responsible for the extravagant memorial.*” Admittedly, it then goes on to say, “*this is, of course, pure conjecture, as no other record of the two ladies exists.*” This is unlikely to be correct, however, not just because it seems reasonable to conjecture that all four children are from the first wife, but also from the fact that the second wife also has a skull placed above her on the memorial, indicating that she almost certainly pre-deceased John Somerset. So, if it was not his second wife, who was it?

As we have seen it is highly likely that all his children died, either just before, or at the same time as, John Somerset, which is why those who did survive for some years have skulls painted above their heads, rather than having plaster skulls like their mother, step-mother and baby sibling. The epitaph below him suggests that their deaths occurred before their father’s death, as it states, “*his hopefull offspring ordered hence to Heaven, in their Baptismal innocence.*” Which hints that the majority of the memorial may well have been prepared some time prior to his death, when the children were still surviving, and kept in storage, consequently requiring the insertion of the painted skulls when it was finally erected. That would also suggest that the epitaph was created and inserted later than the rest of the memorial.

Obviously, Somerset’s estate must have been of a considerable size to be able to afford such a magnificent memorial. Which could mean that whoever inherited the estate may have initiated and financed the memorial, but who that was is not quite as easy to assess as may be thought, as for many years after his death the estate was the subject of considerable litigation, mainly in the courts in London.

At the time of the problems associated with the Civil War it was recorded that John Somerset “*was kinsman to Philip Creech,*” i.e. that Philip Creech had some reasonably close family relationship with John Somerset. Henry Creech, who later claimed to be a cousin of John Somerset and to be his heir, which implies he was his closest living relative, was presumably another member of the same Creech family, though it is not certain whether Henry was the son of Philip. As the closest relative, Henry would be the obvious person to acquire the estate, but things were not quite that simple. In the epitaph below John Somerset’s effigy, after the reference to his children being “*ordered hence,*” it continues, “*the needy here on Earth he chose to be his care, ev’n his adopted progeny.*” Which suggests that he set up some charitable causes and it is these causes which originated the problems with the estate. One, Robert Maundrell, claimed that he was the legal beneficiary of the estate as the administrator of the charity or charities. Whether they were initially set up by John Somerset,

or by Robert Maundrell, to carry out John Somerset's wishes, is not certain. What is known is that Maundrell introduced legal proceedings in London to establish his claim. Initially, things seemed to go in Creech's favour, but then swung in Maundrell's favour, as demonstrated in the counter proceedings Henry Creech (the petitioner) eventually managed to bring against Maundrell (the plaintiff):

“That the 9th of November 1678 a decree was pronounced into the Court of Chancery against your Petitioner to bar him of his right as he had to the estate of John Somerset deceased to whom your petitioner is heir at law. That the said decree is grounded on a non suit in Ejectment, where your petitioner, nor none for him, appeared nor was heard, and setteth up a Deed that at a trial diverted in the cause, and hearing evidence on both sides have been found revoked and void and never any verdict to support it. All which matters appears by the proofs in the said cause and that the estate is your petitioners and the plaintiffs have not any right thereto.

Your petitioner therefore humbly prayeth that (all his proceedings before your Lordship last sessions being discharged by the prorogation) your Lordships would be pleased to appoint a short day for the said Maundrell and others to answer the premises and to reverse the said decree.”

“That your petitioner as cousin and heir to John Somerset late of South Brent in the county of Somerset gent., deceased without issue, was possessed by a manor and several parcels of lands and tenements in the said County of Somerset that were the estate of the said John Somerset. That one Robert Maundrell and others pretended the said John Somerset had made several conveyances and thereby settled all his estate on him and others for a Charity, got into possession of the other part of the said estate and had a trial with your petitioner on such their pretended title and upon full evidence on both sides by a jury of gentlemen of the same county a verdict passed for your petitioner by which it appeared the said Maundrell and others had no title.”

By now things seemed to be going Creech's way, but Maundrell had some trick up his sleeve:

“But the Trustees being rich brought several actions at law and bills in Chancery against your petitioner and after they had ruined him they obtained an Order in Chancery for an Ejectment brought by your petitioner to be tried at the Common Pleas Bar, knowing your petitioner was not able to bring his witnesses up out of Somersetshire, and brought the same to trial by Proviso, where, no one appearing for your petitioner, he became non suit. On which non suit the 9th day of November 1678 the Comp^{ter} got a Decree against your petitioner on no other equity but the said non suit. On which trial your petitioner, nor none for him, ever appeared.”

“Now for that the said non suit and decree are ex parte and tend to the disinheritance of your petitioner who hath a verdict on hearing of evidence on both sides against the petitioner pretences and for that the petitioner being conscious to themselves of the weakness of their pretences have not for twelve years last past effected any charity, but converted the profits to their own respective uses, therefore, and for several other errors and imperfections in the said proceedings and decree your petitioner doth humbly appeal from the said decree to the grave judgement of your Lordships.

And humbly pray your Lordships would be pleased to appoint all parties to attend and to hear the said cause in this honourable House and to reverse the said decree and proceedings thereupon.”

Upon reading the Petition of Henry Creech shewing *“That he hath a Petition of Appeal depending in this House, to which Robert Maundrell and others, Defendants, were, by Order of the 27th of June last, to put in an answer or answer thereunto on the 11th July following, which they have not done yet; and praying an Order for their so doing. It is thereupon Ordered, by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament assembled, that the said Robert Maundrell and others, Defendants, may have a Copy or Copies of the said Appeal; and be, and they are hereby, required to put in their answer or respective Answers thereunto, in Writing, on Monday the Five and Twentieth Day of this Instant November, at Ten of the Clock in the Forenoon; whereof the said Henry Creech is to cause timely Notice to be given to the said Robert Maundrell and the others, Defendants, to the End they answer accordingly.”*

It is apparent that Maundrell and the others, who were presumably so-called trustees of the charity with him, did not respond to this challenge and so the estate did return to Henry Creech, though some part of it must have been retained as a charity because, around 1690 another document (in the South West Heritage records) has the title, *“An account of all and singular the Receipts of the Rents Issues and profits of the estate heretofore of John Somersett of South Brent in the County of Som'sett Gen., dec'ed and now settled in Trustees for*

Charitable uses.” It commences its accounts on the “5th Day of November Ano Dm 1688,” and continues through to the “20th Day of September 1690.” It was particularly concerned with the “Awards of Rents left uncollected by Mr. [Thomas] Durston and his Executors which fell due and payable the Twenty Ninth Day of September 1687.” Whether Thomas Durston carried on the trustee role formerly held by Maundrell, or whether this was a new Charity formed after Creech had won his lawsuit, is not explained. Durston had apparently just died and, though he had collected £209..17s..1½d. in his lifetime, during the period named another £278..15s..10d. was collected, of which £93..16s. was to be disbursed amongst various individuals and some money for the poor of a number of villages. South Brent, East Brent, Catcott and Berrow each received £1, whilst Cossington received £2..10s. and Edington, Shapwick, Burnham and St. John’s in Glastonbury each received £5. Those villages may well have been places where John Somerset had properties, though it is not initially obvious why the division was such as it was.

Returning to the problem concerning who commissioned the memorial to John Somerset, we have so far eliminated his two wives and his children. Henry Creech appears to have been ruined by Robert Maundrell, so seems unlikely to have done so, and Robert Maundrell does not appear to be the sort of person who would erect such a monument. Was it done by friends or the villagers of South Brent? This seems unlikely as the children would surely have been shown with formal skulls if the finance to build the monument had been raised after the death of John Somerset. Which seems to leave only one other option. Surely it must have been John Somerset himself who commissioned it before he died. That would explain the painted skulls over his children and would suggest that he set up the charities prior to his death; “*The needy here on earth he chose to be/His care, even his adopted progenie.*”

Notably, there are some other plaster monuments in the area around this part of Somerset. In Rodney Stoke there is a memorial to Sir. Edward and Lady Rodney which could well have been by the same hand as the John Somerset memorial and that of their son, George Rodney, has a pose which, though much larger, is almost identical in form to that of the second wife of John Somerset, including an angel playing a trumpet call above, though not with the “I am the resurrection and the life” message. In St. John the Baptist church in Axbridge a memorial to Anne Prowse has a very similar style overall. It is known that the wonderful plaster ceiling, introduced, after lightening destroyed the more ancient roof, in 1636 was by George Drayton and it could well be that he is the sculptor of all these memorials as well.

One final point about the John Somerset memorial. In 1963 Clyde Lewis from Burnham re-coloured the memorial after what is stated to be a careful analysis of remaining colours and effected some repairs to the plasterwork. Pictures before and after do suggest that he did a very competent job.