

# The confraternity seals of Burton Lazars Hospital and a newly discovered matrix from Robertsbridge, Sussex<sup>1</sup>

by *David Marcombe*

In the early 1990s a late medieval ecclesiastical seal matrix was discovered by a metal detectorist at Robertsbridge, Sussex. It turned out to be a seal of the confraternity of Burton Lazars Hospital, Leicestershire. The article assesses the find in the context of other confraternity seals known for this institution and concludes that it is untypical of previously identified examples and may well be a prototype.

In the early 1990s Linda McKay was swinging her metal detector in a paddock behind her farmhouse at Robertsbridge, Sussex, when she made an unexpected discovery. The area she was prospecting had once been an orchard and the line of a vanished trackway, leading to Robertsbridge Abbey, snaked its way around the edge. Here, close to a hedge, she unearthed a medieval bronze seal matrix of some size and of impressive, ecclesiastical design (illus. 1).<sup>2</sup> At first it was thought that the find might have been connected with the neighbouring monastery, a Cistercian house founded in the twelfth century as a daughter of Boxley, Kent, and with that theory in mind Mrs McKay passed on the matrix to a more experienced detectorist who sent it for identification to Christopher Whittick, senior archivist with East Sussex County Council.

Because of the poor condition of the object, Mr Whittick had a 'great struggle' to decipher the lettering, but by October 1995 he had concluded that it had nothing to do with Robertsbridge Abbey and was, in fact, a confraternity seal of Burton Lazars Hospital, Leicestershire.<sup>3</sup> This information was duly conveyed to the finder and also to the Leicestershire Record Office who, in turn, informed Jewry Wall Museum. From there the word spread to Jenny Allsop, a member of the Burton Lazars Research Group, who provided me with copies of all relevant correspondence to date. The Research Group, based at the University of Nottingham Centre for

1 I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Burton Lazars Research Group in providing much of the 'raw material' for this paper, especially Judy Smithers and Terry Bourne whose work on seals and letters of confraternity has been invaluable. Linda McKay not only found the seal but has also been extremely helpful and accommodating thereafter.

2 TQ 7556 2153

3 Letter of Christopher Whittick to Carl Harrison, 20 October 1995.



1. Linda McKay at the find spot, Robertsbridge (David Marcombe)

Local History, had been involved in research on Burton Lazars and the order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem in England since 1983, so this most recent discovery in far-off Sussex was an exciting development. By following up the contact numbers in the documentation, I was able to meet Mrs McKay, visit the find spot and negotiate the purchase of the matrix.

Burton Lazars, near Melton Mowbray, was the principal English house of the international crusading order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem and was founded by Roger de Mowbray, probably in the 1150s.<sup>4</sup> Though the order concerned itself with leprosy in the Holy Land its involvement with the disease in England was much more limited. The main function of Burton Lazars was not so much as a hospital, in the modern sense of the word, but as a preceptory responsible for the management of estates in England and Scotland and the return of a measure of its income to support the activities of the order in the Latin kingdom. However, after the fall of Acre in 1291, these priorities changed and the English branch of the order set out on a path which was to lead to its independence from foreign control, a goal it eventually achieved through papal decrees issued in 1439 and 1479.<sup>5</sup> As enthusiasm for crusading waned, so the order turned its commitment to liturgy and especially prayers for the dead, and in this context its confraternity assumed considerable prominence. As people became more and more preoccupied with purgatory in the late Middle Ages, the spiritual privileges of the order were redirected to the benefit of its immediate supporters. By joining such a fellowship, *confrères* could enjoy prayers for their souls without going to the expense of

4 For the history of the order in England, see D. Marcombe, *Leper Knights. The Order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem in England, c.1150-1544* (Woodbridge, forthcoming). For the confraternity see, especially, Chapter 6.

5 *Calendar of Papal Registers, Letters 10, 1447-55, p.81; 13 pt 1, 1471-84, p.3*



founding a personal chantry and as evidence of their membership of this exclusive club 'letters of confraternity' were distributed under a special seal.<sup>6</sup>

For the period between 1455 and 1526 thirty-one of these documents survive and this is likely to be only a tiny minority of those issued since many must have perished at the Reformation. The confraternity had much more than a local significance. Lady Margaret Beaufort, Sir Henry Stafford and the future Henry VII were to be counted amongst its members; as were whole villages, such as East and West Hagbourne, Oxfordshire, and Tredington, Gloucestershire.<sup>7</sup> Although the letters of confraternity invariably state that they were sealed in the chapter house at Burton Lazars, the sheer scale of the operation after 1450 makes this highly unlikely. It is clear, for example, that the order was making use of freelance pardoners and proctors to sell its indulgences and it is likely that these men were agents for the confraternity as well. Eight of these individuals have been traced working in the dioceses of Lincoln, Hereford and Durham between 1481 and 1533 and another was active in Bangor as late as 1535.<sup>8</sup> If the documentary evidence suggests that the Burton Lazars confraternity was by this time big business, to what extent is this confirmed by the order's seals and how does the Robertsbridge discovery fit into the pattern?

The order of St Lazarus used an unusually wide range of seals. Examples survive of a common seal; an indulgence seal; a seal of the preceptory of Burton Lazars; and the privy seals of several masters and dependant hospitals.<sup>9</sup> However, the most common sigillographical survival is undoubtedly to be found in the form of confraternity seals which are encountered not only validating letters of confraternity (as might be expected) but also, occasionally, indulgences. Evidence for confraternity seals survives in three forms – extant matrices; recent impressions taken from extant or recently extant matrices; and contemporary impressions attached to documents. The first matrix to be reported in modern times was dug up in Suffolk in the early nineteenth century and was said to be in the possession of Edward Moor (1771-1848) in 1817 (illus. 2).<sup>10</sup> Moor is an interesting character. An officer in the army of the East India Company, he developed an interest in Hindu religion and published the influential *Hindu Pantheon* in 1810. After an active military career he retired to Great Bealings in Suffolk near where the matrix may have been found.<sup>11</sup> An impression was exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries on 3 March 1814 by Stephen Weston (1747-1830), a well known clerical antiquarian and dilettante who shared Moor's interest in eastern religions.<sup>12</sup> Stamps

6 For the importance of confraternities to late-medieval spirituality, see C. Harper-Bill, 'The English Church and English Religion after the Black Death', in M. Ormrod and P. Lindley (eds), *The Black Death in England* (Stamford, 1996), pp.113-4. For a more detailed discussion see, V. Bainbridge, *Gilds in the Medieval Countryside* (Woodbridge, 1996).

7 Westminster Abbey Muniments, 6660; PRO, C 270/32/5; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Barlow 1, pp.v-vi. For a full list of letters of confraternity, see Marcombe, *Leper Knights*, Appendix 2.

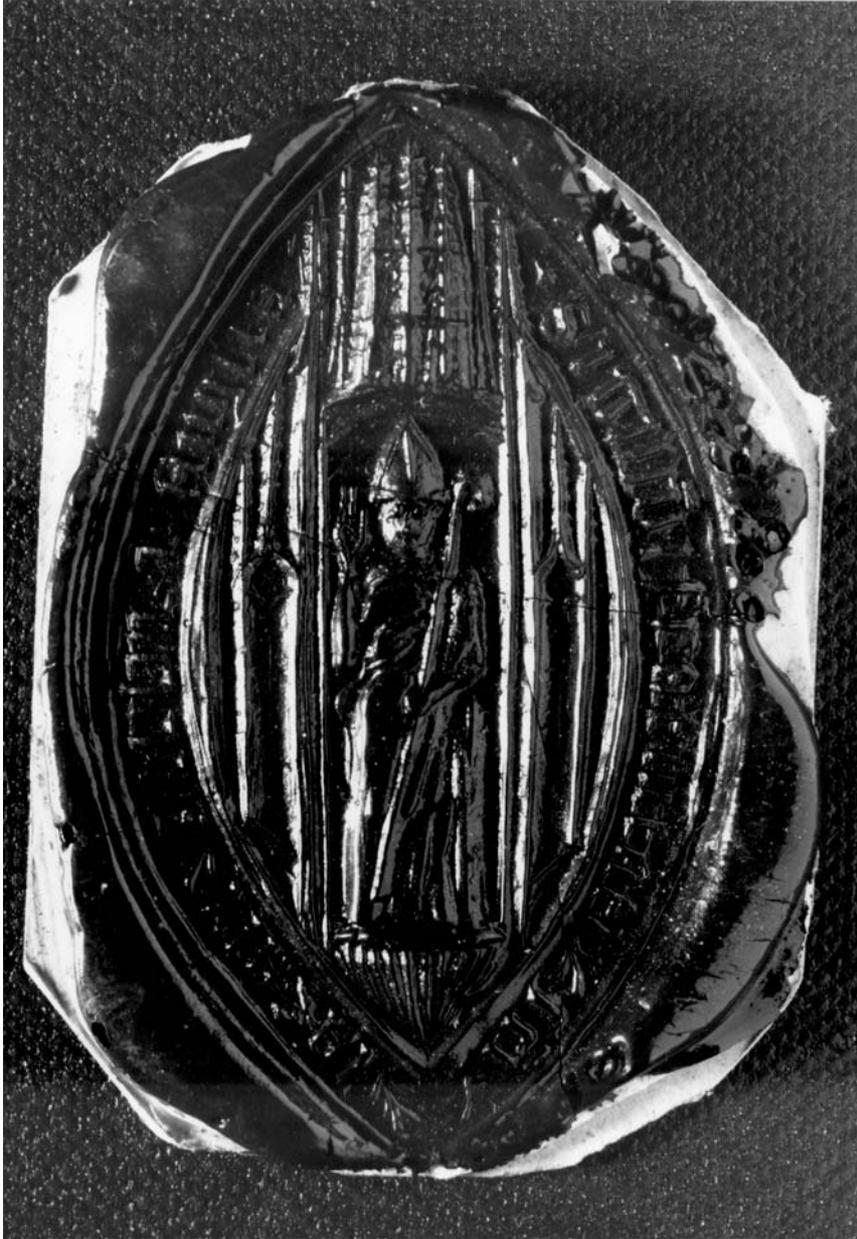
8 M.P. Howden (ed), *The Register of Richard Fox, 1494-1507*, Surtees Society, 147 (1932), pp.46, 73; A.T. Bannister (ed), Hereford Diocese, *Register of Thomas Myllyng*, Canterbury and York Society, 26 (1920), p.74; A.T. Bannister (ed), Hereford Diocese, *Register of Richard Mayew*, Canterbury and York Society, 27 (1921), p.53; K. Major, *A Handlist of the Records of the Bishop of Lincoln and the Archdeacons of Lincoln and Stow* (London, 1953), p.42; A.T. Bannister (ed), *Hereford Diocese, Registers of Bothe, Foxe and Boner*, Canterbury and York Society, 28 (1921), pp.355-60; *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, 8, 1535, pp.242-3.

9 See, for example, BL, Seal lxvi 47; Seal xxxv 169; Seal D. CH. 37; Harl Chart, 44 B 26; Leicestershire Record Office, 10D34/123. The common seal is published in R.H. Ellis (comp), *Catalogue of Seals in the Public Record Office, Monastic Seals*, 1 (London, 1986), p.136 (Plate 48, M 136). It is attached to PRO, E 329/334.10; 'An Inedited Seal of the Hospital of Burton Lazars', *Archaeologia*, 18 (1817), p.425.

11 *Dictionary of National Biography*, 13, pp.781-2

12 *Ibid*, 20, pp.1283-4





2. An impression from the matrix found in Suffolk (by permission of The British Library)



3. An impression from the matrix without provenance (by permission of The British Library ref. Seal lxvi 48b)

from this matrix ultimately found their way into the collections of the British Library and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, but the whereabouts of the seal is now unknown.<sup>13</sup> An impression from a second matrix also survives in the British Library, but in this case there is no record of the ownership or origin of the seal from which it was taken (illus. 3).<sup>14</sup>

The third matrix also has a good provenance. It was used to validate probates for the peculiar of Long Stow, Huntingdonshire, up to 1837, and George Gorham, author of

13 BL, Seal xlix 43; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Department of Coins and Medals, A Way/54, 1890-01

14 BL, Seal lxvi 48b



4. An impression from the Long Stow matrix (by permission of The British Library ref. Seal lxvi 48a)

*The History and Antiquities of Eynesbury and St Neots in Huntingdonshire and St Neots in Cornwall*, obtained an impression of it for John Caley, antiquary, seal collector and a leading light in the Record Commission (illus. 4).<sup>15</sup> This is not the only recorded instance of a medieval ecclesiastical seal dragged into service after the Reformation in a totally different context. The seal of William Dudley, dean of the collegiate church of St Peter, Wolverhampton (c.1457-76), was used in the peculiar jurisdiction of the Soken, Essex, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> The Long Stow Burton Lazars seal was said to be still in existence at St Neots in 1853 and it appears to be the same matrix that eventually found its way into the collection of the British Museum. It is bronze and its lack of patina would seem to confirm continued use after the Reformation. Impressions from this matrix are to be seen in the British Library, the Fitzwilliam Museum and Lincoln City and County Museum.<sup>17</sup> It is remarkable that in the early nineteenth century Burton Lazars confraternity seals were the subject of the attentions of antiquaries of the reputation of Moor, Weston, Gorham and Caley. Because of their efforts the existence of at least two different matrices (the Suffolk seal and the Long Stow seal) were brought to scholarly attention as an 'unusual instance of duplicate seals'.<sup>18</sup> Since then interest has subsided and the anomaly of the 'duplicate seals' has not been followed up.

The impressions from the matrices illustrated in Plates 2, 3 and 4 display some common characteristics, even though the workmanship of the Suffolk and Long Stow matrices is superior to that of the unprovenanced example. All are vesicas and all bear the Latin inscription 'Seal of the Fraternity of St Lazarus of Jerusalem in England' in slightly different abbreviated forms.<sup>19</sup> All employ Black Letter script for their inscriptions. These clues point firmly to a date later than c.1450. Black Letter was popular throughout the fifteenth century, but the description 'order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem in England' was a form of words which only became widely used after the papal bulls of 1439 and 1479. Thus, these matrices were almost certainly in use during the period of the surviving letters of confraternity between 1455 and 1526.

Of these thirty-one letters of confraternity, thirteen provide fragments of seals large enough to enable some tentative conclusions to be drawn about the nature of the matrix that generated them.<sup>20</sup> Medieval seals were made by warming a mixture of beeswax and resin and forming it into a rough shape with the fingers around a seal tag prior to the

15 'A Burton Lazars Seal', *Archaeological Journal*, 10 (1853), p.86; J. Cherry, 'The Silver Seal Matrix of the Peculiar Jurisdiction of the Prebend of St Margaret, Leicester', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 67 (1993), p.25. For George Cornelius Gorham (1787-1857), clergyman and antiquary, who is famous as the subject of the 'Gorham Judgment', see *Dictionary of National Biography*, 8, pp.243-5. For John Caley (d.1834), see *Dictionary of National Biography*, 3, pp.703-4.

16 M.W. Greenslade (ed), *The Victoria History of the Counties of England, A History of the County of Stafford*, 3 (Oxford, 1970), p.330; P. Morant, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Essex*, 1 (London, 1768), p.481. An impression of this seal, provenanced to 'the Liberty and Peculiar Jurisdiction of the Soken in the County of Essex' is in the author's collection.

17 BL, Seal lxvi 48a; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Department of Coins and Medals, Waldon. 37; Lincoln City and County Museum, Burton Lazars Seal.

18 'A Burton Lazars Seal', p.86

19 SIGILLŪ : FRATERNITATIS : SCI : LAZARI : IERLM : Ī : ANGLIA (Suffolk matrix). SIGILLŪ : FRAT'NITATIS : SCI : LACIRI : IERUSALEM : IN : ANGLIA (Long Stow matrix). SIGILLŪ : FRAT'NITATIS : SCĪ : LAZARI : IERL'M : IN : ANGLIA (unprovenanced matrix).

20 Westminster Abbey Muniments, 6660; BL, Add Charts 19864, 47555, 66397, 53492, 53710; Stowe Mss, Charter 619; Staffordshire Record Office, Sutherland Collection, D 593/A/1/32/1, 2, 14, 15; Derbyshire Record Office, D 2977/2/37; Cheshire Record Office, Shakerley Collection, D SS 3991, Drawer 2/1, ex Bundle 2.



application of the matrix.<sup>21</sup> The resulting impressions, subject to half a millennium of wear and tear, are not always easy to decipher. The matrix was often carelessly applied, leading to blurring of detail. Worse still, the fragile and unprotected edges of the seal frequently broke away, leaving only the middle section clinging precariously to the tag. Because of this, the central features of the design – the figure, the canopy and the corbel – are the most likely to survive. Three diagnostic indicators are especially significant: the architectural detail of the canopy, the corbel, and any special details which may appear on the seal to make it distinctive, for example, the crozier held at an oblique angle or decorative motifs appearing in the field.

Close scrutiny of the thirteen surviving Burton Lazars impressions suggests that three matrices were used. First, a fairly elaborate canopy with six crosses and a hatched corbel resting on a ball (1470 and 1484).<sup>22</sup> Second, a design with chevrons on the canopy and an open 'basketwork' corbel, evidently from a fairly crudely-cut matrix (both 1486).<sup>23</sup> Third, the unusual feature of a row of crosses on each side of the figure, combined with a segmented canopy and hatched corbel (1474 and 1479).<sup>24</sup> If all of these matches are upheld, six documents are validated by three seals. That still leaves seven documents where a different seal was used in each case. And on none of these documents is there any evidence of the use of the three matrices discussed and illustrated above (illus. 2, 3 and 4). In other words, if we accept the three matches, the order of St Lazarus used thirteen generically similar but detail-specific confraternity seals between 1455 and 1526. If we do not accept the matches, the number rises to sixteen. Such a large number of matrices used on a comparatively small number of documents is strongly suggestive of a far-flung operation or widespread forgery. It would seem to confirm that pardoners were being dispatched far and wide with their own seals, some of relatively poor quality, to drum up business for the house in all corners of the kingdom. The number of seals in circulation during the century before the Reformation would certainly have run into dozens, perhaps many more.

In this framework the discovery of the Robertsbridge matrix is of particular importance since it does not fit into the context just described (illus. 5, 6). It takes the form of a bronze vesica measuring 52mm x 33mm with a substantial suspension loop on the reverse. From the face of the seal to the edge of the loop is 15mm. It is engraved in good style and, like all the confraternity seals, depicts a standing figure in full episcopal vestments, holding a pastoral staff in his left hand and delivering a blessing with his right. This is probably supposed to represent St Lazarus of Bethany, one of the patron saints of the order, raised from the dead by Jesus.<sup>25</sup> According to legend, Lazarus went on to become bishop of Kition (in the eastern tradition) or bishop of Marseilles (in the western tradition).<sup>26</sup> His apocryphal episcopal status was probably exploited by the order on its seals to give added weight to its confraternity and indulgences. A casual glance may well have persuaded the average *confrère* that here indeed was a document with real episcopal validation.

21 For the means of production and application, see P.D.A. Harvey and A. McGuiness, *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* (London, 1996), pp.1-26.

22 Staffordshire Record Office, D 593/A/1/32/14 (1470); Derbyshire Record Office, D 2977/2/37 (1484)

23 BL, Add Chart, 66397 (1486); Cheshire Record Office, Shakerley Collection, D SS 3991, Drawer 2/1, ex Bundle 2 (1486)

24 Staffordshire Record Office, D 593/A/1/32/1 (1474); BL, Add Chart, 47555 (1479)

25 John 11, vs 5, 41-4; 12, vs 1-11; Matthew 26, vs 6-16; Mark 14, vs 3-11

26 D.H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1992), pp.292-3; J. Cumming (ed), *A New Dictionary of Saints* (Tunbridge Wells, 1993), p.190





5. An impression from the Robertsbridge matrix. 2:1 (Trevor Clayton)

The matrix has three characteristics which deserve comment. First, its inscription – SIGILLŪ : FRAT̄NITAT̄ : DE : BURTO : SCĪ : LAZARI – is formed in Lombardic script (the predecessor of Black Letter) and makes no mention of ‘the order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem in England’. This was simply ‘The seal of the fraternity of Burton St Lazarus’. Second, the canopy is of square Perpendicular type and the corbel contains the full-frontal figure of a praying, robed clerk, perhaps a characterisation of the master of Burton Lazars.<sup>27</sup> Third, a close examination indicates that the matrix was once gilded front and back. Indeed, the roughening of the face of the seal, which gave rise to the initial difficulties of interpretation, was caused, basically, by the degeneration of the

<sup>27</sup> For these figures as characterisations, see, for example, Ellis, *Catalogue of Seals*, pp.16, 25.



6. Reverse of the Robertsbridge matrix. Traces of gilding are visible on the left-hand edge. 2:1  
(Trevor Clayton)

gilded surface. These three characteristics – a Lombardic and ‘truncated’ inscription; a praying clerk; and a gilded finish – make the Robertsbridge matrix unique amongst Burton Lazars confraternity seals.

Comparisons for the architectural canopy and the praying clerk can be found in many British ecclesiastical seals for the period *c.*1350-1540. Fourteenth-century counterparts (with Lombardic script) are to be seen in the seals of Dundrennan and Whalley Abbeys; but that the type continued into the sixteenth century (with Black Letter script) is confirmed by the seals of Thorney Abbey and St Wulstan’s Hospital, Worcester.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the defining features of the Robertsbridge matrix are not so much the architectural and liturgical details as the presence of Lombardic script and the lack of the new ‘English’ description of the order. These two factors suggest a late fourteenth-century date, and this is certainly not incompatible with square Perpendicular canopies or figures in the *orans* position. The fact that the seal is well engraved, and gilded, is also

28 *Ibid*, pp.31-2 (Plate 16, M 296); p.97 (Plate 18, M 928); p.88 (Plate 3, M 841); p.102 (Plate 18, M 967)



suggestive of a period before the mass production of such objects set in after 1455. Such a gilded seal begins to look very much a one-off; something made to serve a smaller confraternity and an object kept at Burton Lazars and actually used in the chapter house there as stated in the documents. In effect, the template for those that came after it.

That these seals had a special power and status, certainly in the early medieval period, is underlined by an anecdote in Jocelin of Brakelond's *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*. Jocelin is sharply critical of the fact that William the Sacrist secretly borrowed 40 marks from Benedict the Jew 'to whom he gave a bond sealed with the seal that used to hang on the shrine of St Edmund and was normally used for sealing documents of guilds and fraternities'.<sup>29</sup> Thus at Bury St Edmunds in the twelfth century the confraternity seal was seen very much as a talismanic object, ingesting spiritual power from the shrine of the saint which would then be passed on, through the medium of wax, to members of his confraternity. Are we seeing in the 'golden' seal of Burton Lazars the last evidence of these old values before a new, more mechanical style of piety took over on the eve of the Reformation?

If the Robertsbridge matrix was, in fact, used at Burton Lazars and was not one of those carried around by a peripatetic pardoner, the question remains as to how it ended up in Sussex. This may not be such a surprise as at first it might seem. The order of St Lazarus actually owned lands in Sussex and supported a small hospital in the county, at Harting, before it was sold off to Dureford Abbey in 1248.<sup>30</sup> More important, Lewes Priory owned the rectory of Melton Mowbray and the Lazarites were often tenants of it, the last lease being made in 1523.<sup>31</sup> There were also links of patronage, because both the earls of Warenne (founders of Lewes) and the St Martin's (founders of Robertsbridge) were related to Roger de Mowbray.<sup>32</sup> These contacts must have engendered some comings and goings between the three houses. Lewes is a mere twenty miles from the find spot, and it is possible that Robertsbridge Abbey was a staging post in journeys between Leicestershire and Sussex and *vice versa*. The matrix may simply have been lost by the roadside. Was it being taken to the priory to admit some important individual to the confraternity; was it by the time of its loss already superseded by the new seals and being carried around as some sort of souvenir from the past? We will never know. What the story of the Robertsbridge matrix does prove, though, is the degree to which the oft-maligned metal detectorist can be of inestimable help to those of us who work in the historical and archaeological professions.<sup>33</sup> Many detectorists pursue their hobbies with the utmost care and sensitivity for our heritage. Without Linda McKay's day out with her detector and responsible attitude to her discovery, the matrix would still lie rotting in the ground today, and in a few more years rendered totally illegible and another piece of our history lost beyond recall.

29 D. Greenway and J. Sayers (trans), Jocelin of Brakelond. *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds* (Oxford, 1989), p.4

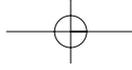
30 W. Page (ed), *Victoria County History. A History of Sussex*, 2 (London, 1973), p.103

31 J.G. Nichols, *History and Antiquities of Leicestershire*, 2 pt 1 (London, 1795), p.250; J. Harley, F.M. Stenton and F. Bickley (eds), *Hastings Mss*, 1, Historical Manuscripts Commission (London, 1928), p.90. John Leland described Melton Mowbray church as a 'cell' of Lewes Priory, Nichols, *Leicestershire*, 2 pt 1, p.251.

32 *VCH. Sussex*, 2, pp.64-71; J. Williamson, *A Sussex Abbey* (1991), p.13. The St Martins were related to William d'Aubigny. The Aubignys and Warennes were cousins of Roger de Mowbray.

33 For the current debate on metal detecting, see S. Hollowell and S. Clayton, 'Metal Detecting... the work of the Devil?', *East Midland Historian*, 9 (1999), pp.51-4; J. Wright and S. Hollowell, 'Metal Detecting... the work of Angels', *East Midland Historian*, 10 (2000), pp.48-51.





*Personal Details*

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