

# THREE LATE FIFTEENTH- EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CHAPEL FURNISHINGS BELONGING TO THE EDGCUMBE FAMILY IN CORNWALL

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*This study documents three chapel furnishings dating from around 1500 belonging to the Edgcumbe family at Cotehele, Cornwall, south-west England, and discusses their survival during the Protestant Reformation and beyond. The textiles were exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries of London by W H St John Hope, FSA and the text of his presentation was published in the Proceedings of the Society in 1912–13. The present article brings together the numerous other historic writings concerning the textiles. Their possible origins are explored and assessed in context with pieces of similar date. Observations of their original making and later changes are recorded, while interpretations by historians of this period are put forward for consideration. The rarity of survival of the textiles and their documented history is acknowledged.*

**Keywords:** England; Netherlands; textiles; embroidery; Cotehele

## INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastical textiles created during the later medieval period (c 1350–1540) rarely survived untouched, if at all, during the English Protestant Reformation later in the sixteenth century when the traditional practices of religious worship were prohibited. While so many such textiles were destroyed, dismantled or sold on for re-use at that time,<sup>1</sup> a small collection belonging to the Edgcumbe family at Cotehele, Cornwall, in south-west England, are ‘a rare survival of pre-Reformation liturgical furnishings preserved in the domestic chapel of the family for whom it was made’.<sup>2</sup> In the early years of the twentieth century these ‘three remarkable pieces of old English embroidery’ were exhibited at the Society of Antiquaries by W H St John Hope, FSA through the courtesy of the Revd Williamson of Calstock, Cornwall. William Henry St John Hope (b 1854) was a recognised authority on a variety of antiquarian subjects with particular interest in archaeology, heraldry and, above all, ecclesiology. In 1885 he was appointed Assistant Secretary to the Society of Antiquaries, an office he served with great distinction for twenty-five years, and – until his death in 1919 – he continued a close connection, frequently reading papers to crowded audiences at the Society’s evening meetings.<sup>3</sup> The notes for his presentation discussed here were published in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* 1912–13.<sup>4</sup> The three inter-related textiles he refers to are now in the collection of the

1. Clark and Slocombe 2023.

2. Marks 2003, 339.

3. Jones 1920.

4. Hope 1912–13.

National Trust at Cotehele.<sup>5</sup> They are, firstly, an altar cloth embroidered with images of Christ and the Apostles, while the second piece appears to originate from a mourning textile. On the third, embroidered lettering of a repeated motto continues to be investigated for possible interpretations. An early seventeenth-century mirror frame also plays a part in the complex story of these textiles.

Hope's text is primarily descriptive of the textiles as found in the early twentieth century. The present article aims to add to this notable document by bringing together the remarkable number of other historic narratives relating to the chapel furnishings, which provide a unique chronicle of how these textiles have been presented over the centuries. With closer observations of their making, the pieces can be placed within a material culture context of ecclesiastical textiles created around 1500, and the rarity of their survival during the Reformation and beyond can be recognised.

### THE ALTAR CLOTH AND MOURNING TEXTILE

The first piece presented by Hope is described as 'the upper front for an altar ... of dark crimson velvet, upon which is laid a row of separate canopied figures of our Lord and the Twelve Apostles, with a powdering of fleurs-de-lis'.<sup>6</sup> A shield directly beneath the central Christ figure bears the arms of Sir Piers Edgcumbe I and his first wife Joan Durnford, suggesting the embroidery dates from around 1493, the year of their marriage, and before her death *c* 1521.<sup>7</sup> Christ is shown as *Salvator Mundi* (Saviour of the World) holding the orb in his left hand and blessing it with his right (fig 1). To either side Hope identifies the twelve Apostles from the symbols they are portrayed with. Saints Philip, Thomas, Matthew, James the Less, John the Evangelist and Peter stand to the proper right of Christ, and Saints Paul, Andrew, Bartholomew, James the Greater, Simon and Jude to the left.<sup>8</sup> Such depiction of individual religious figures standing within canopied vaulted niches is repeatedly seen throughout medieval Christian artefacts, carvings, painted rood screens and manuscripts, as well as embroidered ecclesiastical vestments and furnishings.

Hope's second piece 'which may be a mourning frontal, or perhaps only a hanging ... consists of black cloth on which have been mounted eight detached figures of saints. The two end figures are at present wanting, as is a small shield of arms below the middle'.<sup>9</sup> The figures surviving on the cloth at that date are identified from their attributes as Saints Anthony, Erasmus, Francis, John the Baptist, the Archangel Michael overcoming Satan (fig 2) and Saint Sebastian.<sup>10</sup> In a postscript to his paper, Hope related how he revisited

5. Cotehele, Cornwall, was owned by the Edgcumbe family from 1353 until 1947, when it was passed to the National Trust (NT).

6. Textile NT acc. no. 348343 (800 by 2800mm).

7. In 1493 Sir Piers Edgcumbe I (1468/9–1539) married Joan née Durnford (d *c* 1521). The shield shows the arms of Edgcumbe *gules a bend sable cotised* gold, with three boars' heads silver upon the *bend* impaling Durnford, *sable* a ram's head silver with horns of gold. This shield also occurs in a stained-glass window of the Great Hall at Cotehele.

8. The Apostles normally comprise the twelve disciples of Jesus, with Matthias replacing Judas. Identification of the figures is discussed in Griffith and Andrew (2012), which also questions whether the piece was made to hang below at the face of the altar as a frontal or behind and above as a dorsal.

9. Hope 1912–13.

10. Textile NT acc. no. 348391 (660 by 1994mm). The cloth is currently in store at Cotehele.



Fig 1. The Apostles cloth at Cotehele. Embroideries dating *c* 1500 have been applied to a slightly later velvet. The detail shows Saint Peter and Christ above a shield bearing the arms of Sir Piers Edgumbe I and Joan Durnford. *Photograph:* © National Trust/the author.

Cotehele to inquire for the two figures missing from the black hanging and found them, as well as the missing shield, attached to an embroidered mirror frame in one of the bedrooms.<sup>11</sup>

One of the figures is the prophet Jeremiah holding a long scroll with his name (fig 3); the other is St Roch pointing as usual to the sore in his thigh.<sup>12</sup> The shield is identical with that on the red front (fig 4) and proves that both are the work of the same hand. ‘Lord Valletort is not willing to have the shield or the two figures taken off the frame and replaced on the black frontal, and that is why they cannot be shown to the Society as I should have liked.’<sup>13</sup>

11. Mirror NT acc. no. 347860 (380 by 310mm). Dated *c* 1625 by Christopher Hussey (1924b). The mirror frame is currently in store at Cotehele.

12. Dr Joanna Mattingly of the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (co-author of Berry *et al* 2004), in the summary description on the National Trust Collections website of the current black hanging, identifies the figures in the same way as Hope, adding ‘The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah looks a bit later in date: this would be from another item. On Cornish and Devon rood screens Old Testament prophets sometimes alternate with Christ’s disciples’.

13. Hope 1912–13. Viscount Valletort is a courtesy title for the earldom of Mount Edgumbe.



Fig 2. The mourning cloth at Cotehele. Embroideries dating from the late fifteenth/early sixteenth centuries have been applied to wool cloth in the early nineteenth century. The detail shows Archangel Michael overcoming Satan. *Photograph:* © National Trust/the author.

#### HISTORIC ACCOUNTS OF THE CHAPEL FURNISHINGS AT COTEHELE

Two of the Edgcumbe textiles – here referred to as the Apostles cloth and the Jeremiah cloth – have been chronicled over the centuries by visitors to Cotehele and its chapel. These accounts show no indication of concealed liturgical context during the repression of faith that occurred in England between about 1559 and 1829.<sup>14</sup> As early as 1603, Richard Carew described Cotehele in his *Survey of Cornwall*: ‘The buildings are ancient, large, strong and fayre, and appurtenanced with the necessaries of wood, water, fishing, parks, and mills, with the devotion of (in times past) a rich furnished Chapel.’<sup>15</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century Cotehele was already presented to the outside world as an antiquarian house. In the 1740s, when Richard, 1st Baron Edgcumbe, began to modernise the other family seat, Mount Edgcumbe, he sent the more ancient furnishings up the Tamar to be displayed at Cotehele. His son George, 3rd Baron Edgcumbe, inherited these properties in 1761 and continued to enhance the romantic appeal of Cotehele’s

14. Brooks and O’Connor 2020.

15. Carew 1769, 114. Originally published in 1603.



Fig 3. The mourning cloth at Cotehele. The detail shows the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah.  
 Photograph: © National Trust/the author.

interior settings.<sup>16</sup> In 1789 Queen Charlotte wrote in her journal of a brief visit made there with King George III, listing the things of interest she had seen, which include some chair seats made from priests' vestments. She noted that the chapel was still in good repair.<sup>17</sup> A significant insight into the furnishings of the chapel at the end of the eighteenth century is given a decade after the royal visit, when George Lipscomb observed in *A Journey into Cornwall*:

The Chapel is small and damp . . . The Altar furniture is still perfect – one set of hangings of fine black cloth, on which is embroidered, in gold, the figure of the Prophet Jeremiah, and several coats of arms in gold and purple. Another set is very magnificent, being of royal purple velvet, embroidered with gold, and sprinkled all over with fleur-de-lis in silver – and in the stalls the figures of the twelve Apostles: the very hair is so exactly imitated as to resemble the life in a remarkable degree.<sup>18</sup>

16. Hunt 2013, 7, 22–5. Richard, 1st Baron Edgcumbe (1680–1758). George, 3rd Baron Edgcumbe (later 1st Earl of Mount Edgcumbe) (1720–95), was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and a friend of Horace Walpole. See also Gentle 2016.

17. Queen Charlotte 1789, 6. The seats made from priests' vestments are no longer at Cotehele.

18. Lipscomb 1799, 303. Lipscomb's account, together with others pre-1912, all fail to mention the figure of Christ. The velvet is variously described as red, dark crimson and royal purple.



Fig 4. The mourning cloth at Cotehele. The detail shows the Edgcumbe–Durnford embroidered coat of arms. *Photograph*: © National Trust/the author.

It seems that the Apostles cloth hung along with a fine black cloth embroidered with the figure of the prophet Jeremiah and several coats of arms, perhaps suggesting that one was a frontal to hang at the face of the altar while the other a dorsal placed above and behind the altar.<sup>19</sup> A description in C S Gilbert's 1820 *Survey of Cornwall* recorded that:

the furniture of the altar is very rich, and on one set is embroidered in gold, the figure of Jeremiah, and several coats of arms in gold and purple, of persons allied to the Edgcumbe family. Another set is of royal purple velvet, embroidered with gold, powdered with fleur-de-lis in silver, and enriched with the figures of twelve apostles, placed in stalls.<sup>20</sup>

Curiously, a slightly earlier account in the *Plymouth Literary Magazine* of 1814 reported that the altar furnishings had been removed from the chapel:

The furniture belonging to the altar is uncommonly splendid, but for purpose of preservation is removed to another apartment. On one set, the figure of the Prophet

19. Griffith and Andrew 2012.

20. Gilbert 1820, 449–51.

Jeremiah is embroidered in gold and several coats of arms in gold and purple. Another is of royal purple, embroidered in gold, and powdered with fleur-de-lis and contains the figures of the twelve Apostles in stalls.<sup>21</sup>

It is quite possible that Gilbert was compiling his *Survey* for some years before its publication, but it does seem that the altar cloths were moved in and out of the chapel to preserve them from the damp conditions already described there in 1799.

By 1840, a set of lithographic prints made after watercolours by Nicholas Condy of the interiors at Cotehele show the Apostles cloth twice: once in place on the altar in the chapel and again lying on the bed in the Best Bedroom (now known as the South Room). The collection of prints was published with a narrative text by Revd Arundell.<sup>22</sup> He wrote of the White Bedroom:

by the side of the white bed is a small cabinet, with a mirror, and on it the figures, in needlework, of St. Roque and Jeremiah, having below a shield with Edgecumbe and Dernford impaled. It is, therefore, probable that this, as well as the splendid embroidered altar-cloth in the Best Room, were both wrought by the fair and patient hands of the heiress of Dernford ... on the old worked bed is laid an ancient altar-cloth, formed of red velvet, powdered with fleur-de-lis, on which, in rich gold embroidery, are the twelve apostles, and a shield of Edgecumbe, impaling Dernford.<sup>23</sup>

The textile furnishings were back on the altar in 1856 when John Murray noted that ‘the chapel is small and simple, but has a certain air of solemnity pervading it, and the decorations of the altar are worth inspecting’.<sup>24</sup>

The fate of the mirror frame was still being discussed by A H Malan in 1894:

One of these mirrors was once all covered with animals done in flat bead-work; but the lower half of the pattern came to pieces, and then some gentle but misguided dame, casting about for employment, covered the dilapidated part with velvet; and instead of herself working some objects to relieve it, laid sacrilegious hands upon the altar-cloth (a royal antiquary suggests bier-cloth) and calmly transferred two figures of saints from it to the mirror – forming, along with the Durnford arms, the most incongruous mixture it is possible to conceive.<sup>25</sup>

Particularly intriguing here is the statement that ‘a royal antiquary’ suggested the Jeremiah cloth to be a bier-cloth, but Malan does not enlighten any further. His article about Cotehele was republished in 1902 illustrated with a black and white photograph of the chapel showing the Apostles cloth hanging on the altar table, set above what is clearly

21. Byrth 1814.

22. The collection of lithographic prints, made after an 1830s series of watercolours by Nicholas Condy (1793–1857), were bound together and published c 1840 under the title *Cotehele on the Banks of the Tamar*, which includes a narrative text by Revd Francis Vyvyan Jago Arundell. Copies of the volume printed in colour are in the collection at Cotehele: NT acc. nos 347469 and 347472. Other volumes containing the prints in sepia are also at Cotehele.

23. Arundell c 1840.

24. Murray 1856, 246.

25. Malan 1902, 82, 84.



Fig 5. The chapel at Cotehele photographed in 1894 by Alfred Henry Malan.

Cotehele's current black cloth but with only six figures and no Edgcumbe–Durnford shield (fig 5). Malan noted that 'the altar cloths display the most exquisite needlework, though two of the figures of one of them happen to be missing'. From his account of photographing inside the chapel, it would seem that the set-up was carefully – if somewhat dangerously – choreographed with interior lighting provided by 'all the paraffin lamps in the house' while any natural light was excluded by a huge tarpaulin outside the east window.<sup>26</sup> It could be that the two furnishings were especially placed on the altar for the photograph rather than this being their usual situation.<sup>27</sup> An illustration in Christopher Hussey's 1924 *Country Life* article shows the Apostles cloth still hanging in the chapel as an altar frontal.<sup>28</sup> The angle of the photograph does not allow a view as to whether the black cloth hung below at this time, but it seems unlikely. There is only mention that two other figures, obviously of the same set, 'have been worked into the frame of an early seventeenth-century mirror of stump work character in one of the bed-rooms'. In part II of the article, Hussey more precisely wrote that 'beside the bed hangs a piece of beadwork in a frame surrounding a mirror of about

26. *Ibid.*, 70, 75, 77. 'Never before nor since has the Chapel been so brightened and heated up. The result was surprisingly harmonious but one was glad when the last lamp was safely extinguished.'

27. The altar table currently at Cotehele is thought to date from between 1780 and 1835, made up of earlier fragments: NT acc. no. 347825 (940 by 1683 by 620mm).

28. Hussey 1924a, 330.



1625. In it are contained two embroidered figures, fellows to those on the late fifteenth century altar cloth in the Chapel'.<sup>29</sup>

The 1947 memoirs of James Lees-Milne recall that George Wingfield Digby gave his 'invaluable advice gratis'.<sup>30</sup> In the chapel he identified the purple altar frontal, sewn with silver fleurs-de-lis and depicting the twelve Apostles, as having been made up from parts of a medieval pall. Evidence to support this theory is not elaborated upon. However, both the original Jeremiah fine cloth and the current black hanging have been associated with use at funerals: this information may have become confused. The interest in Winfield Digby's assessment is the suggestion that the Apostles cloth has been made up from earlier pieces.

Regarding Cotehele's current black hanging, by January 1977 correspondence between M S Briggs and G M Trinick of the National Trust established that 'the two missing figures and the shield have at some time been put back where they belong'.<sup>31</sup> Today, the mirror frame still retains its beadwork in the upper area, with the addition below of black velvet on which can be seen the shadows of the previously applied motifs of the prophet Jeremiah together with St Roch and the shield of arms.

#### LATER HISTORY OF THE JEREMIAH AND APOSTLES CLOTHS

Until 1820, various narratives describe a fine black cloth embroidered with the image of the prophet Jeremiah in gold and several coats of arms relating to the Edgcumbe family in gold and purple. Lipscomb's 1799 report of this cloth – as well as of the Apostles cloth – is closely echoed by the texts published in 1814 and 1820. All mention a 'set of hangings', but appear to be describing one hanging with a set of embroideries rather than more than one textile. They refer to the cloth as altar furniture, not as a funeral pall.<sup>32</sup> The report dated 1820 is the last to document the Jeremiah cloth as a 'fine' textile. Publications in 1824 and 1831 describe only the Apostles cloth.<sup>33</sup> By 1840, it is obvious that the fine black cloth has been dismantled. Arundell recounts that Jeremiah and one Edgcumbe shield were now applied to the mirror frame together with a figure of St Roch, while in 1894 Malan observes that these motifs had already once been stitched to Cotehele's current black cloth.<sup>34</sup> Jeremiah is the only figure ever mentioned in connection with the fine black hanging. The Old Testament prophet is clearly identified by the scroll with his name, but surely, had other figures been present, they would have been noted as well. Of the current black

29. Hussey 1924b, 364. 'Stump work' is a term until recently used to define raised pictorial embroidery of the 17th century. However, the original decoration on the mirror frame (1625) is in fact beadwork, as Hussey later stated.

30. Lees-Milne 1992, 142–6. George Wingfield Digby was Keeper of Textiles at the V&A Museum at that time.

31. Unpublished National Trust internal memos.

32. In the early 16th century most families would have borrowed a funeral pall from the church, and only the wealthiest families, or institutions such as the livery companies, could afford their own. The Fayrey family pall dated 1500–16 on long-term loan to the V&A Museum (LOAN: ST.PETER.2) shows the figure of St John the Baptist worked in embroidery of silver-gilt, silver and silk threads on linen, applied to the black or deep purple velvet on each of its four sides. It is said to have been embroidered and made up in London.

33. Stockdale 1824, 129; Britton and Brayley 1831, 18: 'In the state bed-room is a rich altar cloth of crimson velvet embroidered with figures of the twelve apostles, and other devices. This altar-cloth formerly ornamented the family chapel, which is a small edifice'.

34. Arundell c 1840; Malan 1902, 70.



Fig 6. The mourning cloth at Cotehele. The detail shows embroidered figures Saints Roch and Anthony currently applied to cloth of inferior quality. *Photograph:* © National Trust/the author.

hanging, it has been thought that ‘the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah looks a bit later in date: this would be from another item’.<sup>35</sup>

There seems to be no account of why the fine black cloth was dismantled and what happened to the other embroidered coats of arms. Neither is there any clue from whence the figures on the current black hanging, other than Jeremiah, might have originated. If not from the fine black textile, these motifs could have been taken from another furnishing or a vestment made ensuite with the Apostles cloth. Their overall condition displays obvious wear through use: the silk areas are threadbare and the finer metal threads are lifting or lost, particularly on St Francis, St John the Baptist and Jeremiah himself. The making up of the current black cloth looks unprofessional and carried out in haste (fig 6). Two widths of plain black wool cloth are unevenly cut and seamed together down the vertical centre; all edges are bound with a simple narrow woven lace that also forms the loops along the top from which the cloth hangs. The finely embroidered figures – clearly worked for application to a textile of high quality – have been stitched onto the cloth in a somewhat distorted manner and the piece is not lined. Perhaps this cloth was put together for a family funeral such as that of Richard, 2nd Earl of Mount Edgcumbe, who died in 1839.<sup>36</sup>

35. Mattingly in Berry *et al* 2004.

36. Richard, 2nd Earl of Mount Edgcumbe 1764–1839.

Hope's account in 1912 describes the Apostles cloth as very worn with many fleurs-de-lis perished, the velvet much damaged by moths and the whole composition greatly marred by being supported on a length of coarse turkey-red twill.<sup>37</sup> This coarse twill fabric was removed in the 1990s, when the textile underwent full sympathetic conservation treatment and was framed and glazed for display on a wall within the chapel at Cotehele where it still hangs.<sup>38</sup> The piece has since been shown in exhibitions at Truro Cathedral and the V&A Museum, London.<sup>39</sup> A catalogue entry for the latter describes *c* 1500 figures, fleurs-de-lis and coat of arms embroidered in coloured silks and *filé* metal thread on linen,<sup>40</sup> with some detail on tabby silk, applied to a ground of crimson silk velvet.<sup>41</sup> In 2014, the Apostles cloth was included in the online project *History of Cornwall in 100 Objects* with the following text:

The frontal of crimson velvet shows Christ and the twelve apostles, though St Paul with his sword has been substituted for Judas. The figures were individually worked in coloured silks and metal threads on linen and then appliquéd on. Other figures, including a St Michael, also survive here [ie at Cotehele]. This suggests that the frontal may once have belonged to a set of ecclesiastical hangings. The frontal's size suggests it was used in a church, like Calstock, not a house chapel.<sup>42</sup>

#### ORIGINS OF THE TEXTILES

As indicated in the accounts above, the embroidery on the Apostles cloth is stylistically related to that on the black hanging, with the individual figures finely embroidered in silk and metal threads onto linen cloth for application to the textile object. This technique together with the arms of the shields on both pieces suggest they were most likely made during the 1490s. Discussing the origins of the textiles, Hope wrote:

As regards the history of these exhibits but little seems to be known. The altar in the chapel at Cotehele and the three pieces of embroidered work are said to have been brought by the present Earl of Mount Edgcumbe from the Chapel-in-the-Wood, which was built by Sir Richard Edgcumbe to commemorate the victory of Henry of Richmond on Bosworth Field (1485) but I have not yet been able to verify this. The three pieces of embroidery are nevertheless of quite exceptional importance: the frontal on account of its extreme rarity; the black hanging for its quaint and interesting figures; and the altar cloth for the beautiful embroidery appended to it.<sup>43</sup>

From the historic narratives it is clear that 'the three pieces of embroidered work' were already in the house long before any possible involvement by the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe

37. Hope 1912–13. Loss to the velvet is not consistent with moth damage; it seems more likely to have been caused by an element of the original dyeing process, such as heavy use of a mordant to produce the deep colour.

38. Textile Conservation, Ivy House Farm, Banwell, Avon 1993–5.

39. *Treasures of the Sea*, Truro, 2002; *Gothic: Art for England, 1400–1547*, V&A, 2003–4.

40. *Filé* metal thread has a narrow silver-gilt strip wound closely on a core of silk yarn.

41. Marks 2003, 339.

42. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/cB36dXabS-y32UXPC7qaEw> (accessed 14 March 2024).

43. Hope 1912–13.

in the early twentieth century. The Chapel-in-the-Wood is still extant within the grounds at Cotehele, but – now sparsely furnished – it provides little idea of how the altar textiles might have once fitted there. Rebuilding of the chapel within the house itself is thought to have been completed by 1489,<sup>44</sup> and so it is possible that the textiles were created to furnish the altar there. Hope reported that ‘the present altar was of modern origin and gave no clue to former arrangements’. The large recess between the window and the altar would just hold the upper front.

All the historic records quoted above – together with the prints after Condy (c 1840) and Malan’s photograph (1902) – associate the Apostles and the Jeremiah cloths with furnishing the chapel within Cotehele house, yet the text to the *History of Cornwall in 100 Objects* suggests use in a church. Possibly these pieces were part of a portable altar set that the household chaplain took with him when the Edgcumbe family visited the other houses they owned, such as Mount Edgcumbe at West Stonehouse. A connection with Calstock church, where the Edgcumbes worshipped on some Sundays and feast days, and which they no doubt embellished with vestments and altar furniture, cannot entirely be ruled out.<sup>45</sup> In his will dated 1530, Sir Piers Edgcumbe I bequeathed the sum of ‘£3 to the high altars of Calstock for tithes forgot and funeral masses’ together with £33 6s 9d for ‘an honest priest to sing mass and do divine service for his soul in the parish church of Calstock . . . for the space of five years’.<sup>46</sup> His father, Sir Richard Edgcumbe I, in 1488 had likewise provided for prayers for his soul ‘by the space of five years in the church of Calstock’.<sup>47</sup> It is not clear when the Edgcumbe mortuary chapel was added at the north-east corner of the church; dates of 1558 or 1588 are suggested. Initials RE can still be seen on the hood mould of the chapel’s external door; these could denote Richard Edgcumbe, the brother of Sir Piers II, who is buried there under a mortuary slab dated 1588. A seating plan of around the same time shows Sir Piers II (1536–1607) occupied a pew at the very back of the church out of ‘courtesy and respect’.<sup>48</sup> An ornate marble monument to his grandson, Col Piers III (1610–67) indicates the Edgcumbe family’s continuing commitment to Calstock church.

#### STYLE OF THE EMBROIDERY

It is generally acknowledged that the very fine embroidery once recognised as *Opus Anglicanum* or ‘English Work’ was in decline by the end of the Great Period of the Middle Ages (1250–1350), with crafts people in the Netherlands by then providing superior workmanship and design.<sup>49</sup> However it is now believed that the evolution which took place during the Later Period (1350–1540) should not altogether be dismissed as a diminishing of quality. While significant numbers of ecclesiastical textiles of this date are known to have been dispersed, destroyed or dismantled for re-use during the Protestant Reformation, examples of English work from this period are still extant, although mostly refashioned for

44. Hussey 1924a, 329.

45. The author thanks Dr Joanna Mattingly for this insight. Hope does state that he is exhibiting the cloths through the courtesy of the Revd Williamson of Calstock.

46. Wood 2005, 20.

47. Orme 2007, 100.

48. Berry *et al* 2004, 162–3.

49. Marks 2003, 82.

different purposes.<sup>50</sup> In these, stylistic and technical changes certainly can be observed: figures tended to be less elegant, and imagery became less individual than previously found in specific commissions. The drawing of saints was often universally sourced from woodcuts such as those published in 1487 by Jacobus de Voragine in *Legenda aura de sanctis*.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, stitches were looser and worked in less time-consuming, simpler patterns. For silk threads, split stitch became replaced by satin stitch. Metal threads were held by surface couching rather than underside couching. Instead of being worked directly onto a rich textile such as silk or velvet, images and motifs were embroidered onto a linen cloth and then applied to the finished item.<sup>52</sup> Embroidered coats of arms could be commissioned to personalise pieces, while standardised embroidered motifs – such as fleur-de-lis – were ready-made for purchase to be ‘powdered’ (sprinkled) over the textile according to what could be afforded.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout Britain and Europe in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, embroidered figures or scenes from the Bible each set under an architectural canopy were very often used to decorate ecclesiastical vestments and furnishings. Many fine examples of single figures depicted in this way, produced in the Netherlands during the first half of sixteenth century, can be found in the collection of Museum Catharijne Convent, Utrecht, Netherlands.<sup>54</sup> The figure would be created by a specialist embroiderer using silk and metal threads worked on a linen ground cloth. The canopy – usually double gabled with windows and turrets above set on slender shafts – was embroidered separately, possibly at a different workshop, with a background filled to give an impression of depth of space, while leaving a voided area for the figure then to be applied.<sup>55</sup> Examples in the Utrecht collection show that it was not unknown to detach the separately worked figures for re-deployment on a later textile (fig 7).<sup>56</sup> Contemporary examples of altar frontals from the southern Netherlands are to be found in the archive of the Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), which documents collections in the nation’s churches and museums.<sup>57</sup> One *antependium* (altar frontal) in the Groeningemuseum, Bruges, featuring figures within architectural canopies, seems particularly related to the Cotehele cloths in its imagery of the Apostles alongside other saints.<sup>58</sup> These adorn a narrow strip across the upper part of the altar, with other such figures placed down either side of the lower area of cloth. The Apostles motifs at Cotehele may have once made up such a narrow superfrontal and hung with the figures from the current black cloth placed on the main frontal below.

50. Browne *et al* 2016, 20, 87–8; Clark and Slocombe 2023.

51. The Golden Legend. Browne *et al* 2016, 86.

52. *Ibid*, 19–20, 77–8. For underside couching, the laid metal thread is pulled through the ground cloth by the holding stitches, which remain unseen. In surface couching, the stitches holding the laid thread sit visible on the surface. Further discussion is found in Wallis’s (undated) unpublished report. The author thanks Tom Cadbury, assistant curator at RAMM, Exeter, for sharing this.

53. Browne *et al* 2016, 78–9.

54. Museum Catharijne Convent, Utrecht, Netherlands: <https://www.catharijneconvent.nl> (accessed 14 March 2024).

55. Johnstone 2002, 71; Browne *et al* 2016, 79–82.

56. <https://adlib.catharijneconvent.nl/Details/collect/39423> (accessed 14 March 2024).

57. Belgian Cultural Heritage collections archive Balat, <http://balat.kikirpa.be/intro.php> (accessed 14 March 2024).

58. Antependium, Groeningemuseum, Bruges, Belgium, acc. no. 92261. As stated above, imagery was often universally sourced: Browne *et al* 2016.



Fig 7. Two orphreys from a dalmatic with detached figures of Saints Catharine and John the Evangelist embroidered on linen by James of Malborch, dated 1504 (acc. nos ABM t2165a01-a02 and b01-b02). *Photograph*: Ruben de Heer © Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.

Most often, the embroidered background within the arch would be completed with a tiled floor marked out in perspective, although sometimes the figure under the canopy is shown standing on a grassy ground embroidered with flowers, possibly more commonly seen in work made in England (fig 8).<sup>59</sup> A piece known as the St Mary Arches textile in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter, displays such imagery. It is made up from parts of a set of vestments dated *c* 1500, believed to have been saved during the Reformation by removing some of the figures and transforming the textiles into a coffin cover. Although at that time the wearing of vestments was mostly disallowed, palls and altar hangings continued to be used.<sup>60</sup> Embroidered figures still extant on the piece have been identified (from attributes and halos) as Apostles and other saints together with Old Testament prophets who wear the dress of medieval merchants with splendid hats and hold scrolls while making a speaking gesture, much like the Jeremiah figure at Cotehele.<sup>61</sup>

59. There are fine examples of embroidered figures standing on grass and flowers at Ugbrooke House, Devon, in a hanging made up from the orphreys and the velvet from a cope.

60. RAMM acc. no. 102/1994. See Wallis (undated); Browne *et al* 2016, 38, 87.

61. In medieval art it was not uncommon to represent figures from both the Old and New Testaments together, illustrating the doctrine that events in the New Covenant are foreshadowed symbolically in the Old.



Fig 8. Detail of a hanging Ugbrooke House, Devon, made up from the velvet and embroideries of an early sixteenth-century cope. *Photograph:* © the author, published by courtesy of the Clifford Estate Company Ltd.

Similar imagery and quality of embroidery can be seen in the collection at Exeter Cathedral on the St Petrock Pall, which is also made up of a richly woven velvet cloth and sections of embroidered orphreys pieced together from vestments. Here the canopied figures stand either on embroidered tiles or grass (figs 9 and 10).<sup>62</sup> The execution of needlework found in these two pieces shows less refinement than that of the Netherlands examples, or indeed of the Edgcumbe chapel furnishings. It has been suggested that at Cotehele ‘a red velvet altar dorsal of Christ, the Apostles and St Paul [was] commissioned from a London workshop’.<sup>63</sup> At that time, the majority of professional workshops of the embroidery trade were based in London around the area of St Paul’s Cathedral. Survival of such embroideries is seen to occur in a concentration of locations, particularly in the west and south-west of England and in Wales, where the iconoclasm of the Reformation was less stringently enforced. It is not known whether these pieces were the products of the top London embroiderers or of local craftspeople. Elements of ecclesiastical vestments and furnishings could be acquired from the London workshops to be assembled locally.<sup>64</sup>

62. The author thanks Ellie Jones, archivist at Exeter Cathedral, for sharing images of the pall.

63. Taylor 2008. The evidence to support a London provenance is not given.

64. Browne *et al* 2016, 45, 78, 81, 87.



Fig 9. The St Petrock pall at Exeter Cathedral is made up of velvet and embroidery from vestments possibly dating from the fifteenth century. The detail shows embroidery of a figure standing on tiled floor. *Photograph:* © S Tutty/The Dean & Chapter of Exeter Cathedral.

Cotehele's embroidered figures of Christ and the Apostles are worked onto linen with coloured silks and *filé* metal threads then applied to the deep crimson velvet ground cloth. Each figure now stands on a mound of fine green tabby-weave silk divided into triangles, squares or diamonds by stitched lines that hardly convey any sense of depth. Meanwhile the embroidered turreted arches above – that do attempt to display perspective – are applied separately to the velvet but without the characteristic embroidered background filling (fig 11). In past literature, there has been little questioning as to whether the construction of the Apostles cloth is contemporary with the date of the embroideries. Only in 1947 did Wingfield Digby suggest the piece to be made up from parts of a medieval pall. Evidence for this is not now apparent, but there are several reasons to wonder whether the crimson velvet is the original ground for Christ and Apostles under their canopies. Although this velvet has long been associated with the Apostles cloth and the fleur-de-lis motifs do appear to be deliberately arranged around the current placement of the arches, it seems most unusual to display such canopied figures without an embroidered background including either tiles in perspective or a flowering ground. The appliquéd fine green woven silk on which they now stand appears incongruous, depicting neither a tiled floor nor a grassy mound (figs 1 and 11). Possible depiction of tiles closest to this can be seen in





Fig 10. The St Petrock pall at Exeter Cathedral. The detail shows embroidery of a figure standing on grassy flowered mound. *Photograph:* © S Tutty/The Dean & Chapter of Exeter Cathedral.

two of the scenes on the Exeter St Petrock Pall, but these are altogether less sophisticated images and, even then, they are worked in silk thread within a fully embroidered background (fig 9).

A condition report of the Apostles cloth in the 1990s mentions that stitching holding the embroideries was causing distortion and fullness between the figures, necessitating some overlapping of the velvet during conservation.<sup>65</sup> This would indicate that application to this velvet was not the original making up for this piece. However, it does appear that the embroideries retain their original orientation, with each Apostle posed facing in towards the central Christ figure. Incidentally, the conservation report also records tightness in a ribbon surround binding with loops along the top for hanging. This is reminiscent of the making up of the current black cloth. Perhaps the two pieces were given this format around the same time (between 1820 and 1840), probably when the Apostles cloth was supported on coarse turkey-red twill. Aside from this nineteenth century intervention, an earlier re-configuration of the Christ and Apostles embroideries surely has to be considered. If not their initial presentation, the velvet powdered with fleurs-de-lis has been in place at least since the eighteenth century. Seemingly identical velvet and fleurs-de-lis decoration are to be found on the upper part of Hope's third exhibited textile.

65. Textile Conservation, Ivy House Farm, Banwell, Avon 1993–5.



Fig 11. The Apostles cloth at Cotehele. The detail shows Saints James the Lesser and John the Evangelist standing on mounds of applied silk textile and without the characteristic embroidered background filling. *Photograph:* © National Trust/the author.

### THE MOTTO CLOTH

The third object presented by Hope in 1912 – here referred to as the motto cloth – ‘consists of a large panel of purple velvet powdered with applied gold fleur-de-lis arranged in rows. Attached to the lower edge is a band composed of a number of sections of gold embroidery on a beautiful fine plum-coloured velvet’.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the previous two pieces, there appear to be no accounts of this textile before the twentieth century. On the upper panel of velvet, Hope describes ‘traces in the middle of a kneeling figure having been applied there before the fleurs-de-lis were disposed as now’. This observation is difficult to discern today, but should not be dismissed. Evidence of angled seams towards the top of the textile might also suggest earlier use, maybe as part of a vestment. Characteristics of this velvet relate absolutely to those on the current textile ground of the Apostles cloth, in particular the condition of its physical breakdown, together with the loom width and the blue thread used to stitch seams and attach the similar ready-made standardised embroidered fleur-de-lis (fig 12).<sup>67</sup>

66. Hope 1912–13. Textile NT acc. no. 348392 (965 by 1860mm) currently in store at Cotehele.

67. Browne *et al* 2016, 78–9.



Fig 12. The motto cloth at Cotehele. The upper velvet is powdered with applied fleur-de-lis motifs, while the lower band shows embroidered monograms and mottos on earlier velvet. Detail of the proper left section. *Photograph:* © National Trust/the author.

In contrast to the upper panel, the lower band presents a very different quality of velvet, while the style of needlework varies greatly from that on the cloths already discussed.

The chief features of each section are a blue flowering plant with spiky top (meant apparently for the Cornish gentian), a monogram embroidered in gold, and two pairs of words with characteristic flourishes also embroidered in gold thread. The monogram is not the same throughout.<sup>68</sup>

Here the gold and coloured silk threads are worked directly onto the fine plum-coloured velvet, which – although abraded along the peaks of creases caused by slight tightness in the embroidery – shows nothing of the typical breakdown found in the upper velvet panel. From the linings present, it can be seen that the band was made as an entity before it was added to the upper panel, being longer in its breadth and having an unbleached linen lining that is brought forward to bind over the outer edges. Meanwhile the upper area is backed with a looser weave bleached linen. The pieces are joined with a strip of dark brown linen showing stitches across its centre in a blue thread similar to that found elsewhere, both here and on the Apostles cloth. Construction of this object is unusual: perhaps it was put

68. Hope 1912–13.



Fig 13. The motto cloth at Cotehele. Detail of the lower band with monogram referring to Sir Richard Edgcumbe I (d 1489). *Photograph*: © National Trust/the author.

together in its current form to cover for the altar surface with the embroidered border hanging over as a superfrontal.<sup>69</sup> Hope speculates that the embroidered pieces of the lower band once formed vertical orphreys from a vestment, later cut across and stitched in a horizontal layout, and he suggests the alternating central monograms could be RE and JT referring to Sir Richard Edgcumbe I and his wife Joan Tremayne, the parents of Piers Edgcumbe I.<sup>70</sup> Deciphering the lettering, he considers the motto repeated down either side of the central motifs to be *Null saurus diceset*, but he could not find a meaning for *diceset*.<sup>71</sup> In a National Trust guidebook dated 1953, this textile is listed in contents of the chapel as ‘An Altar Cloth. Fleur-de-lis in gold on maroon velvet, with border containing a Latin inscription, “*nul saurus diceset*” and two mottos cut from orphreys. English, late fifteenth century’. From the band it is possible to reconstruct nine vertical repeats showing the monograms alternating through the centre while the three-word motto continues downwards, offset from one side to the other (figs 13 and 14). On two more repeats, where

69. In the V&A Museum an altar frontal band, said to be of English embroidery 1480–1538, is made up in a similar manner (LOAN: BUTLER-BOWDON.4).

70. Sir Richard Edgcumbe I (d 1489) and his wife Joan Tremayne (d 1500).

71. Hope (1912–13) records that a Mr Jenkinson proposed the inscription read ‘*Nul sans Dieu se fait*’.



Fig 14. The motto cloth at Cotehele. Detail of the lower band with monogram referring to the wife of Sir Richard Edgcumbe, Joan Tremayne (d 1500). *Photograph*: © National Trust/the author.

the embroidery forms a narrower band, the motto is level side-to-side, *Null* opposite *Null* etc.<sup>72</sup>

Advice on dating and interpreting the embroidered lettering has been sought from some specialist historians, whose suggestions are presented here for consideration, although a definitive reading of the motto is yet to be confirmed.<sup>73</sup> Dr Joanna Mattingly agreed that the embroidery dated from the mid to late fifteenth century, citing parallels with a similar style of lettering and mottos found on contemporary posy rings.<sup>74</sup> She considered that the needlework might be taken from a secular rather than ecclesiastical furnishing, such as a livery cloth made to hang behind a grand chair in the way a throne is depicted in the Luton Guild book of the 1520s.<sup>75</sup> If the monograms are those of Richard Edgcumbe I and his wife Joan Tremayne, then a dating of 1460–80s is possible. The text might be read as *Null sanus diceset*, which translates as ‘to say nothing is sound’ where sound means ‘healthy’.

72. Reconstruction using photographic images made by the author. About nine more pieces are cut too small to be placed.

73. The information following is taken from emails to the author.

74. Mattingly in Berry *et al* 2004. Murdoch 1991, 180, figs 74, 115, 117 and 118.

75. Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, Luton. Illustrated in Marks 2003, 54.

Professor James Clark, FSA concurred that the script does have the appearance of forms expected for the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century.<sup>76</sup> The marks of abbreviation after *Null* and the single stroke ‘s’ replicate forms found in manuscripts of this period. The first line of text could be read as *Null(um)*. In the second line, Clark saw a clearly intelligible letter ‘a’, but was not convinced of it being preceded by ‘s’. The third line was read as two words, *dice* and *set* [= *sed*], since the single stroke ‘s’ most commonly indicates an initial letter.

Professor Nicholas Orme, FSA remarked on the interesting flower motif and considered the monograms very fancy, seemingly not following conventions of script.<sup>77</sup> They should be read as RE and IT rather than JT – J had not yet emerged as a separate letter and was usually rendered as I in initials and acronyms. Concerning the motto, Orme wondered whether the embroidery could be of French or Flemish origin, in which case it might reflect different regional spellings either from Anglo-Norman or from standard Parisian French. The most likely reading was *Null saunz Diee set*, meaning ‘There is nothing without God knowing’. Dr A B Hunt, a leading authority on Anglo-Norman and medieval French,<sup>78</sup> initially read the motto similarly to Orme as ‘nothing without God’s knowledge’, interpreting *set* as a form of *savoir* and citing two similar examples in Joseph Morawski’s list of early French proverbs: *Deu set tot* (587) and *N’i vaut celee. Deu set tot* (1393).<sup>79</sup> He also considered the ‘commonplace and slightly platitudinous’ *Nihil sine Deo* meaning ‘everything is the work of God’, but he could not find a medieval attestation of this in Hans Walther’s *Proverbia sententiaeque*.<sup>80</sup>

#### SUMMARY – SURVIVAL OF THE CHAPEL FURNISHINGS AT COTEHELE

The embroidered figures on the Apostles and the Jeremiah cloth have clear provenance within the Edgcumbe family, dating from around 1500 through the presence of a shield bearing the arms of Sir Piers I and his wife Joan Durnford. Their existence at Cotehele has been recorded by visitors to the house throughout the centuries in a unique collection of written accounts. The motto cloth – although seemingly not mentioned until early in the twentieth century – appears to carry the monograms of Sir Piers I’s parents, Sir Richard Edgcumbe I and Joan Tremayne. Its upper area of velvet is directly comparable to the current ground textile of the Apostles cloth and there is evidence to suggest that these two objects were assembled in their present form at the same time. Both are seamed with a blue thread that also holds the powdering of identical applied fleur-de-lis motifs. Even when furnishings have been maintained within one family property, they do not always retain their original form and the alterations that have been made are rarely fully recorded. Changes seen here may possibly have been influenced by the restrictions imposed during the Tudor Protestant Reformation, yet the remarkable number of historic accounts of Cotehele suggest it was never considered that the chapel and its furnishings be concealed from view, as was imperative within the houses of recusant Catholic families for many years from the mid-sixteenth century onwards.<sup>81</sup>

76. James Clark, FSA is professor of history at Exeter University.

77. Professor Nicholas Orme, FSA is honorary university fellow of Exeter University.

78. Dr A B Hunt FBA is vice-principal of St Peter’s College, Oxford.

79. Morawski 1925.

80. Walther 1963–9.

81. Brooks and O’Connor 2020.

The application of embroideries on the current Apostles cloth has to be questioned. It appears that the figures and canopies have been detached from their first making within a fully embroidered scene and reset on a velvet textile of slightly later date. This was not an uncommon practice as the style of ecclesiastical embroideries evolved. The history of change to the Jeremiah cloth is difficult to ascertain. The Old Testament prophet is noted as present on a previous fine black textile, but there is no mention of whether the other figures originated here too. Their style and pose suggests they also have been unpicked from under architectural canopies, except perhaps the wider scene of Saint Michael overcoming Satan. They may have been taken for another textile associated with funerals.<sup>82</sup> The current black hanging was put together sometime in the early to mid-nineteenth century and seems to have continued in use as a mourning cloth. On the motto cloth there is no religious iconography involved and the orphreys cut for the lower band are possibly taken from a secular furnishing. In the eighteenth century Queen Charlotte did witness the re-use of priests' vestments to cover chair seats, but by that time the Edgcumbe furnishings were already being put together to create antique interiors. The tradition of presenting Cotehele to the outside world as an antiquarian house continued into the nineteenth century.<sup>83</sup> This can be seen particularly in the set of lithographs after Condry. One image depicts the Apostles cloth hanging in the chapel, while another shows it used to enhance a scene of the Best Bedroom.

While survival of late medieval ecclesiastical embroideries is known to occur in the areas of England that saw less zealous activity on the part of the Church Commissioners during the Reformation, the chapel furnishings discussed here must also owe their further preservation to the antiquarian interest of the Edgcumbe family at Cotehele. The 'three remarkable pieces' exhibited by W H St John Hope to the Society of Antiquaries can surely be acknowledged as rare survivals of pre-Reformation liturgical furnishings preserved in the domestic chapel of the family for whom they were made.

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83. Hunt 2013, 24.

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