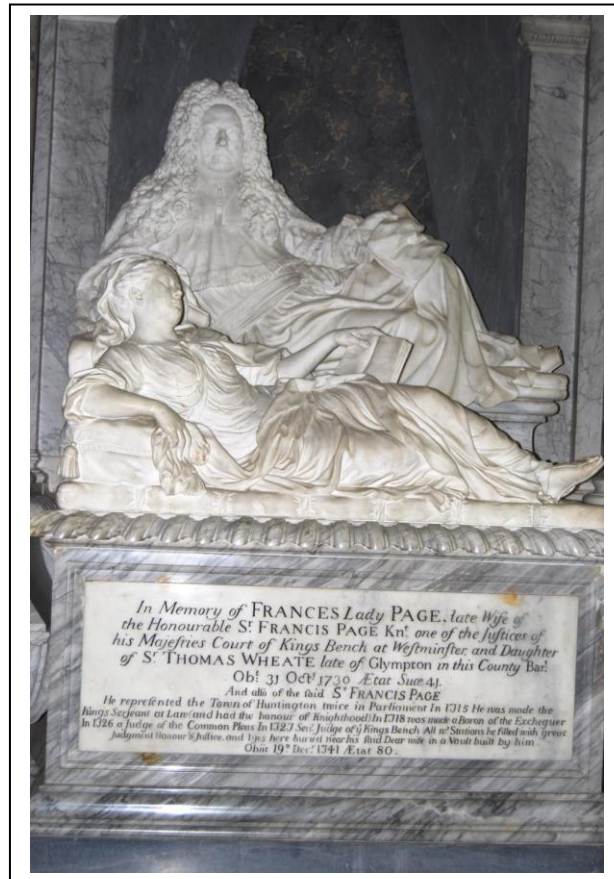




STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

THE HANGING JUDGE – HARSHLY JUDGED?

In the July 1980 edition of SAL, there is a report of a party of Australians who were guests in the village for a day and attended a service in the Church. Afterwards, they were shown round and on seeing the extraordinary monument to Judge and Lady Page were heard to say “we don’t have anything like this back home”. Indeed there are some, even today, who would rather that this somewhat pompous sculpture were somewhere else. William Wing, in his 1875 Annals of Steeple Aston, said that it was handsome, costly, well-executed, but tasteless. The image of Judge Page as a larger-than-life figure seems to reflect the arrogance of a man who commissioned this acknowledged work of art as a tribute to his late wife, but also to himself (although he lived on for another eleven years). It was to be placed in the private chapel that he had created in the church some years before his death.



Francis Page was born around 1660, the second son of Rev. Nicholas Page, vicar of Bloxham. At the age of about 30 he married Isabella White, and they moved to Middle Aston Manor House which was probably of Elizabethan origin, and stood close to the site of the current Middle Aston House. Isabella died childless and at the age of 45 Francis was married again, to Frances, the 16-year old daughter of Sir Thomas Wheate of Glympton.

Page was a lawyer and became MP for Huntingdon for 5 years until 1713, rising rapidly in stature to his knighthood two years later, and was then appointed as a judge. However, he remained active in local politics and in 1722 was accused of corruption in the political affairs of Banbury. References to our local market town in the House of Commons are not frequent

(although recently controversy over the Horton hospital did make the pages of Hansard), but this affair prompted an official hearing in the House. The good Judge stood accused of bribing town councillors to rig the forthcoming election so that his favoured Whig candidate would succeed. He was exonerated, but with a margin of only four votes.

He gained a reputation as a harsh judge, and handed down the death sentence often enough to earn the nickname of “the hanging judge”. He was not, of course, the first judge to have that title- the most famous being Judge Jeffreys in the previous century- and neither was it uncommon for Judges in the 18th century to be equally brutal in their verdicts. In 1728 his trial of Richard Savage, a well-known and respected poet and man of letters who was charged with murder, brought Page into conflict with the world of fashion. Page, the son of a country parson, enjoyed poking fun at the fashionable London set, and he was scathing about Savage, misrepresenting and humiliating him in court, before convicting and sentencing him. Page was already known for his “savage” wit in court (please forgive the pun). But he had reckoned without Savage’s powerful friends, who obtained his pardon. Savage then proceeded to harass the Judge by mimicking him in his writing, and other more well-known writers took to this new sport with relish- Pope, Fielding, and Johnson all denounced the Judge in their published works, which only served to increase Page’s notoriety. Clearly he didn’t mind. At the age of 80, still in court, an acquaintance apparently enquired after his health. “My dear sir,” came the reply, “you see I keep *hanging* on, *hanging* on”.

It is said that he had sentenced 100 men to hang, and there was a local myth that at midnight the ghosts of the widows of the men he had hanged took the form of owls, and pursued him up and down the big pond (presumably the lake at Middle Aston House) on which the hapless Judge floated in a beer-barrel. There is another legend that Page refused to pay the agreed amount to the sculptor of the monument, Hendrick Scheemakers, who in revenge neglected to carve a wedding ring on Lady Page’s finger. Of that we will never know the truth. Hendrick’s brother Peter, incidentally, was the sculptor of the fine outdoor sculptures at Rousham.

William Wing tells us that the private chapel in which the monument originally sat was enclosed by a heavy and unsightly gallery that had been inserted by Page as part of his wide-ranging renovations, which “disfigured and injured the parish church”. He is also accused among numerous stains on his memory of “wanton destruction of ancient monuments to make room for his own erected in his life-time”. The gallery and screening was subsequently removed, bringing the chapel back within the public realm. In his 1929 book “History of Steeple and Middle Aston” Brookes does his best to rehabilitate the reputation of this much-mocked public figure. It seems that in his will the Judge was very generous to servants, friends and family alike, and could therefore hardly have been in reality a cruel or hard character. Brookes makes perhaps the fairest point of commentators about the monument: “He had no child, he should be remembered by his tomb.” In modern times, of course, it would be unusual for serving judges to create (or indeed write) monuments to themselves or their spouses, although there is perhaps a current example!

Sir Francis Page was the lord of the manor of Middle Aston. When he died in 1741, he left his estate to the son of his late wife’s brother, on condition that he change his surname to Page, so that the family name would not die out. So Francis Bourne became the second Francis Page, and in due course became an MP and was knighted. He lived on as the second Sir Francis Page at Middle Aston Manor House until his death in 1803, whereupon the estate was bought by Sir Clement Cottrell-Dormer, who decided to demolish and rebuild the house.

Martin Lipson