

John Somerset



As you enter St Michael's Church, you cannot miss a large plaster memorial to John Somerset, Gent, on the south wall. It is a work that is 'like marmite' in that you either love it or hate it.

John Somerset and Thomas Gilling were imprisoned during the Civil War for allegedly inciting the villagers to rebel against the Royalist troops who had been pillaging and raping our villagers. They were released after a few months without charge.

There is an excellent booklet published by Peter Synge in 1980 which describes these gentlemen in detail. John Somerset lived in what is now called Somerset Court (the east side of the motorway). He was a respected gentleman and a sheep farmer and, although he was given a limited commission, he was apparently no great soldier and believed to be a gentle, generous man. The vicar of the time came to his defence when he was in prison. John was a benefactor of the church and donated some of the church bells.

Looking carefully at the family crest at the top, one can see three gold stars on a green background and a lion rampant: Stars represent celestial goodness and one who is noble. Lion rampant symbolises bravery. Green signifies, abundance, joy, hope and loyalty in love.

He had two wives who are commemorated in the plasterwork. It is suggested that the lady shown on the left, was his first wife, who possibly died after giving birth to his fourth child. The lady on the right is likely to be Joanne, his wife, to whom he wrote whilst he was in prison.

George Drayton - a notable plasterer in Somerset at the time - was probably the craftsman behind this work. It is likely to be made of lime plaster mixed with sand and white hair and finished with a lime wash before painting. George was paid 10 guineas in 1636 for plastering the Axbridge Church ceiling, suggesting that the memorial may have cost the equivalent of £ 2-3000 today.

John Somerset – A poem by Bruce Wingate.

The late Bruce Wingate wrote and produced a poem about John Somerset, which is included below with kind permission of his wife, Sally.

John Somerset by Bruce Wingate

My name is John Somerset - Gent My desire on the whole, is to breed sheep on the Knoll.

I have no warlike intentions, But fate is taken out of my hand.

I have been given a commission and also a mission,

A civil war has broken out in these lands.

My task is somewhat contentious.

I have to look after the village and stop rape and pillage,

Done by the lewd and licentious.

There are some two score soldiers now here.

They are stealing and raping and stealing without any feeling, And they are filling the villagers with fear.

The distant village is revolting, Their anger is as high as the Knoll

So, with pitch fork and pole they have given these soldiers a right jolting. Now I am accused of rebellion.

Before I can blink, they threw me in clink And treated me just like a helot.

It is enough to make anyone weep.

They have my permission to stuff my commission. I want to get back to my sheep. On the wall in the church is my eulogy,

My family nicely carved in plaster - they could not afford alabaster

And the villagers say "What an EFF..igy"

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