‘[An] Impe entombed here doth lie’: the Besford Triptych and Child Memorials in Post-Reformation England

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In the tiny country church at Besford near Pershore in Worcestershire there stands against the south-aisle wall a rare example of a painted wooden memorial picture from around 1600. The number of English wooden memorials from the Tudor and Stuart period is tiny, but there is a significant cluster centred on the west Midlands where the Netherlandish painter and tomb-maker Melchior Salaboss is known to have been active. The Besford triptych is, then, a representative of a modest sub-genre amongst the thousands of extant monuments from this period; but it is also a rarity on a second level since it was erected to the memory of a child, evidently a member of the Harewell family. Although the work is now in a poor state of conservation, it is passably well documented in antiquarian sources and a reconstruction of its painted imagery and verbal texts alerts us to a number of important themes for child monuments in general and raises an intriguing set of questions about the development of the type in the early 1600s.

By way of context, an analysis of the Harewell monument requires some knowledge of child iconography on post-Reformation monuments and a closer examination of certain iconographic categories such as the group of tombs dedicated to the memory of drowned children. We also need to understand the role of the child in monuments erected to record the death of the mother in childbirth and to note passing references to the Holy Innocents theme as well as motifs such as the cradles so often depicted. A survey of a number of monuments to children at Besford, at Magdalen College, Oxford, and elsewhere illustrates the increasing didactic
range of post-Reformation tombs and the development by degrees of a child type partly but not completely independent of adult stereotypes.

The primary function of the post-Reformation English funeral monument was to commemorate the dead in ways that established by example models to be followed by the living.\textsuperscript{4} With the increasing popularity of monuments in the final years of Elizabeth's reign and the broadening of the social types who were thus commemorated – no longer just the nobility and churchmen but the wider ranks of the gentry and, increasingly, members of the professions – the range of exemplary models was steadily broadened too. Child monuments, such as the Besford triptych, developed as part of this process. Through monuments, public attention was drawn to the fact that children could have 'Good Lives' and 'Good Deaths', paralleling those of adults. And, visitors to churches were taught that children's behaviour in the face of adult death could also be exemplary.

The monument at Besford is of oak; it is over seven feet in height by just over three feet in width, and like all triptychs it is designed to be seen both open and closed, more usually the latter. Indeed, it is not easy to speculate with any confidence about times or occasions when the triptych might have been open to inspection. So poor is the present state of the painted panels, that photographs fail adequately to describe these images and we must rely on verbal accounts. The wings of the triptych are painted inside and out, although the central panel is painted on one side only. The subject-matter of the decorative work on the exterior wings is heraldic. On the viewer's left – the heraldic senior, patriarchal or dexter side – are the quartered arms of Edmund Harewell III, the Worcestershire squire who was the father of the subject. To the right are the arms of the mother, Susan Colles from nearby Leigh. The mass of quarterings showed the genealogy of the Harewells in a lineage which can be traced back to the late fourteenth century and was an appropriate public expression of the family's prestige and of genealogical continuity. The enshrining of such continuity was indeed one of the triptych's main functions since the presence of the monument in the church was intended to cushion the break in the family line represented by the death of its subject, who was almost certainly Edmund Harewell IV. He died young at a date unknown, perhaps close in time to the death of his brother, one John Harewell, born in 1596 who also died very young and who