RALPH de CHADDESDEN

Just seven miles to the south-east of Chaddesden lies the village of Sawley, its church containing a thirteenth-century effigy of a priest now thought to be that of Ralph de Chaddesden. Who was Ralph and what was his association with Sawley?

Sawley Church from an old postcard.

A surprisingly large number of people called *de Chaddesden* can be found scattered throughout the pages of medieval history. Named after their home village, were they all related? It seems rather unlikely, although of course some would have been. One of the earliest of those bearing this name was Ralph de Chaddesden, who forms the subject of this article.

Ralph first appears in 1236, during the long reign of Henry III, when the episcopal register of Bishop Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln has this reference to an institution to the rectory of Wymondham[1] in the archdeaconry of Leicester, which formed a part of his vast diocese:

> *Know all men that by the presentation of the Prior and convent of Tutbury, patrons of the church of Wymondham,[2] we have admitted our beloved son Ralph of Chaddesden, cleric, to the same church, and have instituted him canonically in it. Witnesses: John Northampton, William Stowe and Gilbert Huntingdon, Archdeacons, Masters Thomas Walensis, R. de Kaden, J. de Crake, and Thomas de Askeby, canons of Lincoln. Given at Buckden the 8th kal. of June in the first year of our pontificate [25 May 1236].*[3]

The register also tells us that Ralph de Chaddesden was actually a sub-deacon at the time of his institution as rector of Wymondham. This is helpful, since it gives some idea of his age. To be a sub-deacon, which was the lowest of the three major clerical orders (sub-deacon, deacon, priest) in the medieval Catholic church, Ralph would have needed to be at least 18 years old and celibate.[4] Additionally, the rector of a parish church had to be a minimum of 25 years of age, with a suitable character and education, and if not already a priest was intending to become one.[5] If we assume that Ralph had therefore been born c.1211, it might still be thought he was far too young to be appointed as rector of a church, but as with most things medieval, wealth and influence counted for more than age or ability, and since Ralph evidently came from a privileged background – his brother being Sir William de Chaddesden – he could surely have relied on his family to facilitate his career in the church.[6]

Wymondham Church in the late 18th century.

After being presented by Tutbury Priory to the rectory of Wymondham, Ralph would have been entitled to the profits of his new benefice, e.g. the greater tithes, etc., thereby enabling him – if he so wished – to employ a substitute to act as vicar in his stead.[7] It is therefore quite possible that Ralph could have been an absentee rector, living away from the parish.

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1 Here, as elsewhere, in this article, the term 'rectory' means not just the residence of the rector, but the benefice or living held by the rector including its land, tithes and other offerings of the parishioners.

2 Wymondham is some 6 miles east of Melton Mowbray.

3 F. N. Davis, ed., *Rotuli Roberti Grosseteste, Episcopi Lincolniensis, 1235–1253*, London,1913, pp.387, 389. The original entry is in Latin, the English text here being an edited version of a Google translation. Buckden in Huntingdonshire was the location of the bishop's favourite manor house.

4 P. Cullum, 'Boy/Man into Clerk/Priest: The Making of the Late Medieval Clergy', in *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century,* New York, 2004, pp. 51-65.

5 Some 40 years later, the Council of Lyons (1274) would decree that sub-deacons must be ordained priests within one year of their institution or else lose their benefice.

6 Unfortunately the names of Ralph and William's parents are not known with any certainty.

7 The term 'vicar' is derived from the Latin '*vicarius*', meaning substituted.

Tutbury Priory and the villages of Chaddesden and Wymondham were linked together by their common connection with the de Ferrers family. They were the priory's principal benefactors and in 1086, when the Domesday Book was compiled, Henry de Ferrers was one of the greatest tenants-in-chief of William the Conqueror, holding more than 200 manors spread over 14 counties,[8] including Spondon, Chaddesden and part of Morley in Derbyshire and Wymondham in Leicestershire. Tutbury Priory was actually classed as an alien priory since its mother house was the abbey of St. Pierre-sur-Dives in Normandy, the very region that was home to Henry de Ferrers.[9]

Quite how long Ralph de Chaddesden remained as rector of Wymondham is uncertain. John Nichol's *History* lists the next rector taking office in 1286, so the names of one or more holders of the benefice are evidently missing.[10]

West front of Chester Cathedral, 1975.

November 1246 saw Ralph de Chaddesden appointed as archdeacon of Chester in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield[11] when his predecessor there, Silvester de Everdon,[12] became bishop of Carlisle. In Ralph's day Chester Cathedral was simply the Abbey of St. Werburgh. As archdeacon of Chester Ralph presumably spent much of his time at Coventry – then the administrative centre of the diocese – however, he would doubtless have returned home to Derbyshire at various times; on one such one occasion he witnessed this seemingly ordinary local land transaction which rather interestingly lists the names of two more people sharing his surname:

> *Sale and confirmation by William son of Hugh le Forcer, of Mackworth to Robert son of William le Vavasur of Shipley, of ½ acre land in the territory of Mackworth, abutting on 'le Rugelowediche,' etc.*[13] *Witnesses: Master Ralph de Chaddesden, archdeacon of Chester, Nicholas, constable of Tutbury, Thomas Young (Juvenis) of Derby, Thomas de Chaddesden, Henry de Braines, Henry Tuchet*.[14]

At first glance this summary, dating from around 1248 or thereabouts, appears to name just two people called de Chaddesden, yet there is a third since Nicholas the constable of Tutbury is referred to in several other documents as either de Chaddesden or de Breadsall, demonstrating just how flexible early forms of surname could be! Note also that here the archdeacon is cited as 'Master Ralph de Chaddesden', the word 'Master' (Latin, *Magister*) usually signifying someone educated at a university, which in Ralph's case might have been Oxford, Cambridge, or Paris.

Ralph continued as archdeacon of Chester until late 1249 or early 1250 when he was appointed treasurer of Lichfield Cathedral; he and other members of the Cathedral chapter meeting in their new chapter-house built only a few years previously.[15] His years at Lichfield coincided with the episcopates of Bishop Roger Weseham (1245–1256) and then Bishop Roger Meuland (alias Longespée,1257–1295), which marked a period of substantial expansion at the cathedral as its chapter grew in wealth and independence.

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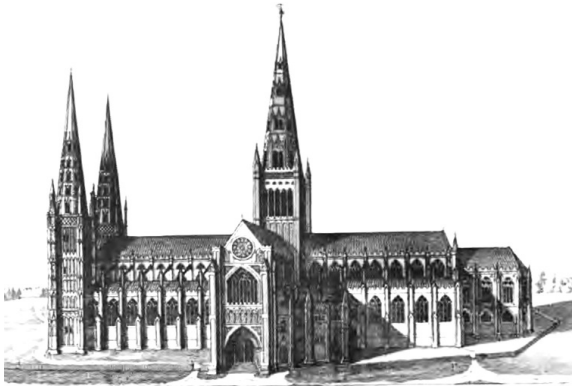
8 A. Saltman, ed., *The Cartulary of Tutbury Priory*, HMSO, 1962, p.5.
9 St. Pierre-sur-Dives Abbey was founded by the Countess Lesceline, great-aunt of William the Conqueror.
10 J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, Vol. 2, Pt. 1, London, 1795, p.406.
11 Chester did not become a diocese in its own right until 1541. Note that various writers have incorrectly described Ralph de Chaddesden as archdeacon of Coventry – this was a post he never held!
12 Everdon was Lord Chancellor of England from 1244 to 1246 and archdeacon of Chester from 1245 to 1246.
13 Rugelowediche – possibly Rowditch.
14 The National Archives, C 146/5588. Spelling of names modernised.
15 *Victoria County History – Staffordshire*, Vol.3, 144 (via British History Online) states Ralph de Chaddesden was treasurer of the cathedral from c.1259, however, this is 10 years too late since there are references to him holding this office from 1249 onwards.

In 1256 after Bishop Roger Weseham was stricken with paralysis and had to stand down, the annals of Burton Abbey tell how several representatives of the diocese including the prior of Coventry and Ralph de Chaddesden as treasurer of Lichfield travelled to London with a letter to Boniface, Archbishop of Canterbury, in which they described how, after being given permission by the king to elect a new bishop, the two chapters of the churches of Coventry and Lichfield had duly met at Coventry and unanimously chosen Roger Meuland and were therefore seeking the archbishop's confirmation of their chosen candidate.[16]

Whether by virtue of his own personal qualities or his position as treasurer of the cathedral, Ralph de Chaddesden was frequently called upon to mediate in disputes. For example, in 1255 he intervened in an argument between the abbot and convent of Burton and Richard the vicar of Mickleover on the one part, and Peter de Thok, lord of Potlak, on the other part, concerning the chantry in the chapel of Potlak and various tithes.[17] Ralph steered them towards a compromise which today makes interesting reading simply because the tiny settlement of Potlak and its chapel vanished many years ago and all that now remains is Potlock House Farm between Findern and Willington.



Lichfield Cathedral in the late 17th century.

The following year he attempted to settle a problem which was eventually solved in a rather unusual way. In this case the two parties – the abbot of Haughmond Abbey to the north-east of Shrewsbury and the dean and chapter of St. Mary, Shrewsbury – disputed the advowson (right of patronage) of the chapel of Fitz, some 4 miles north-west of Shrewsbury. Failing to resolve their differences they decided the best way to proceed was to settle the affair by means of trial by battle, which was won by the abbot of Haughmond's champion![18] In his summation, Ralph de Chaddesden made reference to the '*duellum fuit inde inter eos armatum*', in other words the armed duel between them.

As treasurer of Lichfield Cathedral, Ralph became the *ex officio* holder of the prebend of Sawley, or Sallowe as it was sometimes known in earlier times. A prebend was a specific part of the revenues of the cathedral allowed to a clergyman, and Ralph was fortunate in that the Sawley prebend, which included the rectory of both Sawley and Wilne churches and their tithes, etc., was the most valuable of all those in the cathedral. Cox notes that the churches of Sawley and Wilne were first specifically assigned to the office of treasurer to the cathedral in 1255 and that 'from henceforth the Treasurer was always prebendary of Sawley'.[19]

Thanks to the generous prebendal revenues, Ralph was able to embark on alterations to Sawley Church on quite a large scale. He seemingly added the north and south aisles to the nave, and then, perhaps in the late 1260s, built the chantry of the Blessed Virgin in the new north aisle.[20] The chaplain of this new chantry needed a stipend and in 1271 Ralph made sure that Burton Abbey was legally bound to Lichfield Cathedral to pay £5 annually in Sawley parish church to the chaplain, in order to ensure that a mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary would be celebrated in perpetuity for the souls of Master Ralph de Chaddesden and for the souls of the bishops and deans, and of the canons of Lichfield and of all the faithful deceased.[21] On 6 March 1272 Ralph also made a grant of a toft of land in Sawley to the chantry chaplain and his successors who would be '*ministering in the said chapel and celebrating the mass of the blessed Mary there with an appropriate clerk*.'[22]

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16 H. R. Luard, ed., *Annales Monastici*, Vol.1, *De Margan, Theokesberia, et Burton*, London, 1864, p.377–8.
17 J. H. Denton & P. M. Hoskin, eds., *English Episcopal Acta 44: Coventry & Lichfield 1258–1295*, British Academy, 2014, p.383–6. Staffordshire Record Office, D603/A/Add/128.
18 J. H. Denton & P. M. Hoskin, eds., *English Episcopal Acta 43: Coventry & Lichfield 1215–1256*, British Academy, 2014, p.256–7.
19 J. C. Cox, *Churches of Derbyshire,* London & Derby, Vol.4, p.377.
20 Cox, *Churches*, 4, p.385.
21 G. Wrottesley, 'The Burton Chartulary (Derbyshire Portion)', in *Derbyshire Archaeological Journa*l, Vol.7, 1885, pp.97–153, fol. 110, 146–7.
22 J. H. Denton & P. M. Hoskin, eds., *English Episcopal Acta 44: Coventry & Lichfield 1258–1295*, British Academy, 2014, p.33–4.

During his long ecclesiastical career Ralph acquired another benefice, following Silvester de Everdon (see above) as rector of Potterspury, Northamptonshire in the Diocese of Lincoln. Just like his first benefice at Wymondham, Potterspury had formed another of Henry de Ferrer's Domesday manors. There was also a Tutbury connection too, for the abbey of St. Pierre-sur-Dives, Tutbury's mother house, had the right to present to the living of Potterspury church in the 13th century.[23] Unfortunately in 1275, Ralph as rector of Potterspury was found to be holding a frankpledge court and an assize of bread and ale without the necessary warrant.[24] Frankpledge was a system of corporate responsibility designed to ensure that anyone accused of an offence would appear in court to answer the charge, and the assize of bread and ale was simply intended to regulate the weight, quality and price of these two staple items of food. It is unlikely that Ralph ever had chance to remedy this situation for within a year he was dead and was succeeded at Potterspury by one of his own executors, William de Henovere.

At the time of his death in either late 1275 or early 1276, Ralph de Chaddesden would probably have been in his mid to late 60s.[25] The Great Register of Lichfield noted that by his last will Ralph had left to the cathedral the huge sum of £100 in silver '*for the honour of God, the benefit of his soul, and the development of the Church*.'[26] This generous gift was timely, for the cathedral's nave was then in the process of being rebuilt and the de Chaddesden bequest would surely have helped to defray some of the considerable expenditure. Ralph's will, which does not seem to have survived, apparently expressed the wish that the dean and chapter of Lichfield Cathedral might establish a permanent memorial for his soul in the cathedral, and after consideration they granted that the sacrist (who would always be a priest) should celebrate daily, with the full office of the dead, at the altar of St. John the Baptist for the late treasurer's soul. In return for this additional work, the sacrist was to receive 2 marks annually from the fabric fund on the day of the Holy Trinity. On the day of Ralph de Chaddesden's obit, 20 shillings from the same fund was to be distributed by the fabric keeper and sacrist amongst the poor.[27] Lastly, each vicar taking part in the office of the dead on the day of the obit was to be paid 3d.

Although 25 years' service as treasurer at Lichfield would surely have entitled Ralph to burial within the Cathedral, he appears to have made other plans. Instead he was laid to rest in an elaborate canopied tomb in the north aisle of Sawley Church, in proximity to the chantry he had created some years previously. Cox refers to this '*most interesting and unique monument*' but then notes that during the 1838 restoration of the church it was '*pulled to pieces*'.[28] When the tomb was dismantled in 1838, various pieces of stonework were simply buried in the adjacent churchyard. However, c.1980 when some surviving carved fragments were examined by the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, their experts stated they were of the highest quality.

The art historian Veronica Sekules undertook a detailed analysis of the various remains and was fortunate in being able to access the written notes of an early visit to Sawley made by Godfrey Meynell in 1810, which included a monochrome drawing he had made of the tomb.[29] She noted that the Sawley tomb '*stood, as a kind of miniature chapel, screening the north aisle from the nave of the church and that it was intended to be seen from both sides*.' The stone pillars of the tomb supported a stone canopy decorated with beautifully carved censing angels, whilst between its pillars a decorative grille protected the effigy of its occupant, whom Sekules concluded must surely have been

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23 *Victoria County History – Northamptonshire*, Vol. 5, pp.289–345 (via British History Online).

24 *Rotuli Hundredorum*, Vol. 2, London, 1818, p.11. Potterspury is there called 'Estpiry.'

25 Cox, *Churches*, 4, pp.381–2, laboured under the misapprehension that de Chaddesden died in 1266, with Alan le Breton, the new treasurer of Lichfield, taking over the Sawley prebend in that year. This was based on a scribal error in a transcript of the episcopal registers attributing the ordination of Sawley vicarage to 1266 instead of 1276, a fact picked up by Sekules (see below) on p.177, fn.14 of her paper.

26 H. E. Savage, ed., *The Great Register of Lichfield Cathedral known as Magnum Registrum Album*, Collections for a History of Staffordshire, 1926, p.115, no.244.

27 An obit was a memorial service on the anniversary of the day of death. The payment of 20s to the poor was still being made in 1347, *VCH Staffs*, Vol. 14, pp.189–194 (via British History Online), citing Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 794, pt.1

28 Cox, *Churches*, 4, p.386.

29 V. Sekules, 'A lost tomb from Sawley', in *The Vanishing Past: Studies of Medieval Art, Liturgy and Metrology presented to Christopher Hohler*, Oxford, 1981, pp. 173-177

Ralph de Chaddesden, lying alongside the chantry he founded a few years prior to his death. The Sawley monument is remarkable for being the only known thirteenth-century example of a carved stone canopied tomb in a parish church, such expensive tombs only being commissioned by the wealthiest members of society.

Sawley censing angel © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

After some careful restoration two censing angels were placed on loan to the V & A Museum and, as exhibits 341 and 342, went on to form part of the Royal Academy's *Age of Chivalry* exhibition in 1987.[30] The exhibition catalogue noted that in addition to these two angels on display, seven other fragments from the canopy tomb had survived, i.e. four sections of mouldings, the bottom half of a third censing angel, and two pieces of a fourth angel which had also been restored.[31] The angels themselves were carved from limestone, the mouldings from sandstone (both local outcrops).

In these Sawley examples the angels would originally have swung incense censers, with the smoking incense rising out of the censers an allusion to prayers rising heavenwards. Although the censers were either accidentally or deliberately damaged many years ago, perhaps at the time of the Reformation, this much more modern example of 1920 from the painting by John Eadie Reid in the reredos frame at the east end of the south aisle in St. Mary's Church, Chaddesden, demonstrates that censing angels were still a popular artistic theme many centuries later.[32]

Sawley censing angel © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Censing angel, St. Mary's Church, Chaddesden, 1920.

Sawley Church contains two 13th century effigies without inscriptions and since Victorian times there has been confusion as to exactly who they are supposed to represent. Cox was of the opinion that the better-preserved one depicted Hugh de Scoter, the first vicar of Sawley, 1266–1315 and also chantry priest of the Blessed Virgin, but as Sekules points out, Cox had based de Scoter's dates upon an incorrect transcript of a

Effigy in Sawley Church, believed to be that of Ralph de Chaddesden.

30 At some point in history the angels appear to have been painted as traces of red paint are still visible today.

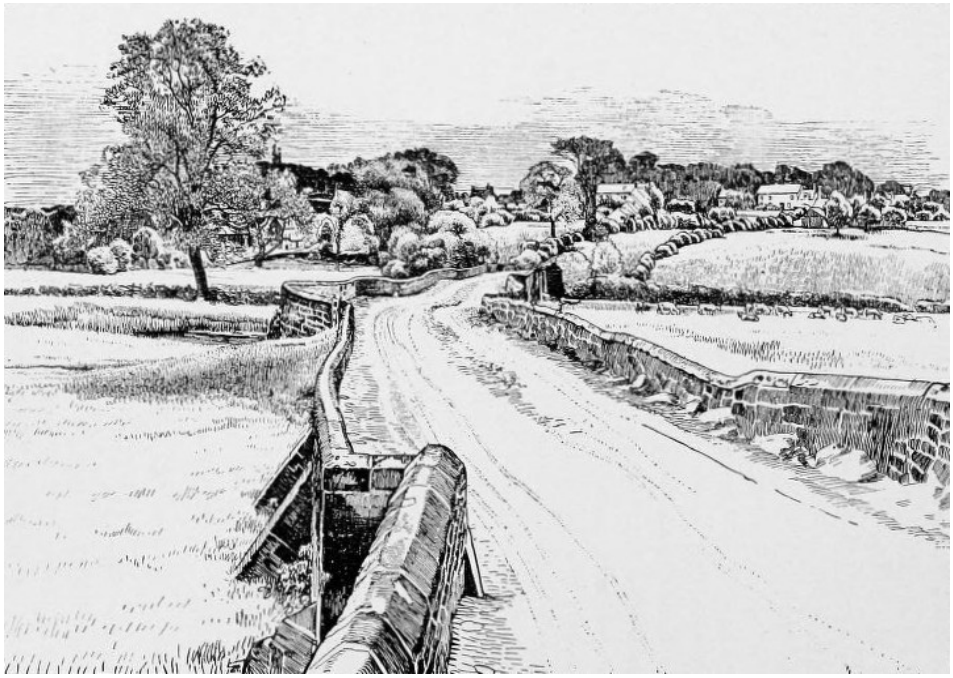
31 J. Alexander & P. Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England, 1200–1400*, Royal Academy, 1987, nos. 341–2, pp.345–6.

32 The Chaddesden example forms part of *The Adoration of the Magi,* one of Reid's favourite settings.

document and de Scoter did not become vicar until Ralph de Chaddesden's death in late 1275 or early 1276. It therefore seems much more likely that the effigy pictured above of a robed and tonsured priest, his well-carved drapery even showing the maniple placed over his left arm near the wrist, is that of Ralph de Chaddesden, whose executors would have been singularly well-placed to afford such an expensive memorial.

Ralph's executors, William de Chaddesden and William de Henovere, were summoned by the Bishop of Coventry & Lichfield in June 1284 to appear before him to report on the administration of the will.[33] Although no further information is provided, perhaps all £100 of Ralph's bequest had not yet been paid to the cathedral.[34] It was, after all, a huge sum for those days and given the fact that there had been a complete national recoinage in 1279 it is quite possible the executors were facing problems in getting Ralph's debtors to pay up. This may well indeed have been the situation, for in 1293, 17 years after Ralph's death, a debt of 160 marks (£106 13s 4d) owing to his estate by Hugh de Vienna had only just been paid![35] This sum is almost identical to the amount of Ralph's bequest to the cathedral and raises the question as to why Ralph de Chaddesden had lent the money to Hugh de Vienna in the first place?

Things become a little clearer when it is realised that Hugh de Vienna or de Vienne was a clerk in the service of King Edward I's brother, Edmund Crouchback of Lancaster, and regularly acted as one of his master's attorneys when Edmund was abroad. Furthermore he apparently had permission to use the earl's seal too.[36] Might the sum of 160 marks Hugh borrowed from Ralph de Chaddesden have had anything to do with the earl? A short entry in the annals of Dunstable Priory in Bedfordshire suggests this may have been the case, for it notes that both Edmund of Lancaster and his clerk died in 1296 and then has this to say about Hugh: '*In the same year died Hugh de Vyenne, steward of the said earl, who spent seemingly endless sums of money on the construction of the stone bridge at Cordisbrygge beyond Trent, while he was still alive*.'[37] 'Endless sums of money' – this phrase could easily include Ralph de Chaddesden's loan, especially when it is realised that Cordisbrygge or Cordy Bridge is in fact an early name for the ancient Swarkestone Bridge, carrying the road leading from Derby to Coventry, which was at this point in time the executive centre for the Diocese of Coventry & Lichfield. Ralph de Chaddesden would certainly have been familiar with the bridge and may well have used it many times when travelling between Derbyshire and Coventry. The bridge was first mentioned in a 1204 charter of King John to the burgesses of Derby,[38] and throughout its long life has frequently suffered damage by heavy floods requiring major repairs and rebuilds on numerous occasions.



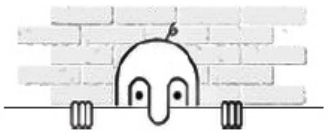
A view of Swarkestone Bridge and Causeway crossing the River Trent and its flood plain.

33 William de Henovere – possibly named from either Rough Heanor (Mickleover parish), or the town of Heanor.
34 Davis & Douie, eds., *The Register of John Pecham, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1279-1292*, Canterbury & York Society, Vol.65, Vol 2, p.229, 1969
35 *Calendar of the Close Rolls*, Edward I, 1288–1296, HMSO, 1904, p.315.
36 E. Gemmill, 'The earls and their clergy in the reign of Edward I', in *Bulletin of John Rylands Library*, Vol.88, Iss.1, 123–152, p.138.
37 H. R. Luard, ed., *Annales Monastici*, Vol. 3., *De Dunstaplia et Bermundeseia*, London,1866, p.402. The quotation is a Google translation from the original Latin.
38 T. H. Hardy, ed., *Rotuli Chartarum in Turri Londinensi asservati*, London, 1837, p.138.

In 1289, some 13 years after Ralph de Chaddesden's death, Bishop Roger Meuland noticed that Ralph had failed to specify exactly who should appoint future chantry priests at Sawley. He had worked with Ralph for many years and so naturally wanted to resolve this issue. In the discussion which followed, the bishop consulted with Sir William de Chaddesden, knight, who was '*Ralph's blood brother and heir and executor*.'[39] The others involved were two more of Ralph's executors, William de Henovere and Hugh of Church Eaton,[40] together with Alan le Briton, the current treasurer of Lichfield. Between them it was amicably decided that whoever was cathedral treasurer should appoint new chantry priests as necessary and also bear the cost of all repairs to the chantry chapel and its vestments. By the time the Sawley chantry was finally dissolved by Edward VI in the 1540s, its possessions were just 3 vestments, 3 altar cloths, a mass book and 2 towels, all of negligible value; the chantry's sole income was still the annual payment of £5 by Burton Abbey first made some 270 years previously![41] Of course, Ralph de Chaddesden's tomb and effigy still remained in Sawley Church, but as we have already seen they too suffered from the zealousness of later ages and now little remains to remind people of this thirteenth-century cleric who was once archdeacon of Chester and then treasurer of Lichfield Cathedral.

Illustration credits:

Sawley Church	1920s(?) postcard
Wymondham Church	J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, Vol. 2, Pt. 1, London, 1795, after p.404.
Chester Cathedral	© Peter Cholerton, 2025.
Lichfield Cathedral	A. B. Clifton, *The Cathedral Church of Lichfield*, London, 1898, p.2.
Two censing angels – Sawley	© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Censing angel – Chaddesden	© Peter Cholerton, 2025.
Ralph de Chaddesden's effigy	© Peter Cholerton, 2025.
Swarkestone Bridge	A drawing by Nelly Erichsen in Highways & Byways in Derbyshire, by J. B. Firth, 1908, p.30



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39 'Blood-brother' – full brother (I.e. by the same mother). J. H. Denton & P. M. Hoskin, eds., *English Episcopal Acta 44: Coventry & Lichfield 1258–1295*, British Academy, 2014, p.37–9.

40 Presumably Church Eaton, Staffordshire.

41 Cox, *Churches*, 4, 384.