

Rector Richard Bracket (c.1561–1635)

Only one pre-19th-century brass monument survives in St Augustine's church, Norwich: that to the memory of Richard Bracket, who was rector here from 1617 to 1634. For many years the plaque was thought lost but was rediscovered beneath fitted carpet under the communion table/altar inside the railed sanctuary in the chancel in 2013 by members of the Monumental Brass Society. According to the *Topographical History of Norfolk* by 18th-century historian Francis Blomefield, Bracket's memorial plaque was in the nave, which is unusual for the grave of a priest. Bracket's will, however, specified that he be buried in the chancel, preferably in the vault of one of his predecessors, possibly John Staller. The fact that Blomefield or his posthumous editor got the date of Bracket's death wrong – 1631 rather than 1634 – suggests he may have been relying on second-hand information. Its present position on the north side of the sanctuary at the east end of the chancel, attached to a ledger slab of an earlier 17th-century interment, suggests it may have been repositioned there, perhaps during the extensive building work undertaken by the Diocesan surveyor, R. M. Phipson, in the 1880s when the central aisle of the chancel was refloored with encaustic tiles.



Photo courtesy the Monumental Brass Society

Richard Bracket (or Brackett) was born in c.1561, the son of Richard Brackett, a gentleman farmer of Wrenningham, Norfolk. He was a pupil at Norwich's King Edward VI Grammar School for four years before going up to Cambridge in 1574 at the age of 13, having been admitted as a pensioner to Gonville and Caius College under the surety of the master of the college, Dr Thomas Legge, author of what is generally regarded as the first History play to be written in England. Here Bracket was a pupil of Dr Goolde, receiving his BA degree in 1577–8. In c.1582, aged 21, he spent six months at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; raising the tantalising possibility that he may have known the poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe, who was a student there at this period. On 21 December 1601, aged 40, he was ordained a deacon by the bishop of Norwich, William Redman, and appointed curate at Ashwellthorpe in south Norfolk. On 25 March 1602 he was ordained a priest by Bishop Redman and appointed curate at Intwood near Norwich, seat of the Hobart family. Prior to obtaining the living of St Augustine's in 1617, where he succeeded John Staller, Bracket had been a curate at St Martin at Palace, Norwich, since 1608. Here he was also a minor canon, meaning that he assisted at the services in the nearby cathedral. Interestingly, Rector Staller had also been a student at Gonville and Caius. During his time as rector of St Augustine's Bracket lived in the parish of St Martin at Palace. He also had property in Wrenningham, presumably inherited from his late father. He was married to Jane. The date of his marriage and his wife's maiden name have not yet been identified. They had at least six children: Richard, Elizabeth, Robert, John, Thomas and another daughter only known as Mrs Abraham Fynke, whose husband Bracket had a long-running dispute with over a debt not finally resolved until Bracket added a codicil to his will three days before his death cancelling the debt.

Richard Bracket died on 29 December 1634 at the age of 73. This year there was a localised outbreak of bubonic plague in St Augustine's, though the fact that he died in the winter when plague was normally dormant and was of sufficiently sound mind to be able to dictate a codicil to his will three days before he died suggests he simply died of old age. The church register notes that he was buried at St Augustine's on 2 January. According to his will the minister of the nearby parish of St Martin at Oak, Robert Kent, preached at his funeral. Among the most interesting items in his will, proved in 1635 by Norwich Consistory Court, were 10 shillings left for cakes and wine for 'the singing men and choristers' of St Augustine's, as well as 40 shilling for the same comestibles to be distributed among his neighbours in St Augustine's and 10 shillings each for the poor of St Augustine's and Wrenningham. He left his quilt and his wife's best petticoat to Mary, wife of his neighbour in St Martin at Palace, Peter Wilkenson, after his wife's decease. His will, also included mentioned of a number of religious paintings he owned, including one of the Hebrew heroine Judith and another of the Four Evangelists.

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The author is grateful to William Brackett for information on on his website 'Eight Hundred Years of the history of the name of Brackett', use with permission. Other principal sources: *Biographical history of Gonville and Caius college* and 'Painters in 16th and 17th century Norwich' by Virginia Tillyard, *Norfolk Archaeology* XXXVII (1980).