# How were they made?

All the tombs are carved from alabaster quarried at Chellaston, just south of Derby. The stone was taken by boat to Burton on Trent, where there were several workshops. Richard and Gabriel Royley made Francis and Dorothy's and John's tomb, whilst Garrett Hollemans (a Dutch immigrant) made George and Frances'.

Tombs like these were not cheap! The agreement for John's tomb survives and shows it cost £22, roughly equivalent to two years of skilled labour. This excluded the cost of transporting it to Breedon, which was to be done by George Shirley. Presumably this was done very carefully, given the cost of any repairs!

# The Shirley Tombs

Francis Shirley, who lived at nearby Staunton Harold Hall, bought the north aisle in the mid-16th century as a place of worship and burial for his family. His grandson, George, ordered the three tombs that now fill its east end. They commemorate his grandparents (Francis and Dorothy), his father (John) and him and his wife.

The tombs were a way for the Shirley family to show off their wealth and successful marriages. However, the family were Roman Catholic and the tombs contain hints of beliefs that would have been very unpopular in an Anglican church.

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# Breedon Priory Church


The Shirley Tombs

# Francis & Dorothy

Francis and Dorothy both died in 1571. It is said that Dorothy managed the estate and household as Francis was more interested in hunting! Their tomb, built the year after their death, was later moved, probably to make space for George and Frances' tomb. When this happened, it was found that Francis' body was 'as firm and entire as if it had been new buried...having only a black little bruise on the top of the great toe .'

In 1571, Dorothy's outfit, especially the pointed gable hood on her head, would have been considered old-fashioned. She and her daughters also have pomegranates on their pomanders (the chained item hanging from their waists). These were both associated with Catharine of Aragon, the Catholic queen whom Henry VIII abandoned. Were these chosen deliberately, knowing they would be on show in an Anglican church?

# John

John Shirley died the year before his father, in 1570. However, his monument was commissioned in 1585; maybe George needed to wait until he had enough money?! George's mother, Jane died in 1582, but is not depicted on the tomb, possibly because she had married again.

The tombs of John and his parents were made by the Royley workshop. The Royleys were less skilful than other Burton tomb carvers, such as the Parker workshop (who made the Earl of Huntingdon's tomb at Ashby). For example, spot the mismatched columns and the poorly carved dogs on the shields. The lion lying at John's feet could also be better! It has been argued that this was simply 16th-century taste, but as other workshops were producing higher quality tombs, the Royleys were probably cheaper than others. For his own tomb, George chose a much more expensive option.

# George & Frances


The memorial to George and Frances is dated 1598, three years after the death of Frances in childbirth (George did not die until 1622). George's grief is seen in the Latin inscription, which praises Frances and boasts about her family connections (her relations included two of Henry VIII's wives: Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard).

The tomb has one strange feature: a full-length skeleton. It may show how upset George was about Frances' death, but it also reminds people to pray for a dead person's soul. This is a Roman Catholic, rather than Anglican, belief; so maybe it was a way for George to show his faith in a world that viewed Catholics with suspicion?

In 1598, George married the very wealthy and strong-minded Dorothy Unton. She insisted that they had a prenuptial agreement so much in her favour that a contemporary noted he would not have married her at that price!