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George Shaw, ancient oak, and beds

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Interest in George Shaw (1810–76) from Uppermill, West Yorkshire, has emerged recently with the publication of an entry on him by BIFMO, as well as essays by the late Petford, Foyle, myself, and Bowett. Deservedly at the centre of research, Shaw was a provincial yet well-connected antiquary, an architect, furniture designer, and forger. Some of his traced furniture—particularly beds that he made and sold as ancient, antiquarian relics and a related example known as the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed, hereafter the royal bed—are at the centre of a debate. This essay explains the context within which Shaw's faked ancestral beds were produced and it makes observations about the qualities of these beds in comparison with the royal bed: it argues that the royal bed was not made by Shaw, but, instead, was one of two Tudor beds inspiring his forgeries.

Even as a teenager, Shaw was a prolific antiquary, collector, designer, and restorer of fragmented furniture, and his manuscripts capture his exploration of historic properties and their carved oak furniture. Concerning the collection of such fragments, Shaw wrote to Frederick Raines (1805–78), curate of Saddleworth Church, on 9 December 1839, that,

> I must say I am sorry selfishly sorry you may say that so many people are becoming affected by <u>our</u> taste, it makes all these matters so inconveniently dear, besides making our respective collections of less importance.—Although God knows I am far, very far, off from the aristocracy yet I feel most aristocratic on the subject of antiquities, and quite provoked when I hear of a <u>tradesman</u> having the impudence and audacity to think of furnishing his pig sty with carved oak.—[1]

[1] Manchester, Chetham's Library, Raines/2/2/178 no. 5.

His production of domestic and ecclesiastical Gothic furniture, of which his antiquarian fakes are a constituent part, was informed by such collecting as well as visits to country houses, and James Dearden (1798–1862) of Rochdale Manner appears to have encouraged him to monetise this expertise as a way of escaping his father's struggling business. In a letter to Dearden, Shaw asks,

> Pray what may you Mean by the sentence? "I could make you a more profitable a week than all Saddleworth trade ever will do for one of your ideas and opinions"
>
> —If you can put me in the way of some lucrative occupation, I shall be very much obliged to you I am sure, as my present one is become almost defunct.—[2]

As a furnituremaker, forger, and architect, Shaw certainly derived an income; his 1865 bill for work on Rochdale Manor totalled £594 10*s* 4*d*, and his bills for faked furniture sent to aristocrats in the 1840s amounted to hundreds of pounds.[3] Shaw's letter to Lord Derby attempting to sell him faked ancestral furniture from 7 January 1842 predates Dearden's suggestion by just over two months, however it is not inconceivable that he was suggesting Shaw to expanded his work as a furnituremaker into commercial enterprise, which he did.

Ancient oak beds especially appealed to Shaw, and his interest in such furniture is evident in a diary entry recalling his visit to Chetham's Library, Manchester, on 31 January 1832:

> Went to Manchester this morning […] I went to the College to see W Cropley the governor. W Aston of Castletown Hall told me to give his complements to W Cropley and he would show me a fine old bed he had got.—I accordingly send WC's compliments, and was ushered into the drawing room of W.C. where he was sitting.—The room is a large, old fashioned vaulted room, lined with some beautiful tapestries in as beautiful preservation, and lighted by two gothic windows, containing a small quantity of Stained Glass.— […] The dining room is that used by the Wardens &c on College occasions.—It is a fine wainscotted room, with deep oriel windows, and entirely furnished with ancient

[2] Rochdale, Touchstones, Dea/2 Box 19, 24 March 1842.
[3] Rochdale, Touchstones, Dea/2 Box 14, 24.

> oak furniture, upon one piece of which was an inscription, to the effect that Humphrey Chetham the founder of the College had also presented that with other articles of furniture.—Over the fireplace is a portrait of him […] After viewing these two rooms, W.C. took me to look at the old bed, which for want of room lies at present in a kind of Storeroom, and a small magnificent one it ~~was~~ is;—and is thorough good repair.—The back very much resembles the old back of the Barroshaw bed, supported by 4 figures, two females, and two males.—The stoops are of amazingly thickness and covered with carving, and support a tester also very much carved—and in fact the bed is one huge piece of carving not having a plan spot upon it.—He also possesses another bed, equally as fine which he uses, and had no objections to sell this one. The price he asks is forty guineas.[4]

Along with the beds, Shaw recorded the Library's 'Hulton bookcase'[5] that was originally a bed made with a decorative vocabulary shared by several other late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century beds made for Lancashire properties including the 'Stanley bed' in Dearden's collection discussed below. Shaw was not aware of the bookcase's earlier history as a bed, its faked inscription, or connection to Dearden's Tudor bed.

In 1842, Dearden suggested Shaw visit an unidentified house near Huddersfield to view a bed, and on 5 October 1842 he described it as a,

> Fine old and much dilapidated bed, near Huddersfield and which he wishes me to get repaired for him.—I have seen it and believe it will be one of the first and finest ones after its reparation, with addition of heraldic insignia &c. &c. &c.[6]

This bed now appears to be the 'Radcliffe bed' currently on display at Ordsall Hall, Salford; Shaw added a shallow and poorly carved heraldic footboard and canopy frieze to the bed that align with his proposed enhancements postulated in the letter.[7] These additions visualised a link

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[4] Oldham, Oldham Local Studies and Archives, M175/1/3, ff. 16–19.
[5] Adam Bowett, "The Great Chair of Sir Ralph Warburton, 1603," *Regional Furniture* 333 (2019), pp. 16–18.
[6] Manchester, Chetham's Library, Raines/2/2/178, no number (5 October 1842).
[7] Adam Bowett, "New Light on the Ordsall Hall Bed," *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter* Spring, no. 72 (2020), pp. 8–9.

between the bed and Ordsall; a house he visited in February 1832 and bemoaned the lack of ancient furniture. By 'repairing' it, shaw fabricated a bed befitting the hall's lineage and his own ancestors, the latter occupying his heraldic studies.[8] After dinner on 10 February 1832, Shaw,

> went down to Ordshall [sic], to see the venerable old Hall, the ancient residence of the Radcliffes from whom my Grandfather is descended.— […] There is no old furniture, or armour left in the hall, and with the exception of stained glass no pictures—The property now belongs to Mr. W. Egerton of Tatton, who, not being connected with the family, cannot be expected to feel any interest in preserving the antiquity and character of the Edifice.—[9]

This bed remained in Shaw's house in Uppermill until its clearance sale in 1920, suggesting its personal significance.[10]

Dearden had a significant Tudor bed in his collection, the 'Stanley' bed, which Shaw recorded Raines' was shown in October 1829: 'the Deardens showed him a very capital collection of Antiquities and curiosities of every kind, and amongst other things, the state bed from Latham [*sic*] House which was there during the siege [of 1644]'.[11] This bed was most likely made for Thomas Stanley (1435–1504), first Earl of Derby, for Lathom House in Lancashire, and it is associated with the Stanleys courtesy of its heraldic decoration.[12] This bed is part of a corpus of other beds and woodwork from around the turn of the sixteenth century, including the Molyneux or Lovely Hall bed recorded in Shaw's surviving manuscripts and illustrated in *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836), and the Hulton bed/bookcase at Chetham's.[13] These pieces

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[8] Peter N. Lindfield, "Heraldic Forgery: The Case of George Shaw," *The Coat of Arms* 4th Series, 4 (2021), pp. 177–204.
[9] Oldham, Oldham Local Studies and Archives, M175/1/3, ff. 43–45.
[10] Allen Mellor & Co, *"St. Chad's," Uppermill, Saddleworth, Yorks.: Catalogue of the Valuable Antique & Modern Furniture Etc., Including a Very Fine Collection of Old Oak* (Oldham: Messrs. Allen Mellor & Co, 1920), lot 509, p. 22.
[11] Oldham, Oldham Local Studies and Archives, M175/1/1, f. 162.
[12] Bowett, "Warburton", p. 16.
[13] Oldham, Oldham Local Studies and Archives, M175/2/5, f. 11, and Henry Shaw and Samuel Rush Meyrick, *Specimens of Ancient Furniture Drawn from Existing Authorities* (London: William Pickering, 1836), Pl XXXVI, p. 39.

share a repertoire of ornament: diaper-carved posts; pierced panels of architectural and floral ornament; and mantled hour-glass escutcheons filled with heraldic ornament, and represent a style circulating in Tudor Lancashire that is the subject of a forthcoming essay by the author.

The Stanley bed remained at Dearden's house in Rochdale until auction in December 1913; a photograph of the bed published in the catalogue records its state at this time, including a mansard tester and heraldic decoration to the canopy and footboard[14] that, by the time it was illustrated in Chinnery's *Age of Oak* (1979), had been removed.[15] Described in the 1913 catalogue as a 'CARVED 4-POST BEDSTEAD, WITH VERY MASSIVE CANOPY TOP, ELABORATELY ENRICHED BY PIERCED AND OTHER CARVINGS IN FLORIATE AND EMBLEMATICAL DESIGNS IN GOTHIC TASTE, THE FOOT RAILINGS BEARING CREST AND COAT-OF-ARMS WITH MOTTO',[16] the bed was given prime billing; Shaw would have been aware Dearden's bed in this form, and when he came to making faked Tudor beds he reused parts of its design—Decorated reticulations—absent from the Hulton and Molyneux beds.

The most distinct aspect of Shaw's faked ancestral beds—what he termed paradise beds—is their triptych-like headboard where the central panel depicts Adam and Eve trampling evil (the lion and dragon in reference to Psalm 91). One of his faked ancestral beds was sold by Sotheby's in 2005 and the footboard shields display the Tudor rose (sinister) and portcullis (dexter), but the client is unknown;[17] the portcullis is a Beaufort (later Westminster) badge, and the rose was employed by Lancastrian and Yorkist families in the late-medieval period. This bed is referred to as the 'Beaufort' bed. A bed mentioned in Shaw's correspondence was produced for Algernon Percy (1792–1865), fourth Duke of Northumberland, and described by Shaw in August 1847 as:

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[14] Rochdale, Touchstones, Max 107, n.p.
[15] Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition: A History of Early Furniture in the British Isles and New England* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 1986), 3.454.
[16] Ibid., p. 17.
[17] https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2005/the-age-of-oak-and-walnut-l05301/lot.132.html

> a most magnificent bedstead—pillars similarly carved—foot board like the upper part of the cupboard or buffet—head part with Adam & Eve standing on each side of the line of life […] & inscription &c also cut through and on each side the Adam & Eve carved panel two sides partly with shields hung in shafts upon arabesque foliage similar to those in the drawing of the buffet—A very rich perforated cornice runs round & the pillars are surrounded by small lions, forming are of the most superb specimen of Tudor furniture in existence and traditionally designated the Paradise Bed.—Its price 70£.—[18]

On 24 September 1847 Shaw added that 'each panel of pierced and perforate carving, as fine as the best Cathedral screen work', and its price had increased to £80.[19] This bed was sold by Christie's in 2004, but it had been reconfigured and the whole bed stripped of Shaw's varnish. Shaw also attempted to sell other versions of the bed, including to George Bridgeman (1789–1865), second Earl of Bradford, of Weston Park, Staffordshire, and it is mentioned incidentally a letter to Bradford from 5 September 1848 as 'a most magnificent State Bed Stead—with Adam & Eve in Paradise &c &c in the head part' that was decorated with 'the Arms of Bridgeman occurring again and again in various parts in various shields amongst conventional foliage—'.[20]

Revealing comparisons can be made between the royal bed and Shaw's Northumberland and Beaufort fakes that contradict the claim that the royal bed is 'one of at least three almost identical beds that Shaw made about 1847–48'.[21] Superficially, the royal bed and Shaw's fakes appear identical (once the Northumberland bed's alterations are considered): all have a five-panelled footboard; a tripartite headboard representing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; and posts with a distinctive lozenge-shaped diaper pattern. There are, however, numerous significant differences between these beds that have been ignored. Significantly, these beds are of

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[18] Alnwick Castle, The Archives of the Duke of Northumberland DP/D4/I/99 12 August 1847.
[19] Ibid., 24 September 1847.
[20] Bolton, Bolton Archives and Local Studies Service ZBR/5/9/13 ff. 1–2.
[21] Adam Bowett, "Antiquarianism in Early Victorian Rochdale: The Trinity Chapel at St Chad's," *Regional Furniture* 34 (2020), p. 60.

different sides: the royal marriage bed is 5'6" (167.6cm) wide x 6'6" (198.1cm) deep (truncated; originally 6'9") x 9' (274.3cm) high, whereas the Northumberland bed is 165cm wide by 260.5cm high, and the Beaufort bed is just 145cm wide. More significantly, a wide-ranging analysis of Shaw's post-1843 *corpus* reveals a largely repetitive and derivative style based upon a small vocabulary of ornament that can be found in royal bed: his Northumberland and Beaufort beds illustrate an economical copyist approach, as do other pieces of Shaw's Northumberland furniture including a pair of buffets that reproduce the bed's diaper posts, frieze, and brattishing (mass produced), and a pair of mirrors that repurpose the bed's organic scrollwork, rope, *banderole*, and escutcheons. Such forms also inform his work. The appearance of his Paradise beds' headboards, including figural and floral forms, are also reductive: the subtleties of the royal bed's sophisticated iconographic scheme which relates to the momentous historic event brought about by Henry VII's reign and marriage to Elizabeth of York—expressed through the wealth of ornamental forms incorporated into the bed's headboard and footboard—are lost in Shaw's work. Similarly, the artistic mastery of form and ornament found in the royal bed are absent from Shaw's beds, which, instead, are crude but nevertheless akin to his *corpus*.

Turning to the figures on the Northumberland and Beaufort beds, they are highly stylised with flowing hair brought together in swirls, the hands are disproportionate, placed without consideration for anatomy, and carved crudely. The serpent's scales are equally mechanical and abstract, and the pair of flowers directly beneath the elbows of Adam and Eve are equally crude. The lion *passant* on the royal bed that Adam's legs disappear into, has, on the Northumberland headboard, adopted a quite different attitude and its face is that of a pig. The cross of Christ, a *cross fleury* at the base of the tree of life, is reformed in the Northumberland and Beaufort beds, and Shaw's carving of this shield is flat and superficial unlike the royal example that has a *bombé* form. The shape of this escutcheon on the royal bed that matches the bed's other barbed hour-glass shields found on the footboard and the headboard's outer panels, whereas Shaw deformed the shields into a different and ungainly abstracted form in each of his

faked ancestral beds. Finally, the dragon to the right of this shield is a notable caricature of the beast on the royal headboard, with its wing appearing more like a holly leaf. The crude handling of the headboard *banderole* and its inscription is also coherent with the quality of his beds. Unlike the royal bed's inscription which fits neatly upon and fills the *banderole*, 'she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat'; Shaw ran out of space on the Northumberland bed's *banderole* (that reads inexplicably from bottom left anti-clockwise) and each letter of 'eate' occupies a quarter of the *cross fleury* escutcheon beneath. This compromises the iconographic meaning of the shield of Christ from which the tree of life emerges. Shaw also made the inscription appear ancient by substituting 'the' on the royal bed with 'ye' on the Northumberland and Beaufort beds.

The Beaufort and Northumberland headboards carved by Shaw's workshop are patently crude compared with the royal original, and iconographically reductive. Aesthetically they are also noticeably poor: the balance between positive and negative space seen in the royal bed's headboard is entirely lost and there is a patent difference between the artistic skill and ambition of the carvers involved in Shaw's beds and those who produced the royal example. Dendro investigation from 2011 concluded that the bed was made from eighteenth-century white American oak felled perhaps in the first decade of the nineteenth century,[22] however wood DNA analysis undertaken by the Thünen Institute in Germany voided this conclusion given oak's DNA indicated a continental European origin.[23] Along with evidence of a medieval paint scheme using materials including coal and lapis lazuli,[24] that the royal bed's iconographic scheme exceeds the complexity of anything that Shaw is ever known to have produced or attempted (being far more interested in heraldry to articulate meaning rather than using flora, fauna, and biblical

[22] Anne Crone, *Dendrochronological Analysis of the Four-Poster Bed from Knowesley Hall, Cheshire; Aoc Project 21935* (Loanhead: AOC Archaeology Group, 2011), p. 5.
[23] DoubleHelix, *DNA Analysis of the Paradise Bed* (Singapore: DoubleHelix, 2014), p. 8.
[24] Helen Hughes, *The Paradise Bed—Paint Analysis* (London: Historic Interiors Research & Conservation, 2013),

narratives), and that its structure is made from one tree,[25] this bed is certainly not the work of Shaw. Given this scientific evidence, and that the bed incorporates highly unusual Tudor heraldry specific to the early reign of Henry VII, and that a bed matching the comparatively unusual size and also its description can be found in the 1542 Whitehall and 1547 Henry VIII inventories, they royal bed only makes sense as that produced for the January 1486 marriage Henry VII and Elizabeth of York.[26] Rather than making the bed, Shaw plundered it repeatedly for decorative forms that he used again and again to create his faked ancestral furniture for Northumberland and other aristocrats, as well as church and domestic interiors including his own house in Uppermill. A comprehensive view of the bed's construction, provenance, physical characteristics, and iconography in the forthcoming book will explain this in far more detail.

[25] Andy Moir, *Dendrochronological Analysis of Oak Timbers from an Antique Bed Tree-Ring Services Report: Lfll/16/16* (Mitcheldean, Gloucestershire: Tree-Ring Services, 2016), p. 11.
[26] Philip Ward, *The Inventory of King Henry VIII: The Transcript*, vol. 1 (London: Harvey Miller for The Society of Antiquaries of London, 1998), 13149, p. 317.