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TRANSFORMATION OF HERALDIC DECORATION: THE ‘RADCLIFFE BED’

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Abstract

The ‘Radcliffe bed’ was largely manufactured in the mid-nineteenth century from historic woodwork supplemented by new carved elements awash with heraldic decoration. Produced by an antiquary, architect, designer, and faker of historical furniture, this bed appears to have been designed for personal consumption and display by George Shaw, the antiquary, in his own house to vaunt his connection to the Radcliffes of Ordsall Hall in Manchester. This essay explores the bed’s design and the ways in which Shaw used heraldry to fabricate the bed’s historical links to the Radcliffes.

The ‘Radcliffe bed’ (**Figure 1**) was last sold on 30 April 2014, and described by the auction house as ‘an impressive Elizabeth I oak and inlaid tester bed, circa 1580, bearing the coat of arms of the Ratcliffes [Radcliffes] of Ordsall Hall, Lancashire, incorporating some associated and some later elements’.¹ Whilst noting the bed’s inclusion of late-Tudor and more modern woodwork, the relationship between these different components was not addressed in detail. Adam Bowett has made some more recent observations concerning the bed’s newer additions from the 1840s, but his note in the *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter* did not unpack fully the bed’s remarkably rich Victorian additions.² Indeed, the relationship between the ancient and the nineteenth-century carved woodwork is crucial when we come to understand the bed’s apparent identity as a piece of ancient furniture: despite appearing antique, large parts of its structure, including the footboard, tester, and headboard are Victorian fabrications. The ‘Radcliffe bed’ sits firmly within the well-known and documented industry of cut-and-shut furniture produced in nineteenth-century Britain: dealers sold ostensibly ‘new’ pieces of furniture much like the ‘Radcliffe bed’ in the Tudor and Elizabethan styles (**Figure 2**) incorporating cobbled-together spolia along with newly carved historicizing woodwork to fill in the gaps.³ This essay, by offering a close reading of the ‘Radcliffe bed’, demonstrates in specific detail how heraldic forms found on and around escutcheons appropriate to the bed’s purportedly original owners – Sir John Radcliffe (c.1536–89) and Anne Asshawe (1545–1627) – were used by George Shaw (1810–76), antiquary, architect, and forger, to produce a series of calculated *en suite* decorations in the 1840s – certainly before 1848 when the bed was seen and described as complete – to augment the bed’s early woodwork celebrating the Radcliffe–Asshawe marriage.

Crucially, we know that Shaw owned this bed and that he constructed it from pieces of ancient woodwork as well as newly carved oak. It was photographed at his

¹ Bonhams, *The Oak Interior*, (Oxford, 2014), lot 197. <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/22148/lot/197>.

² Adam Bowett, “New Light on the Ordsall Hall Bed,” *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter* Spring, no. 72 (2020), pp. 8–9.

³ Mark Westgarth, “A Biographical Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Antique & Curiosity Dealers With Full Explanation and Plates,” *Regional Furniture XXI* (2009), pp. 1–23.

THE RADCLIFFE BED



Figure 1: The ‘Radcliffe Bed’, c.1572, c.1843–48. Private Collection on Loan to Ordsall Hall, Salford. © Peter N. Lindfield.

house in Uppermill surrounded by other pieces of furniture that he had made when the contents of St Chad’s, his home in Uppermill on the border of Greater Manchester and Yorkshire, was put up for auction in 1920. Seen in ‘bedroom over dining room’ (**Figure 3**),⁴ the bed was catalogued as ‘an exceptionally fine OLD OAK “ELIZABETHAN” BEDSTEAD, richly carved and inlaid, with canopy supported on massive columns

⁴ 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, 1920), opp. p. 19.

THE COAT OF ARMS



Left, *Figure 2*: Press Cupboard 1610, c.1875–1910. W.32-1913. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Right, *Figure 3*: Bedroom Over Dining Room, from Allen Mellor & Co, “*St. Chad’s*”, *Uppermill* (1920).

emblazoned with the ‘Radcliffe’ coat of arms. A very rare specimen’.⁵ Allen Mellor & Co, the auctioneers, did not appear to question the bed’s age too much, and it was promoted as a rare and old bed. As it turns out, however, we have a first-hand account of the bed from 1848 recorded by one Mr Burd, an agent of Algernon Percy (1792–1865), fourth Duke Northumberland, who had been dispatched to Shaw’s premises to investigate the vast range of ancestral Percy furniture sold to the Duke by Shaw in the 1840s. Burd’s letter, dated 10 May 1848, not only recorded his impressions of the bed, but also some observations made about it by Shaw. Moving through the house, Burd and Shaw climbed ‘up stairs where he [Shaw] shewed me a Magnificent bed though alas as he said put together and I fancied not quite in unison but he said the parts which seemed so were one when he got them’.⁶ Burd, clearly, was sceptical of the bed’s homogeneity—even the old woodwork did not appear to be coherent despite Shaw’s claim that the pieces of ancient work came to him all together. Documenting the bed, Burd described it in detail and also the heraldic decoration, which he drew and recorded the quarterings. Beginning the entry, he,

fear[ed] I cannot give you a just idea of this piece, on the sides & the top are (new) arms of boyhood He[nr]y VIIth [...] at the bed head are two coats belonging to two families of Radcliffe (once of Ordsall Hall in Manchest[er]) these are the two coats

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ Alnwick Castle, The Archives of the Duke of Northumberland, DP/D4/I/99, 10 May 1848.

THE COAT OF ARMS

The pertinent question arising from this admission, of course, is which parts of the bed are ancient, and which parts are modern and by Shaw: Burd does not really help in this regard as the only piece recorded as ‘new’ is the royal achievement inserted at the centre of the tester (**Figure 4**). Indeed, Burd on his own, or reporting Shaw’s interpretation, misidentified this achievement as belonging to the young Henry VII; this is clearly incorrect as they would have been the Tudor arms of Elizabeth I (if contemporary with the Radcliffe-Asshaws marriage) and they are certainly not Henry VII’s arms from his accession. This achievement was manufactured by Shaw—note the



Figure 5: The headboard of the ‘Radcliffe bed’, c.1572, c.1843–48. Private Collection on loan to Ordsall Hall, Salford. © Peter N. Lindfield.

THE RADCLIFFE BED

[illustration]

I cannot recollect the other families.

I will give you a faint sketch of the bed at the lower end in front are three coats which I will sketch over the page.⁷



Figure 4: The supposed ‘Boyhood arms of Henry VII’ inserted on the underside of the tester on the ‘Radcliffe bed’, c.1843–48. © Bonham’s.

These three escutcheons found on the footboard are recorded by Northumberland’s agent as of Harrington (dexter), Sir John Radcliffe’s quartered arms as found on the headboard (centre), and Trafford (sinister).⁸ He clearly suspected the bed’s compilation over a period of time, and he also recorded Shaw admitting to producing it as a piece of cut-and-shut.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

THE RADCLIFFE BED

crude figuring of the supporters' faces typical of Shaw's output—and clearly intended to enhance the bed's status and appearance of age articulated by the remainder of the bed's heraldic decoration. The headboard (**Figure 5**) described by Burd matches that seen on the bed today: two painted achievements are inset within a pair of panels. On the left is the shield for Sir John Radcliffe (**Figure 6**) quartering 1. Ratcliffe of Ordsall, *Two bends engrailed and in chief a label of three points*; 2. Leigh of Boothes, *Two bars*,



Top, *Figure 6*: Detail of the Sir John Radcliffe arms on the headboard of the 'Radcliffe bed', c.1572. Bottom, *Figure 7*: Detail of the Anne Asshawe arms from the same location.
© Bonham's.

THE COAT OF ARMS

over all a bend; 3. Arderne, *Three cross crosslets fitchy and a chief*; and 4. Sandbach, *A fesse between three garbs*. The shield on the right for Anne Asshawe (**Figure 7**) quarters: 1. Radcliffe, *A bend engrailed*; 2. derivative of Asshawe, *A chevron between three martlets*; 3. English, *Three lion passant*; and 4. Hulton, *An eagle displayed*. These arms record the marriage of Sir John Radcliffe to Anne Asshawe in 1572, with Anne armigerously rich and able to bear, amongst other arms, Asshawe, Harrington, English, and Hulton: displayed together, these arms tie the bed into the history of Ordsall Hall in Salford (**Figure 8**), even though Shaw admitted creating the bed from a collection of ancient and modern woodwork.



Figure 8: Ordsall Hall, Salford. © Peter N. Lindfield.

The remaining heraldry strewn over the bed was concocted and executed by Shaw’s workshop, and the largest concentration of such decoration (the crestings, including three ostrich feathers flanked by supporters on the front face of the tester, no longer survive with the bed) is found on the footboard that has been understood as a fragment from a seventeenth-century joined chest (**Figure 9**).⁹ The crude quality of carved decoration applied to the front and sides of this footboard—both the heraldic shields and guilloche pattern on the rails and stiles—are coherent and also consistent with the incised decoration applied to the newel posts on the staircase of Shaw’s house, St Chad’s. This suggests that the whole footboard was conceived and executed in Shaw’s workshop. The range of shields applied to this panel demonstrates Shaw’s attempt to further enhance the bed’s connection to the Radcliffes and Ordsall Hall by providing a greater contextual range of armorials. The footboard is topped by a shield quartering Radcliffe with Fitzwalter within a garter, crested by an earl’s coronet, and flanked by two bull supporters gorged with a coronet, all upon an engrailed base. This

⁹ Bowett, “New Light on the Ordsall Hall Bed,” p. 9.

THE RADCLIFFE BED

achievement, displaying the Radcliffe quarterings found in the earls of Sussex's arms, must surely be in reference to the connection between Sir John Radcliffe's father, Sir William Radcliffe (1502–68), and the earls of Sussex when he inherited the Fitzwalter estates from Henry Radcliffe, second Earl of Sussex, (1506/7–56), following the failure of his own heirs.¹⁰



Figure 9: Detail of the front of the Radcliffe Bed footboard by George Shaw's workshop, c. 1843–48. Private Collection on loan to Ordsall Hall, Salford.

© Peter N. Lindfield.

Beneath this, on the footboard proper, are three shields, each of the barbed Tudor shape derived by Shaw from the examples found on the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed that he had studied and recreated in the 1840s (Figure 10). The central shield on the footboard repeats the quarterings of Sir John Radcliffe's arms found on the headboard, and it is flanked by Harrington (courtesy of Sir John's marriage to Anne Asshawe who was the great granddaughter of Isabel Radcliffe [c. 1441–97] and Sir James Harrington [c. 1447–97] of Wolfege), and Trafford (from Sir John's mother, Margaret Trafford [b. c. 1509]). Both flanking shields reference armigerous ancestors, and, in addition to the Sussex branch of the Radcliffes represented by the achievement above the footboard, underscore the history of Ordsall Hall. The sides of the footboard are also carved with the Radcliffe arms of a *bend engrailed* impaling Mowgrave of Yorkshire differentiated by a *mullet in chief*; all set within a Tudor-shaped escutcheon matching

¹⁰ Burke LG 1847, vol.2, p. 1092.

THE COAT OF ARMS

those on the front of the footboard, itself within a guilloche pattern (**Figure 11**). This is a bespoke addition created for the bed, and when combined with the rest of the heraldic decoration strewn over the footboard, this bed became a genealogical record of the Radcliffes' family history.¹¹

Shaw's most amusing re-use of heraldic ornament was applied to the frieze running around the bed's tester. To the front we see the gorged bull supporters from the footboard



Left, *Figure 10*: Heraldic decoration found on the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed, c.1486. © The Langley Collection. Right, *Figure 11*: Detail of the sides (dexter [L], sinister [R]) of the Radcliffe Bed footboard by George Shaw's workshop, c.1843–48. Private Collection on Loan to Ordsall Hall, Salford. © Peter N. Lindfield.

set facing a coronet (**Figure 12**); another coronet is set above the centreline of the gadrooned cornice, a pattern repeated upon the tester's side friezes (**Figure 13**). The increased length is filled by the addition of notably cruder bulls (not gorged) flanked by a dragon (dexter) and lion (sinister); each quartet of beasts centres upon a *fleur-de-lis*. The additional supporters are taken from the royal arms, albeit swapped around, and the

¹¹ These arms are in the east window of Oldham Church and recorded in the compendium of Lancashire family arms, *Heraldica Lancastria*, that Shaw consulted: Manchester Record Office GB127, MS 929.6. L3, v.4, f. 711.

THE RADCLIFFE BED



Top, *Figure 12*: Detail of the frieze on the front of the Radcliffe Bed's tester, c.1843–48. Middle, *Figure 13*: Detail of the frieze on the side of the same.

Bottom left, *Figure 14*: Detail of the term figures on the headboard of the Radcliffe Bed. Bed from a private collection on loan to Ordsall Hall, Salford.

© Peter N. Lindfield. Bottom right, *Figure 15*: Detail of term figures from Shaw's carved panelling installed in Hopwood House, Rochdale, 1850s. © Andy Marshall.

THE COAT OF ARMS

use of the *fleur-de-lis* surely also refers to the royal arms that are otherwise absent from Radcliffe heraldry. Demonstrating a higher level of craftsmanship is a yet more unusual series of three *term* figures set on the headboard to frame the achievements. Each term bears a shield (**Figure 14**), bordered with a thick outline as found on the footboard's shields. Rather than displaying the quarterings of the Radcliffes, these, instead, depict the Radcliffe crest within each escutcheon: *A bull's head erased sable armed or, ducally gorged, lined, and ringed argent*, albeit missing the tether. Such a placement of crest upon escutcheon, surely, could only be a nineteenth-century conceit? There are other occasions where Shaw took heraldic devices and placed them out of context on escutcheons, such as the Percy crescent on furniture for the Duke of Northumberland, while other additional pieces have recently come to light. Such term figures found on the 'Radcliffe bed' appear atypical within the context of Shaw's known *corpus* of faked historical furniture, yet they correspond very closely to a series of carved oak interiors that he supplied to Hopwood House, Rochdale, Greater Manchester, in the 1850s (**Figure 15**).¹² The 'Radcliffe' bed's decorative programme can therefore be seen as an 1840s precursor to the more firmly Elizabethan-style woodwork that he produced for Hopwood in the 1850s, a development that signals his movement away from the direct imitation of the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed. Indeed, the term figures' intermediary position in his *corpus* between these two styles is shown by a continued use of mantling taken from the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed that appears like cusped scrollwork.

Given that most of the armorials applied to the Ordsall Hall bed were produced by Shaw in the 1840s, and certainly before May 1848 when Burd saw it in Uppermill, the only 'period' heraldic fixtures are those found on the headboard. But, as recorded by Burd, this ancient woodwork appears to have been brought together—we know that Shaw, like those in his antiquarian circle, collected historical woodwork fragments avidly.¹³ The bed is consequently one of Shaw's most important pieces of 'cut-and-shut' furniture that celebrated his personal connection to the Radcliffes whose arms can be found on his own furniture designs, both executed and hypothetical. A further example, to be explored subsequently, is his panelled heraldic sitting room at St Chad's. The Radcliffe family appears time and again in his correspondence and diaries, for example the entry for Saturday 4 February 1832 records how he had

Wrote a long letter to Mr Raines, thanking him for his information respecting the Radcliffes and his description of Scaitcliffe [Hall, Todmorden, West Yorkshire], and also requesting him to send me the M.S. pedigree book mentioned in his letter, along with a book on Heraldry which he has lately purchased and which he wishes me to bind in brass with clasps for him.¹⁴

Indeed, as illustrated here, Shaw's interest in the Radcliffes was bound up his cognate passion for the study of heraldry, and studying the tangible remains of history expressed through architecture and interiors.

¹² Clare Hartwell, Matthew Hyde, and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Lancashire: Manchester and the South-East, Pevsner architectural guides*, (London, 2004), pp. 518–20.

¹³ See Manchester, Chetham's Library, Raines/2/2/178, letters 5, 7, 10, 22, 24, unnumbered.

¹⁴ Oldham, Oldham Local Studies and Archives, M175/1/3, f. 20.

THE RADCLIFFE BED

Crucially, Shaw visited Ordsall Hall—the bed’s purported historical and original home—and his detailed record of the house, including its history, visual effects, and numerous modifications, underscore the bed’s personal relevance. On Saturday 10 February 1832, more than a decade before Shaw produced the bed, he rode from Knutsford to Manchester, and, after dinner, he,

went down to Ordshall [sic], to see the venerable old Hall, the ancient residence of the Radcliffes from whom my Grandfather is descended.—The Hall is a large irregular pile of building, apparently built at numerous periods, and surrounded by a moat in a good state of preservation. The Entrance is over a narrow bridge, and under an embattle’d [sic] archway where formerly hung ponderous oaken gates;—and from this, a flagged path conducts to the Entrance of the Hall.—The exterior of the edifice presents a picturesque assemblage, of gables, chimneys, steep roofs, and turrets.—built partly of Stone, partly of brick, and partly of Wood and plaster; of which later materials, at some time it has also been composed.—The Hall has been a magnificent and immense apartment supported, like the collegiate church, on 2 rows of clustered columns, of great height and massive beauty and covered with a Norman bracketed roof, like that of Westminster Hall.—This spacious room was lighted by two large embayed in oriel windows almost filled with stained glass glowing with the achievements [sic] of the Knightly family of Radcliffe the possessors, and the various families with whom they were connected by marriage;—and amongst the numerous escutcheons &c. are signets of some of the old kings and queens of these Realms in brilliant colours.—The floor is of diamond flags, and the lofty pillars and roof of English oak.—This Noble Hall is miserably spoiled by being divided into two or three rooms, completely destroying the effect which its large dimensions and beautiful construction would have given it.—

—The whole house is in fact completely modernized.—and the old lofty rooms, dont [sic] form inferior modern ones, although the change displays a barbarity of taste truly astonishing.—There is a Stone Coffin behind the house cut in two pieces, one of which is used as a pig trough, and the other as a washing basin, for the labouress .—In one of the bed rooms I visited, apparently in ancient days the state bed chamber, are two windows each containing the figure of a king, in stained glass, but without any legend.—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.¹⁵

Shaw, here celebrating Ordsall Hall’s medieval fabric and opining its subsequent ‘barbaric’ refashioning, was clearly invested in Ordsall Hall’s history courtesy of his connection to the Radcliffes. He retained the Ordsall Hall/Radcliffe bed, we can assume out of choice, and, despite being an *en suite* fantasy, the escutcheons and heraldic devices decorating the bed link Shaw as its owner to Sir John Radcliffe, Anne Asshawe, and Ordsall Hall.

¹⁵ Ibid., ff. 43–45.