

A Royal Tudor Bed and a Northern Rogue



The 1485 bed made for the 1486 marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York.

Elite medieval furniture

This exhibition offers an unparalleled opportunity to get close to not just *any* bed, but the *first* one made for the founders of Tudor England. A seemingly unique survivor escaping the ‘shipwreck’ of time—especially the widespread destruction wrought by the Reformation and the Civil War—it was made for Henry VII and Elizabeth of York: the parents of Henry VIII.



Double Portrait of Elizabeth of York and Henry VII

A bespoke statement of pious devotion to each other and to England, this bed was commissioned for the couple's January 1486 marriage uniting the previously warring houses of York and Lancaster. Incredibly ornate, it is a powerful statement of royalty from a bygone age.

Medieval furniture reflected the rank of its end user, and beds were the most important piece of furniture anyone—royals included—could own. Rising through the social strata, furniture became larger and increasingly elaborate in terms of enclosure, material, and decoration.

The newly married couple's marriage bed exhibited here, consequently, was designed to be an almost mesmerisingly magnificent statement of unity, piety, and power. Covered with a canopy—or tester—supported on geometrically carved posts, this unashamedly ostentatious bed is effectively a shrine-like piece of architecture of the highest calibre.

Covered in elaborate decoration, it transcends furniture and is a work of art. This was more obviously so when the now stripped paint scheme was present: only traces of it remain today under later Victorian varnish.

Whilst perhaps simply decorative to modern viewers, the bed's carving is pregnant with meaning obvious to fifteenth-century viewers. Not simply a grand, imposing object

designed to represent the power of the King as ruler, this bed was also designed to speak on many levels to the privileged few able to view it in person.

Meaning through design

Decorative forms woven throughout the bed's headboard and footboard commemorate the royals' marriage: Adam and Eve—representations of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York transmuted into Christ and the Virgin—are in a posture of marriage and ignore the apple of temptation presented by the serpent.



Detail of the marriage bed's headboard

The narrative panels also refer to royalty, rule, rebirth, and continuity. Designed to be placed within the Palace of Westminster's now lost Painted Chamber, the bed's tripartite headboard, as Jonathan Foyle realised, was seemingly made in direct response to the room's State Bed enclosure where the wall painting depicted the coronation of Saint Edward the Confessor.

Fertility is also threaded throughout the bed's design via acorns and grapes: whilst the couple's marriage was a significant political event, it could come to naught without a son to inherit England's crown. Indeed, the footboard depicts the birthing of England where the country's royal arms (separated into France and England) emerge through *mandorla*. These explanations only begin to touch on the breadth and depth of the bed's iconography!



Detail of the marriage bed's footboard

The work of a Northern Rogue?

This bed, nevertheless, has been claimed to be the work of George Shaw (1810–76) of Uppermill. Born to Giles Shaw, an operator of woollen mills in the same West Yorkshire village, Shaw began working for the family firm as an agent selling its produce across Britain.

In the 1830s, however, Shaw doubled down on his 'true' passion for antiquarian material to become a practicing architect and furniture maker. Making Tudor-style church interiors, such as St Chad's in Rochdale, he also created new-old pieces of furniture sold to northern aristocrats as genuinely ancient family 'relics'. The design language used to create his church interiors and fake Tudor furniture are the same and derived directly from the Royal Tudor bed.

Of Shaw's fake Tudor furniture, his preeminent 'model' was the 'Paradise State Bed' copying the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed. The Henricus VII Rex bed included in this exhibition is one such example.



One of George Shaw's 'copy beds': the Henricus VII Rex bed, c.1842

Shaw is known to have made and attempted to sell several other 'copies' of this bed, each time covered with family heraldry. He is known to have offered examples to:

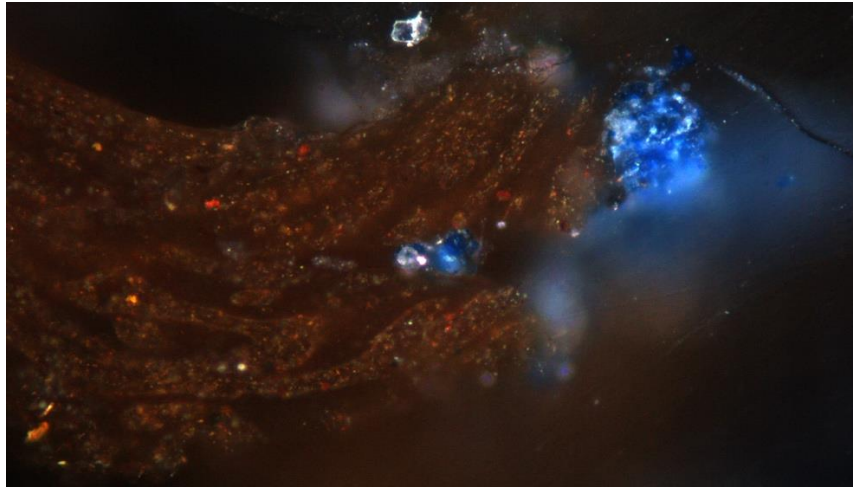
- the fourth Duke of Northumberland (1847): *made and supplied*
- the second Earl of Bradford (1848): *proposed; unconfirmed manufacture*
- Colonel Charles Towneley (c. 1847–50): *made and supplied (with TV 'career')*
- William Herrick (c. 1850): *made and supplied, but returned to Shaw as a fake*



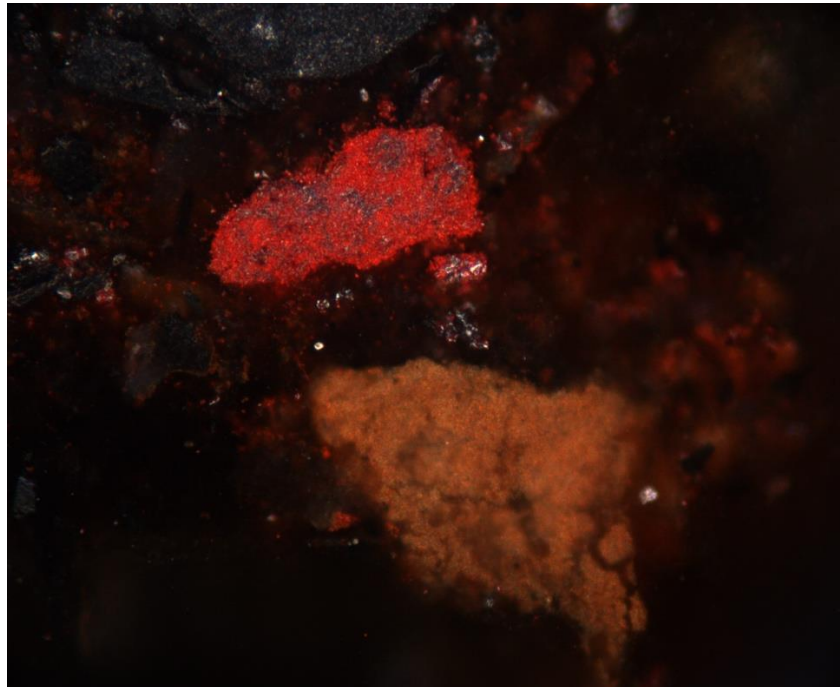
One of George Shaw's 'copy beds': the Northumberland bed, 1847: Christie's

Shaw perhaps made the Henricus VII Rex bed for Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick of Goodrich Court in Herefordshire, a prolific antiquary, author of *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836), and close friend of his. One question, of course, remains: how many more beds of this pattern did Shaw make?

Any claim that Shaw produced the Royal Tudor bed ignores scientific analysis showing remnants of a stripped-off paint scheme caught in the bed's carved recesses. Under intense magnification, the paint layering and pigment preparation are late-medieval; chemical analysis also shows these materials as consistently old and that *lapis lazuli*—a colour more costly than gold—was used on the headboard.



Detailed cross-section of the Lapis Lazuli taken from the Royal Tudor Bed.
© Helen Hughes.



Detailed cross-section of the red iron oxide taken from the Royal Tudor Bed.
© Helen Hughes.

If Shaw had made and painted the royal Tudor bed, he would have not followed such late-medieval techniques. Indeed, he didn't: a pair of hall cupboards supplied by Shaw to the Duke of Northumberland, today at Warkworth Castle, were painted with ultramarine—something mentioned in his letters to the Duke of Northumberland—but the paint and its application are clearly Victorian when scientifically tested.



One of George Shaw's 'hall cupboards' made in imitation of the Royal Tudor bed

The coarse coal ground to the Tudor bed's paint scheme, so typical of medieval work, is entirely absent from Shaw's hall cupboards for the Duke of Northumberland. He clearly did not follow medieval painting techniques—as exhibited on the Royal Tudor bed—when he came to paint his own productions.

The Royal Tudor bed and Shaw's 'Paradise State beds'

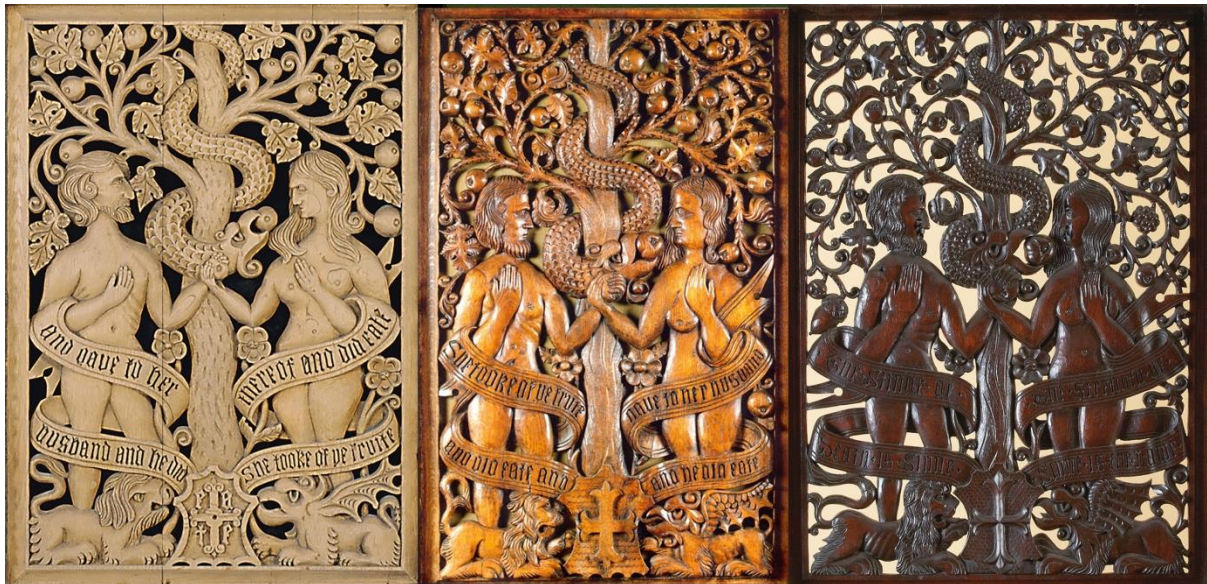
Several reasons have been given to substantiate the Royal Tudor bed as another of Shaw's confections. Firstly, Shaw produced so many of them, so why not add another? This, of course, is predicated upon clear similarities linking Shaw's 'Paradise State Beds' with the Royal Tudor bed.

These similarities, apparent on first glance, swiftly disappear upon close examination; style, material, construction, iconography, scale, fluency of design, and coherence are all unquestionably inferior on Shaw's examples that pale in comparison with the royal workshop's output.

Superficial similarities linking the Royal Tudor bed and Shaw's copies does not make the former Victorian. Indeed, any comparison between the iconography and artistic skill of Shaw's Henricus VII Rex example with the Tudor bed tells of the former's Victorian reproduction.

Shaw recreates the main design elements, but the highly significant iconography on the Tudor bed is lost. The four stars on the Tudor headboard (as recorded in the bed's entry

in the Henry VIII post-mortem inventory), for example, become two stars on the Henricus VII Rex headboard, and the three stars on the Tudor bed's footboard are rephrased as four stylised scrolling leaves on the latter. On the Duke of Northumberland's 'Paradise State bed', all four headboard stars are reworked as scrolling leaves. Shaw clearly did not comprehend their significance.



Shaw's 1840s copy beds (Northumberland (L) and Henricus VII Rex (M)) and 1485 the Tudor original (R)

Shaw's copies were seemingly produced at a distance from the Tudor original and from perhaps incomplete notes detailing its principal elements. The greater the time separating his refurbishment of the Tudor bed in Mosley possession and his production of the beds, the more the decoration is pared back and caricatured. After all, attempting to record and reproduce the Tudor bed in entirety, where every aspect of the complex headboard design has meaning, is challenging!

That Shaw's known copies of the Tudor bed dramatically reduce the breadth and depth of its iconographic meaning, their similarities are essentially superficial.

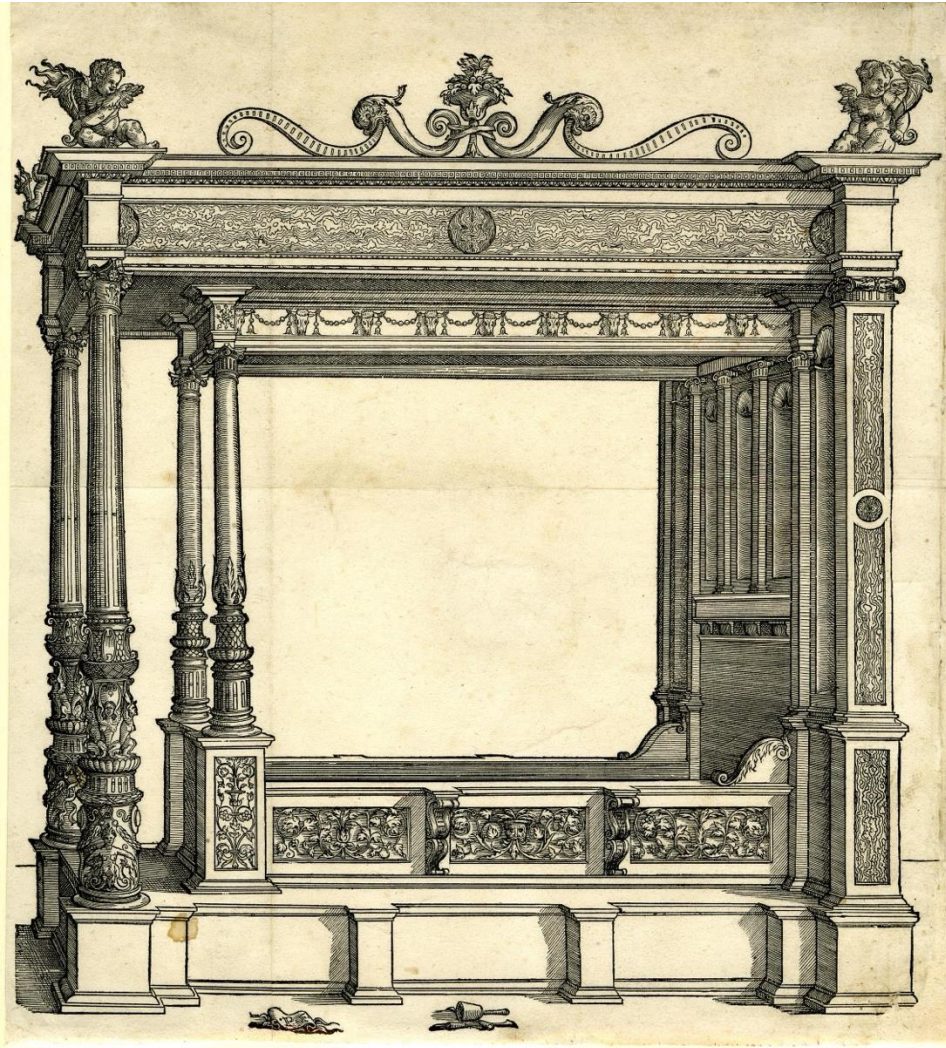
Footboards—a Victorian invention?

Furniture historians and the antiques trade hold onto the belief that elite beds did not include footboards, and that they are a Victorian invention. Following this long-held belief, the footboard attached to the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed is Tudor. Dendrochronology, however, shows that the footboard is made from the same tree that most of the bed is made from, and that remnants of paint found on the footboard's surfaces are also late-medieval. Perhaps knowledge of medieval beds is incomplete?

Well, footboard are found in manuscript illustrations of elite beds—royal examples included—as early as 1140. By the fifteenth century, several manuscript miniatures depict beds with footboards, and in the sixteenth century we find footboards depicted in prints of everything from modest to unimaginably elite beds, the latter including Peter Flötner's elaborate double-tester state bed (1540–41).



The bed of the King of Navarre set on fire, Ms. Ludwig XIII 7 (83.MP.150), 274v, The Getty Museum, LA



Peter Flötner, A State Bed, c.1540, 1992,0620.1, © British Museum, London

When combined with visual evidence, the Royal Tudor bed challenges and redefines what the most ostentatious beds could—and did—look like.

A Family of Lancashire Beds

Spawning a series of derivative beds made around the turn of the sixteenth century in Lancashire, the Royal Tudor bed had a lasting impact. First amongst these examples is that made for Henry VII's stepfather, Sir Thomas Stanley, first Earl of Derby. Shaw saw this bed in 1834 and he recorded it with admiration and in the process of being repaired.



The Thomas Stanley Bed, photographed 1913

When photographed in 1913, this bed featured a double-decker footboard and an elaborate canopy. During the twentieth century, the Thomas Stanley bed was progressively dismantled and reconstructed; by the 1970s, it was a shadow of its former self with its elaborately carved canopy and footboard removed.



The Thomas Stanley Bed in the 1970s

Newly discovered written evidence indicates that the Thomas Stanley bed's footboard and elaborate canopy were part of the bed in the early nineteenth century before its Victorian 'restoration'. Like the Royal Tudor bed, the Thomas Stanley bed deviates from the picture of the Tudor bed created by furniture historians and the antiques trade.

Coda: The Royal Tudor Bed in Victorian England

These beds, manuscript miniatures, and early modern prints illustrate our understanding of elaborate, royal, beds from Tudor England is, until now, incomplete. Not only does the Royal Tudor bed exceed the general understanding of furniture as decorative art, but that Tudor furniture could also serve as a vehicle for multi-layered iconography.

Copying the Royal Tudor bed and selling these reproductions as genuine fifteenth-century relics, Shaw is a fundamental part of this bed's story. He gave the bed a remarkable nineteenth-century afterlife, and he celebrated its design and decoration as a preeminent model to inform three decades of architectural practice.

Principal Multidisciplinary Study on the Royal Tudor Bed

Lindfield, Peter N., ed. *The Marriage Bed of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York: A Masterpiece of Tudor Craftsmanship*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2023.

Further Reading

- Bowett, Adam. "Antiquarianism in Early Victorian Rochdale: The Trinity Chapel at St Chad's." *Regional Furniture* 34 (2020): 143–61.
- . "George Shaw, Rogue Antiquary: Fake Furniture for the Earl of Derby and the Duke of Northumberland." *Furniture History* 57 (2021): 109–47.
- . "New Light on the Ordsall Hall Bed." *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter* Spring, no. 72 (2020): 8–9.
- Brooke, Stephanie. "Imagery, Iconography and Heraldry. The Marriage Bed of Henry VII & Elizabeth of York: Dynasty, Design & Descent." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 8 (2022): 79–122.
- Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, *Spaces of Knowing*, <https://crossroads-spacesofknowing.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/the-bedroom/first-state-bed>.
- Foyle, Jonathan. "The Fraudster Who Unwittingly Acquired Henry VII's Marital Bed." In *The Financial Times*. 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/c26ac356-046e-11e5-95ad-00144feabdc0>.
- . "George Shaw: His Unwitting Discovery of Henry VII's Bed." *Saddleworth Historical Society Bulletin* 47 (2017): 1–5.
- . "Henry VII and Elizabeth of York's Marriage Bed Rediscovered." *The History Vault*. <https://thehistoryvault.co.uk/henry-vii-and-elizabeth-of-yorks-marriage-bed-rediscovered/>.
- Foyle, Jonathan, and Peter N. Lindfield. "A Forger's Folly?: George Shaw's Productions for Chetham's Library, Manchester." *The British Art Journal* XXI (2020–21): 42–50.
- Harrison, Aiden. "A Response to The Thomas Stanley Bed and a Related Corpus of Furniture from Tudor Lancashire, Peter N. Lindfield, *Regional Furniture* 36, 2022." *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter*, no. 79, Summer (2023): 6.
- Hughes, Helen. *Fifteenth-Century Bed—Paint Analysis Interim Report: Observations of Paint in Incised Lettering*. London: Historic Interiors Research & Conservation, 2013.
- . *The Paradise Bed—Paint Analysis*. London: Historic Interiors Research & Conservation, 2013.
- . *Shaw Mirror Paint Analysis*. London: Historic Interiors Research & Conservation, 2014.
- Hyde, Matthew, and Alan Petford. "George Shaw of St Chad's: The Making of a Provincial Architect." *Transactions of The Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 102 (2006): 36–52.
- . "'Pierced and Perforated Carving, as Fine as the Best Cathedral Screen Work': Antiquarianism and Faking Tudor Furniture in the 1840s." *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 175, no. 1 (2022): 266–95.
- . "The Thomas Stanley Bed and a Related Corpus of Furniture from Tudor Lancashire." *Regional Furniture* 36 (2022): 23–52.
- . "Transformation of Heraldic Decoration: the 'Radcliffe Bed'." *The Coat of Arms* 5, series 4, no. 239 (2022): 108–19.
- Moir, Andy. *Dendrochronological Analysis of Oak Carvings from St Chad's House, Uppermill, and Chetham's Library, Greater Manchester: Tree-Ring Services Report, OLUM/47/19*. Mitcheldean, Gloucestershire: Tree-Ring Services, 2019.
- . *Dendrochronological Analysis of Oak Timbers From An Antique Bed Tree-Ring Services Report: LFL/16/16*. Mitcheldean, Gloucestershire: Tree-Ring Services, 2016.
- . *Dendrochronological Analysis of Oak Timbers From Four Antique Bed Posts: Tree-Ring Services Report: BEDA/01/17*. Mitcheldean: Tree-Ring Services, 2017.

- . *Dendrochronological Analysis of Two Posts from An Antique Oak Bed*. *Tree-Ring Services Report: BEDP/24/12*. Hungerford: Tree-Ring Services, 2012.
- Petford, Alan, and Mike Buckley. "George Shaw and the Duke of Northumberland." *Saddleworth Historical Society Bulletin* 47, no. 1 (2017): 6–18.
- Thurley, Simon. *The Royal Palaces of Tudor England: Architecture and Court Life, 1460–1547*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1993.