



THE MYSTERIES OF ANCIENT TIMBER

Dating ancient timber is easier said than done, as Dr Jonathan Foyle explains



On an overcast January morning in 2013, I embarked upon the study of a richly carved historic timber object.

It was owned by a furniture dealer living in a hamlet near Hadrian's Wall. In a tall, converted chapel I encountered a bedframe of four deeply oxidised oak posts, a pierced headboard with royal arms, and a five-panel footboard. The medieval language of its imagery was unexpectedly convincing, its Adam and

Eve characters engaged in a mutual stare with a seriousness demanding respect. After years of exploring Tudor palaces, houses and churches, I both recognised its character yet had seen nothing like it.

How could I identify its age and origin? Unlike functional 19th century oak beds this was a remnant of a frame, covered in generations of repairs, the rails missing, with re-drilled pegs and extinct woodworm chambers filled with dark Victorian varnish. The carved banner winding around the characters bore an inscription of death and sin taken from a mid-16th century Protestant bible, rather than echoing Victorian sentiment. So was it a substantial survivor, or make up from old salvage, or an exceptionally well-informed fake?

The posts had already been sampled for dendrochronology by AOC Archaeology in 2011, when after months of frustration, a match was claimed against a borrowed private database of American white oak growing in the north-eastern US, the last ring supposedly 1756. If this were correct, this bed was the first example of American timber used in British furniture.

In 2016, a blind second-opinion dendro analysis by Andy Moir of 13 frame components confirmed a consistent source of timber, hence a single construction rather than made-up salvage and the impossibility of dating. Between the two trials, a group of Czech scientists had identified in European oak a 'signal' - a diminished ring every four years caused by cockchafer beetle cyclically defoliating trees, reducing photosynthesis and stifling growth. The bed's oak manifested this pattern. A DNA test in Hamburg confirmed it as European oak, not American. Subsequently, Helen Hughes found traces of distinctively medieval paint layers under the varnish.

Yet doubts remained because the bed came from the orbit of a rogue character: one George Shaw (1810-76) from Uppermill near Manchester, a known faker of antiques. Over a door in his house remains an oak pediment cut from the original front crest of this same bed, one with combined royal arms. Between 1842 and 1849, Shaw pretended to have discovered the early Tudor furniture of the northern aristocrats eager to recover their ancestral chattels.

Dr Jonathan Foyle is a lecturer in Conservation and Architectural History, University of Bath, and an author and broadcaster

PHOTO: PAUL CLARKE

As local author Ammon Wrigley wrote, Shaw "had an easy conscience" and "when genuine antiques were not procurable, he promptly set to work on his own".

Shaw was no scholar - his pieces are often outrageous caricatures. But he certainly had access to antique models from the royal orbit because his friend James Dearden in Rochdale owned a collection including "the state bed from Lathom which was there during the siege [of 1644-5]". Rediscovered with traces of red and green paint in the 1970s, that bed bore the heraldry of Thomas Stanley of Lathom, the stepfather of King Henry VII. It has since disappeared, reputedly sold to the US.

Shaw's workshop made at least three versions of this 'Paradise bed' each rejecting the complex, costly and correct symbolism, and substituting the bible text for Victorian sentiment. The carving is inferior, the format smaller, the frames solid, with varnished still-bright oak. None have medieval paint. Not once did he call it or his copies of it a royal marriage bed, though that is what its age and language suggest the original to be.

So, reader, was the bed genuine - a royal marriage bed perhaps taken from Westminster to Lathom in 1495 when the king and queen visited, or a genius-level fake?

Such are the mysteries embodied in old timber. Evidence is still emerging, but - like the bed itself - this story will never be complete. ■

Below: Detail of the headboard of the disputed piece (left) compared with a bed (right) known to have been supplied by Shaw to the Duke of Northumberland in 1847-8



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