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Citation for final published version:

Lindfield, Peter 2025. Ordsall Hall's 'Radclyffe Bed'. *The Antiquary: Fakes, Forgeries & Fallacies*

Publishers page:

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Ordsall Hall's 'Radclyffe Bed'

Celebrated as the c.1572 marriage bed of Sir John Ratcliffe (*d.*1590) and Anne Ashawe (*d.*1630), the 'Radclyffe Bed' has been on loan to Ordsall Hall, Manchester, since its acquisition in 2014. Sold as 'an impressive Elizabeth I oak and inlaid tester bed, circa 1580, bearing the coat of arms of the Ratcliffes of Ordsall Hall', the codicil, 'incorporating some associated and some later elements', is especially important. Upon close inspection, the bed's Tudor components appear limited to veneering; instead, it was manufactured in the 1840s from cobbled-together and re-carved seventeenth-century framing—the headboard and footboard—and augmented with new, Elizabethan-style ornament and heraldry. Indeed, these armorials are the bed's only link to the Radcliffes of Ordsall Hall, and idiosyncratic details indicate George Shaw (1810–75) of Uppermill, West Yorkshire, devised them to illicit ancestral associations. Completed by 1848, it was described as 'magnificent bed though [...] put together and I perceived not quite in unison but he said the parts which seemed so were one when he got them'.

From a mill-owning mercantile background, Shaw was fascinated by his illustrious aristocratic lineage. Encouraged by antiquaries including Francis Raines and Samuel Meyrick, Shaw amassed historical material and was introduced to genuinely ancient and 'new-old' composite furniture. Deploying knowledge of such work and heraldry, and using materials from his antiquarian store, the Tudor 'Radclyffe bed' was born at a time when his 100-strong architectural practice was producing other bespoke, Tudor-style furniture. Some were sold as genuine family relics in daring schemes ensnaring northern aristocrats, including the Duke of Northumberland: Shaw's credentials as a prolific forger have recently come to light. The 'Radclyffe Bed' was no such fake: it was never sold as a genuine Tudor artefact before the twentieth century. Instead, Shaw made it for himself and it remained in his bedroom at the family home, St Chads, until 1920. Implicitly 'old-fashioned', it was designed to fill a gap in Shaw's personal collection of ancient family possessions enhancing his home's suffocating romantic interiors. It also overturned the 'shipwreck of time' that wrought dilapidation upon Ordsall Hall. Visiting Ordsall—a former ancestral pile—in 1832, Shaw recorded its interior stripped of ancient furniture.

Misinterpreted today as genuinely Tudor, this bed is a tremendously valuable record of Shaw's fascination with lineage and the decorative vocabularies employed to recreate the past.

Image captions

Overview of the Radcliffe bed, detail of the headboard's heraldry, and the headboard's composite construction. © Peter N. Lindfield