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Medieval Beds and Footboards

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History is the 'shipwreck of time'. Innumerable examples of domestic furniture from England, including high-status canopy beds, have been lost because of natural wastage, changing fashions, and the Civil War. Today, unless preserved in ecclesiastical contexts, ancient domestic furniture is typically preserved as fragments, including the headboard from Henry VIII's marriage bed now in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow. On occasion, these fragments were cobbled together with modern woodwork to create 'cut-and-shut' 'antiques'.

Despite this overarching theme of loss, pieces of medieval furniture do survive and occasionally materialise. The challenge, of course, is to identify them, and ascertain their history and authenticity. A little over a decade ago, a four-poster (tester) bed replete with English royal heraldry was sold off from a hotel in Chester as Victorian repro. Material analysis has subsequently revealed that this bed's structure and carved panelling is made almost exclusively from one tree and its DNA places it from Central Europe (there is a 2 per cent chance of the oak coming from England). Crucially, the widespread use of wood from one tree means the bed isn't cut-and-shut: if this was the case, material analysis would show the wood having coming from multiple sources.

This bed's surfaces also preserve paint fragments, including *lapis lazuli*, that are consistent with the types and application of pigment from fifteenth-century England. The ornate headboard also speaks of the bed's age, and it includes Adam and Eve trampling evil and the narrative concentrates upon unification and fertility: this and other details, including its heraldry, refer to Henry VII's 1486 marriage to Elizabeth of York that helped mark the end of the Wars of the Roses.

Another bed with similar decoration, save for the headboard featuring pierced fretwork panels, was almost certainly made for Sir Thomas Stanley (*d.*1504), first Earl of Derby. The Earl was Henry VII's stepfather, and this perhaps explains the existence of two remarkably similar state beds from the dawn of Tudor England. A photograph of the Stanley bed taken in 1913 has recently emerged and it records the bed's form when it was sold from The Orchard in Rochdale (**FIG**). Noteworthy are the bed's canopy and double-decker footboard replete with Henry VII's royal arms and Sir Thomas Stanley's gartered shield; these

parts have now disappeared and therefore cannot be materially tested, and the bed itself has vanished into a private collection.

During the twentieth century, the Stanley bed was disassembled and 'restored' at least twice: these 'improvements' fundamentally reformulated the bed's appearance. The footboard was removed almost certainly to make it conform to the understanding of ancient beds: it is widely accepted by the antiques trade, museum professions, and beyond, that medieval beds do not include footboards that were designed to be seen. Such footboards, instead, are believed to be part of the nineteenth-century 'Gothic Revival' spearheaded by AWN Pugin. The double-decker footboard seen attached to the Stanley bed in 1913 has therefore been dismissed as wholly Victorian based solely upon received opinion and without the ability to assess and scientifically test it.

This understanding of medieval beds is, however, hampered by the fact that few examples from this time survive, be they from royal, noble, or more mundane contexts. We, therefore, cannot build up a complete picture of beds' appearance from this time, and inventory descriptions rarely offer meaningful detail. A slim group of early Tudor beds from Lancashire approximating that made for the Earl of Derby exist, however one was converted into a bookcase before being given to Chetham's Library, Manchester, in 1827, and we cannot say how representative these examples are outside of Lancashire.

Instead, for over a century, historians have turned to next best source given the dearth of physical evidence: visual depictions found in manuscript illuminations. Bedding is typically shown extending over the foot of illustrated beds, and this covers the front rail and forms a valance. Given that most English beds illustrated in manuscripts conform to this model, the reasonable assumption is that medieval beds had a modest footrail rather than a large and elaborate footboard rebated between the legs.

As with the Stanley bed, the royal bed's footboard has been dismissed as Victorian frippery and some have used it to call into question the age and authenticity of the whole structure, despite the carved decoration preserving fragments of a medieval paint scheme. But because of the limited number of surviving Tudor beds—let alone royal ones—perhaps the carved footboard is not the Victorian addition some have considered it to be, but, instead a record of what a royal bed from 1486 could look like?

An investigation of beds depicted in medieval manuscripts and early sixteenth-century printed designs, as well as physical examples, reveals that carved footboards intended for

display were very much part of current design language. Perhaps the most significant example is found in a manuscript, no.157, held by Corpus Christi, Oxford (**FIG**): depicting Henry I's nightmares, the scene shows Henry I on a bed where the pierced headboard, along with its capping and corner finials, is replicated at the foot of the bed, too. This footboard rises a little less than the headboard, but it is still above the level of the bedding, and in no way was this board designed to be hidden. Of course, this bed was almost certainly hypothetical, but it still demonstrates that the concept of a carved and exposed footboard existed in English visual culture as early as the twelfth century.

Exposed footboards can be found in numerous other depictions of beds, including in Leonhard Beck's print, *St Leo*, 1517, and Jacques Sacon's plate for *Biblia cum concordantiis*, 1718. A particularly prominent example is illustrated at the foot of the ostentatious double-canopied state bed in Peter Flötner's c.1540 engraving (**FIG**), and a highly ornate Gothic example is included in included a sixteenth-century *retable* now at Musée Boucher de Perthes, Abbeville, France.

These examples not only demonstrate that the footboard was part of the visual language of sixteenth-century beds, but that this concept existed as early as the 1140s in England. Dismissing footboards on Tudor beds as Victorian interventions when we do not have sufficient physical comparators to make conclusive pronouncements illustrates the challenge facing historians of Tudor material culture.

Image captions

The Thomas Stanley bed as seen in 1913.

The Nightmare of Henry I from Corpus Christi, Oxford, MS 157, c.1140

Peter Flötner, design for a bed, c.1540