



a **Royal Tudor Bed** *& a* **Northern Rogue**

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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: Henry VIII’s parents.



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.

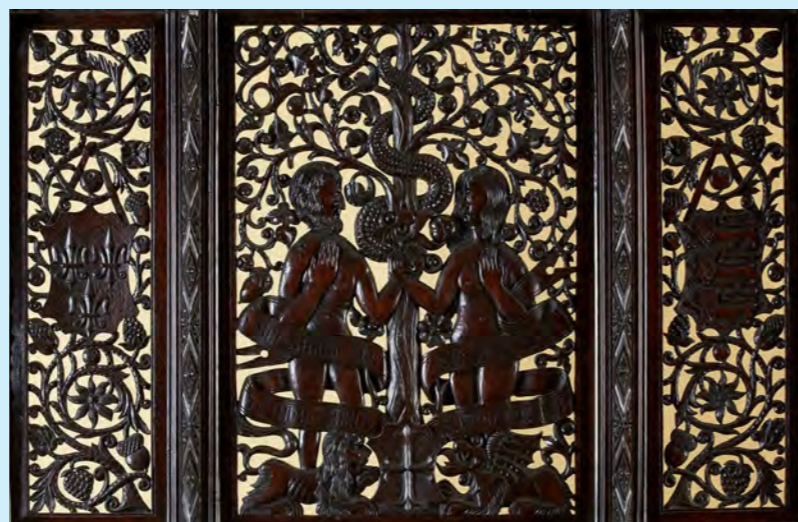
Medieval furniture reflected the rank of its user, and beds were the most important piece of furniture anyone could own. Rising through the social strata, furniture became larger and increasingly elaborate in terms of enclosure, material, and decoration. The newly married couple’s marriage bed exhibited here, consequently, was designed to be a magnificent statement of unity, piety, and power. Covered with a canopy (a 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 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 and Elizabeth transmuted into Christ and the Virgin, are in a posture of marriage and ignore the apple of temptation presented by the serpent.

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



Detail of the marriage bed’s headboard



Detail of the marriage bed’s footboard

direct response to the room’s State Bed enclosure where the wall painting depicted Edward the Confessor’s coronation.

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 (France and England) emerge through *mandorla*. These explanations only begin to touch on the bed’s iconography!

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

- fourth Duke of Northumberland (1847): made and supplied
- second Earl of Bradford (1848): proposed; unknown manufacture
- Col. Charles Towneley (c.1847–50): made & supplied (with TV ‘career’)
- William Herrick (c.1850): made & supplied, returned to Shaw as a fake

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.

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.

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 & Shaw’s ‘Paradise 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, iconog-



George Shaw’s *Henricus VII Rex* bed, c.1842



George Shaw’s *Northumberland* bed, 1847: Christie’s

raphy, scale, fluency of design, and coherence are all unquestionably inferior on Shaw’s examples that pale in comparison with the royal workshop’s work. 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 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?

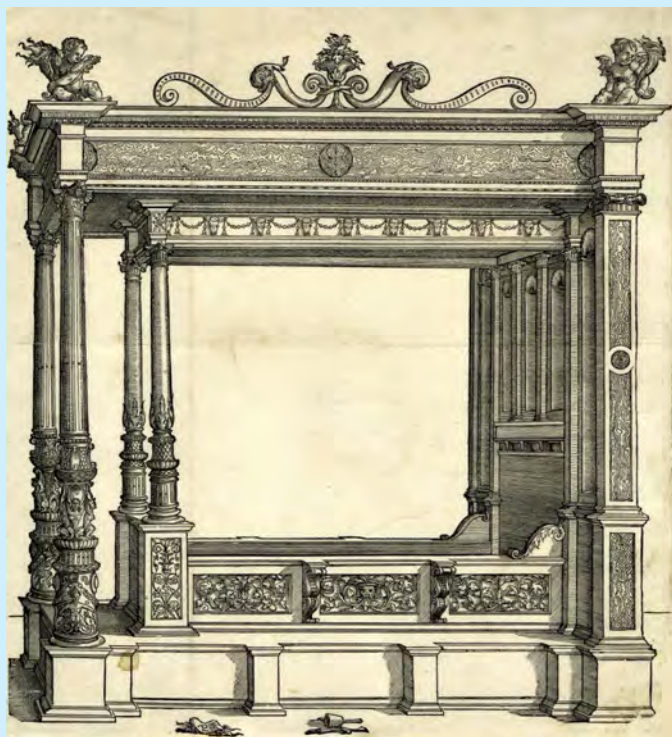
Furniture historians and the antiques trade hold onto the belief that elite beds did not include footboards, and that they are a Victorian invention. Following this long-held belief, the footboard attached to the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed is Tudor. Dendrochronology, however, shows that the



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

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.

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.



P. Flötner, *State Bed*, c.1540, 1992,0620.1, © British Museum, London

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.

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, footboards 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). 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. When photographed in 1913, this bed featured a double-decker



The Thomas Stanley Bed, photographed 1913

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.