

The Bury Chest



Since 1892, when Charles Clement Hodges first reproduced and described it in the fifteenth volume of *Archaeologia Aeliana*, the Richard de Bury chest has figured in several standard works of reference on furniture, including Fred Roe's book on ancient coffers and cupboards (1902) where it forms a colour frontispiece, Cescinsky and Gribble's *Early English Furniture and Woodwork* (1922), the *Dictionary of English Furniture* (1924 and 1954 editions) and Oliver Bracket's *English Furniture Illustrated* (n.d.). It has more-over been shown in two major exhibitions - that of English Mediaeval Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1930 (No. 46) and that of British Art at Burlington House in 1934 (No. 1261). Nevertheless, I think it is true to say that no attempt has ever been made to examine fully all the evidence concerning its original function, ownership and provenance. In the article I shall review the existing literature and outline my own solutions to these problems.

The earliest printed reference to the chest seem to occur in a book (1833) on Durham published anonymously but written by the Rev. James Raine, containing the following statement: 'There is, in the Court of Chancery, within this building (i.e. The Exchequer on Palace Green), a chest, the nether surface of the lid of which contains a curious specimen of Durham painting during the reign of Henry VI. The subject is heraldic, and the accompaniments are not devoid of character.'

Mr. M. G. Snape, Senior Assistant Keeper of the Prior's Kitchen, University of Durham, to whom I owe this and the following reference, observes that the Court of Chancery of the Palatinate of Durham was removed from the Exchequer Building (now part of the University Library) to a new building in the North Bailey in 1855. The subsequent history of the chest is recounted in the *Durham University Journal* (1904, p.139) by the Rev. J. T. Fowler, who, after describing certain 17th century furnishings removed with the Court from the old to the new building, continues: 'A fine old iron-bound chest of much earlier date, formerly in the Court of Chancery, was bought of the contractor by the Rev. W. Greenwell, after the removal of the Court to the Bailey. Inside the lid is some very fine heraldic painting, including two shields of Aungerville, to which family Bishop de Bury belonged, one of England quartering France modern (*sic*), and one of Nevill, but with the saltire gold instead of silver.'

This account, though erroneous in its description of France as 'modern' in the quartered shield of England (Fowler was probably misled by the three lilies in the third quarter) and of the tincture of the saltire in the shield of Nevill (recent restoration has shown that the gold was the accidental effect of discoloured varnish), is certainly more informative than Raine's description of 1833. In ascribing the chest to the reign of Henry VI (1421-71), Raine may have assumed that it was contemporary with the Exchequer building itself, which

dates from the time of Bishop Robert Nevill (1438-57), and housed, as Mr. Snape informs me, not only the Exchequer but also the other courts of the Palatinate, including the Chancery.

Fowler was not the first to associate the chest, with Richard de Bury (b. 1287), Bishop of Durham (1334-45-). In 1892, after describing the chest which he notes as deriving from the Chancery Court in the Exchequer building on the Palace Green and 'now in private possession,' Hodges adds: 'But the chief interest lies in the painting inside the lid, which is remarkably fresh and clean. It consists of four coats of arms, the principal ones being those of Sir Richard de Aungerville, bishop Richard de Bury's father ... and the arms of England and France quarterly, the second and third quarters being *semée* of fleurs-de-l'ys. In the centre of the lid, between the four shields, a man horseback (*sic*) is represented tilting at a cock (*sic*), and the ends are filled up with lions rampant facing outward (*sic*).

We know from Fowler that the owner of the chest at this time was the Rev. William Greenwell, D.C.L., F.R.S., F.S.A. (1820-1918), a well known antiquary who became a minor canon of Durham in 1854 and rector of a church there in 1865. He is still remembered as an authority on prehistoric barrows and for his able edition of the *Boldon Book*, a survey of the episcopal possessions of Durham made by the order of Bishop Pudsey in 1183, published by the Surtees Society. He was also the author of a catalogue of English and Irish ecclesiastical seals at Durham which was collated and annotated by C. H. Hunter Blair and published by the Surtees Society in 1917 in which his ownership of the chest is confirmed in a footnote by Hunter Blair to Greenwell's description of the seal of Richard de Bury (No. 3133): 'The bishop's full name was Richard Aungerville of Bury, and his paternal arms are blazoned in the parliamentary roll of Edward II, *de goules a un quintefoil de ermyne od la bordure de sable besannte de or*; they also appear in colours on the lid of a chest belonging to the Rev. W. Greenwell. The shield suggests a connection with the cinquefoil of the earls of Leicester, and the border with the Duchy of Cornwall, but I have been unable to find more about it than above recorded. The bishop does not appear to have used the arms. There can be little doubt that the man who first recognised the chest as associated with Richard de Bury was the same man that had had the enterprise and perception to rescue it from the contractor (Hodges calls him 'joiner') into whose clutches it had disappeared during the translation of the Court in 1856. It may have been during this unfortunate interlude that the iron lock was removed and replaced by a wooden filling.

Roe's description of the chest, which he calls 'unique of its kind', is longer and rather more searching than that of Hodges. He notes that the four shields are on a green diapered ground and that the second shield cannot be identified but that the cinquefoils point to the bishop's family. He also draws attention to the unusual quartering of the shield of England, but instances another example of lions quartering lilies instead of the normal lilies quartering lions (adopted in 1340) on the south porch of Gloucester Cathedral. The fourth shield he describes as probably for 'Nevill, Earl of Westmorland', forgetting, it may be assumed, that the family was not elevated to this rank until 1397, many years after Richard de Bury's death. This is followed by a brief biography of the bishop—his early appointment as governor to Prince Edward (later Edward III), the succession of preferments he received culminating in his elevation to the Bishopric of Durham in 1334, his splendid retinue and sumptuous living, and his great temporal power which enabled him to place all the shipping of the Palatinate at the service of Edward for passage of troops during the Scotch wars, and to furnish at his own expense twenty men-at-arms and twenty archers.' He also notes that the Close and Patent of Richard de Bury are the earliest extant in the Chancery at Durham. In his opinion, however, the chest, although known to have come from the Chancery Court, was originally an ecclesiastical possession.

Cescinsky and Gribble in 1922 are even more emphatic about its ecclesiastical origin. 'This chest,' they write, 'was originally either the property of Durham Cathedral or of a large monastery close by. The emblazoning is sufficient to indicate that it was made not earlier than 1340 and during the time when Richard de Bury (himself a d'Aungerville) was bishop. As he died on August 13th, 1345, the period of the chest is narrowed down to one of five years.' Long chests of this type, they state, were nearly always intended for monastic or ecclesiastical use to contain vestments, deeds or other treasures. Of the second shield they remark that it is not an English coat at all, but that it might be that of the abbot of an associated monastery, probably in France or of a foreign benefactor of Durham Cathedral. Like Roe, they state the fourth shield to be for Nevill, Earl of Westmorland.

In the *Dictionary of English Furniture* (1924) the second shield is assumed to be an augmentation granted to the bishop and the fourth to be that of Nevill of Raby, which family, it is wisely noted, was created earls of Westmorland in 1397. It is also noted that the chest was originally decorated throughout in tempera and that the inside of the lid has been varnished, 'a process which has caused it to blister and crack.' 'The blazoning of the shields,' it is said, 'supports Mr. Roe's conclusion that the chest was made for the celebrated Bishop of Durham, who was Chancellor of England and High Treasurer, under Edward III.' Unlike Fred Roe, however, and indeed all other writers about the chest, with the exception of the compiler of the relevant entry in the 1934 catalogue of the British Art exhibition, the form of the third shield is said to be indicative of a date *prior* to 1340. No evidence is offered in support of this surprising affirmation, which is repeated in the 1954 edition, and it may be assumed that the author or authors believed that a form of quartered shield in which the normal order of the quartering is reversed was occasionally used at an earlier date.

With the exception of James Raine in 1833, all who have considered the chest agree that the first shield represents the Bishop's family. The second shield, which the D.E.F. probably rightly assumes to be an augmentation of the bishop's arms, is considered puzzling. All authors, except that of the D.E.F. article, consider that the third shield indicates a date not earlier than 1340 and since the bishop died in 1345, they assume the chest to have been made during those five years. They recognise the fourth shield as that of Nevill but fail to specify any particular member of the family. None commits himself to an opinion as to what the chest was used for, but two at least, in spite of the fact that it is known to have been in the Court of Chancery until 1855 and the decoration is entirely secular in character, are convinced that it came originally from the cathedral or some other ecclesiastical building. Only the D.E.F. notes that it was originally decorated outside as well as inside the lid and none speculates as to what this decoration comprised.



Far Left to Left Centre



Centre Right to Far Right

The four shields, it should be noted, are arranged in pairs on either side of the central centaur and dragon. In so far as symmetry is concerned they are given equal weight, but heraldically we must assume that greater importance is to be attached to those on the dexter side. We know that the first shield represents D'Aungerville the family of which the Bishop Richard de Bury was a member. Is there any evidence to support the view of the D.E.F. article that the second shield is an augmentation? If we recall that in the old heraldry of Durham the bishopric was represented by a plain cross between four lions, a shield in which the lions are replaced by the d'Aungerville cinquefoils might be considered a reasonable augmentation for the bishop. On the sinister side the white saltire in a red field of Nevill stands in a similar relation to the shield of England. This suggests that the chest belonged to or was used in the service of two men of almost equal power and authority, one of whom represents the bishopric of Durham and the other the Crown of England, and that this joint enterprise, judging by the aggressive nature of the central motive, was of a temporal and even bloody character. If the first two shields stand for Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham (and Prince of the Palatinate), the other two shields must stand for a member of the Nevill family who was a representative of the Crown and closely associated with him, in other words, Ralph, 2nd Lord Nevill, who spent the greater part of his life in the north of England organising resistance to and fighting the Scots and is remembered especially for his victory at the Battle of Durham or Nevill's Cross in 1346, when King David of Scotland was taken prisoner. He died in 1367 and was the first layman to be buried in Durham Cathedral. His name is frequently linked with that of the King and the Bishop, and he was the major magnate in the Palatinate.

On 11th July, 1338, for example, and again on 27th May, 1340, when Prince Edward, son of Edward III, was appointed Keeper of the Realm during the King's absence abroad, Ralph de Nevill was appointed one of the council to advise him (*Cal. of the Patent Rolls*, 1338-40, pp. 112 and 528). In the summer of 1338 he seems to have been among those who accompanied the bishop on a diplomatic mission overseas (*ibid.* p. 91); on 1st March, 1339, he was appointed to serve on a commission with the bishop to fix the boundaries between the counties of York and Westmorland (*ibid.* p. 279) and on 28th April, 1340, to a commission with the bishop, Henry de Percy, and Geoffrey le Scrope to meet tax collectors at York, to arrange for the payment of the King's army in the north and to make other payments in connection with the defence of the realm (*ibid.* p. 516). Moreover, we know from a provision in the register of Richard de Bury that the bishop appointed his 'very dear friend' Ralph de Nevill as unofficial overseer of the keepers of the temporalities of

the See of Durham during his absence on the King's service (*Registrum Palatinum Dunelmense*, Vol. III, p. 209). Ralph de Nevill was, therefore, empowered to act on behalf of both the crown and the Palatinate and these considerations might justify an equally prominent position being given to his arms beside those of England on the sinister side of the lid of the chest as is given to those of the bishop and the See of Durham on the dexter.

In all previous accounts of the chest it seems to have been taken for granted that the beasts at either end of the lid and the beast and centaur in the centre, are merely grotesque fillings between the shields of the type frequently depicted in the art of the later 13th and early 14th centuries, but it is almost certain that they also contain heraldic or semi-heraldic significance. Indeed the blue lion rampant on the extreme left is almost certainly the blue lion of the Percy family and probably stands for Henry de Percy, 2nd Lord Percy of Alnwick, who, even before reaching the age of twenty-one, is said 'to have carried the Blue Lion many times successfully against the Scots.' Like, Nevill, he was one of the victorious commanders at the Battle of Durham in 1346, and, as we have already mentioned, he was associated with Nevill and the bishop on the commission appointed in 1340 to take defensive measures in the north. The rampant dragon on the extreme right (*or, langued and lined gules*) presumably stands for another doughty defender of the realm, but remains unidentified, as does the brown dragon with blue stripes facing sinister in the centre.

The latter dragon is usually considered, perhaps rightly, as the target which the centaur, half man, half leopard, wearing jester's hood and scaly brigandine, holding sword in his left hand and odd-looking buckler in his right, is charging. In that case, the scene might be associated, as Mr. Jack-Scott remarks, with one of those worm or dragon slaying legendary ancestors claimed by certain families both north and south of the Border. Before the removal of the iron lock and hasp, however, the fixed arm of the latter, marked now on the under surface of the lid by a scar, would have acted to some extent as a barrier between beast and centaur, even if not an insurmountable one, and it may be that they should be considered as separate motives.

As a heraldic charge the centaur is associated with military prowess, the first warrior on horseback having been mistaken by a terrified enemy for a monster. It is said to have been borne as a device by King Stephen in 1135, after his victorious landing in England when the sun was in that sign, and although the man part of the centaur on the lid is more of an armed elf or 'hodeken' than a warrior, the motive was presumably intended to convey a warlike connotation, albeit in a somewhat playful spirit. If the chest, in its day painted on the outside as well as inside the lid, doubtless a showy and even resplendent object, was intended to accompany the bishop or his deputy on a commission of array or recruitment, a motive of this sort would have had a more cheering or, at any rate, less dispiriting, effect on a volunteer or enlisted man than the depiction of a more daunting feat of arms.

With the exception of a 13th-century chest in Newport Church, Essex, the Richard de Bury Chest is almost the only chest to have survived with more than a vestige of the paint which would originally probably have embellished most mediaeval chests, whether carved as well or not. Accounts of Durham Cathedral as it was before the Suppression show that it contained a quantity of painted woodwork, including cupboards and chests for the safe-keeping of relics, vestments and plate, and perhaps it is no accident that the most famous of surviving examples of painted medieval furniture, the Coronation Chair, was made by Master Walter of Durham, the King's Painter, who also carried out the decoration of the painted chamber in the Palace of Westminster. Thanks to the skill and patience of Mr. Ian Hodgkinson of the National Trust for Scotland, and his assistant, Mr. Robert Snowden, who have now completed the arduous task of consolidating and cleaning the flaking tempera paint on the inside of the lid, this chest is now assured of a new lease of life for many years to come. It is my belief that it was made for one of the Courts of the Palatinate, if not actually the Court of the Chancery, whence it is known to have come in 1855, and that it was used in the service of Richard de Bury and of his friend and temporal deputy, Ralph, 2nd Lord Nevill, probably for a military purpose connected with the defence of the realm. As to its original function I suggest that it might have been used to house the banners, standards and pennons (less the poles) of the English forces raised by the Palatinate, which bore, it may be presumed, the same devices that we see on the inside of the lid and that originally perhaps were continued on the outside of the chest.

The chest was acquired by Sir William Burrell from the collection of Captain N. R. Colville, Penhaele Manor, Cornwall, in 1941.