

'The Richard de Bury Chest' Registration number 14-52



Material - painted oak with iron fittings (main lock missing - see wood insert, centre front, where it once was; there is also a locking mechanism at each end for padlocks).

Until c.1850 this chest was to be found in the office of the Chancery Court at Durham. It is very rare for chests as old as this one to survive. The most important thing about the chest is the polychrome ('many-coloured') painted decoration remaining on the inside of the lid. This decoration is on a heraldic theme. The shields of arms, from left, are:

1. (1) the family arms of D'Aungervile of County Leicester
2. (2) these same family arms, quartered within the cross of Durham
3. (3) England and France, quartered - in a form used before 1340
4. (4) the family arms of Nevill of Raby (we also have a 14th century stained glass panel in the collection incorporating these arms; no. 45-287, not currently on display)

Richard of Bury was Bishop of Durham 1334-45. He was a member of the D'Aungervile family, Chancellor of England and High Treasurer under King Edward III. The D'Aungervile arms quartered within the cross of Durham (2) most probably represent Richard de Bury himself. The Nevill family arms (4) may be here to represent Ralph, second Lord Nevill, a soldier who was a close friend of Richard de Bury. The attributed date of the chest, c.1340, is related both to the form of the Royal arms found on it, and the date of de Bury's bishopric. Note how the shields are painted as if suspended on the chest lid by straps.

The rather intriguing figural decoration on the inside of the lid is possibly symbolic. This was a time of war against the Scots, and both Richard de Bury and Lord Nevill were part of a Commission appointed in 1340 to take defensive measures locally. The Battle of Durham took place in 1346. The two flanking rampant animals on the chest lid, a blue lion on the left and a yellow & red dragon on the right may symbolise two staunch defenders of the region - the blue lion representing Henry de Percy, the dragon an as-yet unknown other warrior. The centaur-like creature (half man/half animal) in the centre is armed with sword and shield, and appears to be fighting the brown and blue fierce dragon facing him. This may be generally symbolic of 'a battle' (i.e. fighting a scary enemy) or perhaps just fanciful additional decoration to fill up space. Given the theme of this decoration, it is a possibility that the original purpose of the chest was to store one of these warrior's armour - the separate small section at one end perhaps used for the fixtures and fittings. Armour was very expensive to make and maintain, and would certainly be kept under lock and key when carried around and stored between encampments while on campaign.

Sir William Burrell bought the chest in July 1941. Its earlier history in private ownership began in the 1850s, when Reverend W. Greenwell purchased it from contractors who were moving material from the Durham Chancery Court to a new building nearby. We next know of it when Henry Armstrong, a dealer in Darlington, sold it to the dealer Muirhead Moffat, about 1902, and he in turn sold it to Captain N.R. Colville, who lived in Cornwall. It was bought from Colville by Burrell for £2,500 - a great deal of money at the time.