

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

ON INSPECTING THE 'GOTHIC REVIVAL' FOUR-POSTER HE'D BOUGHT UNSEEN, IAN COULSON SUSPECTED SOMETHING WAS AWRY. EXPERT RESEARCH FOUND HE'D UNCOVERED A RARE PIECE OF MEDIEVAL CRAFTSMANSHIP, THOUGH ITS SIGNIFICANCE HE COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED



I first entered an antique shop as a teenager. It was a Dickensian world of dark furniture with the intoxicating aroma of old wood and beeswax; I was smitten. A degree in art history at the University of Manchester cemented an appreciation of form and proportion. A desire to own a period four-poster made me an unapologetic clinophile, a connoisseur of historic beds. Over 30 years I have bought, sold, repaired and researched hundreds, the majority from the 18th century; earlier beds are rare.

It was on a freezing December morning in 2010 that I arrived home from Houston, Texas. That same day, an auction in Chester had an intricate and impressive mid-19th-century 'Gothic Revival' four-poster for sale. With no time for viewing I purchased it unseen, thinking it may have been an important exhibition piece. The Northumberland winter meant it was several weeks before I could collect it. What I encountered was far beyond my expectations. The overriding impression was one of power and antiquity; a work of art, not a work of commerce. Close examination revealed that the lozenge-carved columns were whittled with blades rather than the lathe turning you would expect from the 17th century onwards. There was a history of loss and repairs, extensive woodworm, rot, shrinkage and a level of oxidisation I hadn't seen on any 18th-century bed. This was clearly not a 19th-century revival piece – so what was it?

The royal arms prominently displayed, without those of another family, suggested one thing: I had discovered a bed made for Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. The profiles of the Adam and Eve figures on the headboard bore a striking resemblance to early portraits of the royal couple, while their naive sloping shoulders resonated with late Medieval stained glass. The claim was met with a healthy degree of scepticism, compounded by the discovery of two documented beds by George Shaw of Saddleworth (1810-75). These smaller, ill-proportioned beds were, to my eye, clearly copied from an earlier original. Could Shaw have owned this one? A trip to his home in Uppermill provided the answer. The rooms were full of Victorian carving copied from the bed. As I was leaving his library, my heart skipped a beat as I saw the missing royal crest from the bed canopy, truncated by 20cm each side and fixed above the door as a pediment.

Pigment detritus under the varnish revealed that the bed had once been richly painted. Helen Hughes, a conservator, took 200 samples, revealing an overall scheme using a coal-based primer typical of the late 15th century. Lapis lazuli (a pigment more costly than gold) was found on the Adam and Eve panel. Helen had found lapis only once before, again on a royal commission. DNA analysis carried out by the same team who worked on the *Mary Rose* demonstrated that the timber was European oak, the greatest concentration of which is found in Austria and the Czech Republic. This is typical of the origin of the finest oak used by Medieval elites: Edward III used planks from Latvia for his bed of 1360.

Jonathan Foyle, a Tudor historian and former curator at Hampton Court Palace, has deciphered the bed's iconography and put it in its historical context. Adam and Eve are shown in a marital pledge, refusing the serpent's apple, figures not of sin but redemption. Bernard André, Henry VII's chronicler, tells us that a marriage bed was prepared in 1485. The royal pair spent their wedding night in the Painted Chamber at the Palace of Westminster. The room was decorated with a mural of Edward the Confessor's coronation, revealed and recorded in 1817 before it was destroyed by fire in 1834. The bed would have fitted perfectly in front of it.

Forgotten and then misidentified, this magnificent piece can now be seen as a significant relic of our national history. A short film about the investigation of its origins and provenance will be released in the spring ■ For more information about Henry VII's state bed, and to see other historic beds, visit thelangleycollection.com.