

The Cotehele Cupboard: An Elegy in Oak

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1 The Cotehele cupboard, oak, Welsh, probably c. 1526–36.
Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust

Previously published studies of the Cotehele cupboard front have given some attention to its carved inscription and imagery, recognising that these might hold the key to its identity and provenance, but the outcomes have been far from conclusive (Figure 1).¹ In 2007 Richard Bebb renamed the Cotehele cupboard the ‘Newcourt Cupboard’, and suggested that it is the remains of an imposing Welsh cupboard made in or about the Golden Valley in the Welsh Marches. He cited an appropriate patronym and a late

¹ Riall and Hunt (2006); Bebb (2007), 1, pp. 161–68; Riall (2012).

fifteenth-century Welsh bardic elegy and praise poem or *marwnad* to identify Harri Ddu ap Gruffudd of Newcourt (d. c. 1477), as the dedicatee. Bebb proposed that the cupboard was created about 1522–36 as a memorial to Harri Ddu. He identified early sixteenth-century European influence in both the joinery and the clothing depicted, Welsh influence in its construction and a pre-Reformation date in the reign of Henry VIII due to the religious iconography in the design. Bebb's proposed dating accords very well with the results of the dendrochronological analysis, which suggested a felling date range for the timber of 1524–50 and very close match with wood previously sampled at Michaelchurch Escley, which is less than five miles west of the Golden Valley.² However, the suggestion that the cupboard celebrates Harri ap Ddu is more speculative, and does not begin to explain, except in vague terms, the wealth of imagery and symbolism which covers every inch of the cupboard's surface.

In his 2012 article Nicholas Riall linked the cupboard to other pieces of carved work near Clun and at Llanfair Waterdine that also depict hunt scenes, and thus suggested a point of origin further north and east than the Golden Valley. In support of this he briefly drew attention to the presence of some recognisable heraldic badges on the frame. Two of these badges he identified with the families of two Marcher lords; the horse with fructed oak is the badge of the FitzAlans, Earls of Arundel, Oswestry and Clun, and the talbot dog is the badge of the Talbots, Earls of Shrewsbury. Riall considered the reign of Queen Mary (1553–58) to be the most probable period of the carving's execution, a conclusion based on perceived Catholic iconography in the design and on the opinions of costume experts, who had studied the clothing styles depicted in the carving. However, Riall's analysis precluded a more comprehensive interpretation because he proposed that the cupboard front is a composite piece made from two items of furniture of similar date and provenance, so any attempt to discuss the imagery as a unified whole was bound to fail.

Adam Bowett's article in the present journal questions Riall's interpretation and suggests that the physical evidence proves the cupboard to be a single structure, as Bebb also believed. If this is the case, then the way is once more open to unlock the secret of the cupboard's creation through analysis of its imagery. The purpose of this article is to revisit this enigmatic piece of furniture, taking the date and location suggested by the dendrochronology as its starting point, and working on the premise that the cupboard is an oaken elegy or *marwnad*, created to celebrate the memory of its dedicatee. The question it seeks to answer is, who was that dedicatee?

A BARDIC INTERPRETATION

There are many unusual elements employed in the carving of the cupboard; these draw the eye, promote questions and offer important clues. A reasoned interpretation for each element is central to the understanding of the completed piece of work. The challenge is to find an interpretation in which most elements of the design are integrated within a believable hypothesis.

Bardic poetry typically had several layers of meaning. The Welsh musicians of panel 3, with the prominent tuning key, hint that a bardic analogy is the 'key' to under-

² Miles (2012).

standing the cupboard. In the poetic form of the '*awdl vrydiau*', which was particularly fashionable in the late fifteenth century, animal metaphors in the ode stood for personalities well known to informed listeners.³ Heraldic badges in the form of animals and birds could fulfil an analogous visual role in the frame of the cupboard, understood by an informed audience while seeming, to the uninitiated, to be a simple hunting scene. If an allegorical interpretation is correct, the cupboard's designer must have understood bardic poetic convention, heraldic symbolic usage, genealogy and cultural history. There is also, clearly, a strong religious element to the carving. The elements of the design would represent visually the elements found in a traditional bardic *marwnad*. We would expect to see many of the personal badges of the dedicatee and his wife, as well as those of their extended family and allusions to biographical details of their achievements.⁴

The idea that the cupboard is an elegy or tribute is suggested by the carved inscription in archaic Welsh:

KYFFARRWTH ~ AIGWNA ~ HARRY ~ AP ~ GR

The difficulty of translating this into modern English is evident in Bebb's and Riall's accounts; both suggested that *kyffarrwth* can be translated as 'expert', but Bebb also suggested 'storyteller' as a possible alternative. In medieval Wales, especially in a bardic context, *kyffarrwth* or *cyfarwydd* had the meaning 'storyteller' or 'relater of tales'.⁵ In this context it was used in the famous collection of medieval Welsh stories *The Mabinogion*, for example for Gwydion in the story of '*Math ap Mathonwy*'.⁶ Thus the use of the word *kyffarrwth* on the cupboard might suggest that the designer or carver of the cupboard may have seen himself as 'relating' the life and genealogy of his sponsor's family. Especially significant to a bard would be the family's influence in the cultural and administrative society of the Welsh Marches.

The letters GR are shown with a mark indicating an abbreviation, and this has been assumed to indicate a patronym, perhaps GR[uffydd]. However, by the sixteenth century the use of patronyms was changing, especially among the gentry with strong political or family connections to England. Even as early as the reign of Edward IV the use of patronyms was discouraged. This became more general after Bishop Roland Lee became President of the Council of the Welsh Marches in 1534. He was impatient with the complexities of the patronymic system and instructed all gentry to use either their last name or place of residence as a surname. This raises the possibility that GR is not an abbreviated conventional patronym but a shortened form of Gŵyr (Gower).⁷ The translation could therefore read:

THE STORYTELLER ~ CREATED THIS FOR ~ HARRY ~ SON OF ~ GOWER

³ Jones (1837), p. 470, 'Awdl Vrydiau, a species of poetry so current in the bard's time, in which the leading characters of the day were introduced under fictitious names, borrowed chiefly from the animal creation'.

⁴ Durie (2012), Chapter 11.

⁵ MacKillop (2004). See also Davies (1992).

⁶ Davies (1992), pp. 231–57. Professor Davies of the School of Welsh at Cardiff University is also the author of a monograph in Welsh, *Creffft y Cyfarwydd* (the Craft of the Storyteller), published by the University of Wales Press in 1996.

⁷ 'Peris' (1831).



2 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the cubit arm and scroll. *Tankerdales Conservation/ The National Trust*



3 The Cubit Arm and Arrow, the personal badge of Sir Charles Somerset, Earl of Worcester, displayed in the Beaufort Chantry, St George's Chapel, Windsor. *The author*

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Lordship of Gower was held by Sir Charles Somerset (1460–1526), K.G., Earl of Worcester, Baron Herbert of Raglan, Chepstow and Gower, Lord Chamberlain of the Household, Steward and Chief Forester of Crown lands in the southern Welsh Marches and Lord of Ewyas Lacy. In his will, proved on 20 November 1526, Somerset styled himself 'Erle of Worcestour, *Lord Herbert of Gower* and of Chepstowe' (my italics).⁸ After his death Sir Charles's lands and titles passed to his eldest son, Henry Somerset, 2nd Earl of Worcester (c. 1496–1549).

The scroll on which the dedication is carved is held at its left end by a disembodied hand and forearm with two diagonal bands on the sleeve; the index finger points meaningfully towards the inscription. This is unlikely to be a casual image; if the cupboard is indeed an oaken *marwnad* then every element has significance, and in this case the arm can be identified as part of the disassembled badge of Sir Charles Somerset, which was the 'Cubit Arm and Hand grasping an Arrow'. It can be found among the badges in the Beaufort chantry in St George's Chapel, Windsor (Figures 2 and 3). The 'Cubit Arm and Hand' lacks its arrow, which has been taken by the skeletal figure of Death. Could this be an explicit reference to the death of the great man for whose son, Harry, otherwise Henry Somerset, 2nd Earl of Worcester, the cupboard was created?

⁸ Nicholas (1826), II, pp. 662–63.

SIR CHARLES SOMERSET, K.G., AND THE HERBERT DYNASTY OF RAGLAN

Sir Charles Somerset was born Charles Beaufort, an illegitimate son of Henry Beaufort, 3rd Duke of Somerset (Figure 4). He was acknowledged by his father and legitimised, but his father never married and was executed by Yorkist forces in 1464. Charles was sent to Flanders for safety and eventually became part of the court in exile of Henry Tudor. In August 1485 Charles landed with Henry in Pembrokeshire and was knighted before taking part in the battle of Bosworth later that month. Then, although a legitimised member of the Lancastrian Beaufort family and a cousin of the new king Henry VII, Sir Charles took as a surname his father's dukedom of Somerset rather than retain the Beaufort name. In 1492 Charles married Elizabeth Herbert, daughter and only child of William Herbert, Earl of Huntingdon and 2nd Baron Herbert.

The Herbert dynasty had been founded by a hero of Agincourt, William ap Thomas. His knighthood on the battlefield led to the rise of his family's position in the southern Welsh Marches and their ownership of Raglan Castle. Their son, also William, was a loyal follower of the House of York during the Wars of the Roses. He was instructed by Edward IV to abandon the use of a Welsh patronym and so took the surname Herbert from a distant, possibly mythic, ancestor.



4 George Perfect Harding (c. 1779–1853), portrait of Charles Somerset, Earl of Worcester, Baron Herbert of Raglan, Chepstow and Gower (1460–1526). Watercolour, after a lost original. NPG 1492. Copyright National Portrait Gallery, London

Sir William Herbert became a Welsh-born peer, Knight of the Garter and 1st Earl of Pembroke. This significant position gave the Herbert family great prominence in South Wales. Sir William married Anne Devereux, from another family of great influence in the Welsh Marches, and together they acted as guardians to the young Henry Tudor before his escape into exile.⁹ As a loyal supporter of the House of York, Sir William Herbert was executed by Lancastrian forces in 1469. His elder daughter Maud had married Henry Algernon Percy, the future Earl of Northumberland. Sir William's son, also William, 2nd Earl of Pembroke and later Earl of Huntingdon, had married Mary Woodville, sister of the Queen, Elizabeth Woodville, in St George's Chapel, Windsor.

The only heir of Sir William Herbert and Mary Woodville was their daughter, Elizabeth, a cousin to Queen Elizabeth of York. She could not inherit the Earldom but could and did inherit the Barony of Raglan, Crickhowell and Gower in 1491. Her marriage to Charles Somerset, cousin of King Henry VII, was the foundation for the next powerful Marcher Lordship, centred in the area of Raglan, Monmouth and Chepstow.

In right of his wife Sir Charles Somerset became Baron Herbert, and in 1496 was made a Knight of the Garter. He rapidly became one of the most influential figures at Court and in the Welsh Marches during the reigns of both Henry VII and Henry VIII. Every honour and responsibility Sir Charles was given as a courtier was matched with responsibilities and stewardships of Crown lands in the Welsh Marches and Glamorgan. From 1509 until his death he served as Lord Chamberlain to the Royal Household. Sir Charles's landholdings in the Welsh Marches were extensive, and included Raglan and Chepstow castles, both Herbert strongholds. Raglan is about ten miles south east of Abergavenny and twenty-three miles south of Michaelchurch Escley, which provides the closest dendrochronological match for the timber used in the Cotehele cupboard. In 1503 Sir Charles had been made Lord of Ewyas Lacy, the ancient hundred of which Michaelchurch Escley was a parish. This means that the oaks from which the cupboard was made more than likely belonged to Sir Charles or, after 1526, to his son.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PANELS: THE ROYAL/SOMERSET ARMS

The central panel in the upper tier (panel 2) appears to depict the Royal arms (Figure 5). The quarterings are reversed, with the *fleur de lis* of France in the second and third quarters rather than the first and fourth, but such reversals, though rare and technically incorrect, are not unknown at this early date. A similar reversal occurs on a carved and painted panel from Usk Priory, which is thought originally to have come from Raglan Castle.¹⁰ Since the College of Arms was not incorporated until 1484 the systematic discipline of heraldry was still in its infancy and inconsistencies now seen as errors, confusions, omissions and reversals can be found in monuments and carvings

⁹ Their marriage could have inspired the design of the front of a fifteenth-century chest decorated with the badge of the Herbert's, a Wyvern, and that of the Devereux, a Talbot, on either side of the sacred monogram IHS [illustrated in Bebb, (2007), 1, p. 152].

¹⁰ Kenyon (2003), pp. 22–23; Rickards (1904), pp. 21–23.



5 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the Royal/Beaufort arms.
Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust

of the time all over England and Wales.¹¹ In the upper corners of the panel are Tudor roses, and the supporters are an uncrowned lion (dexter) and greyhound (sinister). Officially, no English monarch used these supporters, but, as Riall has pointed out, they do occur on arms mounted on the tomb of Prince Arthur in Worcester Cathedral.¹² These are not Arthur's own Royal arms but the impaled arms of Arthur's parents, Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, and the supporters are the white greyhound of the earldom of Richmond and the white uncrowned lion of March, as used by the family of Edward IV. Since Henry VII and Elizabeth were also the parents of Henry VIII he too was entitled to use the same supporters, so conceivably these arms are in tribute to Henry VIII, although it is odd there is no Royal crown depicted.

Sir Charles Somerset's arms were the Royal arms of England, differenced by the azure and argent 'Beaufort bordure'. These arms were inherited from his father Henry Beaufort, 3rd Duke of Somerset, but were debruised by a bendlet sinister to show Sir Charles's illegitimate birth. When Sir Charles died in April 1526 he was buried, together with his wife, who pre-deceased him, in the Beaufort Chantry at St George's Chapel at Windsor. The stall plate bearing his arms is in the Quire of St George's Chapel (Figure 6). It bears the Royal arms and Beaufort bordure differenced with a bendlet

¹¹ Riall (2012); personal communication from Anthony Jones, Bath Heraldry Society, 11 April 2014.

¹² Woodcock and Robinson (1999), p. 71; Riall (2012).



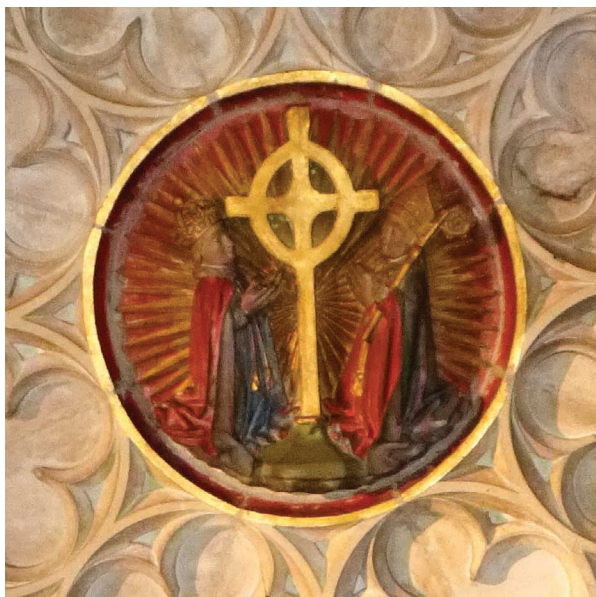
6 (above) Stall plate of Sir Charles Somerset, St George's Chapel, Windsor. *Reproduced by permission of the Dean and Canons of Windsor*



7 (right) Another version of Sir Charles Somerset's arms, from the Beaufort Chantry, St George's Chapel, Windsor. *The author*

sinister impaled with the arms of his wife, Baroness Elizabeth Herbert, which are charged with three lions. Another version of the same arms occurs in the Beaufort Chantry (Figure 7). On the cupboard the lion and greyhound supporters are shown 'regardant', or facing outwards, which signified circumspection or possibly mourning. As well as being appropriate to Henry VIII, these supporters could also have been used by Sir Charles Somerset; on one side is the Beaufort greyhound and the other the Herbert lion of the Welsh Marches. The two roses could signify descent from the two houses of Lancaster (Beaufort) and York (Herbert).

A key difference between the arms on the cupboard and those on the stall plate in St George's chapel is the lack of a bendlet sinister, and its absence from the cupboard is puzzling. However, given the largely unregulated condition of heraldry at this time, and given that Sir Charles was an acknowledged and legitimised son, it is possible that the creator of the cupboard did not consider the bendlet a desirable or necessary attribute. Moreover, it is possible that in seeking a definitive attribution for the arms we are missing the point; the ambiguity could be deliberate, for the idea of ambiguity is central to the tradition of the *marwnad*. The arms might therefore be both an acknowledgment of the king (and until 1537 *de facto* Prince of Wales), Henry VIII, and a memorial to Sir Charles Somerset. Certainly Sir Charles was the only man who fulfils the necessary criteria of time, place, status and lineage whose arms bear any resemblance to those on the cupboard.



9 The Cross Gneth, depicted on the ceiling of St George's Chapel, Windsor. *The author*

bosses in St George's Chapel (Figure 9).¹⁴ Christ's Passion was often the subject of devout bardic poetry, and the Redemption offered by Christ was symbolized by the Cross Gneth. Thus the *Arma Christi* had great spiritual and national importance in the Welsh bardic tradition. Their prominent position on the cupboard declares Sir Charles Somerset's devout character, both as the head of a noble Welsh patrimony and as a Knight of the Garter.

The inclusion of an imperial state crown in the top right of the panel was not usual in depictions of the *Arma Christi*, but in this case it is significant. The 'crown imperial' symbolised the fact that the English king was *rex in regno suo est imperator* (an emperor within his own domains) and owed fealty to none but God. The message of the crown imperial was adopted and pushed to the fore by both Henry VII and Henry VIII as a means of reinforcing their links to earlier kings and hence their legitimacy on the English throne. A new Tudor version of the crown was commissioned by either Henry VII or Henry VIII and can be seen in a state portrait of Charles I painted by Daniel Mytens in 1631. It was more elaborate than preceding crowns and was mounted with medallions representing Christ, the Virgin Mary and St George. The crown was destroyed by the Commonwealth government after Charles's execution in 1649.¹⁵ In 1521, Henry VIII wrote the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (The Defence of the Seven Sacraments) as a reaction to the ideas of Martin Luther. The book was seen as strong support for the sacrament of marriage. This was acknowledged by Pope Leo X with his gift of the title *Fidei Defensor* to King Henry VIII. The imperial crown displayed with the *Arma Christi* symbolises the perceived link between the monarch and the spiritual leadership of the country.

¹⁴ The Cross Gneth was among the relics and treasures of the Chapel taken to the Tower of London by King Edward VI's Commissioners to 'await the King's further instructions'. It is presumed that none have survived.

¹⁵ Hoak (2002), p. 86 et passim.



10 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the Welsh musicians. Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust

THE MUSICIANS

The depiction of two Welsh musicians and their instruments firmly places the cupboard in its bardic context (Figure 10). The high quality of the carving of both instruments gives a unique insight into the design of *crwth* and also of the harps of the period. The harp tuning-key was a significant bardic badge and its visual prominence probably signals the use of this idiom in the interpretation of the cupboard.

Bards were often skilled musicians and/or poets, but they were also teachers, heralds, historians and genealogists for their patrons. Their role in recording and celebrating their patrons' lives and works was very important to Welsh culture and, especially in the elegiac verse of the *marwnad*, was also of genealogical importance. The support they received from their noble patrons was essential for their creative livelihood.

Three earlier generations of Elizabeth Herbert's Welsh Marches forebears had sponsored bards in the fifteenth century. These included high-ranking, important bards such as Guto'r Glyn and Lewys Glyn Cothi. Extant Welsh poetry describes Elizabeth's great-grandmother Gwladys as 'the Star of Abergavenny'.¹⁶ There were also strong cultural bardic links with later generations of the Somerset family in the sixteenth century. Lewis Morgannwg was the foremost of a number of well-known bards associated with the family. He created a poetic *marwnad* for Sir Henry Somerset, 2nd Earl of Worcester, on his death in 1549. *Marwnad* and praise poems were also dedicated to Henry's son and grandson; this implies some comprehension of Welsh language, with sponsorship and support of Welsh Bards into the seventeenth century.¹⁷ It also suggests that it would have been quite natural for Henry to have commissioned this cupboard as a visual *marwnad* for his dead father.

¹⁶ Jones (1837), p. 1.

¹⁷ <http://wbo.llgc.org.uk/en/s-SOME-RAG-1450.html>.

The panel may also reflect a wider engagement with the cultural life of the bards. Within Sir Charles Somerset's stewardship of Caerwys and Ruthinland in 1523, a great *eisteddfod* was held at Caerwys, in order to 'chair' new bards.¹⁸ There was a stringent examination, under the great multi-instrumentalist and teacher Tudur Aled, to ensure continuation of the high standards of Bardic culture, both instrumental and poetic. It is quite likely that the *kyffarrwth* or 'storyteller' of the cupboard was present at this *eisteddfod*, perhaps as the Herbert/Somerset family bard. He would be well versed in the genealogy of the earlier Herbert family and of Sir Charles' own biography.

ST GEORGE

Panels 6 and 8 depict scenes from the legend of St George and the dragon (Figures 11 and 12). In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries the St George legend was strongly linked to Wales and the Welsh Marches, to the skilled Welsh bowmen of the region and also to the premier family of the region, the Herberts. In 1415 the Welsh bowmen at the battle of Agincourt made a vital contribution to the unexpected victory of Henry V and his smaller English force against the might of the French nobility. St George was said to have made a miraculous appearance that sealed Henry's victory, and from that time St George was considered a personal patron by many of the veterans of the battle. It was at Agincourt that William ap Thomas, later Sir William Herbert, was knighted. From 1485, bowmen of the Welsh Marches were employed as members of the Yeomen of the Guard, the new bodyguard of the Welsh-born Henry VII, and Henry's cousin, Sir Charles Somerset, was Captain of the Yeomen from 1486–1501. His wife, of course, was Baroness Elizabeth Herbert, heiress of the Herbert dynasty.

St George was also a central figure in the mythology of the Garter Knights, having been adopted as the patron saint of the Order of the Garter from its inception in 1348. St George was deemed to possess all the attributes of the perfect knight: military excellence, Christian chivalry and loyalty to the Sovereign. The Garter insignia worn by the King, the Prince of Wales, and all the twenty four Garter Knights had St George's cross on the mantle and the 'Great George' image suspended from the Garter collar. The portraits of two Garter Knights of the 1570's, Robert Dudley 1st Earl of Leicester¹⁹ and William Somerset, 3rd Earl of Worcester (Sir Charles' grandson), show the 'Great George' medallions with the Saint wielding a sword rather than a lance.²⁰ St George was used in ecclesiastical imagery as an exemplar, taken from St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, where the Christian armed to fight the forces of evil is 'clothed in the Armour of God and bearing the shield of Faith, the Helmet of Salvation and the Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God'.²¹

Most images of St George on horseback show him with the lance impaling the dragon, but the design of panel 6 may have inspired by and is very reminiscent of a

¹⁸ A newly qualified bard would be ceremonially seated as a part of the proceedings of an *Eisteddfod*. The 1523 *Eisteddfod* was the first use of the term to mean a formal assembly of poets and musicians.

¹⁹ National Portrait Gallery, NPG 247 and 2400.

²⁰ Kenyon (2003).

²¹ Chapter 6, verses 10–18.



11 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing St George defeating the dragon. *Tankerdale Conservation/ The National Trust*



12 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the Princes leading the defeated dragon. *Tankerdale Conservation/ The National Trust*

fifteenth-century wall painting from the Church of St Cadoc, Llangattock Lingoed, near Abergavenny. There is a drawn sword in the Saint's hand and a broken lance has pierced the neck of the dragon in both depictions. On the panel the dragon is an *amphisbaena* and the second head, in the tail, is striking at the horse's leg. As Nicholas Riall has pointed out, other contemporary depictions of the *amphisbaena* occur in the Welsh Marches.

St George's horse bears two ostrich feathers on its head. The ostrich feather was one of the badges of the House of Lancaster and is prominently displayed in the frieze of the Beaufort Chantry. The studded band of the horse's harness links it visually and metaphorically with the Royal/Somerset arms in panel 2 and the *Arma Christi* in panel 1, implying that St George stands for Sir Charles and vice versa. The link between the three panels is especially important in the context of a memorial for a Garter knight, emphasising his loyalty to God, St George and the King.

The story of St George and the Dragon is continued in panel 8, and it is possible that, just as St George stands for Sir Charles, the princess stands for his wife, Baroness Herbert. This second part of the St George story is rarely portrayed. In it the rescued princess is given the task of demonstrating the passive nature of the now defeated dragon. Is this a metaphor for the Baroness's Welsh inheritance, with the dragon standing for the Herbert dragon, or merely a conventional rendering of the ending of the tale?

ADAM AND EVE IN EDEN

Positioned between the two St George panels is a representation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Figure 13). Adam and Eve are naked. An angel with sword in hand (maybe the representative of God) stands beside Adam, and in his left hand is a scroll, perhaps to show the first role Adam played in the Creation, that of naming the beasts. Adam and Eve are on either side of the Tree of Knowledge, around which winds not a snake but a wyvern, the crest of the Herbert family. The position of their hands implies the vow of marriage. Adam and Eve were often depicted on Tudor period dower chests, especially when both members were of armorial bearing families. This was especially true if a sole hereditary heiress was the bride, as in case of Elizabeth Herbert.²²

LEAVES AND FLOWERS

A common feature of panels 3, 6, 7 and 8 is the trailing leaf and flower motif which fills much of the background. This was possibly inspired by a poem of the late fifteenth century, 'Ode to St David' by Daffyd Llwyd. The ode refers to the Welsh as 'the folk from the land of the vine and the white flower'. The same leaf and flower, with its spear-shaped leaves and four-petalled flowers, occurs on church carvings in the region of Abergavenny from the late fifteenth century, which suggests that the motif was part of a common regional decorative repertoire (Figure 14). The similarity in the spear-shaped leaves and the four-petalled flowers with the berry-like centre is notable.

²² For instance, the later sixteenth-century chest at Prideaux Place, Padstow, Cornwall.



13 (above) The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing Adam and Eve with the Tree of Knowledge. *Tankerdale Conservation/ The National Trust*



14 (left) Detail of the rood screen at the church of St Issui, Patricio, Crickhowell, showing leaf and flower motifs. *The author*

THE IMAGERY OF THE FRAME

In his 2012 article Nicholas Riall identified at least two possible heraldic badges on the cupboard frame, the horse with the fruited oak of the FitzAlans and the talbot dog of the Earls of Shrewsbury; to this we can now add the cubit arm of Sir Charles Somerset. This suggests that the imagery of the frame, which to the uninitiated appears as merely as a collection of Tudor hunting scenes, has a more important message to convey. The creator of the cupboard has used symbolic imagery and animal metaphor similar to the poetic '*awdl vrydiau*', by which Sir Charles and his friends and family, personalities well known to informed viewers, are depicted by their heraldic badges and cognizances. The basis of the following analysis is *Heraldic Badges*, published in 1907 by A. C. Fox-Davies, in which are listed and described the personal devices used as badges by Royalty and the nobility of England and Wales.²³ These badges were taken from what is now called *Prince Arthur's Book* and from the *Book of Standards*, compiled between 1510 and 1525 and now held in the College of Arms. The badges of early Tudor Garter Knights are also found as ceiling bosses in the Quire of St George's Chapel.²⁴

PERSONAL BADGES OF SIR CHARLES SOMERSET

A number of badges on the frame are those belonging to Sir Charles Somerset or relating to his various offices and duties. The cubit arm has already been mentioned. In *Heraldic Badges* it is described as: 'A cubit arm habited bendy sinister wavy of five pieces argent and azure and issuant out of rose gules, hand proper grasping an arrow'. It was one of the personal badges of Sir Charles Somerset and is found among the sixteenth-century decorations of the Beaufort Chantry and tomb of Sir Charles and Lady Elizabeth (Figure 3). On the cupboard, the badge has been symbolically broken by Death (Figure 15).

The hunting imagery of much of the rest of the cupboard is doubly appropriate, not only because it allows personalities to be identified by their animal badges, but also because Sir Charles was Chief Forester of Glamorgan, Ruthin, and Montgomery. Additionally, he was Captain of the Yeomen of the Guard, Henry VII's (mostly Welsh) bodyguard, between 1486 and 1508. In this capacity he was present at the creation of Prince Henry (later Henry VIII) as Duke of York in 1494 and in 1501 he was responsible for the Guards array at the reception of Katherine of Aragon.²⁵ Thus although the bowmen's arrows are the broad-headed hunting type rather than the armour-piercing military 'bodkin', the allusion to the prowess of Welsh bowmen is apt (Figure 16).

In the centre of the middle rail is a deer or hart, lying down or 'lodged', and pierced with an arrow (Figure 16). The hart was a badge used by Richard II (and possibly by his namesake Richard III), but there is no known badge of a pierced hart (perhaps the arrow is a reference to Sir Charles' badge). The hart is flanked by dogs — greyhounds (sight hounds) on the left and a breed of low slung scent hounds on the right. Riall identified the latter as basset hounds, which may or may not be the case.²⁶ The key

²³ Fox-Davies (1907).

²⁴ Cave and Stanford London (1953).

²⁵ Hewerdine (2012), p. 42.

²⁶ Riall (2012).



15 (left) The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the figure of Death with the arrow taken from the cubit arm. On the rail above is a horse bearing a fruited oak and a pelican vulning its breast for its young. *Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust*

16 (below) The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing two of the Welsh longbowmen carved on the frame. On the rail above the panel is the wounded hart. *Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust*



point is that they seem to be a specifically Welsh type; similar short-legged, large headed, lop-eared dogs occur on the reconstructed altar rail at Llanfair Waterdine and on the Lower Spoad Farm bressumer or hearth beam.²⁷ These could indeed be the 'low legged hare hounds of Wales who can well discover a hare after they find it sleeping ...'.²⁸ In all three examples — Cotehele, Llanfair Waterdine and Lower Spoad Farm — two types of dog are depicted; greyhounds with collars and short-legged hounds without. In the case of the Cotehele cupboard, a further layer of meaning can be suggested, because the Lancastrian greyhound was a badge of Sir Charles Somerset while the Welsh scent hounds might represent the Herbert lineage with the dog badge of Anne Devereux, Elizabeth's Grandmother. Appropriately, the greyhounds enter from the dexter or senior side and the Welsh hounds from the sinister or subordinate side (in heraldry dexter and sinister are deemed to be seen from the point of view of the wearer of the arms).²⁹

On the lowest rail the hunting greyhound and scenting hounds appear again, also entering from dexter and sinister sides (Figure 17). They pursue two animals which may allude to the motto of the earls of Worcester — *Mutare vel Timere Sperno* (I scorn change and fear) — which is found on the gateway to the Beaufort Chantry at Windsor. The animal with the long, raised tail confronted by the Beaufort greyhound may be a stoat or ermine, symbolic of change, as its summer coat is totally different to its winter one. The hare hunted by the Welsh hounds is symbolic of timidity and fear.

Three falconers are carved on the top muntins, each with a fettered falcon (Figure 18). This is again a typical hunting scene, but is it also a political statement? The falconers wear the ostrich feather badge of Lancaster and each holds a staff. This is perhaps the staff of the office of Lord Chamberlain of the Household. Sir Charles Somerset seemed to set especial store by this ceremonial position, as can be seen in extracts from his will, and the staff, symbol of his office is shown prominently in surviving portraits of him (Figure 4).³⁰

The falcon (sometimes with a fetterlock) was a badge used by the Plantagenet descendants of Edward III and Richard, Duke of York, such as Edward IV and his sister Elizabeth de la Pole. After the death of Richard III in 1485 the de la Pole family were the chief Plantagenet claimants to the English throne. The elder of Elizabeth's sons, John, Earl of Lincoln, was named heir to Richard III but was killed at the Battle of Stoke in 1487. His brothers, Edmund, Richard and William, in turn became Plantagenet claimants to throne of England and a focus for Yorkist support. They canvassed their claims with both the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, and the French king, Louis XII. In 1502 Sir Charles Somerset undertook an embassy to Maximilian which resulted in the banishment of all the Yorkist rebels, most notably Edmund de la Pole, from the empire. His brother William was imprisoned by Henry VII in 1502 and all three brothers were attainted in 1504. Henry VIII had Edmund, a prisoner since 1506, executed for inciting his brother Richard to rebellion in 1513, while Richard died in 1525 at Pavia, fighting as a mercenary for the French against Emperor Charles V. William died in 1539, a prisoner of 37 years.

²⁷ Illustrated in Riall (2012), figs 17 and 18, and Bebb (2007), 1, figs 264a and 265.

²⁸ Letter of Edward, Prince of Wales written c.1305, quoted in Riall (2012).

²⁹ Robinson and Woodcock (1988).

³⁰ Nicolas (1826), II, pp. 622–23.



17 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing the hounds pursuing a hare and a stoat or ermine (?). *Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust*



18 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing two of the three falconers. Note the plumed hats and the staffs. On the top rail is a talbot. *Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust*

Sir Charles Somerset's role in this family saga was to ensure by his Continental diplomacy that the de la Pole brothers were unable to raise enough in funds and manpower to challenge for the throne of England. He had met the Emperor Maximilian in 1490, when he was sent by Henry VII to invest the Emperor with the Order of the Garter. He was present at the meeting in Calais between Henry VII and Archduke Philip in 1500 and joint ambassador to Maximilian in a mission lasting from September 1501 to July 1502. Sir Charles distinguished himself in Henry VIII's French campaigns, for which he was created Earl of Worcester in 1514, but was nevertheless chief ambassador to the court of Louis XII to negotiate the marriage of Princess Mary. He was chief commissioner to negotiate with Emperor Maximilian in 1516 and to negotiate with the Pope, Francis I and others in 1518, which culminated in the meeting

of the French and English kings on the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. This conspicuously expensive piece of 'Pageantry for Peace' was Worcester's greatest triumph. As Wolsey's appointed deputy he was responsible for the implementation of all the English decisions from the initial site selection and the use of the famous temporary palace to the politically sensitive pageantry of the meeting.³¹ He was again Chief Commissioner from Cardinal Wolsey to Francis I in 1521 and was a Commissioner to treat with France in 1525. In all, Somerset was vital to keeping the interests of the new Tudor dynasty alive in Europe and in thwarting any threat from the Plantagenet claimants. The fettered falcons are a neat metaphor for Somerset's success in keeping the successive de la Pole pretenders from power.

BADGES OF KINSMEN AND GARTER COMPANIONS

Kinship links to Sir Charles and his wife would have been important in the conception of a visual *marwnad*, and several badges associated with members of the extended family are identifiable. Some are also badges of brother Knights of the Garter and all, including Sir Charles, seem to have died within the period from 1524 to 1528. This may have been of significance to the designer of the cupboard and his sponsor.

The white horse and fruited oak is the badge of Sir Thomas FitzAlan, Earl of Arundel, Oswestry and Clun (Figure 15). He was uncle by marriage to Elizabeth Herbert and his major sphere of influence in the Welsh Marches abutted lands stewarded by Sir Charles Somerset. He died in 1524, two years before Sir Charles. The same device occurs among the roof bosses in the Quire at St George's Chapel, Windsor.³² Thomas and Sir Charles worked closely together as Knights of the Garter, Privy Councillors and advisers to King Henry VIII.

Next to the FitzAlan horse is a pelican, 'vulning' its breast to feed its young in its nest (Figure 15). This is a conventional symbol of Christian piety, but it was also the personal badge of Richard Fox, Bishop of Winchester, Prelate of Order of the Garter and Lord Privy Seal (c. 1448–1528). This badge and bishop's mitre are displayed on a pendant boss above the altar in the quire of St George's Chapel. His arms are on a second boss.³³

Richard Fox was Lord Privy Seal for Henry VII and one of the council of advisors to Henry VIII in the first years of his reign. Sir Charles Somerset, Lord Chamberlain of the Household, was one of his closest colleagues on the Privy Council. In 1508 both contracted 'the sweating sickness' when serving in the King's household; both were seriously ill but survived the ordeal. Bishop Fox was illustrated at the deathbed of Henry VII with his arms displayed, confirming that his charge was the Pelican in its Piety.³⁴ Sir Charles may also be shown in the same illustration, holding his staff of office and closing the eyes of his kinsman. They were both among the executors of King Henry's will. By 1520 Bishop Richard's eyesight had deteriorated to the extent that he resigned his post as Lord Privy Seal but he remained Bishop of Winchester and Garter Prelate until his death in 1528.

³¹ Richardson (2013), pp. 11, 52–72, 78.

³² Cave and Stanford London (1953).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Illustrated in the account of Garter King of Arms, Sir Thomas Wriothesley (d. 1534). <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/henryviii/birthaccdeath/deathbed/>.

At the opposite end of the top rail is a dog-like animal identified by Riall as a talbot (Figure 18). The creature is curiously leonine, but some sixteenth-century depictions of the talbot portray it with a mane of curled hair on the shoulders and always with a protruding tongue and clawed feet. There are two possible personalities who could be assigned to this cognizance, as both used the talbot as a badge or crest, and both were Garter Knights with property and influence in the Welsh Marches. Sir George Talbot, 4th Earl of Shrewsbury (d. 1538), was a friend of Henry VII and godfather to his eldest daughter, Margaret, Queen of Scotland. Sir George's home and primary estates were near Sheffield, but he had property and influence in the Welsh Marches. Sir Walter Devereux, 9th Baron Ferrers (d. 1558) was a kinsman of Elizabeth Herbert, and was appointed South Wales Chamberlain on the death of Sir Rhys ap Thomas. Sir George was a friend and colleague to Sir Charles Somerset but Sir Walter had kinship with Elizabeth through his grandmother Anne Woodville, Elizabeth's Aunt; it is impossible to say, in this case, which might be represented by the talbot.

Immediately in front of talbot is a bird of nondescript appearance (Figure 18). While it is impossible to determine what type of bird is intended, it is possible that this is the raven badge of another Garter Knight, Sir Rhys ap Thomas. He was a vital supporter of Henry VII before and during the Battle of Bosworth (some accounts even suggest he killed Richard III) and helped Jasper Tudor to win over his countrymen to the Tudor cause. Among his appointments were Chamberlain of Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire, Constable and Lieutenant of Breconshire, Seneschall and Chancellor of Haverfordwest, Rouse and Builth, Justiciar of South Wales and Governor of all Wales. His installation as a Knight of the Garter in 1505 was highly significant to both Sir Rhys and the Welsh. Sir Rhys fought for Henry VIII alongside Sir Charles Somerset at the Battle of the Spurs in 1513. His badge was a single raven, as seen among the roof bosses of the Quire of St George's Chapel.³⁵ Sir Rhys died in 1525.³⁶

A highly significant Garter Knight, Emperor Maximilian I, may be represented by the Imperial double-headed eagle in the centre of the frame, between the two former drawers (Figure 19). In 1490 Sir Charles was sent by Henry VII to invest Emperor Maximilian I with the Order of the Garter and, as we have seen, he was a frequent visitor of ambassadorial status to the emperor's territories in Flanders throughout his life. Thus the use of this symbol might refer to Sir Charles Somerset's close connexions with the Flanders Court of both Maximilian, who died in 1519, and with his grandson Charles V.³⁷ A double headed eagle is also among the designs on the Usk Priory frieze thought to have links with Raglan Castle.³⁸

The huntsman on the lower right stile of the frame blows a horn and wears a shacklebolt, a restraint used in falconry, hanging from his belt (Figure 20). A 'shacklebolt or' and 'a blue bugle horn sans strings' were among the badges of Sir Henry

³⁵ Cave and Stanford London (1953).

³⁶ Intriguingly, Sir Rhys's grandson, Rhys ap Gruffydd, was the son of the first marriage of Lady Katherine Edgcumbe of Cotehele. In the past it had been suggested that Lady Katherine might have originally brought the cupboard to Cornwall on her marriage to Sir Piers Edgcumbe, but her arrival at Cotehele was before the latest date of tree felling given by the dendrochronological analysis.

³⁷ Nicholas Riall pointed out that the double headed eagle was also the badge of the Glyns of Glyn-llifon, Gwynedd and the Lloyd family of Llwyn-y-Maen near Oswestry, but there do not appear to be any genealogical links between the Herbert/ Somerset family and either of these Welsh families [Riall (2012)].

³⁸ Kenyon (2003), p. 22; Rickards (1904), p. 23.

19 (right) The Cotehele Cupboard, detail, showing the double-headed Imperial eagle.

*Tankerdale Conservation/
The National Trust*

20 (below) The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing (right) the huntsman with shacklebolt.

*Tankerdale Conservation/
The National Trust*





21 The Cotehele cupboard, detail, showing three falcons (?) above the Royal/Beaufort arms.
Tankerdale Conservation/The National Trust

Algernon Percy, Knight of the Garter and 5th Earl of Northumberland (d. 1527).³⁹ A shacklebolt representing the 5th Earl is depicted among the Quire bosses at St. George's Chapel.⁴⁰ His mother, Maud Herbert, was Elizabeth Herbert's aunt, so he was Elizabeth's paternal cousin. Anne Percy, his sister, was married to Sir William FitzAlan, Earl of Arundel, Elizabeth Herbert's maternal cousin. The relationship between the Percy and Herbert families is recorded in the frieze from Usk Priory, which has a shield with the Percy arms.

Several images remain to be identified. The figures on the lowest parts of the right and left stiles have largely disappeared (the bases of the stiles have been replaced) and so elude interpretation. On the top rail immediately above panel 2 are three birds, perhaps falcons (Figure 21). As we have seen in the account of the de la Pole brothers, the falcon was a Plantagenet badge used by many members of the extended Plantagenet line. Catherine of York was the daughter of Edward IV, sister to Elizabeth Woodville (wife of Henry VII), aunt and godmother of Henry VIII and a cousin and friend of Elizabeth Herbert. Her daughter, Margaret Courtney, was Sir Charles's daughter-in-law and both women would have been entitled to use the falcon badge. Margaret died

³⁹ Fox-Davies (1907), p. 129.

⁴⁰ Cave and Stanford London (1953).

c. 1525, Catherine in 1527. It is more difficult to suggest a candidate for the third falcon. One possibility is another of Elizabeth's Woodville cousins, Sir Henry Stafford (died 1523). He was brother of the disgraced Earl of Buckingham executed for treason in 1521. However, in his will Sir Charles asked for prayers for 'his wife, her friend and her mother' so it is possible that the three falcons represents Elizabeth Herbert herself, her great friend and cousin Queen Elizabeth of York and Mary Woodville her mother. Their position immediately above the Beaufort arms reinforces this possibility.

There are two important images closely associated with Sir Charles and Lady Herbert that are not found on the cupboard front as it appears today. They are the portcullis and the bascule. The portcullis is one of the most recognisable of the Beaufort family badges cited by Fox-Davies. Its usage can be traced back to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. It was a favourite badge of Henry VII and became the cognizance of the Somerset family, the Earls of Worcester and subsequently the Dukes of Beaufort. It features prominently on the gate of the Beaufort Chantry (Figure 22) and is also displayed on one of the bosses of the Quire and in his Chantry Chapel. The other significant omission is the bascule badge of the Herberts. A bascule is a drawbridge counter-balance. It is prominent among badges associated with Elizabeth's grandfather, Sir William Herbert, 1st Earl of Pembroke and can be seen at Raglan Castle. It is displayed alongside the Beaufort portcullis on the gate of the Beaufort Chantry (Figure 22).

The portcullis and the bascule are architecturally similar badges from different sides of the family and seem natural partners. It is possible, therefore, that they were placed symmetrically on the two drawer fronts, now missing, but this speculation cannot be proved.



22 The gate to the Beaufort Chantry, St George's Chapel, Windsor, showing the Bascule (centre) and Portcullis (right). *The author*

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Some aspects of the cupboard's imagery remain to be resolved, most notably the costume, for which the dating evidence, as presented by Riall, was somewhat ambiguous.⁴¹ A full discussion of the costumes would require an article all to itself, but there is growing acceptance that English costume during the reign of Henry VIII was strongly influenced by European fashions, especially that of France, but also that of Spain, as seen at the court of Emperor Charles V. However, we know from the dendrochronological analysis that the cupboard was most probably made between the years 1524 and c. 1550, somewhere close to Michaelchurch Escley in the Welsh Marches.⁴² The overtly Catholic imagery of panel 1 makes it likely that the cupboard was made before 1536, which narrows the date range of its creation to between 1524 and 1536. The cupboard's inscription in archaic Welsh tells us that it was made for Harry, son of 'GR' (Gŵr), and the man who best fits this description in terms of date, locality and status is Henry Somerset, 2nd Earl of Worcester (c. 1496–1549). His father was Sir Charles Somerset, 1st Earl of Worcester, K.G., Lord Herbert of Raglan and Chepstow, Gower (1460–1526), and it is likely that the cupboard was made in his memory. The clue to this is given by the disembodied cubit arm, the personal badge of Sir Charles, with its arrow stolen by death. The word *kyffarrwth* or 'storyteller', combined with the display of Welsh musicians in panel 3, suggests that the cupboard has a story to tell; it is a visual version of the traditional bardic *marwnad* or elegy, commissioned to commemorate the life of a great man.⁴³ Usually the *marwnad* would have been read in public at a gathering of all interested parties a month after the funeral, but when Sir Charles died he specified in his will that 'no month's mind dinner should be held'.⁴⁴ This may be why the cupboard was commissioned, as a visual tribute to Sir Charles in place of the spoken *marwnad*.

The frame-and-panel structure of the cupboard creates, in effect, two levels of information. The panels focus on Sir Charles himself, centering on the Somerset/Royal arms, and declaring his triple allegiance to king (panel 2), God (panels 1 and 7) and St George (panels 6 and 8). The frame alludes to Sir Charles's offices and appointments, his political achievements and to kinship with his fellow Garter Knights. All is couched in playful animalistic imagery similar to that used in the *awdl vrydiau*, a fashionable style of contemporary Welsh poetry for odes and elegies.

The large size of the cupboard, probably almost seven feet high with its original feet, suggests that it was made to reflect the status of its subject. Few nobles in England could match Sir Charles's rank and achievements, and none in Wales; he was a pre-eminent power in the Marches. And although Sir Charles was an Englishman born and bred, his title, income, landholdings, offices and privileges were predominantly in South Wales and the Welsh Marches. His son Henry was deeply imbued with Welsh culture. Unusually for the time, he spent most of his life in Wales administering crown and family estates rather than at court, and when he died in 1549 he was honoured with a bardic *marwnad* like his grandfather and earlier generations of the Herbert family. The

⁴¹ Riall (2012), Appendix II.

⁴² Miles (2012).

⁴³ Durie (2012), Chapter 11.

⁴⁴ Nicolas (1826), vol. 2, pp. 622–23.

commissioning of the cupboard therefore fits well with what is known of Henry's life and character. Very probably the cupboard stood in either Raglan or Chepstow castles, which were Henry Somerset's principal Welsh houses.

It must be admitted that the chief objection to the interpretation summarised above is the ambiguity of almost every element of the cupboard's imagery. By its very nature heraldry relies on allusion and metaphor, and many heraldic symbols are ambiguous, particularly at this relatively early date. The total number of available heraldic symbols and badges was limited, and some were used by more than one family, and were susceptible to more than one meaning. The pelican vulning its breast is a good example; is this a conventional emblem of Christian piety, or the personal badge of Bishop Fox? Much of this ambiguity would be absent if the cupboard were in its original context, but it is not. The difficulty is compounded by the lack of colour, which is essential to the accurate interpretation of heraldry. There is little doubt that the cupboard was originally painted, and small traces remain in places, but these are insufficient to indicate any coherent colour scheme. To have the badges correctly coloured and the huntsmen and falconers arrayed in their original livery would remove much of the apparent ambiguity.

An added layer of uncertainty arises from the bardic context, because word play, pun and metaphor were inherent in contemporary Welsh poetry and songs. Thus nothing can be taken at face value, nor was it intended to be, for this was the essence of the *awdl vrydiau*, to delight and intrigue listeners and to demonstrate the skill of the poet. Much of the perceived ambiguity is therefore deliberate, made to intrigue and delight those with the wit to understand it.

Despite the obvious difficulties, if even half the images have been correctly identified and their meanings correctly understood, then the enigma of the Cotehele cupboard can be resolved. It is an elegy in oak, a tribute to one of the greatest statesmen of the age, commissioned by his son. Sir Charles Somerset therefore has two memorials. The 'official' one is in England, at St George's Chapel, Windsor, where Sir Charles lies with his Welsh wife. The unofficial or family memorial is the cupboard, a tribute to his father from a dutiful son, and quite possibly one of the greatest pieces of Welsh furniture ever made.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Rachel Hunt, whose friendship, help and support has been invaluable; to members of the City of Bath Heraldic Society; to Enid Davies, Assistant Archivist at St George's Chapel, and to my husband, Mike O'Connor, for his support and photography.

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