An Early Seventeenth-Century Armchair from Cheshire

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The chair in figure 1 is painted with the arms of Sir Richard Wilbraham (1579–1643), of Woodhey, Cheshire. The high-set arms suggest a late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century date, which is consistent with the years of Sir Richard's adult life. The form and style of the chair is unremarkable and apparently devoid of strong regional inflection, although the treatment of the lunettes in the top rail is somewhat individual. On the other hand, the painted arms are an exceptionally rare survival, and so the principal question posed by the chair is whether the painting is genuine and original, or whether it is a later embellishment. Its survival is made less implausible by the fact that the back and seat of the chair were at one time covered by upholstery. There are rows of holes left by upholstery tacks on the crest rail, the lower back rail, on both sides of the arms and around the front and sides of the seat. It is impossible to say how long this covering was *in situ*, nor when it was removed, but it could explain the survival of the paint in what is otherwise an exposed and vulnerable position.

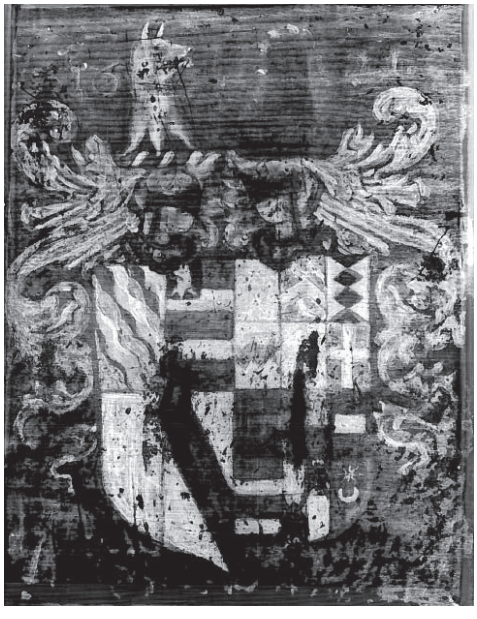
To establish whether the painting is of the same period as the chair a full programme of analysis was carried out in 2012, beginning with a visual examination by stereo-microscope.[1] A variety of photographs was taken, using conventional white light, infrared reflectography and X-radiography. Each type of photograph revealed different aspects of the painting. The infrared image enhanced the details of the scrollwork to the sides and around the helmet, while the X-ray image revealed features not evident from the white light and infrared photos (Figure 2). To the upper right and left corners the figures 16 and 21 became visible; 1621 was the year in which Sir Richard was created baronet. To the right of the wolf's head (the badge of the Wilbrahams) are five white points which are the claws of a lion's paw. This is the badge of the Savage family; Sir Richard's wife was Grace Savage (see Figure 7).

Samples of paint were taken from several parts of the crest and mounted on glass slides for polarized light microscopy; other samples were prepared for X-ray spectrometry under a scanning electron microscope. Parts of three samples were reserved for infrared spectroscopy analysis. These combined tests revealed that all the pigments used were consistent with early seventeenth-century paints, made with either organic or mineral pigments. One of the yellows, for instance, was made from lead tin, whose use ceased in about 1750, and another yellow was made with dry process vermillion, which went out of use at the end of the seventeenth century. The whole painted surface was covered with a modern clear coating consisting predominantly of plant-derived wax — perhaps carnuba wax.

There were some surprises, however. The first was that this was not the first painting on the panel. Analysis of the stratigraphy of the paint layers showed that the ground was originally prepared with a gypsum base, and there were also traces of pigments

[1] McCrone Associates (2012).

1 Joined chair, *c.* 1600–21, once belonging to, and showing the arms of, Sir Richard Wilbraham of Woodhey (1579–1643), Cheshire. *Private collection*



2 X-ray photograph of the chair back, revealing traces of the date 16–21 (top left and right corners), the lion's paw crest of the Savage family (top right centre), and alterations to part of the arms (upper left quartering). *McCrone Associates*

unrelated to the present design. These had been cleaned off and overlaid with a chalk-based ground on which Wilbraham's arms were painted. The implications of this finding are unclear; one explanation is that the panel is re-used, perhaps from wall panelling or from another piece of furniture, another is that the chair predates 1621 and was repainted in that year. Perhaps it originally carried the arms of Sir Richard's father, who died in 1610. However, the essential authenticity of the chair is not in doubt, and there is no evidence that any back panel other than the present one was ever fitted.

The analysis further suggested that attempts had been made to overpaint or obscure parts of the image. The reason for this is unclear, but changes to one particular part of the arms are evident both to the naked eye and in the X-ray photograph (Figures 1 and 2). The top left corner of the shield bears wavy bends in azure and argent which have obviously been altered. The reason for this became clear after the College of Arms had been consulted. In the 1630s a dispute arose between Sir Richard Wilbraham and Sir Thomas Playter of Sotterley, Suffolk, who claimed that Sir Richard was using his arms. Both men's paternal arms were wavy diagonal bends of azure and argent; one (Playter) comprised six bends, three of each colour; the other (Wilbraham) comprised seven bends, three azure and four argent. It seems that the mistake was Sir Richard's and the matter was resolved in a judgement of 1635.[2] The repainted section of the shield is proof that it took effect, and it places the date of the painting beyond doubt; it must predate 1635, and the date 1621 is therefore entirely plausible.

The survival of the painting raises the possibility that many panel-back chairs with plain panels were similarly decorated but have since had the paint removed. If so, the loss is significant, because an identifiable set of arms immediately places the object within a context, allowing conclusions to be drawn about date, provenance, status and regionality. In the present case the painted arms mean that this is only known Cheshire joined chair for which a date, location and owner are known.

Sir Richard was the eldest son of Sir Thomas Wilbraham (*c.* 1554–1610) and Frances Cholmondeley (*c.* 1554–*c.* 1610), both members of long established and powerful Cheshire families. The estate of Woodhey, which is about 4½ miles west of Nantwich, had been held by the Wilbrahams since the thirteenth century, and was the centre of an extensive landholding, amounting at one time to 28,000 acres in Cheshire alone.[3]

[2] Noel (2013).
[3] www.woodheyhall.co.uk

3 Woodhey Hall farm, photographed in 2013. Nothing of Sir Richard Wilbraham's house survives. The building to the right is a chapel built about 1700. *The author*

Nothing survives of Sir Richard's Woodhey Hall, which is now a farm, and the oldest building on the site is the chapel built by his grandson's widow, Elizabeth, about 1700 (Figure 3).

The Wilbraham pedigree is complex, with numerous branches and sub-branches, and unravelling its interwoven lineage it is not made any easier by the family's tendency to stick to a handful of names for their male children: Thomas, Richard, Ralph and Roger occur in every generation from 1400 to 1700, while among the female cousins to whom these males were frequently married, Elizabeth, Alice and Rachel were favoured.[4] Paradoxically, the Woodhey branch, which was the senior, is the least well documented. The probable reason is that the Wilbrahams of Woodhey needed to do nothing but look after their considerable inheritance; they were comfortably situated and had no reason to make a noise in the world. The other Wilbrahams, by contrast, had to make their own several ways, both locally and, in many cases, in London. They became lawyers, businessmen and government officers, and consequently their lives have been documented in legal transactions, political appointments, church records and other sources.[5]

Richard Wilbraham of Woodhey inherited the estate on the death of his father in July 1610, and he was created baronet by James I in 1621. He had married, about 1600, Grace Savage of Clifton, near Runcorn, and in 1601 his son Thomas was born. For the next forty years his life seems to have been uneventful, although he was clearly a major figure in the area. He is said to have been responsible for the refurbishment of the chancel of his local parish at Acton, about 1630, and although it has been reconfigured since, particularly during a major restoration in the late nineteenth century, fixed panelling, pews, and the low screen and gates to the chancel all survive (Figures 4 and 5). The work is in a late Mannerist style which features strongly in the area; similar work can be found a few hundred yards away at Dorfold Hall, a house rebuilt in the early seventeenth century by Ralph Wilbraham, a close relative. Dorfold in turn was

4 Burke (1838), p. 565.
5 Hanshall (1817–23), passim.

inspired by nearby Crewe Hall, rebuilt by Sir Randolph Crewe between 1615 and 1636, and the fact that Sir Richard's Wilbraham's chair shows no sign of this more modern style tends to support the theory that it was made before 1621.[6]

The outbreak of the Civil War in August 1642 brought calamity and division to the Wilbraham family. Sir Richard's son Thomas was appointed a commissioner of array for the king, responsible for mustering and arming the local militia, but the people of Nantwich initially refused to take sides, maintaining that neither king nor Parliament could survive without each other; Sir Richard Wilbraham was one of the signatories of a petition to this effect.[7] It proved impossible to remain uncommitted for long and, almost uniquely in the strongly Royalist county of Cheshire, Nantwich declared for Parliament. Thomas Wilbraham was obliged to take refuge with the Royalist garrison in Chester, whence he returned when Royalist forces moved against the town in September 1642, occupying it and confiscating all the arms held there and in surrounding houses, including Woodhey. Four local worthies were taken prisoner and carried to the king at Shrewsbury; these included Sir Richard Wilbraham of Woodhey and Ralph Wilbraham of Dorfold. Two of the captives were soon released, but the two Wilbrahams remained in prison. Sir Richard's health failed, and in April 1643 Sir Richard Wilbraham, '... Knight, and Baronett, a verie worthie gent., and good justice of the Peace... ended his Lyfe'.[8]

When the war was over Thomas Wilbraham was fined £2,500 by Parliament for 'delinquency'.[9] This was his penalty for backing the losing side and, in effect, he had to pay this amount to regain his estate. He died in 1660 and his son, also Thomas, became the third baronet. He erected a fine memorial to his parents and grandparents in Acton church (Figures 6 and 7).

Thomas Wilbraham, grandson of Sir Richard, prospered. He was High Sherriff of Staffordshire in 1654 and MP for Stafford 1679–81. In 1671 he married Elizabeth Mytton of Weston under Lizard, Staffordshire, and set about building a new mansion at Weston Park, Stafforshire, which still stands. After Sir Thomas's death in 1692 the Wilbraham baronetcy became extinct. There being no male heirs, the Woodhey estate passed by marriage to Lionel Tollemache, Lord Huntingtower, who had married Thomas's second daughter, Grace, in 1680. Tollemache was the eldest son of Elizabeth Dysart, the formidable chatelaine of Ham House, Surrey.

It is not known when Sir Richard's chair left the Wilbraham family, for when it was sold at auction in 2010 it had no meaningful provenance, but it could have remained in Cheshire for some time.[10] The most puzzling finding of the paint analysis was that both the paint and the wood beneath it were impregnated with chlorine, suggesting 'that the wood panel was in a chlorine-rich environment at some time during its existence'.[11] The report noted: 'Sources for chlorine include sea water and perspiration ... A chlorine-containing bleach or cleaning compound is also possible ...'. The

[6] In 1662 the historian Thomas Fuller wrote: 'Sir Randal first brought the model of excellent building into these remoter parts; yea, brought London into Cheshire, in the loftiness, sightlines, and pleasantness of their structures' [Fuller, 1840, p. 273].
[7] Hall (1883), passim.
[8] Malbon (1889), p. 48.
[9] *House of Commons Journal*, vol. 4, 2 May 1646; www.historyofparliamentonline.org.
[10] Dreweatte's Donnington Priory, House Sale and Other Properties, 15 July 2010, lot 564.
[11] McCrone Associates (2012).

4 St Mary's parish church, Acton. Pews, *c.* 1630, said to have been commissioned by Sir Richard Wilbraham. *The author*

5 St Mary's parish church, Acton. Gates to the chancel, *c.* 1630, said to have been commissioned by Sir Richard Wilbraham. *The author*

6 St Mary's parish church, Acton. Tomb and memorial to Sir Richard Wilbraham and his wife Grace, erected about 1660. *The author*

7 St Mary's parish church, Acton. The impaled arms of Sir Richard Wilbraham and Grace Savage, from their memorial. *The author*

explanation for this anomalous finding probably lies in Nantwich's industrial past. Together with the neighbouring towns of Northwich and Middlewich, Nantwich had been an important centre of salt production since Roman times, if not earlier. Around Nantwich there were a number of naturally occurring brine springs, whose water was channelled into brine pits where it was stored before being carried into the salthouses to make salt. The brine was boiled to evaporate the water, leaving behind pure salt. At the peak of the industry in the late sixteenth century there were 216 salthouses active in Nantwich alone.

Like most local landowners, the Wilbraham family had interests in the salt industry. Although the extent of Sir Richard's involvement is not known, another branch of the family had been making salt since at least the 1580s.[12] It is possible, therefore, that the presence of chlorine can be explained by the chair having been located in close proximity to salt production. There are two objections to this hypothesis, however. The first is that no sodium was found on the chair, which tends to rule out salt (NaCl, sodium chloride) as the source of the chlorine. The second is that it is very difficult to obtain chlorine from brine; it required the development of an electro-chemical process in the late nineteenth century to enable it to be done on an industrial scale. Once the process was viable, chlorine production replaced salt as Cheshire's primary industry in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Conceivably, therefore, the chlorine found in Sir Richard's chair dates from this period, and the chair remained close to where it was made for perhaps three hundred years. It is now in a private collection in the United States.

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[12] Hall (1883), p. 253.