

# SEVENTEEN CHAIRS FROM DULAS CHURCH HEREFORDSHIRE

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By the late 1970s, it was clear that moveable furniture of a local origin was disappearing from English parish churches at a faster rate than it was being researched.<sup>1</sup> The principal reason behind this was the gathering pace of church redundancy, particularly in rural areas where tiny parishes were still served by their own churches. During the same decade, these parishes began to be grouped together in clusters of five or six, under the roving control of one Rural Dean, rather than several vicars. The redundant churches were closed and their furnishings removed. Where churches were spared closure, re-organisation frequently took place and furnishings were sold in order to pay for church repairs.

This is the pattern that was followed in the case of St Michael, Dulas, Herefordshire, a small country church 11½ miles to the south west of the county town of Hereford. The original church, of which some twelfth century fragments remain,<sup>2</sup> was replaced in the mid-nineteenth century. The present building (Figure 1), is a very understated and pleasing example of fourteenth century style Gothic revival, designed by G C Haddon in 1865. The interior housed an unusually varied collection of seventeenth century oak furniture and fittings that would appear to have been salvaged from the mediaeval church. The Royal Commission on Historic Monuments (England) inventory for *South West Herefordshire* (1934) records fourteen chairs in the church at Dulas and Nikolaus Pevsner, working from the same volume, records the existence of fourteen in his *Buildings of England – Herefordshire* (1963). In 1980, there were seventeen chairs of historic interest in the church. It has not been possible to determine with confidence that the number noted by the RCHM was inaccurate, this mistake being duplicated by Pevsner, or whether three additional chairs had been acquired since 1934. The latter theory seems more likely as, by 1980, the south western Herefordshire parishes close to the Monmouthshire border had been grouped together under the supremacy of Ewyas Harold, a larger eastern parish, and ‘supernumerary’ furnishings were certainly re-distributed. Adforton church near Much Birch, for instance, served as a store for unwanted furniture from newly-redundant churches. The provenance of re-distributed items was not recorded at the time. In 1981, the choir, chancel, nave and vestry of St Michael, Dulas were closely packed with seventeenth century chairs (Figure 2), and it is these the present author recorded in the summer of that year. On 20th October 1987, the Diocesan Advisory Committee decided to sell items of oak furniture from St Michaels; two chairs were retained, but the rest of the collection subsequently disappeared from view.

As a group, the chairs are notable for their generous use of timber; arms are thick and panels deeply fielded. A considerable amount of waste wood must have been left, for instance, after making the dished surfaces of chair arms in figures 10 and 12. In several

examples (see figures 3 and 17) the carving of the back panels is noticeably deep. The bulky nature of furniture in western Herefordshire can be compared favourably with the size and weight of furniture from similarly isolated and sparsely populated areas of Wales and the English Lake District and interestingly, the retention of Celtic and zoomorphic motifs used in furniture decoration goes hand-in-hand with this bulky nature, being peculiar to these regions.

Only one of the Dulas chairs has a paired serpent cresting, but, as Richard Bebb points out in his magisterial *Welsh Furniture 1250–1950. A Cultural History of Craftsmanship and Design* (2007), this was an archetypal subject for carved panels and chair crestings, particularly in North Wales.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the serpent or dragon motif appears in a disparate range of regional oak furniture repertoires. Both Gloucestershire and County Durham, for example, supported serpent lore in the seventeenth century, and this is reflected in their carved woodwork.<sup>4</sup> Herefordshire has several folk legends about native dragons, the most celebrated of which is ‘The Dragon of Mordiford’ recorded by Rev. William Henry Cooke in Duncumb’s *History of the County of Hereford*.<sup>5</sup> Chair 13 is carved with long open-mouthed serpent friezes in its back and seat rails. Although not overtly zoomorphic, the paired scroll crestings in chairs 4, 10 and 15 and the scrolls in the back panel of chair 16, are serpent-like in their writhing, elongate form.

More specifically, the quatrefoil guilloche seen in chairs 4, 5, 6 and in lobed form in chair 9, is typical of Herefordshire and the Welsh border counties, notably Montgomeryshire and Shropshire. The device appears on fixed furniture such as the original mediaeval pulpit at St Michael’s church, but, perhaps more interestingly, on seventeenth century woodwork at the abbey church of Abbey Dore, one mile distant from Dulas.<sup>6</sup> (see figure 8)

Also recognisably Welsh in character is the motif of paired hearts, which lingered on in Cambrian woodwork until the eighteenth century. It is a widespread device in Herefordshire church furniture (see figure 20) and is represented in the Dulas collection by chair 19.

Other motifs such as the lozenge, the columned arch and foliate carving are too common to have relevance as specific regional decoration types, but something can be said about the personality of these subjects when they appear on Herefordshire furniture. The columns in blind arch motifs are invariably fat, as can be seen in chairs 14, 15 and 17, and where foliate carving appears, particularly in combination with the blind arch, it is typically lush.

Although related in many respects, the collection of chairs at Dulas, before it was dispersed, represented an assortment rather than a defined group attributable to a specific workshop. The chairs were, nevertheless, of significance for their particular constructional and ornamental features and for their clear stylistic links with fixed woodwork in the rest of Herefordshire and in the Welsh Marches.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

1. See: Christopher Gilbert and Anthony Wells-Cole, *Oak Furniture from Yorkshire Churches*, Temple Newsam House, Leeds, 1971 and *Town and Country Furniture Illustrating the Vernacular Tradition*, Temple Newsam House, Leeds, 1972.
2. The re-assembled fragments of a Norman doorway have been arranged as a garden gateway in the grounds of nearby Dulas Court.
3. Richard Bebb, *Welsh Furniture 1250-1950. A Cultural History of Craftsmanship and Design*, Saer Books, Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire, 2007, chapters 3 and 4.
4. See: Anthony Wells Cole, *Oak Furniture from Gloucestershire and Somerset*, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, 1976, introduction. There is no published survey of oak furniture in County Durham.
5. Rev. John Duncumb, *History of the County of Hereford*, Hereford, 1892 edition.
6. Abbey Dore, a Cistercian abbey founded in 1147 and suppressed in 1535, was extensively repaired by John, first Viscount Scudamore, in 1632. He engaged John Abel (1577-1674) to construct the interior fittings, including screens and pulpit. The abbey church contained a rich repertoire of seventeenth century oak furniture, some of which has survived.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

All photographs are the author's.



1. St Michael's, Dulas, Herefordshire, by G C Haddon, 1865



2. The chairs seen from the choir



3. Armed chair  
1640 (Dated)  
Oak

Of framed back panel design, the top rail decorated with an ovoid and rectangle strapwork design and inscribed 'E 1640 C'. The back panel, contained within a moulded, mitred border, is carved with a stepped and spired obelisk motif beneath a columned arch enriched with rope moulding and with stylised foliage in its spandrels. A box frame of plain joined panels, stiles and stretchers forms the lower part, with a simple planked seat.

The arms, dipped and notched, rest on supports turned as Tuscan columns.

The upper half of each back stile bears channelled niche carving



4. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (second quarter)  
Oak

The back panel is carved with a quatrefoil guilloche with central flower motif and incised foliage sprouting from the interstices. Plain back uprights meet a top rail carved with an undulating strap and three acanthus motifs on a stippled ground. The lower rail is moulded and channelled and the whole back panel is headed by a paired 'S' scroll cresting that stretches right across the top of the frame. A plank seat, baluster turned and blocked uprights supporting dipped and notched arms. The front and side seat rails are unornamented except for a pierced profile lower edging



5. Armed chair  
c.1660  
Oak

The back is constructed of channelled uprights supporting an overhanging top rail decorated with a deeply carved repeat lobe pattern. Small bracket like ear pieces adjoin the lower edge of the top rail; the lower rail bears thick rope moulding. The mitred central panel contains a somewhat elongated quatrefoil motif with small incised sprays emerging from its tips. Baluster turned and blocked uprights support gently sloping arms decorated with incised lines on their uppermost surfaces. The front stretcher has incised channel decoration, as does the seat rail which has a dentilled lower edge



6. Armed chair  
Mid seventeenth century  
Oak

Of framed panel back design, the main panel carved with quatrefoil guilloche and central eight petalled flower; the top and side framing members having a round-stopped chamfer on their inner edges, decorated with chip carved nail heads. The top rail decorated with a nulled frieze, each niche separated by a vertical groove and hole; the back stiles channelled and the lower rail carved with rope moulding, dentils and channelling. Front uprights with turned Tuscan columns and balusters separated by rectangular blocked sections support dipped and notched arms with scrolled ends.

The seat rail is enriched with rope moulding and the four stretchers simply channelled



7. Abbey Dore Church, Golden Valley, Herefordshire



8. Quatrefoil guilloche motif on chest at Abbey Dore Church



9. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (second quarter)  
Oak

The back panel carved with an incised, four lobed foliate motif in flat relief above which is a deep top rail carved with niches and crowned by a paired 'S' scroll cresting and two egg finials. Plain back stiles with flattened dipped arms tenoned in. Turned and ringed front supports with rectangular block sections abutting a channelled seat rail and plank seat. Four plain stretchers





10. Armed chair  
Mid seventeenth century  
Oak

A tall rectangular back panel with wide stiles, a deep niched top rail placed between these morticed and tenoned in and fixed with three pegs on either side. The back panel, framed by mitred moulding, contains a deeply carved and moulded lozenge motif with central carved flower surrounded by four paterae. Small double sprays extend from each lozenge corner and stylised leaves in flat relief decorate the surrounding panel ground. Gracefully curved arms with notches to upper and lower edge rest on front uprights, blocked and turned with rope moulding and pierced fretwork edging. The back crowned by paired 'S' scroll cresting and ball finials



11. Armed chair  
Mid seventeenth century  
Oak

The back is constructed of uprights and rails framing a sunk panel bordered with mitred beading; the stiles are decorated with long palmettes both above and below the arm sockets; the top rail carved with squat niches and fixed between the stiles. Above the top rail is a cresting situated between the stile terminals and of a humped and scrolled design with punched decoration. The central panel motif is a diamond carved with stylised foliage radiating from a pointed cross. The curved and notched arms rest on baluster turned and blocked front supports that pass through the seat board, joined by a rail decorated with a zig zag and punched circles. The seat board splays outwards from the back panel and then in around the arm support blocks. The back legs are decorated with plain paired niches and united with turned front legs by low stretchers



12. Armed chair  
c.1660  
Oak

The large back panel which contains a diamond or lozenge motif with lightly carved radiating foliage, is framed by grooved uprights with scrolled terminals and a combined top rail and cresting fixed between the stiles. The top rail is decorated with three bold lunettes, the cresting carved with 'S' scrolls and foliage on a stippled ground. The arms, which have a pronounced dip, rest on heavily turned and blocked front supports.

The seat rails are channelled, the seat board scalloped and nailed in position



13. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (first quarter)  
Oak

Of framed back panel construction with plain scrolled cresting and ball finials; the back panel is decorated with foliage radiating from a ten petalled flower within a lozenge, with four sunflowers filling the corners of a rectangular sunken field. The top rail, with integral cresting, is enriched with a guilloche pattern; the back posts decorated with a pattern of repeated circles. Both the lower back panel rail and seat rail are carved with a writhing, open mouthed serpent, forming a gouged frieze. The arms are of flat section with a slight dip on their uppermost surfaces and supported by front stiles blocked and turned to a 'marrow leg' shape decorated with ringing



14. Armed chair  
Mid seventeenth century  
Oak

The top rail, with four 'S' scrolls and stylised foliage, crowned by a separate cresting of paired 'S' scrolls, sits between backposts of demi-palmette decoration. With a lower rail carved with rope moulding, they frame a richly carved back panel, containing a columned arch that echoes the demi-palmette and rope moulding of its framing members. Within the arch is a stylised thistle with lateral leaves and sprouting rosettes. The corners of the panel are filled with foliate carving. Slender arms, dipped and notched and with scrolled ends, are supported by front uprights, blocked, and turned with restrained Tuscan columns. A plank seat is fronted by a plain seat rail with pierced profile edging



15. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (third quarter?)  
Oak

The back is constructed of narrow uprights and rails framing a sunk field panel carved with a lush palmette motif within a columned arch. Acanthus and scrollwork infill covers the spandrels. The back posts are decorated with demi-palmette carving, the top rail containing two enclosed 'S'scrolls and headed by a cresting of elaborate leafy paired 'S' scrolls. A plank seat; dipped and notched arms supported by column turned front uprights. The lower panel rail and seat rail are enriched with rope moulding. Below the seat, front uprights, rear and side stretchers are all bulb-turned



16. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (first quarter)  
Oak

Of framed back panel construction, the central panel displaying a Celtic-inspired paired 'S' scroll design on a sunken, stippled ground. The top rail echoes the decoration of the back panel with horizontally positioned Celtic 'S' scrolls, as does the lower rail with three 'S' scrolls of an abbreviated design. The back posts are decorated with two sizes of tall palmette above and below the arm sockets and have rounded terminals. The arms are dipped and deeply notched within a flat section, with column turned and blocked supports below. A plank seat rests on a seat rail carved with three conventional 'S' scrolls. The chair has four plain stretchers

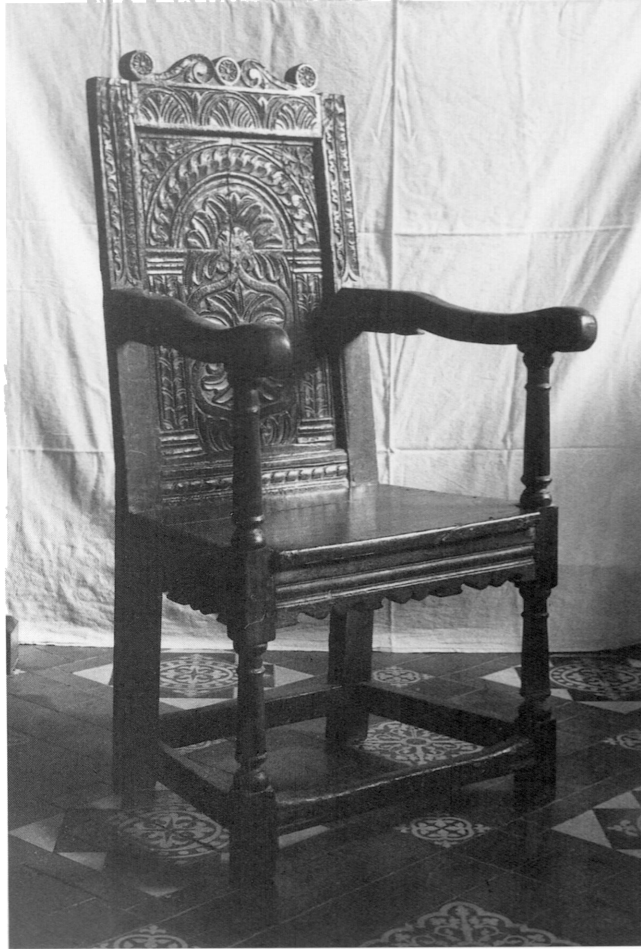


17. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (second quarter)  
Oak

The back panel is deeply carved with a blank arch decorated with lunettes and palmettes; a deep chamfer around the inner edge of this arch creates a raised field in the centre. The spandrels are filled with stylised foliate motifs and the whole panel framed by plain stiles rising to the height of an integral top rail and cresting with paired 'S' scrolls. Horizontal arms with slightly dipped centres and scroll profile finials rest on baluster turned and blocked front supports.

A plank seat is faced by a plain seat rail with fretwork edging





18. Armed chair  
Mid seventeenth century  
Oak

The entire back panel and frame is enriched with decoration, apart from the lower section of each back upright that is plain in each case. The central panel contains a tall columnar arch decorated with rope moulding and palmettes. Within this is a double heart motif surrounded by acanthus and stylised foliage. The spandrels contain carved rosettes with attached leaves. The top rail and cresting are carved from the same piece of timber; the top rail comprised of three large lunettes; the cresting of paired 'S' scroll design with three rosettes. The lower cross rail is decorated with rope moulding and channelling, the back staves bearing tall palmette designs on their upper sections. The arms are dipped and notched having scrolled ends with attached turned and blocked front uprights below. A thick plank seat rests on a channelled seat rail with fretwork edging. This edging continues along the side rails. The back legs are slightly raked



19. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (first quarter)  
Oak

The chair back is constructed from a complete framed central panel framed in turn by top rail and back uprights continuing down to arm level, from which point they are supported by turned and blocked back posts

**The central framed panel:** This is constructed of two wide uprights with moulded channelling, a top and bottom rail decorated with large lunettes framing a sunk panel containing simple horizontally positioned double heart motif. The inner edges of the back uprights have been chamfered with a scratch stock, forming rounded edges to the chamfer.

**The outer frame:** This is composed of two back uprights and a top rail set between, all decorated with incised lunettes, probably marked out with a compass. A simple flat strip heads the top rail.

**The arms and seat:** Dipped and notched arms rest on baluster turned and blocked supports at front and back. The seat is constructed of two wide planks running from front to back; the seat rail is decorated with a lunette frieze

Converted from a chair/table



20. Double heart motif on chest at Much Birch, Hereford



21. Armed chair  
Seventeenth century (third quarter)  
Oak

Of framed panel back construction; the back posts bearing carved palmette decoration above and below the arm sockets; the lower rail carved with lunettes. The top rail continues across the top of the back posts and has an integral 'S' scroll cresting. This rail has rounded ends and is decorated with interlocked lunettes and anthemion motifs. Notched arms with a hipped curve and elongated scrolled ends rest on turned and ringed 'marrow leg' supports; the central blocks passing through a splayed seat board with moulded edge. The back panel contains a columnar arch decorated with three bands of chip carving. Within the arch, on a raised field, is a lozenge carved with radiating foliate motif. The seat rail is decorated with lunettes



22. Armed chair  
Mid seventeenth century  
Oak

The back, which frames a decorated panel, has a broad overhanging crest of paired dragons united by a 'bunch of faggots' motif; the lower rail is carved with rope moulding. The back panel, bounded by channelled uprights, contains an arch decorated with rope moulding and with a fretworked edging around the soffit. Within the arch, and flanked by plain columns, is a chamfered lozenge on a plain ground. The spandrels contain anthemion motifs. The arms, flat on the underside but dipped on the upper surface, bear an interesting incised and punched pattern of dots and chevrons. The arms are supported by column turned and blocked front posts that are united by an open arcaded seat rail.

The seat, of one piece of timber, has a moulded edging and deep side rails