

# A PAINTED BED DATED 1724

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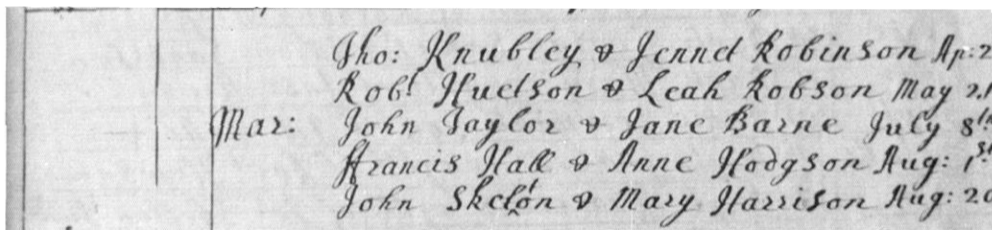
In 1979 a very remarkable painted bed was bought for Temple Newsam House, Leeds. It bears the initial F<sup>HA</sup> and the date 1724 (Fig. 2) and with the exception of a short period in the antique trade had never been removed from the house for which it was made. This was a yeoman's house in the small Cumbrian village of Kirkbride, on the southern bank of the Solway Firth. Several dates are recorded on the building which is now called Lilac Cottage: FRANCIS HALL and ANNE HALL with the date 1721 incised on the lintel over the entrance (Fig. 5), 1723 with the initials F<sup>HA</sup> carved on the central tablet of a panelled overmantel from the downstairs parlour (Fig. 6) and 1724 on a cast iron fireback original to the house.

Francis Hall was the third and youngest son of the Rev. Henry Hall, the rector of Kirkbride, and his wife Jane. In 1713 Francis married Anne Hodgson in Kirkbride church, the marriage being recorded in the parish register for 1 August (Fig. 1), and they soon began to have children, Robert born 1715, Henry in 1715, Francis 1719, Jane 1721, Anne 1722, Francis 1727, Anthony 1730 and Jane 1734. The rector died in 1717, bequeathing Francis £200 to buy land, and his widow Jane Hall died in 1720, leaving £50 to Henry, who was presumably the eldest surviving grandson, Francis (born 1718) probably dying in infancy. Clearly the bed was made for the house which Francis built with the help of his father's legacy.

The room in which the bed stood is the principal chamber on the first floor: the bed occupied a corner position with a mural niche behind, accessible through a hinged panel in the headboard and allegedly for concealing contraband; opposite the foot of the bed, a box bed built-in over the staircase still survives. This was undoubtedly where some of the Hall children slept.

Structurally the bed is simple, having posts which are square below and turned above, ending in metal spikes which support the tester. The tester centres on an elaborately shaped sunk panel and is of frame and board construction. A prominent shaped cornice surmounts the tester on two sides only. The bed rails are drilled for cords to support the mattresses and the posts are united by forged iron curtain rails located into eyes. The headboard (Fig. 3) is treated architecturally, being articulated with pilasters and a frieze; in the centre is the cupboard door and below are two horizontal panels. In use these would have been concealed by pillows and are unpainted but the rest of the bed-head is painted, and so are the tester (Fig. 4) and cornice.

The painting consists of repetitive conventional ornament, the stylised flowers on the upper member of the cornice, parts of the tester and the posts, panels and panels at the head of the bed; illusionistic valances and curtains; and other elements, tree, birds and so on, which are probably emblematic. The materials are water and oil-bound distempers, which were, probably from the early 19th century onwards, covered with layers of copal and other varnishes. It is unlikely that all the decoration dates from 1724, the repeated conventional motifs having probably been added later. In many ways the most interesting elements are those that imitate the curtains and valances of a bed, i.e. the furniture, and there is a



1. Kirkbride Church register recording the marriage of Francis Hall and Anne Hodgson on 1 August 1713



2. Painted bed for Kirkbride inscribed FHA 1724 on the headboard

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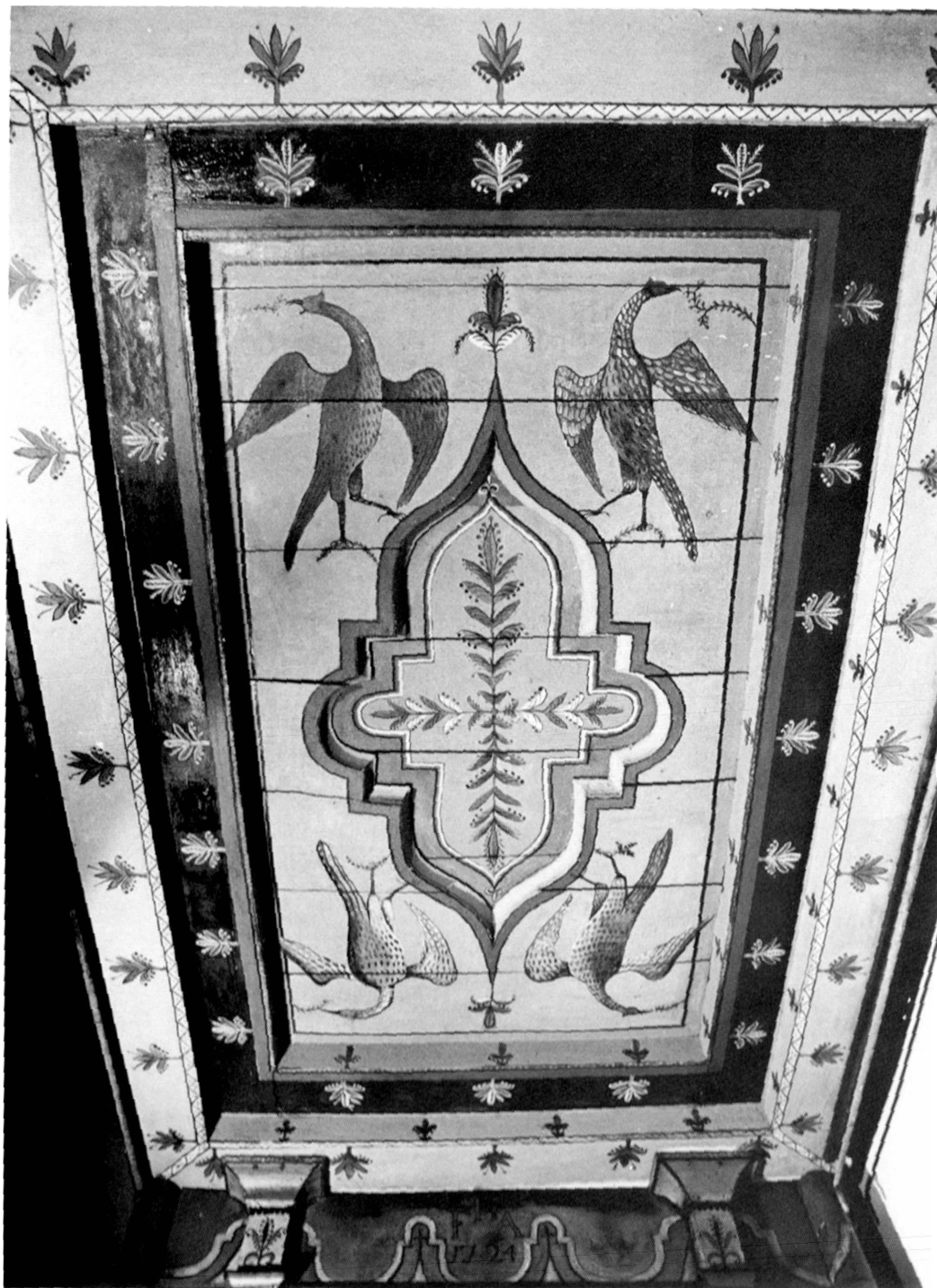
possibility that these represent the fabrics that were used once used: a blue with black motifs may, on the evidence of the headposts, have covered the foot posts, a green stuff with a paler braid may have been used for the inner valances, with brown outer valances while the curtains may have been green with yellow braid. Much of the painted ground is of ochre colour but blue and green grounds also appear. The conventional flowers may represent simple embroidered motifs. As no inventories of the house survive, however, it is impossible to know what the actual furniture was.

The significance of what may be emblematic decoration has not yet been clarified. In each of the four spandrels on the tester appears an emaciated bird, perhaps intended to represent a cormorant or even a pheasant, while the uppermost of three elements on the pilasters of the headboard are, left, a hand holding a serpent, and, right, a hand holding a bird. Although a number of emblems in Claude Paradin's *Dévises Héroïques* (Lyons, 1553) make use of the hand motif, none is identical to either of these. Nor do the motifs derive from the most influential emblem book, Alciati's, first published in 1531. The decoration of the cupboard door is particularly curious. It depicts an arch (struck from three different centres, with a decorated keystone), surmounted by gathered curtains and a small valance, and enclosing a tree standing between a pair of traditional flowery mounds. The tree is rather nicely shaped to fit the round-headed format and, as a result, strongly recalls the woodcuts in early herbals. It is indeed possible that such a woodcut provided the inspiration for the painter; the tree may simply be an oak, but somewhat resembles the *Arbor Vitae* (Tree of Life) in Pietro Andrea Matthioli's *Commentarii . . . Pedacii Dioscoridis* first published in Venice in 1554 (1598 edition p. 123; Fig. 7), but the tree is shown uprooted. Trees depicted growing appear in Jacques D'Alechamps' *Historia Generalis Plantarum* (Lyons 1586–87) but I have been unable to consult this publication myself: if a 16th- or 17th-century herbal provided the source, this one seems the most likely. Certainly the woodcut in Thomas Johnson's expanded edition of Gerard's *Herball* published in 1636 is quite different. He describes it (p. 1369) as having 'small yellowish flours' followed by 'a fruit in hot Regions, much like unto the fruit of the Cypres tree . . .'. Alternative names are *Thuia*, *Thya* or *Cedrus Lyciae*, its main virtues being 'as an excellent cordial, and of a very pleasant smell'.

It is not easy to pinpoint any earlier, contemporary or indeed later painted furniture from this area. Certainly the decoration does not reproduce in paint contemporary carved ornament found further south in what used to be Westmorland, which in the 1720s was still firmly following 17th-century traditions. Neither continental European, Scandinavian, nor American furniture provides any very close analogies, although trees and highly stylised flowers can, not surprisingly, be found on some examples (trees, for instance, on a well-known mid 18th-century chest of drawers, and stylised flowers on a Connecticut chest with drawer, repr Dean A. Fales *American Painted Furniture 1660–1880*, 1972, figs 47 and 33 respectively). Geographically the closest tradition of painted decoration occurred north of the Solway Firth in Scotland, and its earlier manifestations have been charted by M. R. Apted in his *Painted Ceilings of Scotland 1550–1650*, 1966; so it may be that the bed depends on the later continuation of this tradition — certainly repeated conventional motifs in subsidiary bands are a feature of the spectacular ceiling at Cullen House, Banffshire (Apted, frontispiece). Otherwise the bed would have to be something of a freak, representing only the personal taste of a strongly individual yeoman family in a remote part of north-west England.



3. Detail showing the headboard, the central panel depicting a tree of life is a hinged door which opened to reveal a wall niche



4. Underside of tester decorated with birds

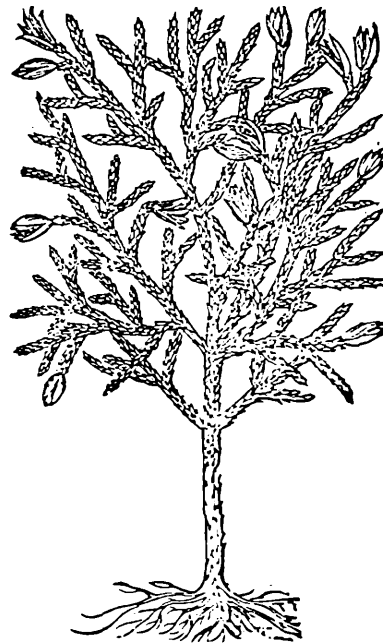


5. The painted bed was originally made for an upstairs room in this house at Kirkbride, Cumbria. The lintel is inscribed FRANCIS HALL ANNE HALL | 1721



6. Central tablet of pine overmantel,  
with traces of paint  
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#### IV. ARBOR VITAE.



7. Tree of Life in Pietro Andrea Matthioli,  
*Commentarii . . . Pedacii Dioscoridis*, 1598