

A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY OAK CUPBOARD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

David Jones

Of the St Andrews University furniture which remains from the late medieval period, the most striking survival is the large oak cupboard which is now kept in St Mary's College Hall (Fig. 1). This cupboard has suffered modifications including new interior shelves, cornice and plinth base, but the frame, which is united by wooden pegs, and the vigorously-carved panels which this encloses, comprise a complete and apparently original structure.

The front, which is divided into upper and lower compartments, each with central, strap-hinged¹ double doors, bears a scheme of carved decoration which is of interest both for its deliberate asymmetry and for its employment of an idiosyncratic repertoire of motifs, some of which have symbolic significance. The cupboard has been recorded previously in historical anthologies; firstly by John Small in his *Ancient & Modern Furniture*, 1883² and secondly by James S. Richardson in his article 'Unrecorded Scottish Woodcarvings' in *Proceedings of The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. XII (1926).³ These surveys, one by an inspired antiquarian and designer, the other by an Inspector of Ancient Monuments of Scotland, plainly emphasised the need for further research in the neglected field of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scottish furniture. The object of this article is to present a further analysis of an important piece of Scottish furniture which has been well-recorded but otherwise unresearched.

The most prominent parts of the St Andrews cupboard are the twelve carved panels of the cupboard front, each of which depicts a young vine plant sprouting from a horizontal woody stem or cutting. The vine plants on the panels of the double doors of both upper and lower compartments are more or less erect, but the plants on the flanking panels follow a serpentine form. There is one major exception; the lower panel to the left of the upper double doors (Fig. 3) bears a plant with a distinctly straight stem. The repertoire of motifs from which these 'hybrid' vine plants are composed includes a square leaf, a pointed leaf, a stylised grape cluster, two different types of naturalistic grape cluster and a motif showing a row of grapes against a leaf. These elements can be seen in combination on the outer panels of the lower compartment (Figs 5 and 6). The two most distinctive hybrid elements, a thistle and an eight-petalled flower, occur on the upper part; the thistle on the lower left panel flanking the double doors (Fig. 3) and the flower, which resembles a daisy, on the opposite flanking panel. A small rose of conventional form, and distinct from the daisy, appears on the upper panel of the top compartment.

The composition of the panel on which the thistle occurs can be compared directly with that of a panel in the Abbot's House, Arbroath Priory,⁴ a building which was much-enlarged during the first half of the sixteenth century. The Arbroath and St Andrews panels are similar in that they both depict plants with distinctly erect stems from which 'hybrid' elements grow, both stems terminate in a prominent central fruit or flower and they each feature thistles with boldly-carved bracts and similarly-flaring flower clusters. It is clear that the two panels are probably not by the same hand, but they share a common design which

appears to be unique amongst surviving sixteenth-century Scottish woodwork. An important link between St Andrews and Arbroath, which may be of significance in the transfer of a particular design from one place to the other, is the churchman James Beaton. He was educated at St Andrews and after a rapid succession of church appointments became Abbot of Arbroath in 1517, returning to St Andrews in 1523 to become Archbishop and a noted figure in the expansion and improvement of the university. He would have been very familiar with the university furniture during the early sixteenth century and it is possible that he commissioned items which recalled the decoration of work at St Andrews during his occupancy of the Abbot's House at Arbroath.

The significance of the thistle as a national symbol is a subject of great interest; it has traditionally been the focus of mythology and apocryphal information but has recently received valuable scholarly attention from historians and botanists in Scotland.⁵ The appearance of the thistle as a decorative or symbolic motif on Scottish furniture however has not been thoroughly investigated and is a subject which repays study.

The earliest occurrence of the thistle as a prominent motif in a provenanced item of Scottish furniture appears in the carved decoration of a set of misericords at Dunblane Cathedral. The stalls on which these appear, known as the 'Ochiltree Stalls' were, traditionally, donated by Bishop Michael Ochiltree (active 1429–46) during the first half of the fifteenth century. The underside of one of these misericords shows two thistle heads and leaves, their stems emerging from a crown (Fig. 9). This would appear to be a royal symbol which pre-dates the use of the thistle motif on Scottish silver coinage of James III's reign.⁶ The use of the thistle in Scottish furniture dating from after this period is widespread; it appears, for instance, in notable carved work such as the Beaton panels of c. 1530⁷ and it has since continued as a persistent motif.

The thistle on the St Andrews cupboard can also be seen as a royal symbol, particularly if we consider it in combination with the daisy and the rose carved on the cupboard panels and, in turn, if we consider this combination of floral motifs in relation to early sixteenth-century manuscript sources. It has been noticed that the thistle, marguerite and rose appear conspicuously in the decoration of the Ratification of Marriage Contract of James IV and his bride Margaret Tudor dated 17 December 1502 and illuminated at Stirling by the court painter Sir Thomas Galbraith.⁸ The floral combination also appears in a Book of Hours which is thought to have been commissioned by James IV as a wedding gift for Margaret.⁹ Folio 14v shows the Royal Arms of Scotland surrounded by a border of intertwining thistles, marguerites and roses. The following pages feature entwining thistles and hybrid plants as margin decoration. Here, in straightforward symbolic language, the thistle represents the Scottish Crown, the rose represents the House of Tudor and the marguerite, the most personal device, represents Margaret Tudor.

The appearance of these motifs on the St Andrews cupboard can be interpreted as being symbolic of this Royal merger in exactly the same manner. The way in which the motifs are situated is significant. James IV and Margaret Tudor, the royal partners, flank one another on opposite sides of the cupboard, while the rose appears in a subsidiary panel on what is, perhaps deliberately, the symbolically 'male' side of the cupboard. In this way, the decorative scheme of the cupboard façade assumes a symbolic balance and it can be seen that the different motifs are not arranged in a random manner. The iconographic scheme is discreet, but one's eye is drawn first to the thistle, sprouting robustly from its straight stem.

This interpretation would suggest that the cupboard façade was devised as a complete scheme, and thus challenges the theory that the cupboard was 'made up' from a collection of existing panels.

Work directly related to the St Andrews cupboard exists in the form of two panel fragments in the collection of the National Museum of Scotland (Figs 7 and 8). To what they once belonged is not known, but the panels, first recorded by J. S. Richardson, were collected in St Andrews¹⁰ and their carved decoration consists of motifs identical to those employed on the St Andrews cupboard; notably the stylised grape clusters and two different leaf types.

The exact provenance of the St Andrews cupboard is a problem; there is no evidence which reveals its original purchase, purpose or even its location within the university. What can be investigated however, is the occurrence of this furniture type, variously described as 'aumbrie', 'almary' or simply 'press' within the sixteenth-century furnishing schemes of the university. The concept of the University of St Andrews owning furniture does not seem to have arisen for the thirty-nine years between 1411, when the university was founded by papal bull, and c. 1450, when construction of the college of St Salvator began. During the early years, the community of scholars which formed the university was obliged to occupy existing buildings belonging to the various religious institutions within the city and it seems that the general furniture used by academics must have been owned by these hosts. Doubtless, items could have been inherited from the priories and hospitals which housed the early scholars, but the relatively ambitious nature of the new residential colleges and their schools must have made new furniture a necessity.

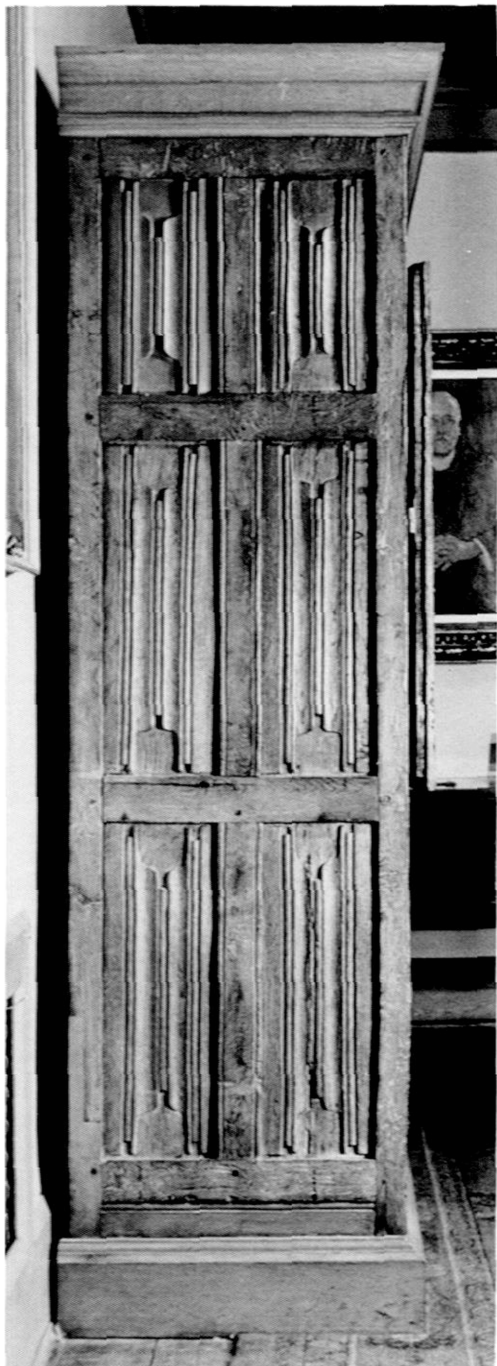
Evidence concerning the furnishings of the new colleges is scarce, but inventories surviving from the sixteenth century do at least throw light upon the distribution of furniture, including cupboards of various kinds, in the rooms of the newly-inhabited buildings. St Leonard's College, which was founded in 1512 and which occupied an existing priory hospital of the same name, has an inventory of 1544¹¹ which includes brief mention of furniture. Of the rooms surveyed, the last, called a 'cubiculum' (bedchamber) was amply furnished containing, in addition to a 'beid', a 'lang sadill' and a 'schort forme', 'ane pres' and 'ane almary'. The distinctive features of these last, and presumably different, types of cupboard are not described.

A clearer idea of the repertoire of furnishings in college rooms, but no clearer description of the exact appearance of different types of 'press' can be gained from an 'Inventar of the Plenishings of the Chalmers within the New College, 18th May 1588'.¹² This document shows that the standard furnishings of a student room consisted of a bed, a press, a form and a 'burd' (table). The description of presses in the master's rooms are occasionally fuller, and include a hanging press and a press fitted for books.¹³ The decoration of these presses is not mentioned, making it very difficult to trace a specific item such as the St Andrews cupboard.

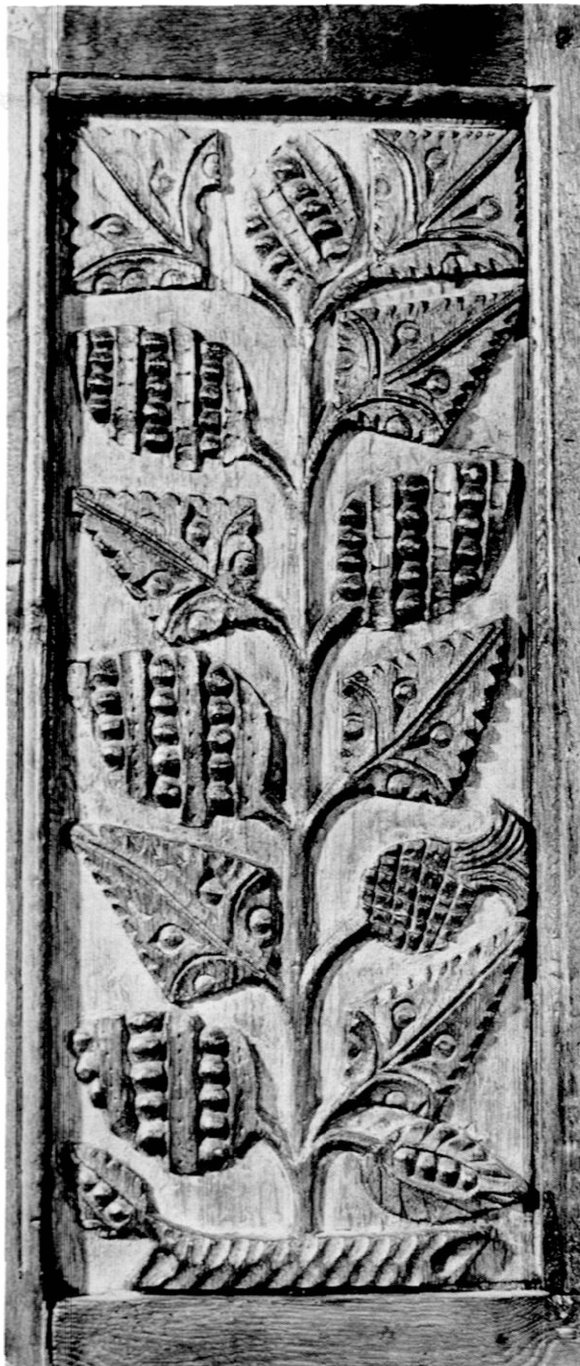
If the St Andrews cupboard was made for a university college, then the most likely candidate, in terms of date, financial resources and known activity as a patron of the decorative arts,¹⁴ would be St Salvator's. This was the first university college to be built and architecturally it was the most ambitious. Behind the Gothic Collegiate Church were two courts where the surrounding buildings provided teaching and residential accommodation for college members. The Common Hall and Schools building (Fig. 10) where most of the teaching was carried out, was built shortly after 1450 (demolished 1844). St Salvator's has



1. The St Andrews cupboard, St Mary's College, University of St Andrews



2. Linenfold panels on the left side. The upper left panel is a modern replacement



3. The St Andrews cupboard thistle panel, middle left



4. Panel from the Abbot's House, Arbroath Priory
*Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate,
Scottish Development Department*

5. Panel from the St Andrews cupboard,
lower compartment, left, showing two leaf
types, stylised grape cluster and 'grapes
against leaf' motif

6. Panel from the St Andrews cupboard,
lower compartment, right, showing two leaf
types, and stylised and naturalistic grape clusters

7. Panel fragment. The design is related to
that of the St Andrews cupboard decoration
Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland

8. Panel fragment. The design is related to
that of the St Andrew's cupboard decoration.
Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland

9. Misericord carving on the Ochiltree Stalls,
Dunblane Cathedral



6



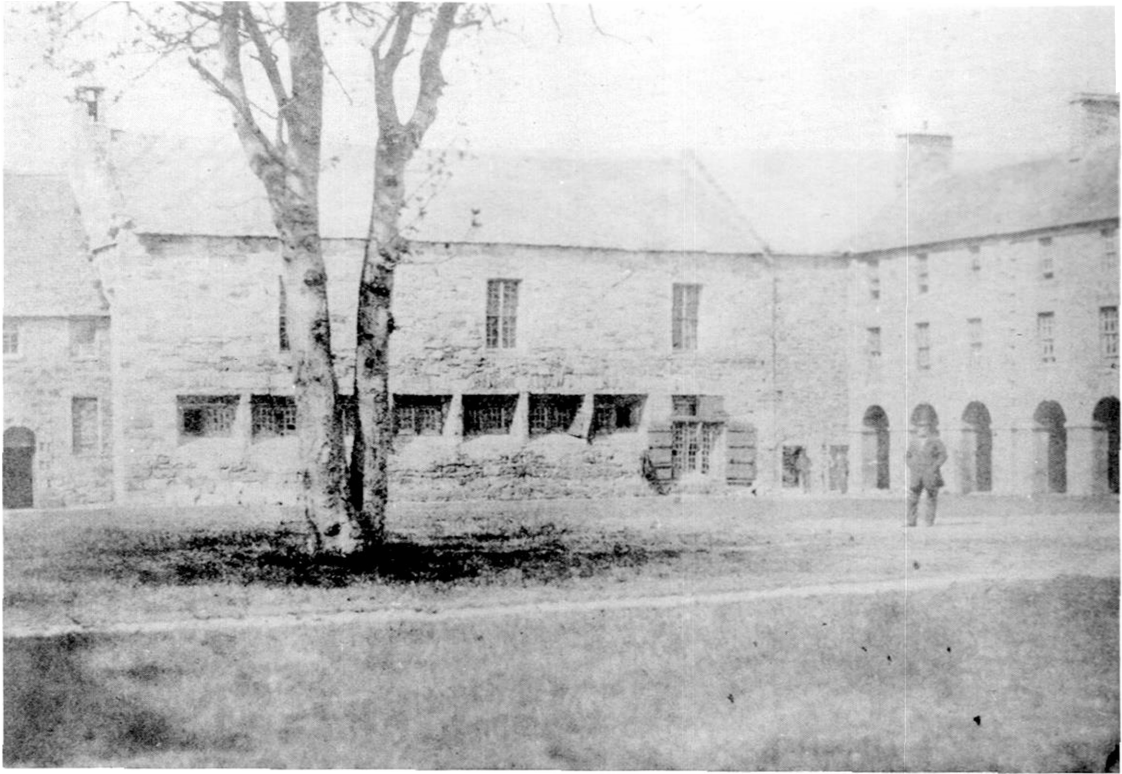
7



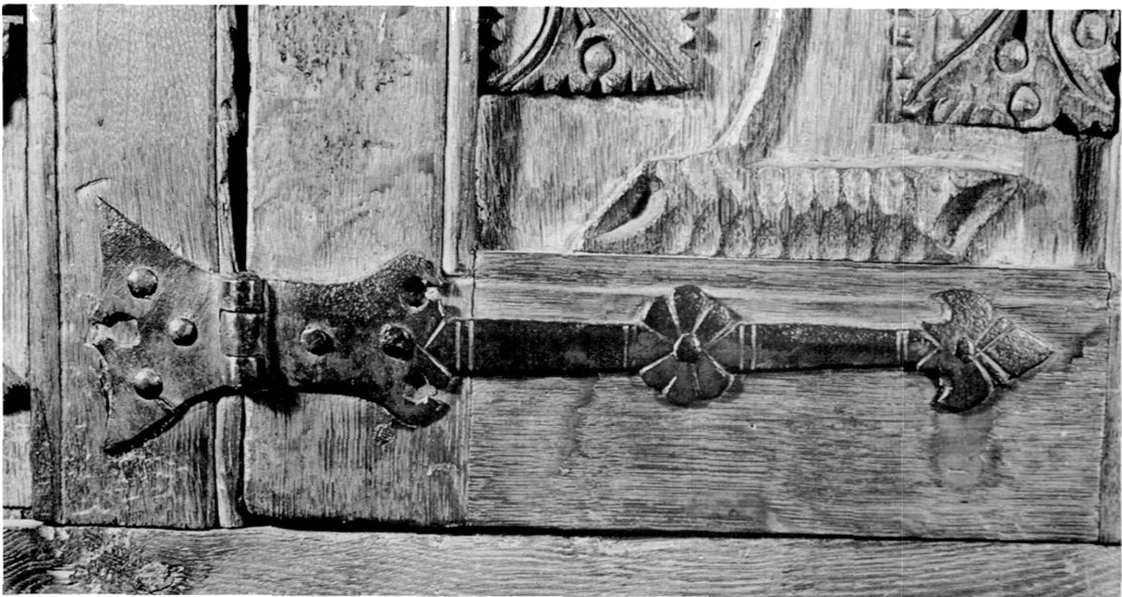
8



9



10. The Common Hall and Schools building, St Salvator's College. Calotype by John Adamson, 1842. The building was demolished in 1844
St Andrews University Photographic Collection



11. Detail of strap hinge on the St Andrews cupboard

no surviving sixteenth-century documentation comparable to the inventories of St Leonard's and St Mary's colleges and so, unfortunately, nothing is known of the basic furnishings of these buildings, apart from surviving fragments of woodwork, such as the door to the Common Hall and Schools.¹⁵ What is known however is that St Salvator's college was the last location of the St Andrews cupboard before its removal to St Mary's at some time between 1883 and 1926. This was probably done at the instigation of the Marquis of Bute who, as Rector of the University (1892–95, and 1895–98), had an active interest in the preservation of its ancient furniture.¹⁶

Despite problems of provenance and lack of documentation, the St Andrews cupboard can be dated with some accuracy. Comparatively observed, the appearance of both the hinges and handles and the linenfold carving on the side panels indicates a date of c. 1500,¹⁷ but this can be more accurately focused, by the symbolic reference to the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor, to the period 1502–13. It seems certain that, despite some modifications, the cupboard survives in its original form and as such, it provides a most useful starting point for research into the furniture of the late medieval oak tradition in Scotland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Mr R. N. Smart, Keeper of the University Muniments, Emeritus Professor J. K. Cameron of St Mary's and Jim Douglas, Senior Janitor of St Mary's, for their help.

REFERENCES

1. The strap hinges and cupboard door handles appear to date from c. 1500. For comparable examples of hinges with central floret see P. Eames, *Furniture in England, France and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*, Furniture History Society (1977), pls 4–6, 16b and p. 276. Eames argues that the rose, placed centrally or otherwise on a strap hinge, is a common late fifteenth-century form which continued until c. 1500. The same form can be seen on Flemish furniture illustrated in K. Sluyterman, *Huisraad En Binnenhuis In Nederland In Vroegere Eeuwen*, S. Gravenhage Martinus Nijhoff (1918).
2. *John Small's Ancient & Modern Furniture* (1883), contained both his own designs and measured drawings of old Scottish furniture; it followed *Scottish Woodwork of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1878), which, although random in its selection, was the first proper survey of the subject. Small's measured drawing of the St Andrews cupboard is, however, inaccurate in that it omits the rose in the upper left panel.
3. J. S. Richardson was also Hon. Curator of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. He was the first to note the similarity between the St Andrews cupboard panels and the panel at Arbroath Priory and to record the related panel fragments from St Andrews (Figs 7 and 8).
4. This panel can be seen on display in the Abbot's House, Arbroath Priory, which is in the care of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate, Scottish Development Department.
5. See Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries, *The Thistles of Scotland*, exh. cat. (Glasgow, 1983) and J. H. Dickson and A. Walker, 'What is the Scottish Thistle?' *The Glasgow Naturalist*, Vol. 20 part 2 (1981).
6. See Ian Halley Stewart, *The Scottish Coinage*, 2nd edition with supplement (Spink, London, 1967).
7. The Beaton panels are fully illustrated and described in National Museum of Scotland, *Angels, Nobles and Unicorns: Art & Patronage in Mediaeval Scotland* exh. cat. (Edinburgh, 1982).
8. This is noted by L. MacFarlane, in 'The Book of Hours of James IV and Margaret Tudor', *Innes Review*, Vol. XI (1960). The marriage contract is in the Public Record Office, London, ref: E/39/81.
9. *Ibid.* The Book of Hours is now in the Ost Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, ref: Cod 1897.
10. The panels were collected by David Hay Fleming (1849–1931), a self-educated historian and collector who was born in St Andrews. He amassed a considerable collection of oak fragments, some of which he bequeathed to the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh.
11. University Muniments SL155 p. 12. This inventory is transcribed in J. Herkless and R. K. Hannay, *The College of St Leonards* (1905).

12. University Muniments UY172/1 pp. 211–12. St Mary's was commonly known as the 'New College' until the nineteenth century. St Salvator's was referred to as the 'Old College'. See R. G. Cant, *The University of St Andrews* (Scottish Academic Press, 1970 edition), p. 34.

13. The masters' rooms were also equipped with chairs.

14. The most notable example of this patronage was the commissioning by the college in 1461 of a silver gilt mace from the Parisian goldsmith Jean Mayelle. The furnishings of the Collegiate Church of St Salvator were lavish. Surviving documentation regarding this is reprinted in R. G. Cant, *The College of St Salvator*, Vol. XLVII (St Andrews University Publications, 1950).

15. This has been reconstructed in a new position inside the Collegiate Church of St Salvator. Its decoration consists of panels of large-scale linenfold carving. Preserved in the University Muniments is a single oak rail, carved with vine trail decoration, which is also thought to survive from the original Common Hall and Schools building.

16. The Marquis of Bute is known to have had copies made of seventeenth-century university chairs for use in Falkland Palace, Fife, of which he was Hereditary Keeper.

17. See note 1. The upper left panel of linenfold carving on the left side of the cupboard is a modern replacement.