

CARVED OAK FURNITURE FROM TUDOR WALES

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The curious, but widely held, theory that all worthwhile furniture developments originated with the Court in London, and worked their way down the social scale by the process of imitation, seriously inhibits our understanding of regional styles. It is normally assumed that Welsh furniture is later than it appears, on account of the 'remoteness' of the region, and, conversely, when a piece can be shown to be early, that it must have been imported. I shall attempt to break out of this circular mode of thought by considering some pieces with impeccable provenances in their fullest social and historical context, and with reference to fixed woodwork from their areas.

The powerful head in Figure 1 is one of a group of eleven, each different, which dominate the Gwydir Chapel adjoining Llanrwst Church in the Conwy Valley. Impossible to categorise, and therefore difficult to date, they have been disregarded and unanimously assigned to local craftsmanship on account of their 'primitiveness'. But their dramatic and highly individual treatment, going far beyond the conceivable instructions of a patron, deserves more serious appreciation. The chapel was built in 1633 as a monument to Sir John Wynn of Gwydir, and that is the latest date we can reasonably assign to the heads, which are integral to the stallwork. Local tradition claims that much of the woodwork for the church came from nearby Maenan Abbey, which had originally been part of the Celtic church, and was dissolved a century earlier. Heads, often severed, figure prominently in Celtic mythology, and a number of stone examples are known from the area. Those in the chapel are shaved in the front, and this may represent the practice of Irish monks, or it may represent the hairstyle popular on knights in the early sixteenth century. (A brass plaque of 1525 in nearby Dolwyddelan Church shows the great-grandfather of Sir John with such a hairstyle.) The Wynns, like most of their contemporaries, were preoccupied with ancestry, which gave land rights, and it seems likely that such a prominent feature had a special significance for them. The decoration and motifs below the heads are carried through to the carved and fretted stalls and wall panelling, and are repeated on the desk and table seen in Figure 3. These may be the 'pulpit and desk' mentioned in church papers as having been brought from Maenan Abbey, and thought to have disappeared. Coarse workmanship is variously thought to be either very early or very late, and if it is found in Wales normally the latter. Fortunately, most of the superbly carved church woodwork we find can safely be assumed to be pre-Reformation, and can mostly be placed between 1450 and 1530.

Due to a lack of freestone and a comparable abundance of oak in most districts, timber rood-screens were the norm in the typically vernacular churches. This led to an early development of carpentry and carving skills, independent of the stonemason's craft. Furthermore, forming the main architectural division between the nave and chancel, they have survived in greater numbers in Wales than elsewhere. They are characterised by a freedom of design permitted by the non-formal nature of the church buildings, and strongly individual carving. There is little repetition in the panels, which often combine pictorial elements with Celtic motifs including interlacing and zoomorphic forms. Some of these



1. One of eleven heads, Gwydir Chapel, Llanrwst, built 1633



2. Rood loft at Llanengan, Llyn Peninsula, c. 1500



3. Oak table, associated with Figure 1



4. Rood loft at Llanegryn, Merionydd, c. 1500

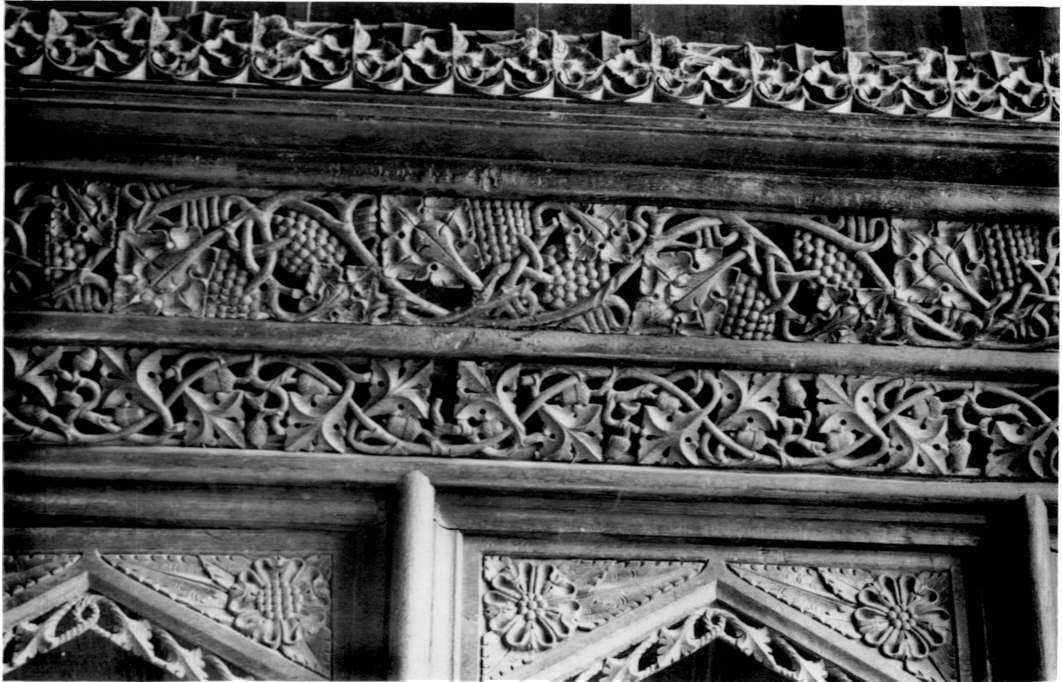
features can be clearly seen in the balanced work in Figures 2 and 4. The overall setting out of the screen in Llanrwst Church (Fig. 5) is akin to English practice, but other features, including the intricate carving, are clearly local. Each section is different, and includes wolves' heads spouting foliage, boars eating acorns, and the minute religious symbols shown in Figure 6. Given that the examples of church woodwork surviving can only be a fraction of that originally produced, a large number of joiners and carvers must have been engaged in Wales. They probably worked from several centres from which there is evidence they may have supplied churches in the English border counties. The work is typically 'medieval' in character, and when, on larger projects, 'Renaissance' influences are seen, it is invariably assigned to foreign craftsmen. It is thought, for example, that the scale of the unique and monumental nave ceiling at St David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire, together with the presence of slight Continental motifs must be the product of Flemish or South German workers. St David's was not as isolated as is normally assumed, and the Bishop was an important temporal as well as spiritual lord, with large estates. Many of the Cathedral's other features are exceptional examples of their type, and the ceiling marks the transition from the decorated roof to the decorated ceiling.

This was a period of intense building activity in South-West Wales, both ecclesiastical and secular, coinciding with the peaceful times of the early Tudor period. The patron for much of the work was Sir Rhys ap Thomas, Henry Tudor's most powerful Welsh ally, who introduced many advanced architectural features to his own home at Carew Castle in the

first quarter of the sixteenth century. These included oak panelled walls, and large 'Tudor' windows, archways, and fire surrounds in Bath stone. Delicately carved, with restrained ornamentation, and featuring the heraldic devices of the Tudors and Rhys ap Thomas himself, many still survive intact. He was on particularly close terms with Bishop Vaughan (d. 1522), and his coat of arms appear at St David's, and many of the churches in the area, as acknowledgements of his contributions. The most noteworthy local event in this period was a tournament held at Carew in 1507 to commemorate the award of the Order of the Garter. This brought together over five hundred nobles from all over Wales, two of the leading contestants being Rhys' son Gruffydd ap Rhys, and John Wyn ap Maredudd of Gwydir (grandfather of Sir John Wynn). At the ensuing feast, Rhys ap Thomas sat apart with Bishop Vaughan, either side of a place set for the absent King.

It is in this illustrious context that we must judge the chair in Figure 8, one of a pair, which has remained in the possession of Sir Rhys' descendants. It bears his coat of arms, surrounded by the Garter, and might well have been made for the tournament itself. Similarly crisp armorial carvings are to be found on the stonework at Carew — dated to 1502 by the inclusion of Prince Arthur and Catherine of Aragon — and the guilloche design on the seat rail is identical to that on a stone fireplace bearing the arms of Henry VII, and is also found on the underside of the archway into the Main Hall. As an open-framed chair it is of a very advanced form, and the pronounced symmetry of the panel carving represents a new departure, and undoubted Continental influence. Rhys ap Thomas was brought up in the Burgundian Court, and would have introduced some French ideas and possibly even craftsmen. In addition, the merchants of nearby Haverfordwest and Tenby had long-standing trading links with Europe. But, in the absence of comparable examples, it is difficult to make a precise attribution. It is easy to isolate one familiar feature of a piece, and categorically assert its origin: it is more difficult to consider the piece as a whole, and account not just for similarities, but differences, and even idiosyncrasies. In general, there is an overwhelming feeling in the woodwork and stonework of this period in South-West Wales of traditional 'Gothic' decoration, with the addition of 'Renaissance' features, and where foreign craftsmen were employed it is possible they performed, or supervised, only part of the work. Wherever they originated, they clearly worked for a long period in the area, and there is certainly no need to postulate outside centres of production.

Returning to the more obviously local tradition, Figure 7 shows a part of a bed bearing the coat of arms of Sir Rhys ap Thomas. Featuring jousting figures and a harpist, it may, like his chairs, also commemorate, or even have been made for, the tournament. It well illustrates why the bards themselves considered carpenters their artistic equals. Of a similarly pictorial nature are the enriched doorheads in Figures 9 and 10, from Rhydarwen, a related house in Carmarthenshire. They are covered in layers of paint, and the carving is finer than it appears, featuring religious, hunting, and armorial motifs. Profile heads on another doorhead in the house may be portraits, and when originally discovered apparently bore traces of original colouring. Such doorheads are a common feature of the typically open doorways in Welsh church screens, and although not known elsewhere in South Wales, are a much more usual feature in the North, where they are often associated with dated domestic screens. One example, from Berain in Denbighshire, uses an elongated leaf and rose pattern common in church and domestic doorheads throughout the century in this area. But Figure 11, from the same house, is far more distinctive, with heads, possibly



5. Top of rood screen, Llanrwst Church, Conwy Valley, c. 1525
Conway Library, Courtauld Institute and Revd M. Ridgway



6. Archway in rood screen, Llanrwst Church, Conwy Valley, c. 1525
Conway Library, Courtauld Institute and Revd M. Ridgway



7. Details of a bed, Derwydd,
Carmarthenshire, c. 1510
*National Museum of Wales, Welsh Folk
Museum*



8. Chair of Sir Rhys Ap Thomas,
Pembrokeshire, c. 1505–20
*The National Museum of Wales, Welsh
Folk Museum*



9. Doorhead at Rhydarwen, Carmarthenshire, c. 1525
Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales



10. Doorhead at Rhydarwen, Carmarthenshire, c. 1525
Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales



11. Doorhead at Berain, Denbighshire, c. 1530
Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales



12. Cupboard of John Wyn Ap Maredudd of Gwydir, Conwy Valley, c. 1530
The Burrell Collection



13. Cupboard front, now at Cotehele, Cornwall, c. 1500–25
The National Trust and the National Museum of Wales, Welsh Folk Museum

portraits again, with serpents spouting foliage. This design, including the moulded edge and central division, is identical to the drawer fronts on the famous Wynn cupboard from Gwydir shown in Figure 12. The Conwy Valley in the early sixteenth century also saw a great deal of church and domestic building. From 1525 John Wyn ap Maredudd extended the castle built by his father, drawing on the rich local carpentry tradition.

As has been mentioned, heraldry was of crucial importance in this period. Men such as Rhys ap Thomas and John Wyn ap Maredudd, and even the Welsh King Henry Tudor himself, had dubious claims to the estates they were acquiring. They were anxious to use the tradition of establishing their claims to status by reference to genealogy. Welsh rules were more flexible than English, being based on tribal rather than individual ancestry, and bards were employed to provide suitably impressive evidence of royal descent. They invented arms for figures who lived before the days of heraldry, the three ravens of Rhys ap Thomas, for example, were assigned to Urien Rheged, an early sixth-century chief. The carving on the Wynn cupboard is a pictorial demonstration of the claims of John Wyn ap Maredudd, with references to the twelfth-century Lord of Eifonydd (where the family originated); the

Princes of North Wales and the ancestors of the Tudors, through to the Houses of York and Lancaster, with whom they were at least connected by marriage. In this way it is even more particular to its owner than the mere presence of his initials suggest. It has been said that the design on the drawers represent three severed Englishmen's heads, the arms of the thirteenth-century Grand Forester of Snowdon, Ednyfed Fychan. This, however, was not an ancestor that even the Wyns claimed at this date, and when they did they were rendered quite differently. Their individual appearance, and the evidence of the Berain doorhead, suggests that they were portraits, something which was very popular at this time on memorial brasses. The abundance of images and lack of symmetry in the panels, added to the preponderance of zoomorphic shapes, are clearly part of the local tradition. Particularly striking is the style of carving, where each motif is laid down separately on a flat background, with no overlapping or attempt at perspective. Advanced as the form of the cupboard may be, this feature is not the work of an outside craftsman. Furthermore, there are close parallels in the stone doorheads of Gwydir Castle itself.

Welsh armorial bearings could change significantly with each generation in this period, and those shown on the top right and bottom centre panels are actually those of the father of John Wyn ap Maredudd, who died in 1525. The cupboard would not therefore have been made much after that date.

The front from a remarkably similar cupboard (Fig. 13) is housed at Cotehele in Cornwall, where it now serves as a bedhead. In 1527 Sir Piers Edgecombe of Cotehele (whose father had fought with Rhys ap Thomas at Bosworth) married Catherine, the widow of Rhys' son, Gruffydd ap Rhys, and this connection makes it likely that the cupboard arrived at that date. Like the Wynn cupboard, and the Rhys ap Thomas bed, the carving is so much more than decoration, and is probably in the form of praise to a patron. The bottom panels forcibly show the triumph of Good over Evil, through stories of St George and the Garden of Eden, in images which would have been immediately recognisable at the time. The top panels show the emblems of the Passion (a favourite in Church woodwork) and the musicians playing the harp and crwth either side of a slight variant of the Royal Arms of Henry Tudor. The bas-relief hunting scenes in the frame — necessarily carved after assembly — form a background to the main story, and are clearly by the same craftsman. Since the crowded inscription, prominently presented in a scroll, lacks correct spacing and includes an abrupt abbreviation of 'Gruffydd', we must assume it was designed for maximum visual impact, and that its meaning was quite clear to the owner. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. The most tempting translation would give us the craftsman Harry ap Gruffydd as the maker. But such dominant positions are unfortunately invariably reserved for owners, and a more likely interpretation is '(a) craftsman makes it (for) Harry ap Gruffydd'. The 'craftsman' may have been the carpenter/carver, or the musician shown, or a bard whose task it was to praise his patron. Given the connection through marriage to the son of Rhys ap Thomas, it is worth noting again the doorhead in Figure 9, with its foliage, instrument players, hunting scenes, and heraldry.

The fixed woodwork and movable furniture discussed displays the highest standards of joinery, reflecting the long tradition of carpentry in a region which had plentiful supplies of oak and virtually no freestone. Wales has a history of its own, and much of its furniture is quite distinctive. Often, the earlier work is steeped in the narrative tradition which surrounded the chieftans and Princes, and the carving is typically asymmetrical and

pictorial, vigorously executed, and extremely well finished considering the nature of the timber. It is not always necessarily indicative of a precise period, and has consequently often been ignored or assigned to a late date. For example, many of the attributes connected to the Renaissance, such as curvilinear designs, were already present in the Celtic tradition, and many motifs such as dolphins, paired serpents, and trailing vines had been a part of the design repertoire since earlier Classical influence during the Roman occupation. Nevertheless certain clear reference points exist to show the quality and type of work produced in Wales in the sixteenth century, from the pre-Reformation Church woodwork at the start, to the dated domestic screens toward the end. It should come as no surprise when apparently Continental influences are seen at this period. Many individuals like Rhys ap Thomas maintained direct contact with the most fashionable centres of their day, introducing new ideas and undoubtedly some new craftsmen. The early sixteenth century was a period of widespread building in Wales, and the carpentry involved can be seen to represent a fusion of styles, the acceptance of new forms into an already flourishing tradition which was capable of development. The evidence tying pieces of furniture in this period to known owners and specific areas by reference to heraldry and fixed woodwork is as strong for Wales as any other region, and made stronger by consideration of their cultural context. Clearly, this body of work forms the background to the far more numerous examples of oak furniture to be found from the following two centuries, with more readily recognisable 'Welsh' attributes.

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