

A 16th-Century Lancashire Tester Bed

The most expensive lot in the sale of the Douglas Collection, at Bonhams, Oxford, on 30 April 2014, was an oak tester bed that sold for £50,000 (£62,500 including premium). This is probably a record UK price for a joined tester bed (Fig. 1).

As is usually the case with such beds, it is a mixture of original and later parts, but the headboard and the tester (but not the cornice) are original. The richly carved headboard bears the arms of Sir John Radcliffe of Ordsall Hall (c. 1536–89), Salford, and of his wife, Anne Asshawe (1545–1627), whom he married about 1572. The headboard can thus be securely dated between c. 1572 and 1589 (Fig. 2).

The bed was almost certainly made for Ordsall Hall in Salford, which is now owned by Salford City Council. The first house on the site was built about 1251, and the manor of Ordsall came into the possession of the Radcliffe (or Radclyffe) family in 1335. The Dutch scholar Erasmus visited the house in 1499 and gave it a characteristically caustic appraisal: '... the floors are made of clay and are covered with layers of rushes, constantly replenished, so that the bottom layer remains for twenty years harbouring

spittle, vomit, the urine of dogs and men, the dregs of beer, the remains of fish and other nameless filth ...'.

Sir Alexander Radcliffe built the present great hall in 1512, and it shares similarities with nearby Rufford Old Hall and Samlesbury. Additions to the house were made in the 17th century and by 1666 it was the largest house in Salford, with nineteen hearths. However, as staunch royalists the Radcliffe family had backed the losing side in the Civil War, and the incumbent, John Radcliffe, was forced to sell in 1662. The house subsequently passed through a succession of owners before becoming a workingmen's club in the late 19th century. After further vicissitudes Ordsall Hall was purchased by Salford Corporation in 1959, and it opened to the public as a museum in 1972. So far as is known, the bed is the only piece of original furniture from the Hall to have survived. It is not known when it left Ordsall, but by the mid-20th century the bed was in a house in Whalley Range, near Salford, from where it was bought by a Mrs Robinson of Monyash, Derbyshire. In 1968 it was spotted in Mrs Robinson's barn by Maurice Goldstone, the well-known



Fig. 1 Tester bed made for Sir John Radcliffe of Ordsall, c. 1572, with later additions (Bonhams)



Fig. 2 The headboard, showing the arms of Sir John Radcliffe (left) and Anne Asshawe (right) (Bonhams)

Bakewell, Derbyshire dealer, who advised Dr Chris Douglas to buy it.

While the bed was very probably made in the Manchester area, the style seems solidly mainstream without obvious expressions of regionality. This might simply be the consequence of a lack of detailed study of 16th-century woodworking from this area. One feature worth noting, however, is the style of inlay on the tester, with its stylised, hooked and dotted foliage (Fig. 3). This is very similar to the inlaid work on the panelling of the Inlaid Chamber at Sizergh, in Cumbria, (see *RFS Newsletter* 52 Spring 2010, p. 24) which is exactly contemporary with the bed. The quality of both the inlay and the carving is high, and suggests that highly competent artisans, conversant with the latest metropolitan styles, were operating in northwest England in the late 16th century.

The bed was underbid by Salford Museum, which had hoped to return the bed to its original home. At the time of writing it is thought the bed is due to be exported to the United States, in which case it is possible that Salford will have another opportunity to buy the bed if an export stop is put on it by the Arts Council.

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Fig. 3 Detail of the tester, showing inlaid work very similar to that at Sizergh Castle, Cumbria (The author)