

# The Great Chair of Sir Ralph Warburton, 1603

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In 2015 the Strawberry Hill Collection Trust purchased a large early seventeenth-century armchair from a private owner (Figures 1 and 2). The chair bears the date 1603 and the arms of Sir Peter Warburton of Grafton Hall, Cheshire. At one time it belonged to Horace Walpole and formed part of his famous collection of antiquities, curiosities and works of art at Strawberry Hill. It is not clear when or how Walpole acquired the chair. It was not mentioned in either of Walpole's descriptions of Strawberry Hill's contents, published in 1774 and 1784, but must certainly have been bought before his death in 1797.<sup>1</sup> Walpole had a Cheshire connection through the Cholmondeley family because George, 2nd Earl of Cholmondeley, married Horace's sister Mary, but to suggest that this was the agency by which Horace acquired the chair is a speculation. Perhaps the chair became available when the Warburton properties in Cheshire, having passed by marriage to the Stanley family of Nether Alderley, were sold off or leased out in the eighteenth century.

Warburton's chair remained at Strawberry Hill until 1842 when it was sold, together with the rest of the collection, in a three-week sale during April and May. On the eighteenth day of the sale (14 May 1842), the chair stood in the entrance hall. It was catalogued as Lot 117:<sup>2</sup>

A most curious and finely carved Elizabethan arm chair, the back pierced and ornamented with grotesque heads, in the centre is the date 1601 [sic].

The chair was bought by Edward Smith-Stanley, 13th Earl of Derby, for £21. According to the artist C. J. Richardson, the price was lower than it might have been because the chair, 'being occupied by the person who sold the catalogues, escaped the observation of many of the numerous assemblage of visitors'.<sup>3</sup> Richardson made a sketch of the chair which was later reproduced in Margaret Jourdain's *English Decoration and Furniture of the Early Renaissance*.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, he also mentioned that 'prominent parts of the enrichment' were gilt and included sketches indicating the gilded parts. These included the centres of the carved fruit in the cresting and the beading running along the top rail immediately underneath the cresting. None of the gilding is now visible.

Lord Derby's interest in the chair almost certainly stemmed from the Warburton arms in the back, because in 1596 Sir Peter Warburton's daughter Elizabeth married Sir Thomas Stanley of Alderley Hall (1577–1605), a descendant of the 1st Earl of

<sup>1</sup> Walpole (1774, 1784).

<sup>2</sup> Waldegrave (1842), p. 178. A copy in the University of Michigan library is annotated with prices: [www.catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001166399](http://www.catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001166399).

<sup>3</sup> Richardson (1844).

<sup>4</sup> Jourdain (1924), p. 254, Fig. 354.



1 The great chair of Sir Peter Warburton. *The Author*



2 Detail of the cresting, dated 1603. *The Author*

Derby's brother.<sup>5</sup> Lord Derby took the chair back to Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool, where it remained until sold in the 1950s to a Lancashire antiques dealer. It was subsequently exhibited at the Bath International Art Treasures Exhibition in 1973 and illustrated in Chinnery's *Oak Furniture*.<sup>6</sup> After 1973 it was not seen again in public until acquired for Strawberry Hill in 2015.

Peter Warburton (c. 1540–1621) was a scion of the long-established Warburton family of Arley, Cheshire. He was born in Northwich but completed his education at Staple Inn, Holborn, where his arms were displayed in a stained-glass window in the Great Hall until destroyed by a VI flying bomb in August 1944 (Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> He joined Lincoln's Inn in May 1562 and was called to the Bar in 1572. He divided his professional life between London and Chester; in the latter city he was successively Justice of the Peace (1573), Sheriff (1582–3) and Alderman (1585). He was elected MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1584 before being returned for the City of Chester for the Parliaments of 1586, 1589 and 1597. In 1600 he was made Justice of the Common Pleas and in 1603, the year the chair was presumably made, he was knighted by James I. In 1591 he built a handsome timber-framed house in Watergate, Chester, on the site of a former Dominican priory. Part of the house, now called Stanley Palace, survives and is owned by Chester City Council (Figure 4). In 1602 he bought the manor of Grafton, about twelve miles south of Chester, and built Grafton Hall, which was demolished in 1965 (Figure 5).<sup>8</sup> In 1618 he built a gallery in the local church at Tilston which was

<sup>5</sup> Sir Thomas was descended from Sir John Stanley (1425–c. 1480), elder brother of Thomas Stanley, 1st Earl of Derby (1435–1504).

<sup>6</sup> BADA (1973), no. 63, pl. 72; Chinnery (1979), fig. 4.34.

<sup>7</sup> HMSO (1925), no. 8.

<sup>8</sup> For information on Grafton Hall see [www.historicengland.org.uk](http://www.historicengland.org.uk), list entry no. 1011031.



- 3 The arms of Sir Peter Warburton displayed at Staple Inn, Holborn. From Horace Gray, *Boteler Grammar School Warrington: 1526–1926* (1926). *The Author*

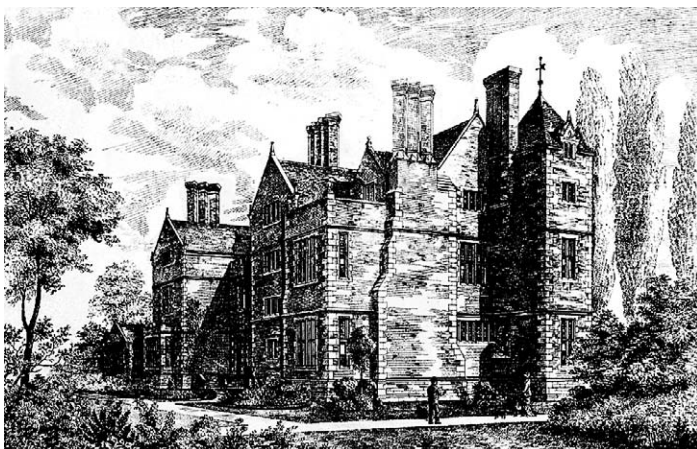


*Wells*  
**Arms of Sir Peter Warburton, from a Window in Staple Inn Hall.**

- 4 Stanley Palace, Watergate, Chester.  
*The Author*



- 5 Grafton Hall, Cheshire.  
Photo lithograph from *The Builder*, 29 December 1883. *The Author*





6 Church of St Mary, Tilston, Cheshire. *The Author*



7 The arms of Sir Peter Warburton in Tilston church, dated 1618. *The Author*

taken down in the nineteenth century, but the dated gallery beam bearing his arms was retained and placed high on the north wall of the church (Figures 6 and 7). Warburton died at Grafton Hall on 7 September 1621 and his remains were interred at Tilston.

Despite his professional and worldly success, Warburton's life was overshadowed by the stigma of illegitimacy. His arms, a variation on the arms of Warburton of Arley, were granted in 1593 by Sir William Dethick (1543–1612), the Garter king-of-arms.<sup>9</sup> Dethick was a notoriously irascible character, hated by many of his colleagues, and grants of arms made by him were often viewed with suspicion, which is probably why in 1597 Warburton felt it necessary to explain to the College of Arms that his grandfather was a younger son of Sir Geoffrey Warburton of Arley and 'having little to live upon was never married, so my father [was] illegitimate'.<sup>10</sup> The Visitation of Cheshire of 1613 put it more bluntly: 'Thomas Werburton, a bastard'.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless

<sup>9</sup> Jewers (1912). Further information about this grant was kindly supplied by Robert Noel, Lancaster Herald at the College of Arms.

<sup>10</sup> [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/warburton-peter-1540-1621](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/warburton-peter-1540-1621)

<sup>11</sup> [www.cheshire-heraldry.org.uk/visitations1613/1613.pdf](http://www.cheshire-heraldry.org.uk/visitations1613/1613.pdf)

8 Detail of Figure 1,  
showing the  
damaged original  
fixing of the cresting  
and the later iron  
plates. The plates  
hide two further  
floating tenons.  
*The Author*



the grant stood, which is why Warburton was able to display them on his chair, at Staples Inn and in his parish church at Tilston.

Warburton married three times; his third wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of his namesake and contemporary Peter Warburton of Arley. The marriage reunited the Grafton Warburtons with the senior and legitimate line of Arley Warburtons, but its only surviving issue was a girl, also Elizabeth, who married Sir Thomas Stanley of Alderley Hall (1597–1672). Consequently, all Warburton's property passed into the ownership of the Stanley family.

In construction and carving the chair is of exemplary quality. It is made entirely of walnut with comparatively little worm damage, considering its age. There is very little wear, the carved detail is crisp and the joints are tight. The latter is probably the consequence of having never been kept in a centrally heated house. The top-heavy cresting was originally fixed to the top rail with floating tenons but these proved inadequate and have been augmented with screwed iron plates (Figure 8). The repair is early and might even have been instigated by Walpole himself.

One might assume that given its quality and its sophisticated design the chair was made in London, but actually there is no reason to suppose it was not made in Chester. In the late sixteenth century Chester was an important city, a hub of the Irish trade and the largest maritime port in the northwest. It was prosperous and well regulated, with sixty recognised trades of which the company of Joiners, Carvers and Turners





9 Press, c. 1680, in the Church of St Werburgh, Greater Manchester. *The Author*

was one.<sup>12</sup> These men undoubtedly found plenty of employment in the many fine timber-framed buildings erected in Chester at this time, including Peter Warburton's house on Watergate. Presumably they made furniture to a similarly high standard.

There are, moreover, a couple of details that convey a distinct Cheshire or north-west inflection. The clumsiness of the cresting contrasts with the precise pattern-book style of the rest of the chair, and suggests spontaneous local invention, incorporating paired serpents or dragons which perhaps reflect the general popularity of that motif in the north and west of Britain. For example, the press which survives, by pleasing coincidence, in the parish church of Warburton, Cheshire (now Greater Manchester), and is presumably of local manufacture (Figure 9).

<sup>12</sup> Lewis and Thacker (2003), vol. 5, part 1, pp. 102–109.



10 Detail of the Warburton chair, showing the back panel with its ring and dart moulding around the arch. *The Author*

More intriguing is the innermost moulding of the arch, a pierced ring-and-dart repeat which appears to have no antecedents in Renaissance or Mannerist pattern books but relates instead to late Gothic decoration on a group of furniture associated with north west England (Figure 10). It occurs on the so-called 'Stanley' bed, probably made for Thomas Stanley (either the 1st or 2nd Earl of Derby) at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and also on the closely related 'Lovely Hall' bed illustrated in Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836).<sup>13</sup> Another bed bearing attributes of the Stanley family, and with the same decoration, has recently come to light and is currently in a private collection. Fragments of a fourth bed from Hulton Hall, near Bolton, survive at Chetham's Library, Manchester, having been re-assembled into a bookshelf or dumb-waiter in the nineteenth century (Figures 11 and 12). Chinnery opined that the beds '... must derive from the same workshop, somewhere in Central or South Lancashire'.<sup>14</sup> Or perhaps in Chester? The use of the same decoration on an overtly

<sup>13</sup> Shaw and Meyrick (1836); Chinnery (1979), figs 3:454, 3:455a-c, 3:457-8.

<sup>14</sup> Chinnery (1979), p. 391.





11 Bookshelf or dumb waiter, assembled from the headboard of a bed probably made for Adam Hulton, of Hulton Hall near Bolton, c. 1500. *The Author, courtesy of Chetham's Library*



12 Detail of Figure 11. *The Author, courtesy of Chetham's Library*

13 George Shaw's version of the moulding, used on bogus 'medieval' woodwork supplied for the Trinity Chapel, St Chad's parish church, Rochdale c. 1843–8. *The Author*



Classical great chair of 1600 is difficult to explain, except in terms of a local survival of craft practice.

More than two centuries later still, the moulding was copied by the Oldham antiquarian and architect George Shaw, who incorporated it into the Gothic-style church furnishings he designed and supplied to several churches in what is now Greater Manchester in the mid-nineteenth century (Figure 13). He probably copied it from one of the 'Stanley' group of beds. He used the same moulding on the pastiches of medieval domestic furniture which he created for a number of rich clients in the 1840s, most notably the Duke of Northumberland, some of which can be seen at Warkworth Castle, Northumberland.

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