

Old oak, new doors: the Durham Table c. 1500

This is a follow-up note to my article on the history of the oak table, c. 1500, in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums (14.312), published as ‘Changing histories: The life of a ‘curious’ table from Durham Cathedral’ in *Regional Furniture*, XXXI (2017), pp. 10–31. Following publication, I received several communications in which opinions were expressed that the table base, a trestle-type cupboard, showed features which may be Flemish or German.² More investigations need to be made on this.

Further letters have come to light in the Burrell Archive which add to our understanding of the making of new doors for the linenfold panelled cupboard which supports the table top. William Burrell bought the table from John Hunt and, as part of Burrell’s gift to the City of Glasgow, it was delivered to the Art Galleries in April 1952. The question of a missing door soon arose as, although there were two openings in the cupboard, only one small linenfold door was received, wrapped separately. Hunt referred to this as a Victorian door and said the second one had always been missing in the table’s recent history. Frank Surgey, who had retired from the antique business and moved to Bow, near Crediton, Devon, was commissioned to find a skilled carver who could make a new door. By August it was decided to order two doors and Andrew Hannah, Keeper of the Burrell Collection, wrote to Burrell notifying him that the existing replacement door, with measurements and photographs, had been sent to Surgey (GMA.2013.1.2.12.162).

In a series of letters from late 1953 to 1954 (GMA.2013.1.2.9.259, 267, 269, 270), Surgey explained to Hannah why it had taken so long to find suitable oak, writing ‘... A table top & then an early chest lid were tried but when carved the wood was found to be bleached & light on the surface only & a dark brown colour was exposed. A beam from a late 13th century building I am restoring is now being used & appears to

be satisfactory.’ He described this further: ‘... it was not easy to find someone able & willing to undertake the work ... The oak used was older than the table but when opened up & finally treated with chemicals to secure the surface & tone required this old oak has a tendency to crack – the cracks could have been dowelled & closed with glue but I thought they might enhance the general effect.’

When the doors arrived in Glasgow, Hannah wrote immediately: ‘The linenfold oak panels arrived today, and look to be fine colour and very close to the originals in carving.’ The table was in store out at King’s Park, and Hannah was delayed in going there, writing a few weeks later that ‘I have now had the opportunity to try out the linenfold doors and find them admirable in fit, style, and colour. Some very slight modifications will be required, but I may leave these until I can show you the job as it stands.’ There is no further correspondence.

The revised view, based on the letters, is that both doors were made in 1953–1954 from an oak beam from a late thirteenth-century building, perhaps in Devon.

With grateful thanks to Fiona Cairns for access to the letters.

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² Thanks to Charles Tracy and Chris Pickvance for their comments.