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### The James II Bed and the Rural Industries Bureau

#### Abstract

Knole in Kent holds a collection of important and often unique pieces of furniture either commissioned by members of the Sackville family or acquired as perquisites to senior courtiers. The James II bed is one of these important pieces, commissioned by James II for Whitehall Palace only 3 months before the King was exiled to France and it must have been virtually untouched when it came to Knole in 1694. The exquisite bed is richly carved and gilded with fine hangings of blue-green Genoa velvet trimmed with lavish russet and cream trimmings, en-suite with two armchairs and six matching stools.

The bed has undergone many repairs in its 300 years from housekeepers and members of the family to ultimately the Rural Industries Bureau (RIB) in the 1960s. However, over the intervening years the adhesive used by the RIB to “conserve” the textiles was brittle, hard and discoloured. The original water gilding had been painted over, and carvings had been reworked. On taking down the bed it was found that the structure of the bed and the tester had been changed, and frame and spacers no longer in the correct configuration. By the time the Textile Conservation studio and Tankerdale came together to work on this bed in early 2000s it was in dire need of conservation. This talk will discuss the issues surrounding the 1959–60 RIB interventions, in terms of reconfiguring the bed on its recent installation back in the property as well as the cross disciplinary team work between furniture and textiles whether on site or in the studio.

#### Keywords

State bed, upholstery, alterations, historic repair, adhesive, archives, James II



Fig. 1. Overall of bed

The James II bed and its accompanying furniture is an outstanding set of surviving late Stuart upholstered furniture. Knole House, National Trust, is very fortunate to have this bed amongst others in an unrivalled collection of early English furniture.<sup>1</sup>

1. Geoffrey Beard, *Upholsterers and Interior Furnishing in England 1530-1840*, Yale University Press New Haven and London, 1997.

Background

Knole has been the Sackville family home for over 400 years (fig. 2). Much of the collection there today was acquired from Whitehall Palace by Charles, 6th Earl of Dorset (1638 – 1706) in 1695, when he was Lord Chamberlain to William & Mary (1689-97). Royal furniture obtained as a 'perquisite' of public office has furnished the state rooms at Knole since 1701, and the James II bed and attendant seat furniture are listed in the 1706 inventory that was taken after the 6th Earl's death (fig.3).



Fig. 2. View of Knole.

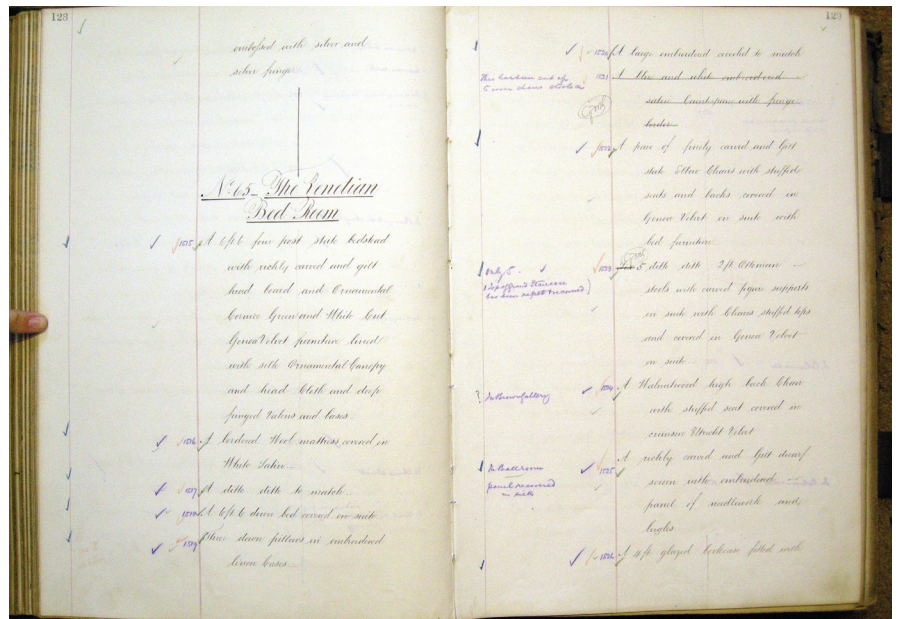


Fig. 3. 1706 inventory.



One of three state beds in the house, this bed was commissioned on 24th August 1688, three months before James fled into exile in France. The bed is believed to have been made by the joiner Thomas Roberts and upholstered by Jean Poictevin, but archival confirmation of the makers' names has not yet been found.

#### Previous interventions

Curatorial research has revealed that the room and furniture has undergone some changes since 1700, but other than evidence of repairs to the curtains in the 18th century, it seems that the redecoration, re-upholstery and re-arrangement of the furniture occurred in the latter part of the 19th century (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Chair on the brown gallery upholstered with original counterpane from James II Bed.

Vita Sackville-West, writing in 1922,<sup>2</sup> describes her own feelings about the rooms at Knole, 'It is almost a relief to go from here (that is the Kings Room which she considered vulgar on account of the abundance of silver objects) to the Venetian Ambassador's Bedroom. Green and gold; Burgundian tapestry, mediaeval figures walking in a garden; a rosy Persian rug – of all rooms I never saw a room that so had over it a bloom like the bloom on a bowl of grapes and figs. I cannot keep the simile, which may convey nothing to those who have not seen the room, out of my mind. Greens and pinks originally bright, now dusted and tarnished over. It is a very grave, stately room, rather melancholy in spite of its stateliness. It seems to miss its inhabitants more than do any of the other rooms.....'

When Knole came to the Trust in 1946, it encouraged the Sackville family to apply for a £1,000 grant from English Heritage to carry out urgent repairs to the bed. This grant funded the treatment by the Rural Industries Bureau in the 1950s-1960s.

2. Sackville-West, V, *Knole and the Sackvilles* First published by Ernest Benn Ltd, 1922 and The National Trust, 1991.

### The Rural Industries Bureau

This organisation, now part of Natural England, was set up to promote jobs and communities in rural England after the war. In 1956 a training scheme was started at the request of the Historic Buildings Council of The Ministry of Works for the maintenance and restoration of chattels of historic importance. The Bureau carried out extensive work at Knole as witnessed by invoices and correspondence in the archive.

In the case of the bed, they replaced carved losses (figs. 5 and 6), re-gilded and repainted certain elements, altered the configuration/construction of the bed frame (especially the tester rail), and repaired the textiles. Unfortunately the methods and materials that were used did not stand the test of time, and only 10 years later during a survey, the textiles were described as very fragile, dry and brittle.



Fig. 5. Cornice during RIB treatment.



Fig. 6. Cornice after RIB treatment.



The RIB had replaced original silk with synthetic fabrics, introduced very coarse threads for the couching stitching, and applied a significant amount of adhesive (fig. 7). The adhesive, identified as gutta percha (chemically similar to natural rubber), had discoloured to an unsightly dark brown colour, oxidised and become hard, and was failing, putting strain on the surrounding fabric (fig. 8). Tests showed that it could only be softened with dichloromethane and then rinsed through with warm de-natured alcohol (methylated spirits), and this required extraction equipment. The likely treatment costs were escalating, and there was discussion about how the bed should be displayed following treatment, in order to extend the period before any subsequent re-treatments might become necessary.



Fig. 7. Introduction of synthetic fabrics and coarse stitching by RIB on foot curtain.



Fig. 8. Adhesive hardened and brown on headcloth.

### Treatments from 2002 to date

In 2002 the National Trust's Textile Conservation Studio relocated to new premises on the Blickling estate. The studio was fitted out with all the "mod-cons", including specialist fume extraction equipment.

In 2004 funds were made available for the pilot project to treat the first set of curtains (that had been removed from display 17 years earlier) (fig. 9). This involved adhesive removal, specialised wet cleaning and support of the textiles with sympathetically dyed conservation fabrics.



Fig. 9. Adhesive removal on the curtains.



Fig. 10. Removing the headboard in 2009.



In March 2006, following collapse of part of the upper outer foot valance, most of the hanging textiles were removed, packed and put into store.

In 2009, the headcloth, headboard, and four carved and gilded feet were also removed (fig. 10). The headboard and one of the feet were sent to Tankerdale Ltd. for analysis of the gilded surfaces, and to clean and treat the gilded elements.

The rest of the bed was dismantled in 2016. Whilst the RIB's tester and frame went through the door of the Venetian Ambassadors Room in one piece (easily identified as their work, because they signed and dated the various components), it would not fit through the door into the Brown Gallery, the way out of the house. Therefore the tester first had to be separated into its two component parts (upper/inner and lower/outer tiers), by removing the brackets/corbels (that connect the two tiers of this tester). Everything was then packed into purpose-made, lightweight polycarbonate boxes for transport to the relevant conservation studios.

### Conservation of the curtains

The Textile Studio started work on the four curtains following the successful trial and conservation of the cantonnières and headcloth. The components with combined wood, gilded and textile elements could not be treated in the same manner as these could not be separated. Here is where the collaboration started. One example of this was the treatment of the headboard.

### Headboard

The headboard comprises a shaped flat base of wooden boards, covered in silk, with applied carvings and mouldings, some covered with fabric, others water-gilded, further embellished with cream and russet trimmings (fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Headboard before conservation.

The headboard was in a poor condition, with a lot of visible staining from the RIB's adhesive (fig. 12). The embroidery had lost a lot of ground silk and there were areas of missing velvet. There were three velvet patches adhered near the centre, on top of the embroidery for no apparent reason. All the fabrics and trimmings were extremely dusty (fig. 13).



Fig. 12. Areas of missing velvet and silk ground.



Fig. 13. Velvet adhered patches.

#### Treatment - gilding

Treatment of the headboard started at Tankerdale Ltd. in May 2009. 90% of the original water gilding survived, with later oil gilding restricted to areas that retained very little water gilding beneath, suggesting that the oil gilding had been applied only to badly damaged areas. Analysis confirmed that the red paint (vermillion) inside the crown was part of the original scheme. Following cleaning trials and approval of the cleaned samples, all of the gilding was cleaned and then consolidated with hot rabbit skin size (fig. 14). Areas of later oil-gilding were removed with a dichloromethane gel (there was no gesso beneath the oil-gilding – only white paint). Small losses of carving were re-carved to match, and the missing cross on top of the monde was re-carved to match the original detailing of the crown, and then water-gilded to match (fig. 15).





Fig. 14. Trial cleaning of gilding.



Fig. 15. After cleaning, treatment and new cross on top of the monde.

#### Treatment – textiles

The trimmings were removed, surface cleaned and sewn to a dyed cotton tape, and the loose tassels were re-strung where necessary because treating whilst still on the headboard proved more damaging (fig. 16).

The silk along the lower edge of the headboard, below the scrolled design had split along both edges. This was supported onto a dyed silk backing and protected with dyed net, with a length of new woven silk<sup>3</sup> along the bottom edge to enable it to be tacked back in place (fig. 17).

Rusty drawing pins that had formerly been used to hold the silk along the lower edges were removed and replaced with stainless steel staples.

3. This new silk, a pattern made from fragments and the selvedge found on the headcloth, was commissioned in 2005 from Whitchurch Silk Mill. This was also used to replace the synthetic curtain linings, swags of the headcloth and parts of the inner tester.



Fig. 16. Supporting trimmings to new dyed cotton tape.



Fig. 17. Spit silk after conservation.

The adhered velvet patches on the embroidery were removed with the aid of a spatula. Poultice tests were carried out on the embroidery to see if the darkened adhesive could be removed or lightened, but to no effect. It was felt that it would be safer to leave the remaining adhesive in place, and disguise its appearance with the addition of the net layer.

A glass bristle brush was used on the bare areas of wood, where the velvet was entirely lost, to reduce the adhesive before infilling with acrylic paint (fig. 18). A cross hatch pattern was worked over the wood to replicate the weave of the velvet. (fig. 19) Following discussions with Tankerdale Ltd. about suitable adhesives, loose areas of velvet were re-adhered with bookbinders' starch paste.

The net overlay was applied over the embroidered flat areas only. The idea of printing onto the net with fabric paints and the use of digital printing onto net to enhance the design were also explored, but neither method provided the visual improvement that we were hoping for, so it was overlaid with plain dyed green net as used elsewhere on the bed.

Tankerdale Ltd. then came to the textile studio to re-attach the trimmings (fig. 20).





Fig. 18. Areas of bare wood before treatment.



Fig. 19. Areas of bare wood after filling with acrylic paint.

### Trial assembly

Following treatment of the various elements at both studios, a trial assembly of the entire bed was undertaken at the Textile Studio in May 2018 (fig. 21). This was partly to assess what additional elements were required (to replace inappropriate alterations by the RIB), and partly to ensure that it could be safely assembled afterwards in the Venetian Ambassador's Bedroom at Knole, where there is minimal clearance between the top of the bed and the ceiling.

The RIB's alterations had increased both the height and the weight of the bed, making it rather top-heavy (fig. 22). Following this trial assembly, including improvisation with a yoghurt pot, Tankerdale Ltd made a new beech cornice rail and octagonal beech spacers to replace the RIB's frame; (fig. 24) stainless steel corner brackets to hold the foot cornice mitre joints





Fig. 20. John attaching trimmings.



Fig. 21. Bed trial at studio.



Fig. 22. Alterations by RIB.





Fig. 23. New beech rail and octagonal spacers to replace RIB frame.



Fig. 24. RIB curtain hanging technique.

together; supplied stainless steel screws to fit the cornice to the new beech frame; made 3 new rods to hang the cantonnieres; and curtain/cantonnierre rod hanging brackets to fit the top of each bed post.

The curtains had originally hung on curtain rods, but the cantonnieres had been hung from rings on 3 screws/pins knocked into pieces of wood. The yoghurt pot became a metal hanging bracket that fitted over the top of each of the bed posts. Each of these had separate hooks from which to hang the curtains (at the bottom) and the cantonnieres (at the top). A hook on the outside allowed for one of the rings to be attached where the cantonnierre wrapped around the post (fig. 25).



Fig. 25. New curtain hanging technique.



Fig. 26. Installing the bed at Knoke.

The bed was finally installed in the Venetian Ambassador's Bedroom in October 2018 (figs. 26 - 28).

### Conclusion

This complex project has involved wide consultation, investigation and documentation, with recent access to previously unavailable inventories. Time and effort has been devoted to fundraising and visitor engagement, as well as the actual conservation treatments. Those involved have maintained energy and enthusiasm throughout – and thanks are due to all members of the team.





Fig. 27. Detail of bed after conservation.



Fig. 28. After conservation and installation.

### Acknowledgements

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### Biographies

John Hartley ACR jointly founded a partnership with Hugh Routh ACR in April 1977 which was to become Tankerdale Ltd in the 1990s. The business concentrates on conservation treatments to furniture, frames and wooden objects. With a staff of six, the treatments include structural issues and work to decorative surfaces. Collection condition surveys are also undertaken, and John is also the National Adviser on the Conservation of Furniture and Frames to the National Trust. Other clients include heritage institutions, ecclesiastical bodies, university colleges and private individuals. Former assessor and now Icon PACR Accreditation Committee member.

Claire Golbourn ACR, BSc, completed her degree in Restoration and Conservation in 1999 at the former London Guildhall University. She worked as preventive conservator for Historic Royal Palace at Hampton Court before joining the National Trust in 2000. Claire has been senior conservator at the Textile Conservation Studio since 2006. She became an Accredited Conservator in 2014. She has managed a number of large studio-based conservation projects, besides participating in on-site teams. She is an accredited member of the Institute of Conservation and has been treasurer for the Textile Group.

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