

A good night's sleep for a royal visitor

by Sophie Clubb

A star exhibit of the Brecon Gallery in y Gaer is the Elizabethan carved bed, in which, it is popularly believed, Charles I spent the night during his visit to



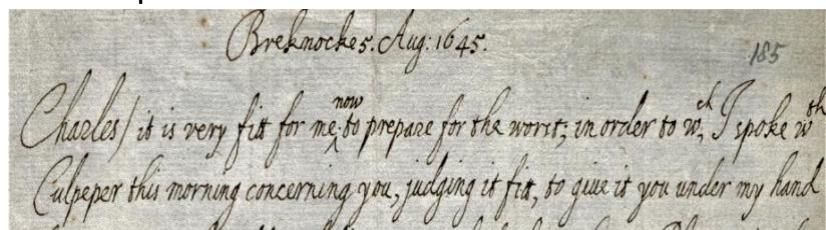
The bed in the Brecon Gallery at y Gaer, photo by Mike Williams

Brecon in August 1645. Recently conserved, it provides a link to the web of fact and folklore which surrounds the King's short visit, the context of which is more comprehensively explored in E.G. Parry's article, 'Charles I in South Wales', published in the 1996-1997 volume of *Brycheiniog*. While the facts around Charles' visit are thin, it is the folklore which makes the story

so fascinating. Should we add the bed to these legends? Or is there more compelling evidence that Charles slept in it?

The Visit to Brecon

The facts about Charles' visit to Brecon are recorded briefly in a journal of his movements during the Civil War called the *Iter Carolinum: being a succinct relation of the necessitated marches, retreats, and sufferings, of His Majesty Charles the I from January 10, 1641, till the time of his death 1648*. We know that he travelled to Brecon on 5 August 1645 from Llancaiach Fawr, near Nelson in the Rhymney Valley. In Brecon he dined with the Governor, Sir Herbert Price and stayed at his home, the Priory House, in a room which is now part of the Diocesan offices. It is presumed that the bed he used is the one given to the Brecknock Museum by the Marquess Camden in the 1930s. There is also a chair housed in the Brecon Cathedral Heritage Centre which purports to have been used by the King. During that night, Charles wrote a letter to his teenage son, the future Charles II,



Extract from letter written by Charles I to his son British Library

instructing him to flee to France, should he find himself in danger from the 'rebel army.' The following day he left for Gwernyfed.

The Context

By the summer of 1645, the King was in desperate straits. Historians tend to agree that his loss of the Battle of Naseby in February 1645 had effectively cost him the First Civil War. But he spent the next 3 years touring the country, trying to drum up support and hoping for help from Scotland and Ireland, this



Copy of a painting of *Charles I leaving the Priory, Brecon* by Sam Garratt, Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery

prior to his complete defeat in the Second Civil War of 1648, which of course led to his eventual execution. Before arriving in Brecon his journey had taken him to see the Earl of Worcester at Raglan Castle and Sir William Morgan at Tredegar House, near Newport, who both remained loyal. Cardiff

had already turned against him though and Colonel Pritchard at Llancaiach Fawr pitched in with the Parliamentarians soon after his visit. Even his short stay in Brecon was ultimately unprofitable, since by the Autumn of 1645 the town was in the hands of the Parliamentary forces.

The Bed and its Provenance

The bed is highly decorated - bedrooms were not the private places they are today and beds were furniture that was designed to be seen. Known as a 'standing bed' it has an elaborately carved panel at the head which supports a 'tester' or canopy. At the foot, there are two decorated columns of a mixed-up classical style, broken halfway with a large feature called a 'melon bulb'. This is decorated with distinctive teardrop-like carving called 'gadrooning' around the top and acanthus leaves around the lower two thirds. The bulb has a heavy appearance and dates the bed quite closely to the late 16th century, where it was seen on beds and tables in particular. By the mid 17th century, such decoration would have become much lighter.

The bed is described in *Welsh Furniture 1250-1950, Vol. 1*, by Richard J. Bebb, as typical of the period 1570 to 1600 and some of the carving may tie it more

closely to the 1590s. The Museum catalogue gives an origin of Gloucestershire, although a local antiques specialist, Thane Meldrum, does not think there is clear evidence for this since there were workshops producing work of a similar style over a far wider area of the Welsh borders at that time.



Photograph of the bed taken in the garden of an unknown house. Could this be Dinas, the home of Sir John Lloyd?

There was some entertainment included for Charles in the form of

the bed head which is also heavily carved but with some lightness of subject matter. It is framed with two Romanesque arched panels – a very common design. A female figure, who appears to have a tightly laced bodice of the period, stands between the two arches and two male figures stand at the other side of each panel. They are in contemporary Elizabethan dress with large ruffs and long hair. Some charming images of long-beaked birds appear in the arched panels. On the left a lone bird pecks around on what could be reeds, and on the right, two birds stand beak to beak. This imagery could represent many things, but is perhaps likely to symbolise love or fertility. If Charles had found trouble sleeping (as well he might have done, given the situation) he could have stared up at the tester which is panelled with lozenges, palm fronds and roundel patterns, of the sort seen on other furniture of the time, especially chests.

We know from the Museum records that the bed was repaired or reconstructed around 1880 with new parts added, but these are clearly identifiable and certainly the bulk of the bed is original.



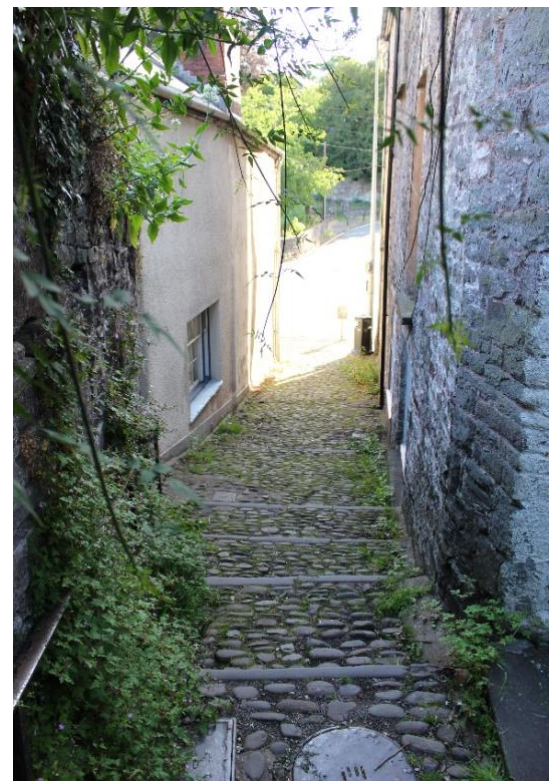
Patterned underside of the bed's tester or canopy

Is it reasonable to link the bed with the history of Priory House? We know that it was the 4th Marquess Camden who gave the bed to the Brecknock Museum in the 1930s and, from Tony Bell's 2006 *Brycheiniog* article, we can trace the ownership of Priory House from Sir Herbert Price, who entertained King Charles, down through the Jeffreys family, until a marriage brought the house to the Camdens in the mid 18th century. Although the house was let for much of the time, it remained in Camden ownership until it was sold to the Maybery family in 1915. While one can imagine successive tenants being prepared to take on such an interesting bed, it surely must have been moved elsewhere after the sale. Intriguingly the Museum holds a number of fine glass negatives showing the bed displayed on the lawn of a building which does not seem to be Priory House. A suggested location is Dinas, the home of Sir John Lloyd (now demolished) but readers may be able to propose others.

Myth and Legend

Several legends and traditions are attached to the King's stay in Brecon. He is said to have hidden in a small cave in the Priory Groves at some point. This is perhaps easy to dismiss, since if he had supper and a bed lined up at the Priory House, it seems most unlikely he would have been skulking around in the woods! Another fascinating story appears in Parry's article, related to him by owners of The Neuadd, a farm in Cantref parish, about a King who had stopped there many years ago to drink a glass of milk. This seems very romantic, but it did strike Parry that there may be a grain of truth in it, since the farm lies on a route Charles and his entourage could have taken from Llancaiach Fawr over the Beacons. Lastly, when Charles left the Priory on 6 August, he is said to have made his way up King Street (or the King Charles Steps as they are now known). Since he was on his way to Hay, it may seem strange that he did not go up the Struet, but perhaps he continued on from the Steps over the Slwch and onto the Hay road.

It is not surprising that a mythology surrounds Charles I. After his execution his supporters sought with some success, to turn him into an icon and a martyr. A notable publication of 1649, said to have been written by Charles



King Street with the King Charles Steps today.

himself (unlikely) was the *Eikon Basilike*, which emphasised his deep religious faith and closeness to his people. In 1660 he was canonised by the Church of England by direction of Charles II and churches at Tunbridge Wells and Falmouth are dedicated to him. The many portraits of Charles, a result of his patronage of painters such as Van Dyck, added to the mystique. The fleeting



King Charles I after Anthony van Dyck, 1636

glimpses of him in the mid 1640s as he travelled hither and thither, trying to hold onto his kingdom were ripe for myth and legend to develop and it was inevitable that people and places wanted a strong link to this heady combination of celebrity, struggle and untimely death. Having an item of furniture linked to Charles would have been an attractive notion.

What evidence do we have that it was the bed? Monarchs would usually have travelled with some furniture, including their own bed. Charles would still have had a sizable entourage of troops and baggage with him. Perhaps his court was now more streamlined. It is also recorded in the *Iter Carolinum* that he had lost his baggage train along with infantry and guns at Naseby – perhaps this included his bed? The bed is also of the right style and period, although it was rather old by 1645, and it is reasonable to accept that for much of its history it was in the Priory house and we know that this is where he stayed.

Conclusion

We will never know for certain, of course, whether Charles slept in the bed and it is difficult to reconstruct what happened from the facts available. Ultimately, perhaps it does not matter whether we can provide conclusive proof. The bed remains a tangible link for Brecon to the momentous events of the mid 17th century and to the King's visit and, as such, it is an important and evocative exhibit, as well as being a fine example of late 16th century furniture from the Welsh borders.