

The Wardrobe of Adam and Eve

An elaborately decorated example of domestic furniture is to be found at Cotehele in Cornwall (260), where it was believed in the late 20th century to have been the tester for the carved bedstead of Sir Rhys ap Thomas (see 276), a story given credence by the marriage in 1530 of Sir Piers Edgcombe of Cotehele (whose father had fought with Sir Rhys at Bosworth) to Catherine the widow of Rhys's son Sir Gruffydd ap Rhys.¹⁹⁸ The reverse, however, has grooves and mortises cut in positions that show it to have been the front of a cupboard, having a central door with a lock between two panels at both the top and bottom, two drawers between and panels on each end. The carved panels are all original with only minor repairs, although the drawer fronts have been replaced by reduced sections with enriched parchemin decoration (a simple type of linenfold) of similar period. The framework is also original, with the abrupt ending of the figures on the stiles showing that these continued downward to form legs, but it is not possible

to tell exactly how the sides were laid out or whether the panels were carved. Shallow grooves on the reverse of the stiles indicate that the cupboard was assembled from green timber (see 119). At over 6ft tall, items placed on the top would have been out of reach and for display and there might once have been a canopied top section comparable to that on the Raglan cupboard or a more elaborate example of c1500 from Plougrescant in northern Brittany, which was 6ft 1ins to the display board and 8ft 10ins overall.¹⁹⁹ The quality of the joinery was outstanding, and included true-mitred joints, which were not general until the second half of the 16th century although they were in use in the Low Countries c1500. On this basis, and with the presence of drawers, the piece is unlikely to date from before the first quarter of the 16th century, but the narrative nature of the carving could hardly be much later and the strong religious imagery is likely to be pre-Reformation.

260a
The Newcourt Cupboard front,
oak.
Golden Valley, Herefordshire,
c1515-30.
Formerly known as the
'Cotehele panel'.





260b
Cupboard panel.

On the lower door Adam and Eve were shown being driven from the Garden of Eden by the archangel Michael bearing a sword, flanked by panels telling the story of St George and the Dragon. This was a familiar heroic theme throughout Europe, forcibly portraying the triumph of good over evil and the authority of the Christian faith. It was often incorporated into church decoration, for example being painted on the screen at Newtown. The story involved a dragon who had been besieging the heathen city of Silene in North Africa, and was about to devour the princess. St George wounded the dragon and instructed her to lead it into the city, and after the king converted he had it slain. The similarity of some of the features to those found elsewhere and in other media, such as the faces looking out of the windows, raises the possibility that the compositions were based on woodcut illustrations. The upper door showed the royal shield, with Tudor roses alongside and supported by a lion and talbot, representing the arms of Henry VIII. The quarters were reversed from their normal rendering at this period with the three lions in the first and third, and the fleur-de-lys in the second and fourth. The Welsh gentry strongly identified with the Tudors, under whom they prospered. To one side were the emblems of the Passion in a shield supported by angels; to the other a scene showing gentlemen or musicians playing the harp and *crwth*, which had been the only instruments

261
Ceramic floor tile.
Neath Abbey, Glamorgan,
c1340.



used to accompany the poets of the courts and thus became the recognized devices of the bardic circuit (260b). The *crwth* was a specifically Welsh instrument in this period, which was referred to by the 15th century poet Gruffudd ap Dafydd ap Hywel who wrote that 'from the sycamore melodious music is obtained'.²⁰⁰ In front of the harp there was a tuning key, a valued article specified in the Medieval Laws. The early-Tudor costumes represented current Continental styles (which did not though become general in England until the second half of the 16th century) and featured the distinctive tall 'sugar loaf' hats favoured at all social levels in Burgundy from the late 15th century, with the addition of impressive feathers.²⁰¹ Each panel was framed by beaded ropework, a popular motif on both French and Burgundian woodwork. The delicate and intricate carving on the fixed panels was pierced through and laid on to boards in the manner of church screenwork.

The framework had carving by the same craftsman but in a lower (bas) relief, of necessity done after the cupboard was assembled. It mixed scenes of falconry and the chase, with various huntsmen, hawks, dogs and prey crowding every space in a largely asymmetrical but balanced arrangement. This was a popular subject, and a similar design was used on a 14th century ceramic floor tile from Neath Abbey (261). The lower figures held longbows and might have represented soldiers rather than huntsmen. In the top left was a dramatic doom figure brandishing an arrow, together with a horse bearing an oak bough with acorns (representing rebirth) and a pelican (symbolizing piety as well as renewal). In the centre between the drawers was a prominent double-headed bird – perhaps an eagle – and, with the possible exception of the birds above the royal arms and the horse with a bough, this was probably the only element that could be heraldic. It was, however, often used to signify the unity of elements and had a number of meanings, including the twin supreme powers – temporal and spiritual – and the Holy Spirit. There might formerly have been carving that related to the owner on the original drawer fronts or on a canopy.

An almost incidental feature of the decoration, forming the background to the upper right and lower panels, was a variant of the water-plant which was shown rising from distinctly comma-shaped seeds or roots. The design incorporated tiny flowers of very distinctive appearance, with four small petals and large round centres, which in this context should perhaps be termed water-flowers. Small flowers were standard embellishments on Gothic decoration and often appeared at the intersections and terminals of tracery designs (see 194). Within Wales they put in an early appearance on the St Davids throne, and the four-petalled type were particularly popular in Breconshire and Monmouthshire in the 15th century. They were very evident around the Black Mountains in important locations such as the priories at Abergavenny and Brecon, as well as many of the smaller churches. The precise form varied, and could occasionally vary on a

single bench end, but many of the examples in this area were identical to those on the cupboard. Usually referred to generically as roses they were in other cases called the passion flower, which had a large centre and is said to have grown where Christ was crucified. In this locality they might have equally been inspired by the golden Welsh poppy (*Meconopsis cambrica*) which flourishes in the south-east. The way they were painted might have distinguished them, and original colouring at Abergavenny Church shows the way they might have been picked out from the surrounding background. By the early 16th century such flower heads had become incorporated into the more specifically Welsh designs, and were found in profusion on several of the finest screens including Patrisio and on remnants such as those at Abergavenny where, like the cupboard, they were in both cases incorporated into an intricate water-plant pattern (262, 263).

The other element that may be expected to be seen reflected in church woodwork was the form taken by the dragon. These frequently appeared at the end of trails, such as those found at both Patrisio and Abergavenny, and that on the latter in particular was very similar. Like those on the cupboard, they typically also had a serpent's head on the ends of their intertwining tails. A larger three-dimensional example on a stall end at Abergavenny, unfortunately with a replaced head and tail, had the same distinctive small folded downward-pointing wings. Two late 15th century misericords at this church may also be relevant, one having a grotesque monster with webbed feet comparable to those on the Cotehele dragon, and another having folded feathers like those found on the plumage of St George's horse.

Human figures rarely appear on surviving ecclesiastical woodwork, and the closest parallel to the individuals on the cupboard with their long fingers and distinctive facial features occurred on the remnants of an idiosyncratic screen at Llanfair Waterdine Church, on the Shropshire border, which was timber-built at the period (264). A decorative but obscure inscription carved on one section was emphasized by a pointed finger, a device used in medieval manuscripts to draw attention to important details which was also found on the cupboard. It has been translated as 'Sir Matthew and Meyrick Pitchgar of Clun set it up for ten pounds', with the former identified as Mathew ap Ieuan, chaplain between 1485 and 1500.²⁰² A bearded figure on an upright might have shown one of these patrons, with a female in a long dress perhaps representing his wife and the project possibly intended as a memorial. Another rail had a minute dragon with a serpent on his tail similar to those on the bottom panels of the cupboard. On a further rail was a row of animals including a stag, hare, and two types of hound in precisely the form found on the cupboard, and other figures and creatures interspersed in the foliage show that further narrative scenes once existed. A more lively rendering of the hunting theme can be seen on a massive chimney beam at Lower Spoad nearby, which



262 (above right)
Screen detail, oak.
Patrisio Church, Breconshire,
late 15th – early 16th century
(see 207).



263 (centre right)
Screen detail, oak.
Abergavenny Church,
Monmouthshire,
late 15th – early 16th century.



264a & b (below right)
Screen remnants, oak.
Llanfair Waterdine Church,
Shropshire, c1485-1500.





265 (above)
Fireplace beam, oak.
Lower Spoad, Clun, Shropshire.
Tree-ring dated to 1546.

266 (centre)
Fireplace beam, oak.
Llanllugan, Montgomeryshire,
late 15th – early 16th century.

267 (bottom)
Frieze, oak.
Pentrehobyn, nr Mold, Flintshire,
16th century.

has been tree-ring dated to 1546 (265).²⁰³ Literally straddling Offa's Dyke, this was a good quality 15th or early 16th century cruck-framed storeyed hall-house; nothing is known about the original owners of this high-status dwelling although the population of the district was largely Welsh, and by 1600 it was owned by Morrice James who was referred to in documents as a gentleman. The beam has been likened to a Romanesque lintel or tympanum because of the symmetrical but pre-Renaissance arrangement of the animals.²⁰⁴ With two types of hound closing in on a stag and hind, the design showed the preoccupation with this subject among the nobility and gentry, and both covert hounds and greyhounds had been specified

in the Medieval Laws. The hind on the beam and the stag on the cupboard were pierced through the stomach from below with an arrow, an ancient practice which was outlawed by the Normans. Although the animals were more deeply carved and detailed than on the cupboard frame, they were still in bas-relief and, together with the plain background, this may indicate that the beam was originally painted. This would have allowed more detail, and it might have formed part of a larger decorative scheme, which included the well-moulded ceiling beams and post-and-panel partition. Comparable carved beams were found to the north in the Severn valley, and in Llanllugan (Monts) farther west a dramatic example was built into a half-timbered



hall-house which featured a jettied dais canopy (266). Such examples were precursors of the elaborately carved chimneypieces of the ensuing period. A similar subject was also found on a ceiling frieze to the north (267).

It is extremely rare to find lettering on early woodwork, and that on the cupboard is of particularly high quality. The roman form of the individual letters has been found on 6th century memorials in Wales and was closely similar to an inscription of comparable size of the motto of a French nobleman who was Bishop of Lausanne between 1473 and 1517.²⁰⁵ The Cotehele example was first brought to public attention in a letter to *Country Life* in 1950, when it was suggested to be either Cornish, Welsh, 'corrupt Hebrew' or a cryptogram that was incapable of being deciphered. The archaeologist Wilfred J Hemp, former Secretary to the RCAHMW, subsequently transcribed it as: 'KYFFARWTH. AIGWNA. HARRY AP: GR' and gave the translation: 'An expert was Harry ap Griffith who wrought this'.²⁰⁶ This remained the accepted interpretation and with a desire for pieces marked by carpenters it is tempting to acquiesce. However, craftsmen and artists at this date were not expected to sign their work, and such a prominent position in a scroll across the front must have referred to the patron. The crowded letters with their lack of correct spacing and the abrupt (though conventional) abbreviation of 'Gruffudd' were intended for maximum visual impact in a form whose meaning would have been readily apparent at the time, and it should probably be read as, '[A] craftsman makes it [for] Harry ap Gr[uffudd].' The term *cyfarwydd* can mean (as an adjective) skilled or experienced, or (as a noun) a storyteller or craftsman. Literally it translates as 'one who is familiar with', with the verb *cyfarwyddo* being 'to guide', 'to direct', or 'to share with others'. The essence of the narrative tradition was that the attention of the observer was pointed toward certain features, as opposed to the perfection and realism sought by later periods, which was intentionally devoid of meaning. As can be seen in the church screenwork, the carpenters themselves could deservedly be considered storytellers on occasion. Below the right hand end of the scroll a figure with a full beard and rope or purse around the waist appears to hold a large horn above his head. Although perhaps forming part of the hunting theme, he may have been intended as a bard or herald proclaiming the inscription. In effect, both carpenter and poet were telling the story. The top of an apparently identical figure possibly holding a staff, appeared below, and on the lower left another bearded figure was shown holding either a bow or staff.

Harri ap Gruffudd

The connection through marriage between the Edgembes and the son of Sir Rhys ap Thomas has always led to the assumption that the cupboard arrived in Cornwall in 1530, when the bride brought all of the 'household stuff' and plate left by her late husband, and that it was originally from south-west Wales. But searches for a likely owner in that area have proved fruitless, and there are no exact parallels in the recorded woodwork. The marriage therefore could be a red herring and a later Piers Edgcombe might have acquired it in the late 18th century as part of his antiquarian collecting, conscious perhaps of his remote Welsh connections. This is undoubtedly how he built up his collection of great turned chairs, an interest shared with Walpole who apparently referred to the cupboard itself when in 1777 he wrote of the house, and asked, 'Is not the old wardrobe still there? There is one from the time of Cain, but Adam's breeches and Eve's under-petticoat were eaten by a goat in the ark.'²⁰⁷

Although both Harri and Gruffudd were common names, only one individual with the patronymic form found on the cupboard has been identified from any part of Wales. A certain Harri Ddu ap Gruffudd of Cwrt Mawr in Euas was acclaimed by his close friend Guto'r Glyn, one of the leading bards of the late 15th century, who described himself as 'a craftsman of the praise-*cywydd*'.²⁰⁸ The poet extolled the attributes of Harri which included, besides those of being a worthy patron and protector, the virtues of physical prowess, bravery in battle, hospitality, learning and noble descent.

Euas had been a tribal division within Gwent, and under the Normans became the Marcher lordships of Ewyas Harold to the east and Ewyas Lacy to the west. The most westerly strip is in what became Monmouthshire, with the remaining part, known as the Golden Valley, in Herefordshire. At this period it was a thriving area and, like most of the present border region, was Welsh in character, home to a number of the leading native gentry and an important centre of bardic activity. Praise-poems by Guto'r Glyn placed Harri firmly in this area and traced his descent from heroic and locally important individuals. His ancestor, Moreiddig Fychan ap Moreiddig Warwyn, had settled in the Golden Valley in the early 12th century and, according to later genealogies, married the widow of the lord of Ewyas Lacy.²⁰⁹ Through him, the family claimed both Irish and Welsh royal descent, and these connections linked them to the Vaughans of Bredwardine, Tretower, and Hergest. The relationship was not merely historical, for Sir Roger Vaughan of Bredwardine fought at Agincourt in 1415 with Harri's uncle John ap Harri, himself an important figure who had been Sheriff in 1399. Harri was also a prominent soldier, and introduced Guto'r Glyn to the Duke of



268 (above left)
Ceiling beams, oak.
Craswall Church, Monnow valley
Herefordshire,
late 15th – early 16th century.



269a (centre left)
Reading desk and bench, oak.
Bacton Church, Golden Valley,
Herefordshire,
late 15th – early 16th century.

269b (below right)
Reading desk panel.

York, commander of the English forces in France, who in 1440 was raising troops in Gwent. On the Continent they would have fought alongside Sir William ap Thomas of Raglan and his son Sir William Herbert, both of whom were to become patrons of this poet. Harri continued his military career at home and in 1461 fought at Mortimer's Cross, a decisive battle in the Wars of the Roses, which saw the elevation to the peerage of Sir William Herbert. According to Guto'r Glyn, Harri was 'a true son of stallions and arms' who was expert with both 'red-hot spear' and bow. In his elegy, produced sometime before his own death around 1493, the bard proclaimed that 'the world is dangerous without Harri ... the black-grey lion' and the loss was 'a life blow throughout Gwent' as well as 'the county of Hereford, Clifford and Clas'.

Harri's grandfather, Harri ap John, is known from genealogies as being of 'Old Court', a house that has been identified as a 14th century three-unit cruck-framed hall-house subsequently enlarged and remodelled in the 16th century. Harri's father, Gruffudd ap Harri, built a 'New Court' close by early in the 15th century and Harri, who had married the heiress of Trostre, Usk (Mons), was to inherit both houses. According to the poet, 'Cwrt Newydd [New Court] was always open to us' and Harri 'knows better

how to pour wine / Than the King's men', among the varied drinks at his table being rumney, a sweet wine from Greece. Harri was literate, possibly something of a poet himself, and 'there was no more able linguist'. He played his part as patron:

He knows eloquence ...

He deserves poetry ...

Hiring for festivals ...

Such a generous stag ...

Although this is all typically eulogic, Guto'r Glyn was a renowned poet who visited many of the leading noblemen and clerics throughout Wales, and it is certain that Harri ap Gruffudd was himself an important individual within his area.

A number of the features of the cupboard have parallels in locations that are in or close to the present border region, and further confirmation that it probably originated in this area can be found within Ewas itself. The extent of new building in the district at this period is evidenced by surviving houses and churches with fine internal timberwork, which included painted partitions and ceilings, dais canopies, as well as carved fireplace beams and doorheads (268). The 'court of Ewas' kept by Harri was in the parish of Bacton and the church, although re-built in the 19th century, retained late 15th century reading desks which appear to be the work of the same craftsmen who were employed in local houses, including Old Court (269). The construction and design of the panelled fronts was similar to the domestic screens, with moulded frames that had stop-chamfers on the uprights, which compared to the local beams and joists, as well as to the Monmouth cradle. The tracery heads varied, with corner spandrels of flowers and acorns, which again compared to the cradle. As at Abergavenny, there were unusual flower-heads combined with a swirl, as well as a prolific use of the four-petalled flower identical to those found on the cupboard. The desks were commissioned by the family at Newcourt, since in the corner of an extra large panel, presumably the front of the seat of a leading individual, was found their coat of arms: a fess between three lozenges (269b). A mile or so up the hill is St Margaret's Church, whose elaborate screen was festooned with long strips incorporating the

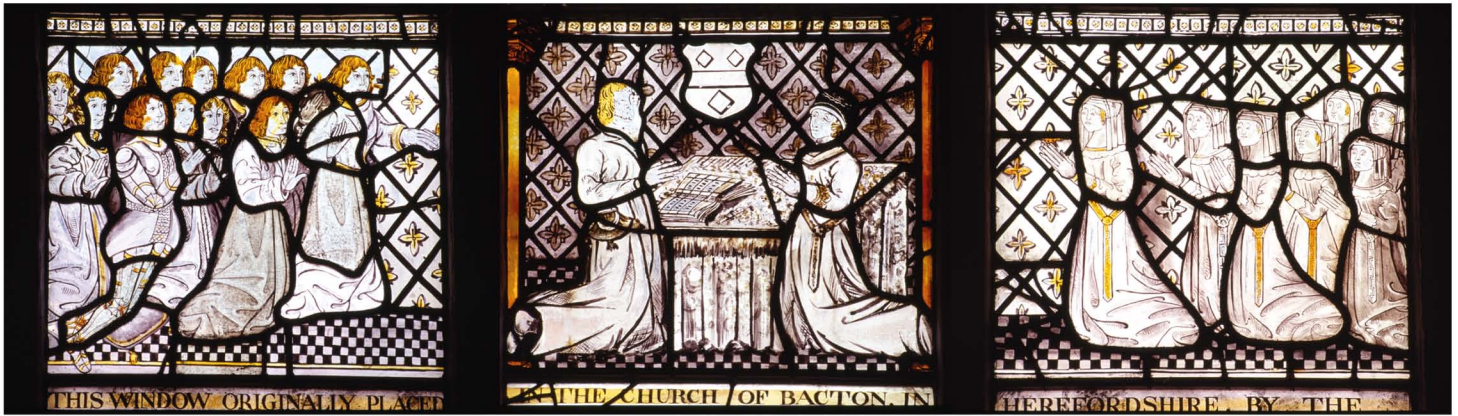




tiny four-petaled flower (270). Both church and screen were very much in a Welsh building and carpentry tradition, and a length of oak from the roof bore the carved inscription ‘*Karka Dy Ddiwedd 1574*’ (Prepare for thy end). Although in the county of Herefordshire since the Acts of Union, the churches in Ewias were part of the diocese of St Davids until 1849.

From the various sources it can be seen that Harri ap Gruffudd of Newcourt was the likely candidate for the name on the ‘Cotehele’ cupboard. He was a soldier who mixed with some of the leading figures of the day. He lived in a newly built hall of some importance in a prime position in the prosperous Golden Valley, in which his family had been prominent for centuries. This was, moreover, an area that was Welsh in culture as indicated by the level of bardic patronage in which he himself was prominent. Lastly, closely similar carving was to be found in the immediate district, with others at a radius of about 25 miles. The status achieved by Harri is shown by the marriage of his eldest son Miles ap Harri to Jane (or Joan), daughter of Sir Henry Stradling of St Donats. Sir Henry was one of the leading officials in south Wales, and his wife Elizabeth was the daughter of Sir William ap Thomas of Raglan and Gwladws, daughter of Sir Dafydd Gam. Elizabeth’s brothers were Sir William Herbert of Raglan and Sir Richard Herbert, and her half-brothers were Watkin Vaughan of Bredwardine, Sir Thomas ap Roger of Hergest and Sir Roger Vaughan of Tretower. Miles died in 1488, apparently shortly after his father, and his surviving will showed that besides extensive estates he left money to Bacton Church and silver plate for his daughter’s marriage.²¹⁰ His heir, Henry Miles ap Harri, erected an elaborate Renaissance-style stained glass window as a memorial in the local church, and was himself a distinguished figure (271). Connected through his mother to the Stradlings, Herberts and Vaughans he would have maintained an impressive household at Newcourt. His daughter, Blanche Parry, rose to become chief gentlewoman and Keeper of the Jewels to Elizabeth I, after being introduced to Court in 1536 by her kinswoman ‘lady Herbert of Troy’. Other members of the family also prospered, with Stephen Parry, who acquired estates at the Dissolution, becoming Sheriff in 1546 and James Parry Master of the Queen’s Hounds. When Thomas ap Harri of Oldcourt died in 1522 he was commemorated with a marble slab that depicted him in full armour with his wife in fashionable dress, both similar to the apparel on the cupboard. Guto’r Glyn had ended his elegy to Harri with the prayer that his progeny would flourish, and this was certainly the case. Since the cupboard carried the prominent affirmation of loyalty to the Crown in the form of the coat of arms of Henry VIII which, although he was crowned in 1509, was not used until c1515, it was presumably commissioned sometime between that year and the Reformation of the 1530s to commemorate the renowned forebear who built the estates and gave the family the name of Parry.

270a, b & c (far left)
Screen, with details, oak.
St Margaret’s Church,
Golden Valley, Herefordshire,
late 15th – early 16th century.



271 (above)
Memorial window detail.
Formerly at Bacton Church,
Golden Valley, Herefordshire,
c1500.

The carving on the cupboard took up many of the themes found in the praise-poems and in particular in the powerful elegy, and was a pictorial celebration of the achievements of Harri ap Gruffudd. Hailed as 'the stag of Cwrt Newydd', he was said to be a soldier, brave in battle and expert in handling weapons, who was the protector of the region. He was also a courtier, literate, expert at hunting, generous in hospitality and a patron of the traditional arts. The memorial element is evident in the prominence given to the overtly religious tales in the lower panels as well as the emblems of the Passion in the top left panel. The macabre doom figure on the top left was a reminder of death, which was also found on medieval wall paintings in nearby Abbey Dore and Patrisio Church. On the cupboard it held an arrow and, although a familiar addition, this may have been a reference to the way that Harri met his end: according to the poet, 'a great arrow shot my eagle'. This line could account for the double-headed bird in the centre, although, if this particular feature is heraldic, it might have shown a connection to the Bluets (the original 12th century lords of Raglan) and would have been a badge they shared with the Herberts, the most powerful family in the region and with whom they were closely connected in this period (see 315).²¹¹ As a memorial, the cupboard might have originally been placed in the parish church or Abbey Dore, a few miles downstream, which contained stone monuments with the family's arms. It is conceivable – but perhaps fanciful – that the tall figure towards the bottom of the left stile was intended as Harri, and that on the right as Guto'r Glyn who was among those poets who favoured carpentry metaphors; the figures below might have represented the same individuals at a later stage of life.

The 'craftsman or storyteller' who made the cupboard at Newcourt was a skilled artist and aware of current Continental furniture designs. Depending on the length of his working life either he or a master or apprentice was also responsible for the screen of c1500 at Llanfair Waterdine and the chimney beam of c1546 at Lower Spoad. He worked within a wider regional tradition, and carving showing certain similarities was found in further locations (272). He was a particularly gifted individual, and probably travelled around to important commissions over a wide area, following the

practice of the bards. Poets such as Guto'r Glyn travelled continuously and extensively and their routes often took them to houses beyond the present border that were great centres of learning. In his carving of the cupboard the carpenter brought together the traditional motifs of the Passion, contemporary local patterns of intertwining water-plant and the latest fashions in clothing. Trained in the medieval narrative tradition, he combined familiar religious themes with episodes relating to the life of his subject, and paralleled the tributes to Harri ap Gruffudd that had been produced in verse and song.



272 (below right)
Bench end, oak.
Ludlow Church, Shropshire,
c1500.