

History of the Combe St. Nicholas Gothic Bench

As late as the mid-19th Century the Green Dragon held a Gothic Bench or Settle. The following is a history of the Settle written by Mrs Dorothy Jones who has researched several aspects of the history of Combe St. Nicholas:

In his article entitled 'Wall Seats and Settles of the Sixteenth Century' in 'The Connoisseur' magazine of 1948 pp16-21, Murray Adams-Acton describes this artefact as a settle, which is qualified in Chinnery's Oak Furniture as a communal seat with back and arms, so for my purposes I propose to follow suit.

The settle first came to my notice in an article in The Times of Thursday 30 July 1914, accessed via The Times Digital Archive, entitled 'New Exhibits at the Victoria and Albert Museum'. It refers to the loan by Mr F. Harris Mitchell, of Chard, of 'the famous Gothic bench, for many years in the Green Dragon Inn at Combe St Nicholas ...'

It appears that the settle was one of the best known specimens of old English furniture of the pre-Reformation period, and was exhibited in the Department of Woodwork in Room 21, near the Exhibition-road entrance to the Museum, adjacent to an oak Gothic window-frame from Hadleigh, Essex, presented to the Museum by Mr A.H. Fass.

Following enquiries to the V & A in November 2006 I was advised by the Curator of the Furniture, Textiles & Fashion Department that the settle is not part of their collection, but was exhibited at the Museum from about 1914-1921, according to an annotation in one of their records.

The Curator also provided some very useful references to pursue for illustrations: Parker's Domestic Architecture in England (1859), which illustration was reproduced in Victor Chinnery's 'Oak Furniture. The British Tradition' (Woodbridge, 1979), p.235; and The Connoisseur, March 1948, in an article by Adams-Acton, which showed its physical deterioration [p17, Fig. IV].

According to an annotation by one of the Curator's predecessors in their copy of Fred Roe's Old Oak Furniture (1908), the settle was removed sometime after 1905 to Seaforth Lodge, Seaton, Devon by F.N. Mitchell (apparently a dealer); sold after 1921 to the Marquis of Granby and taken to Haddon Hall, Derbyshire, where it was restored during the 1920s by the 9th Duke of Rutland, Lord Granby's father. The Curator advised that Haddon Hall is open to the public and it is possible the settle remains there, although not mentioned in any of the literature on the house held in the Museum's records.

Enquiries to Haddon Hall presented problems: the Head Steward reported back that their records made no mention of the transaction. However, upon receipt of a copy of the illustration from The Connoisseur, they were able to identify the settle - standing on the access to the Minstrels' Gallery, an area not open to the public.



The Steward has very kindly provided dimensions:

To its back the bench is 62 inches (158 cm) high, and is 142 inches (361 cm) wide. The seat is 23½ inches (60 cm) high and 16½ (42 cm) deep. The bench ends are 50 inches (127 cm) high – left, and 60 inches (152 cm) high – right. The left hand bench end is hinged inwards on what appear to be the original hinges. The Hammer beam part has been cut off at 80 inches.

From photographs taken by the Steward it is apparent that the settle was undoubtedly the work of a master craftsman: the carving, particularly in the spandrel of the hammer beam and the linenfold panels along the back, is exquisite. Sadly, the cresting that would have spanned the spaces between the finials along the back was already missing from the

earliest-known images [the water-colour painting by W.W. Wheatley, 1849, and the wood engraving from Parker's Domestic Architecture in England, 1859], so it is difficult to envisage the magnificence of the finished artefact. However, there are images in Chinnery's book that suggest cresting with fine tracery would have been in keeping.

The hammer beam at the left end of the settle probably served a part-structural function in its original placement, but no such function is revealed in the early illustrations showing the relatively low ceiling of The Green Dragon. The armorial shield with figure holding a small animal appears to have been an appendage, hung to cover the sawn-off end of the beam.

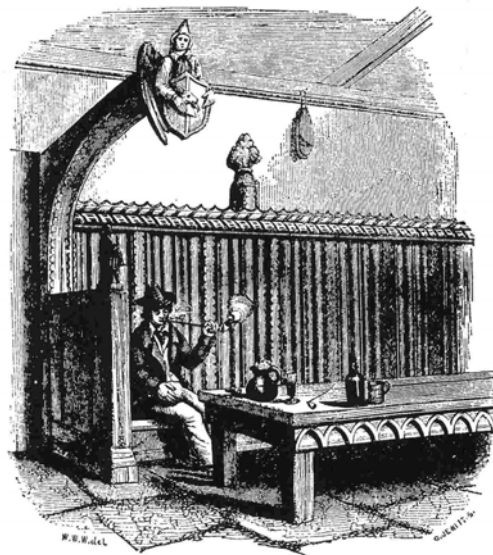


(A print showing a bench is shown. This was taken from a photocopy supplied by Anne Hunt. It was published in the Parish in Pictures in 2000 and this described the picture as a watercolour by W.W. Wheatley, 1849, showing the interior of the Green Dragon before it was renovated (1880s). This is probably held by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.)

The following is an extract from 'Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England from Richard II to Henry VIII' Part II (1859) p339 15th Century. Author: PARKER, John Henry.

'At COOMBE ST. NICHOLAS is an old house, now the Green Dragon public-house, which is partly of the time of Hen. VIII; and in the present kitchen, which seems to have been part of the old hall, is the original settle and apparently a table of that period.'

There is a footnote stating see page 112 for an engraving of this settle, which appears in the previous volume - Part I - and is reproduced here:



This woodcut illustration also depicts a fine table with carving, but it is worthy of note that in the water-colour painting the table appears to have been fashioned from rough-hewn timber.

The photograph of the settle was taken at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire. Their website can be visited at www.haddonhall.co.uk.