The Carpet of Arms

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In 1903, the English periodical, Country Life, published an article on Chawton House in Hampshire, then the seat of Mr. M. G. Knight. It described the Tudor manor house, whose great charm was (in those days) that it had suffered "no restoration by Wyatt or his followers, and no improvement by Kent or Brown." In the library hung an armorial tapestry, and the family preserved a memorandum, dated 1662, reading, "Remember to keep safe ye Carpet of Armes, now aged about 100 yeares, wch in ye failure of the elder house totall consuming itselfe by daughters and heires[ses] and passing into other names, was sent thither by Constance Glemham of Trotton, who was one of those heiress[ses], for record to the younger house and whole name." The handwriting of this somewhat incoherent statement has been identified as that of Sir John Lewknor, K. B., of West Dean in Sussex, then (in 1662) thirty-nine years old; his "carpet of arms" (Figure 3) is now in the Metropolitan Museum, acquired by means of the Fletcher Fund in 1958.

Many old English families possess heirlooms, often believed to have been brought home by a crusader or given to the house by a reigning monarch, but human memory is notoriously unreliable and all too frequently such treasured objects are found to be of a totally different date and provenance from those assigned to them by their inheritors. Information provided by the object itself, especially inscriptions, dates, and coats of arms, and documentary evidence of unimpeachable antiquity, referring unmistakably to the object in question, are the only solid proofs of age and history. It is rare indeed to find a work of decorative art, four hundred years old, whose history can be followed from the time of its creation down to the present day. Thanks to its coats of arms, its inscribed date, and Sir John's useful memorandum, this claim can be sustained for the Lewknor table carpet.

It is tapestry-woven of wool, with details in silk and silver thread, sixteen feet four inches long and seven feet six inches high, with approximately twenty-three warp threads to an inch. The ground is dark blue, thickly covered with scrolling blue-green leaves of rose, lily, and honeysuckle, with their flowers in now-subdued yellows and pinks. A shallow hillock in the lower center is dotted with plants of cowslips, daisies, hearts-ease, and strawberries. On this stand two plump fair-haired youths, each grasping ribbons that support a coat of arms in a wreath of leaves and fruit. Two other shields, within wreaths of acanthus and olive, flank the central motif. The ground of the border is pale yellow, almost concealed by masses of dull-toned fruit, leaves, and flowers; spaced along it are smaller coats of arms, arranged so that, when the carpet was laid on a table with the border falling over the edges, the shields would all be right way up. In the lower right-hand corner is a panel, inscribed A.D. [Anno Domini] 1564.

The outstanding characteristics of the piece as a whole are the extreme skill of the design, every curving stem and leaf and flower falling beautifully and effortlessly into its place, and the harmony of the coloring, now somewhat faded, as can be seen from the greater brilliance of the reverse, but still eminently satisfying. The technique is most competent, with as many warps to the inch as in some of the best Gobelins; hatching is used for shading in flowers and fruit,
and minute slits mark the contours in the flesh areas. Designer and weaver, or weavers, were masters of their crafts.

The heraldy of the carpet has been exhaustively studied by Mr. Fane Lambarde in the Sussex Archaeological Collections. The central, most important shield shows the arms—three silver chevrons on a blue field—of Sir Roger Lewknor (about 1465–1543) on the dexter side, the spectator’s left, and those of his third wife, Elizabeth Messant, on the sinister. In the border immediately below is Lewknor alone, and opposite, on the upper border, Lewknor and Messant again; to right and left in the center and all round the border are arms of couples, two of them of Sir Roger with his first and second wives, the others those of his ancestors or relations. The bearers of the arms are all known, though their exact connections with the Lewknor family have not been discovered in every case. They have

sonorous Norman names: Camoys, Cantelupe, La Warre, Moyne, D'Oyley, Audley, and Tuchet, all great South and West Country families, some of them linked with the history of England. Eleanor Camoys, for example, a grandmother of Sir Roger, whose arms appear in the right-hand border, was the daughter of Thomas Camoys, Knight of the Garter and commander of the left wing at Agincourt in 1415, who married Harry Hotspur’s widow. Her family’s gold, on a chief gules 3 bezants (three coins on a red band at the top of a gold shield) is seen again on the masculine (dexter) side of the large shield on the right, impaling Despencer, a connection that the Lewknors were evidently proud of. The other equally emphasized alliance, probably even more prized, being placed on the dexter side, is that shown on the other large shield, of Sir Roger’s Lewknor great-great-great-grandfather with, not his wife, but his mother-in-law, Margaret Tregoze. A name that rings more familiarly than these is Dalingridge, indicated by a red cross on a silver ground in the left-hand border. One of Sir Roger Lewknor’s great-grandmothers was Philippa Dalingridge, who brought into the family the castle of Bodiam in Sussex, now a ruin, but still a fairy-tale place within its wide moat. Kipling took this good Sussex name for the old knight in Puck of Pook’s Hill, spelling it Dalyngridge, and so made it famous in lands the Normans never heard of.

The tapestry, then, was intended to honor Sir Roger Lewknor and his last wife, but, as indicated by the date 1564, it was not made until twenty-one years after his death in 1543. Did his widow order it, or was it an act of filial piety on the part of his youngest daughter, the Constance Glemham of the 1662 memorandum? She was twenty-three when the carpet was made and at that time was probably already married to her first husband, Thomas Foster of Newnham in Worcestershire; her second husband was Edward Glemham and she died at the age of ninety-three in 1634. The “elder house” had then indeed been “totalie” consumed, for Sir Roger Lewknor had had no son and the head of the family was Constance’s second cousin twice removed, the Sir John who wrote the memorandum. He was a boy of eleven when his distant relative died;
one can imagine him as deeply impressed when this woven proof of his family's ancient lineage was brought to its new home.

But the "younger house" itself did not last long; Sir John Lewknor's son John died childless in 1706 and his inheritance passed to a second cousin, Elizabeth Martin. She fell heir also to Chawton House on the death of another cousin, Sir Richard Knight. When she died in 1737, she left her property to yet another cousin, who, born Thomas Brodnax, had inherited one fortune on condition of taking the name of May; now he came into one more on condition of taking the name of Knight. He sold West Dean and the other Lewknor property in Sussex and contented himself with two houses, an Elizabethan one in Kent called Godmersham Park, which he transformed into a Georgian mansion on inheriting his first fortune, the other, Chawton House, which he left as it was. The now-ancient tapestry, commemorating a long-extinct family, was certainly more appropriately placed in the latter house and here it remained for the next two hundred and twenty-one years. A photograph of 1945 shows it hanging in the library at the east end of the south wing; there is a window to the right of it, and the tapestry is indeed more faded on that side, where the sunlight may have fallen on it, decade after decade.

The names "Chawton," "Godmersham," and "Knight" sound familiar in conjunction; this is because Thomas Knight was generous to his cousin, the Rev. George Austen, father of the famous novelist, giving him a living at Steventon near Basingstoke and later adopting his third son, Edward. Edward, when he had come into his inheritance and taken the name of Knight, was kind to his widowed mother and his unmarried sisters, giving them the choice of a cottage near Godmersham or one at Chawton; they

2. Detail of the Lewknor table carpet
3. The Lewknor table carpet. Probably made in Flanders, perhaps after an English design. Dated 1564. Tapestry-woven of wool, with details in silk and silver-gilt thread. 7 feet 6 inches x 16 feet 4 inches. Fletcher Fund, 59.33
chose the latter and here *Mansfield Park, Emma,* and *Persuasion* were written. Chawton House is thought to be the original of "Donwell Abbey" and Godmersham of "Mansfield Park." Though the Knights were seldom at Chawton House, preferring the more modern Godmersham Park, Jane Austen must have known the Lewknor tapestry. It does not seem likely that she would have admired it. "Sliding panels and tapestry... exhibiting figures as large as life" were among the "horrors" that Henry Tiley promised Catherine Morland would be found at his home, though, when she reached Northanger Abbey, she discovered that her apartment "contained neither tapestry nor velvet." In fact, its walls were papered and "the air of the room altogether far from uncheerful," a type of interior decoration clearly preferred by the author, although disappointing to the heroine.

But, with all this information about the Lewknor tapestry, it is still not possible to say where it was made. When first published, it was considered to be of English manufacture; its date, 1564, is just late enough to enable it to be attributed to the tapestry workshops set up by William Sheldon, a rich landowner of Warwickshire and Worcestershire. In his will of 1570, he wrote of his concern with the art of making tapestry and mentioned Richard Heeks (usually spelled Hyckes), "the only author and beginner of this Art within this realm." In a codicil, Sheldon added that he had placed Hyckes in his "mansion house of Barcheston," rent free, so that he could make "tapestrye, arras, moccadoes, carolles, plometts, grosgraynes, sayes and sarges."

"Arras" and "tapestry," at this date, were not synonyms; "arras" was the equivalent of "tapestry" today, but "tapestry" was a cheaper fabric. The poet George Herbert, in 1633, could write, "I care not though the cloth of state should be/ Not of rich arras, but mean tapestrie." All the other stuffs made at Barcheston, except for saye, which was a fine serge cloth, were, as far as they can be identified, coarse and inexpensive fabrics,
probably of wool. Sheldon went on to say that he wanted his son Rauf (Ralph) to continue the arrangement, “so that the said Richard Heeks (as my special hope and trust he will) do continue the exercising of the said trade to so good purpose as he hath begun.”

Sheldon had acquired his manor of Barcheston in 1561 and there is a record of Hyckes’s being paid “for hangings made for Mr. Talbot of his armes, and a covering of the same work for the new plor [parlor]” in 1568. It has been mentioned that Constance Lewknor’s first husband was a Worcestershire man, and she had a cousin who married a nephew of Sheldon’s. Most of the known Sheldon tapestries have been found in the neighborhood of Barcheston, which is near the border of Warwickshire and Worcestershire, so what could be more probable than that Constance, or her mother, would have given this important commission to the newly-established local industry?

Unfortunately, the style and technique of the Lewknor tapestry do not agree with those of the known Sheldon products (see Figure 4). It is true that these are all much later in date, the earliest being a series of maps of about 1588, and the majority of them dating from just before the turn of the century down to 1611. The Metropolitan Museum owns several typical examples, all cushion covers, and all probably made after 1600. They have a naïve charm, but the crude design and workmanship are very far from the assurance and competence of the Lewknor tapestry. The same flowers and fruit appear, notably heartsease, roses, and honeysuckle, but how differently portrayed! It is not, of course, completely impossible that Richard Hyckes, in one of his earliest works, produced something of much finer technical quality than he and his assistants were ever to achieve later, but it seems most unlikely that a brilliant designer made a cartoon for him once and never again.

It was not true that Hyckes was the first tapestry-maker in England, as Sheldon wrote. There had certainly been medieval workshops, and, in the mid-sixteenth century, refugees from religious persecution in the Netherlands set up others in several parts of England; the only objects they are known to have made are cushion covers, and none of these have been found. The lists of royal arras-workers for this period also contain many Flemish names, but these craftsmen were primarily repairers.

It was, however, quite usual in sixteenth-century England to have tapestries made to order in the Low Countries; the most famous instance is the commission given to Frans Spierincx of Delft to weave the series commemorating the defeat of the Spanish armada in 1588 that was destroyed when the old Houses of Parliament were burned down in 1834. Throughout the sixteenth century, in fact, the tapestry-makers of the Low Countries, especially those of Tournai and Brussels, were at the height of their fame and filled many orders for distant clients, such as the Medici in Florence, whose arms appear on a Tournai verdure tapestry in the Cleveland Museum of Art. A tapestry table cover of the second half of the sixteenth century, owned by the London Merchant Taylors’ Company since 1616 or 1618, has the mark of a Brussels weaver, and a number of English armorial tapestries of this period are now usually thought to be of Continental workmanship.

Of these, the one most closely related to the Lewknor carpet is in the Burrell Collection in the Glasgow Art Gallery (see Figure 5). It is mentioned in the will of Dame Margaret Luttrell, who died in 1580, and shows her arms and those of her husband, Sir Andrew Luttrell of Dunster in Somerset. The tapestry is believed to have been made during his lifetime, though certainly later than the date of his marriage in 1514, when he was still a minor, and presumably not before he came into his estate in 1521. If it was actually made before his death in 1538, it could not have been a product of Sheldon’s looms. But, as has been shown, the Lewknor tapestry is dated twenty-one years after the death of the bearer of its chief coat of arms; if the date had not been inscribed on it, the piece would certainly have been attributed to a period before Sir Roger’s death in 1543. Could not Dame Luttrell also have commissioned a memorial to her husband? The tapestry is not mentioned in his will. She is described by Sir H. C. Maxwell Lyte, who analyzed the heraldry of the Luttrell tapestry in his History of Dunster (London, 1909), as a powerful personage with a considerable jointure; not long before her death, she threatened to disin-
herit her grandson, making him "a poor gentleman," and Lyte believes she may have commissioned the famous picture of her son John, rising nude from the waves, by Hans Eworth of Antwerp.

The general arrangement of the two carpets, Lewknor and Luttrell, is very similar, three large coats of arms within wreaths on a central field, with smaller shields placed all round on a wide border. The presence of these smaller shields constitutes the most marked resemblance between the two pieces. It is a rather uncommon arrangement in tapestry, but it does appear on a table carpet made at Wolfenbüttel by a weaver from Brussels, dated 1608, formerly in the Berlin Schlossmuseum, and on a round table carpet dated 1586, formerly at Schloss Aschaffenburg and believed to have been made by Flemings working in Germany. It is seen on English embroidered table covers, such as the Bletso carpet in the Victoria and Albert Museum, made about 1600. The shields usually show the alliances of the family for whom the piece was made.

One coat is shown on both the Luttrell and Lewknor tapestries, the gules, a fret gold (a gold interlace on red) of the great Somerset house of Audley. No close relationship is involved; an Eleanor Audley was Sir Roger Lewknor's first wife, while a Margaret Audley was one of Sir Andrew Luttrell's great-grandmothers. But the link shows at least that the two families came from the same social stratum; Dame Lewknor and Dame Luttrell could have been acquainted.

The geometric design of the Luttrell tapestry is quite unrelated to the Lewknor pattern and the workmanship is slightly coarser. The drawing of the flowers, however, especially the lilies, is as beautiful, and, in some cases, very similar. There is nevertheless another striking difference between the two pieces. The Luttrell interlaced background is carefully designed, and so is each individual coat of arms, but there is no consistency in the shapes of the shields, nor in their positions in relation to each other and to the pattern of the central field. Even the two shields that flank the central one are unlike, and the wreaths that encircle them are quite different. The shields in the border are of several shapes and unsymmetrically placed. In the background, the honeysuckles and daisies that appear in the

5. Detail of the Luttrell table carpet. Probably made in Flanders, first half of the xvi century. Tapestry-woven of wool, silk, and silver-gilt thread. The Burrell Collection, Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum
centers of the interlaces are perfectly adapted to the spaces they fill, but the Tudor roses, with which they alternate, are not. It is easy to imagine that the workshop was using old cartoons for the interlacing pattern and the border, and fitting in, perhaps as the weaving progressed, a set of designs for the shields and the Tudor roses.

Characteristic of the Lewknor tapestry, on the other hand, is, as has been said, the harmony of the overall design, except perhaps for the rather curiously placed panel with the date. Here the weavers certainly had a complete cartoon to work from, with the date possibly added as an afterthought. The designer used, for the most part, the standard repertoire of tapestry motifs of his day. Two nude boys holding a shield are seen on a northern French tapestry of the first half of the sixteenth century in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, but more frequently such supporters are winged, especially on German examples. They usually hold a wreath that encircles the main coat of arms. Even more often, the wreaths and shields stand alone on a verdure ground; Flemish, German, and French examples are known, and the motif was copied by English embroiderers. One instance is a Flemish tapestry of the second quarter of the sixteenth century in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which has three shields within wreaths on this ground. The arms here are those of the Giovio family of Como in Italy, so that this tapestry is another example of a foreign commission. On this piece, as on many others, appear the little lion-masks seen at the corners of the inner border of the Lewknor


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tapestries. The pattern of the narrow borders, and the massed flowers and fruit of the wide border are frequently found, as is the hillock with its tufts of flowering plants; the latter is seen on the Merchant Taylors' carpet already mentioned. Sixteenth century tapestry workshops anywhere in Europe were usually staffed by Flemings, who used the designs with which they were familiar, though the quality of the work frequently deteriorated when the makers were far from home.

The fineness of the design and of the weaving of the Lewknor tapestry suggests that it was made in a first-class shop, presumably in Flanders.

But one feature of the Lewknor tapestry is almost unique, the curving stems of the lilies, roses, and honeysuckles of the background. The standard verdure shows strictly vertical plants; even the richest of them, the armorial tapestries with the arms of Charles V, made by Willem de Pannemaker in Brussels in 1540 and now in the Austrian State Collection, have their great shield-bearing eagles spread on a ground that might be a hedgerow, a dense mass of flowers and leaves and fruit portrayed as if springing up in a natural profusion from the lower borders of the tapestries. To find a parallel in tapestry for the graceful scrolling stems of the Lewknor foliage is not easy. One late Sheldon cushion cover reproduces the scheme feebly, on a small scale; bold, coarse flowers twist across the ground of an armorial tapestry, now in Breslau, made in Brig, in Germany, by a Brussels weaver about 1570; and more elegant, though somewhat rigid, curling floral sprays fill the ground of another German tapestry table cover, made at Wolfenbüttel in 1610, and now in the Brussels Musées Royaux.

But the scheme is common in another group of textiles: English embroideries of the second half of the sixteenth century, such as the Bletsoe carpet mentioned above, and a coverlet, of which a detail is illustrated in Figure 6, in the collection of Irwin Untermyer; it is, in fact, their most distinctive feature, not found in contemporary Continental embroideries. Such delicate and sensitive flowery circlings as extend so gracefully into every available space on the Lewknor tapestry can only be paralleled on these English embroideries. It is conceivable that the whole design was put on paper in England, as the blazons of the coats of arms must have been, though not necessarily by an Englishman; even the figures would not have been beyond the capability of the artist who was responsible for the shield-holding boys of the carved stone frontispiece of Montacute, made about 1540, or too difficult for Hans Eworth, who painted a nude goddess in the portrait of John Luttrell, already mentioned, which is dated 1550. The Lewknor border of fruit and flowers is purely Flemish, but English art of this period was under strong Flemish influence and an amalgam of the two styles is a common occurrence.

If a flight of fancy may be permitted, some such scene as the following can be imagined. Dame Lewknor (or her daughter Constance) visits her friend Dame Luttrell, now a widow, and admires the great carpet that has been made overseas and now so nobly honors the memory of Sir Andrew and his family. She thinks of her dead husband and her lack of sons, and determines to perpetuate the Lewknor name in the same way. But Lady Luttrell does not like the way the shields, the only really important things, have been handled; she sent accurate drawings, of course, and the blazons are correct, but naturally she expected the workshop to make the shapes conform and to space them correctly. Workmen are so outrageously lazy and careless nowadays and she couldn't have been more put out when the carpet arrived with the shields copied all too literally and inserted just as the silly weavers pleased. And how they mishandled our loyal Tudor roses, jamming them in, every which way! Lady Lewknor decides she will do better. The design she will procure will be not only good heraldry, but perfect as a whole and in all its details; the tapestry shop has but to copy it exactly.

"The iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy," wrote Sir Thomas Browne at about the same moment that Sir John Lewknor was recording the importance of his "carpet of arms." Bodiam Castle is a ruin and Chawton now famous only for its connection with Jane Austen, but, three thousand miles away and four hundred years after it was woven, Sir Andrew Lewknor's azure, 3 chevrons silver on his carpet of arms is kept safe forever in the Metropolitan Museum.
REFERENCES
