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Fit for a queen

Arundel Castle, West Sussex

A state bed commissioned to receive Queen Victoria at Arundel Castle has just undergone a transformative restoration, as Annabel Westman explains

Photographs by Paul Highnam

THE Queen has come! The Premier-Duke/Receives with joy his Sovereign Liege' announces a four-stanza poem, published in *The Illustrated London News* of December 5, 1846. It captures in rugged octosyllabic meter the excitement of Queen Victoria's arrival for a three-day visit to Arundel Castle in West Sussex on a cold, but sunny winter's afternoon. The town was out in force to watch the monarch and her consort, Prince Albert, pass by in their royal carriage, through a huge and gas-illuminated evergreen arch over the lodge gate. There to greet them was Henry Charles, 13th Duke of Norfolk and his wife, Charlotte, daughter of the Marquess of Stafford, the richest man in England. They had been given two years notice of the proposed visit and no expense had been spared in providing for the royal party's comfort and entertainment.

The royal couple was conducted through the grand entrance hall to the library, a magnificent Gothic room created from the former Elizabethan long gallery by the 11th Duke in 1801 and specially refurbished for the occasion. Here, the Queen briefly addressed the assembled guests before retiring—according to a report in the *The Morning Advertiser*—to an 'elegant suite of rooms selected for their exclusive use'. First impressions of the visit were sadly not recorded in the Queen's journal, but this omission was more than compensated by no fewer than 23 regional and London newspapers that chronicled in detail the royal itinerary and the 'gorgeous—

Fig 1 top: A portrait of the Young Victoria hangs opposite the bed. Fig 2 right: The restored bed. It occupies a room of similar proportions to the lost royal bedchamber





Fig 3: The bed is sumptuously ornamented, as this detail of the gilded footboard and post shows, with the cabinetmaker and upholsterer working closely together

magnificence' of the interior. In particular, *The Illustrated London News* included a detailed description and engraving of the 'royal state bed', which has played a crucial role in the recent restoration project.

The company responsible for furnishing the six-room royal apartment and main reception areas, including the Great Drawing Room, Dining Room and Library, was G. Morant & Sons of No 91, New Bond Street, London. This prestigious firm, established by George Morant in 1790 and boasting an impressive clientele, received the Royal Appointment early in Queen Victoria's reign. At the time, it was working not only at the castle, but also supplying furnishings to Norfolk House, the Duke's London home, and the family's other nearby property in Carlton House Terrace. Morant's retirement in 1845, aged 85, and his death the following year, could have

disrupted these large commissions, but the firm seamlessly continued under his son, George John Morant, who went on to supply more furniture to Henry Fitzalan Howard, the 15th Duke, during the 1870s and 1880s.

The royal apartment created for Queen Victoria did not long survive. Morant's itemised bills are lost, but examination of the castle furnishings listed in the 1861 inventory—the earliest list of contents compiled following the premature death of the 14th Duke—suggests that several pieces which had been acquired for the royal visit of 1846 had already disappeared. Nor did the rooms themselves fare much better in physical terms, being reconfigured through the long-running restoration of the castle undertaken from the 1870s by the 15th Duke and his architect, Charles Alban Buckler. In view of these changes, the aim of the present project has

not been to restore the royal bedroom, but to re-create its sumptuous impact (**Fig 2**). This has been done using all the information known about the bed and in keeping with the current presentation of the interiors. It has also attempted to make sense of the complicated history of its 20th-century display.

During the Second World War, the castle was requisitioned and much of the collection was put in store. When it was reopened in 1947, the bed was placed in the ante-library with the few original surviving items associated with it, such as the 'carved white and gold double washstand', 'white and gold knee hole dressing table with cupboard and drawers' and 'a pair of mahogany bed steps covered with crimson velvet'. The rest of the room was then filled with other pieces of Morant furniture to create a 'Victoria' grouping of objects. It was probably also at this time that several other items of unrelated furniture—including a sofa reserved from the Norfolk House sale of 1938—were recovered to match the bed and presented with it.

This recovering work may have made use of window curtains from a later copy of the original fabric, probably re-woven in the 1870s. During the recent project, this second weaving was found with slightly different trimmings on some of the bedroom items, including the fire screens. It is possible that in 1846 not all the furnishings of the bedroom were covered as a set (although this cannot be proven). Certainly, the 1861 inventory notes a couch and two easy chairs covered with 'blue and amber silk damask' and a blue Brussels carpet. The colours matched those in the adjoining dressing room, which contained a brass bedstead with hangings of blue silk damask.

Whatever the case, the complete ensemble of furnishings as re-created in the ante-library for 1947 was photographed for the 1950s and 1965 guidebooks to the castle. This was the first time since the 1840s that the bed had received notice, despite the first guide having been printed in 1851. The bed was subsequently moved to its current location in 1987, a former guest room now called the Victoria Room (**Fig 1**), which had the neat advantage of looking similar in proportion to the interior depicted in *The Illustrated London News*. This has been dressed—as the report describes—so that 'the window-curtains correspond with the Bed' and 'the walls throughout this suite are hung with paper richly and tastefully gilt'. With nothing surviving of the latter, the repeated pattern of stencilled and gilded stylised motifs of roses, thistles and oak leaves—numbering 9,000 in total—taking inspiration from the bed decoration, has been designed and expertly applied by Hesp Jones and Co.



Fig 4 above: The pelmet of the tester with its light weight gold-coloured fringe. Note the new corner finials and central motif of the Horse of Arundel with a branch of oak in its mouth. Fig 5 below: The restored royal arms in the headboard of the bed



The wall decoration provides an excellent foil for the restored bed, now resplendent in its original colours, described in *The Illustrated London News* as 'of highly artistic design, with lavish brilliancy of decoration. It is of white and gold and richly carved throughout, surmounted by a gorgeous canopy, in the centre of which rises a dome, formed of gold-coloured satin, interlaced and looped with thick rope of gold' (**Fig 7**). It was fashioned in the 'old English' style and, with its domed, three-quarter-length tester, represents an extravagant example of what *Cassell's Household Guide* of 1869 would recommend as an 'excellent substitute for four-poster bedsteads, as they admit of curtains without entirely excluding the air'. The *Guide* later added that 'Some draperies... with the slightest addition of fringe or band of pattern of colour may be very pleasing to the eye'. Such an effect can be seen on this bed, where the upper pelmets are edged with a light-weight gold-coloured fringe (**Fig 4**), providing a contrast to the 'heavy crimson silk bullion fringe, interspersed with gold-coloured silk hangings [hangers]' on the bed base, a missing element that has been reinstated using the pelmet tassels as a basis for the design.

The attention to detail (**Fig 3**) in the creation of the bed demonstrates the outstanding craftsmanship and superb skill of both the cabinetmaker and the upholsterer working closely together. Fortunately, much of the →

original carved and gilded decoration in pine and composition has survived, albeit in a very soiled condition. These areas, applied to the off-white painted mahogany frame, have been cleaned and loose sections consolidated and repaired by Chyrowski Studio. Actual losses of decoration amounted to about 15% and were mostly from the head- and footboards, although the royal coat of arms crowning the headboard (**Fig 5**), mirrored by the ducal coat of arms at the foot 'beautifully chiselled and richly gilt' (**Fig 6**), were more or less intact. Missing sections were replaced, copying corresponding ornament, and gilded to tone in with the original finish.

Among these pieces, probably mislaid during storage, but of crucial importance to the status and symbolism of the bed and visible in *The Illustrated London News* engraving, were the two corner finials and scrolled crestings from the centre of the front and side cornices. These elements have been re-carved using the accompanying text of the newspaper report as a guide—'in the centre of the sides and front appears the Horse of Arundel, with an oak-branch in his mouth, and supported by a series of elaborate scroll-work.' This Fitzalan motif appears in several places in the castle in different media, including in the frieze of a pair of magnificent marquetry cabinets made by Morant for the Drawing Room and recently re-acquired. It's a reminder that the Duke was a descendant of the medieval Fitzalan Earls of Arundel, as well as the Howard Dukes of Norfolk, a fact he felt sufficiently strongly about to encourage his sons to change their surname to Fitzalan Howard by Royal Licence in 1842.

The bed hangings were in considerably worse condition than the frame and have been replaced by R. D. Robins Upholstery and J5

Interiors. The once-vibrant 'rich crimson and gold brocade' had faded beyond recognition, the gold-coloured silk sun-ray headcloth was hanging in shreds and a number of large decorative tassels were missing. Four colours were identified in the main fabric—a brocette—taken from a concealed section inside the dome by Humphries Weaving. The silk yarns were crimson, pink and gold and the linen thread was a purple-grape tone. Often, the linen thread, typically found in a brocette with its added weight helping to make the pattern more pronounced, is left undyed, as it is only visible from the back. However, close examination discovered that the purple had the effect of subtly tinting and 'lifting' the design and was specially dyed to match, together with the silk colours.

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In all, about 24 trials were woven by the company to ensure that the colour, weave structure and weight were evenly balanced across the leaf and scroll design. The original vertical pattern repeat (60cm/23in) was also

copied, as was the narrow width (51cm/20in), which suggested a Spitalfields manufacture. Spitalfields was renowned for its continued use of narrow looms and the Morant firm was known for its patronage.

The gold-coloured silk lining was again specially dyed and woven from an unfaded fragment, as was the glossy white satin specifically mentioned in *The Illustrated London News*: 'In the corners of the interior of the canopy, appear the letters "V.R.", in gilt carving, laid upon and relieved by white satin.' After years of light degradation, the white was barely distinguishable from the rest of the silk lining and was only used in this section. It is yet another example of the attention given to the smallest details, a factor also found in the intricate designs of the tassels, fringes and gimp trims, which have been copied by Sevinch Passementerie through Watts 1874. Only by careful analysis were the former colours deciphered, with some unexpected combinations, which is what makes such restoration projects such a thrilling adventure.

The Queen and Prince Albert made a number of regal visits during the 1840s, including to Woburn in Bedfordshire, Chatsworth in Derbyshire and Burghley in Lincolnshire, but most beds prepared for royal use were refashioned from existing frames. Arundel was exceptional, although the bed has not received the attention it deserves. Perhaps now it is once again 'unusually gorgeous and superb' (*Salisbury and Winchester Journal*) it will not be passed by again without comment. 🐉

Visit www.arundelcastle.org
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Fig 6 below: The Norfolk arms and supporters crown the footboard. Fig 7 facing page: A view up into the dome of the tester

