

## The Steyning Screen: part one

*One of the wonders of Steyning stands with pride of place in St Andrew's church, behind the altar, yet nobody knows where it came from or how it got here. This new look at the question describes first what the screen itself can tell us, before making some interesting connections next time, in part two.*

The Steyning screen is in fact a set of lavishly carved oak panels, helpfully inscribed with the date 1522. Until 1961 the screen was in the old vicarage or priory, when it was moved to the newly built vicarage nearby. It remained there until 1983, looking gloomy and out of place in its modern setting. Hopefully it has now found an appropriate home where it can be appreciated for many generations to come.

The earliest hint of the presence of the screen in Steyning is in 1781. The famous antiquarian, William Burrell of Knepp Castle commissioned the artist S. H. Grimm to visit Steyning. Grimm produced detailed ink and watercolour records of Steyning church and - a ceiling at the vicarage. Strange to say, the ceiling showed the same Tudor features as the screen, but the ceiling was lost some time later and Grimm did not record the old oak panelling. A picture in the *Sussex County Magazine* of October 1950 shows how the panels looked in the old vicarage parlour.

It might be logical to expect that the panels were designed and carved for the old vicarage in 1522, but they certainly were not. The picture shows how awkwardly they were cut and fitted. The damage is evident today. Some pieces were possibly discarded, used elsewhere or even left in an earlier setting. The quality and the subject matter hint that the panels came from a magnificent setting, vastly more affluent than Steyning in 1522. In fact the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was one of the low points of the town's prosperity. The *Victoria County History* describes it as 'largely populated by labourers' and 'much declined'. It was a century in which the church began to fall down, after which both church and vicarage needed extensive repair.

So what does the screen itself tell us about its origins? The answer is a great deal, except that reading the clues has been fraught with difficulty for many years, even centuries. Chris Tod, David Thompson, Doug Thompson and Lynda Denyer recently decided to play history detectives with the help of a new research tool - the internet.

The screen as it now appears measures about 8ft high by 14ft long. The outer frame to the left and right appears to match the main beam of the ceiling depicted by Grimm. It may even be the same piece of wood. The 47 panels show the royal arms, the lion rampant, angels, dragons, greyhounds, fleurs-de-lis, Tudor roses, thistles, the portcullis, acorns and oak leaves, and Catherine of Aragon's pomegranates and grape vines. All this and more is sufficient to justify the date which appears in abbreviated Latin lettering on one of eight carved scrolls at the top. The screen could only have come from the time of King Henry VIII and his first wife Catherine.

Another scroll shows a tiny mitre and a dolphin with the words, "The arms of Richard fitzJames late Bishop of London" in abbreviated Latin. This explains many more symbols. One panel shows Richard fitzJames' arms, which had two crosses with dolphins, and an eagle. His personal arms were impaled with those of his diocese as he progressed from Bishop of Rochester (1497) to Chichester (1504), then to London

(1506). On the screen his arms have the crossed swords of London with a bishop's mitre above, supported by figures, possibly angels. St Paul appears twice, with gospel scrolls and with a sword. Dolphins and eagles decorate several other panels.

Bishop fitzJames demolished the old bishop's palace at Fulham and rebuilt it in Tudor style, proudly displaying his arms. Had the old cathedral of St. Paul's survived, including the fitzJames tomb, it might have revealed more. FitzJames was a prolific builder. His armorial dolphins are also on display at Merton College, Oxford where he was Warden from 1482 to 1507. FitzJames escorted Catherine of Aragon in 1501 when she came to England to meet her first husband, Prince Arthur. The bishop housed her at Fulham Palace in 1506, during the miserable years after Arthur's death. Catherine's eventual marriage to King Henry in 1509 was a triumph for Bishop fitzJames. He was a formidable force, particularly in his persecution of Lollards and devotees of the Wycliffe Bible. At his death in 1522, Richard fitzJames was the last Roman Catholic bishop of London. His successor soon became embroiled in King Henry's divorce, his marriage to Anne Boleyn and the Reformation.

There are two further images which have been the main causes of confusion about the panels. The first occurs eleven times. It has been interpreted as an elaborate W (or a W with two inter-laced Ls, one as a mirror image) plus two Es (one as a mirror image), one on each side. It has long been observed that a similar image appears above a gateway at Chichester Cathedral, in Canon Lane. Doug Thompson believes he has interpreted both. The symmetric monogram on the screen consists of the letters VLE (Vero Londiniensis Episcopus or In Truth Bishop of London) interlaced with their mirror images. At Chichester the letters VCE represent Vero Cicestrensis Episcopus (In Truth Bishop of Chichester) interlaced in the same way. Heretics had long denied the authority of the bishops who persecuted them. Bishop FitzJames, like many others, emphasised his appointment by the Pope and his 'true' consecration.

The second puzzling image may also be more straightforward than it seems. It has been interpreted, unconvincingly, as an S, I and O, leading to the conclusion that the screen came from Sion Abbey. Sion or Syon certainly had charge of Steyning in 1522, but this is a false trail. The image surely displays some of the symbols of the bishop's authority. There are the vestments with the crosier and a bishop's seal in the typical almond shape, or vesica.

There are two scrolls which state in Latin, "Give glory to God who made all these things" and "The arms of St Richard one time Bishop of Chichester". This saint was possibly personal to fitzJames, his namesake. Both had been bishops of Chichester. But there are no arms of St Richard to be seen - only a tiny carved fret on his scroll. If the St Richard panel ever reached Steyning, it is now lost. Could it be that the scrolls were actually carved for Steyning, and the VLE monogram was mistaken for the arms of St Richard? If so, the monogram in Canon Lane, Chichester, may have caused the error. In *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol. 16, p. 237, Matthew Bloxham gave an account of the Steyning panels in 1863. He did not describe a St Richard panel and so by 1863 it probably wasn't there - and neither, it seems, was the Tudor ceiling.

*At Steyning Museum, David Thompson has maintained a file of information and research on the subject. An illustrated booklet of research during 1990 is available for only £1.*

*Lynda Denyer*

## The Steyning Screen – part two

*Part one described the screen in St Andrew's Church dated 1522, carved for the Bishop of London, Richard fitzJames. But how did these sumptuous oak panels come to Steyning? A new look at the question has revealed some interesting connections.*

Moving on from 1522 through 120 years of turbulent religious history, another bishop of London took refuge at the Bishop's Palace in Fulham during the Civil War. He was Bishop William Juxon. In 1649, when Cromwell's cavalry horses were stabled inside old St Paul's Cathedral, Bishop Juxon famously ministered to King Charles I on the scaffold. Juxon then retired quietly to the country. His home was at Little Compton in Gloucestershire, but much of his wealth was prudently transferred to his brother John Juxon, with whom he stayed at Albourne, West Sussex. A local story has the bishop hiding there from Cromwell's men, disguised as a bricklayer working on the chimney.

Colonel Edmund Harvey of Cromwell's cavalry moved into Fulham Palace. Yet with the triumphant return of King Charles II, the brave, faithful, gentle old Bishop Juxon, as the new king saw him, was raised to be Archbishop of Canterbury. Stained glass windows and other treasures emerged in 1660, as if by magic, to be restored to Fulham. Had Bishop Juxon also spirited away the fitzJames panels from Fulham Palace during the Civil War and left them at Albourne Place? Maybe, but Albourne was sold in 1665. Little Compton is the place associated with other family treasures. Several 'secret' valuables such as a chair, chalices and a bible said to have belonged to King Charles I, were revealed by later generations of the Juxon family.

Chris Tod visited Little Compton Manor House and received a warm welcome there from staff of the Reed Business School, who now occupy it. Neither the house nor the church has any sign of Tudor panels, despite plenty of evidence of the Juxon family and fine woodwork. It was a long shot, but worth a try to see if any of the fitzJames panels or similar carving had been left there. Fulham Palace has recently been restored and opened for visitors. Windows with the arms of bishops from fitzJames onwards have survived, but the Palace Curator knows of no woodwork of his period.

John Juxon died during the Commonwealth in 1655. Archbishop Juxon died in 1663. They both left their property, including Little Compton, to William Juxon, John's son. William had been favoured by King Charles II in 1660 with the title of Baronet and the archbishop greatly assisted the career of his beloved nephew. In about 1685, William's daughter Elizabeth Juxon made an interesting marriage to James St Amand.

At last, the missing link has appeared to connect the bishops of London with Steyning. In 1664, aged 21, James St Amand had inherited from his father the lay rectorship of Steyning. With a tidy sum as income, the rector had a responsibility for maintaining the structures of the vicarage and the chancel of the church. The advowson, or appointment of the vicar, didn't fall to St Amand until 1702 when he presented John Matthews. The *Calendar of Treasury Papers*, Vol. III reports a petition of Matthews in 1702: "His three predecessors in the vicarage had not paid the tenths, and had left 49*l.* 10*s.* due. They had died insolvent and left the vicarage house much out of repair." Did James St Amand move the fitzJames panels from Little Compton to Steyning whilst improving the vicarage for John Matthews?

James St Amand was the MP for St Ives in 1685, but failed as a candidate for Steyning in 1710. He kept an apothecary shop in Covent Garden. As apothecary to King James II, he was present at the birth of James Stuart in 1688. After King James fled England and William of Orange took the throne with Queen Mary, St Amand was implicated in a Jacobite plot of 1691. By 1701 he was the chief Jacobite agent in London. Letters in the *Calendar of the Stuart Papers* reveal his code names Arnett, Berry, Emtrose and Mr Jones. He served, meanwhile, as apothecary to Queen Anne.

What actually took place in the privacy of the parlour at the old Steyning vicarage, and who met there, we can only guess. James St Amand was a truly mysterious and adventurous man. The fitzJames screen is an exuberant celebration of King Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, recording the last glorious years of Roman Catholic England. It would have dazzled those who risked all to remain faithful to the old religion. Even the screen's reference to St Richard would have seemed significant. This Chichester bishop was celebrated for opposing the secular power of the king over the church. It was said that Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn saw the death of Merry England. The shadow of religious persecution and civil strife descended over generations to come. Dissent, intrigue and resistance became ever more complex and seldom a matter of religion alone, as with the Jacobite cause to restore a Stuart king.

James St Amand died in 1728. He was still holding the Steyning Rectory but his childless son James, a collector of antiquarian books, was provided with only a simple annuity of £300. The will of James St Amand made provision for the care of his Sussex estates by appointing two executors: William Juxon, his wife's brother, and the eminent Jacobite, Erasmus Lewis. The Rectory of Steyning was to pass to Robert Hesketh, son of James St Amand's daughter Martha. Robert was not yet one year old when his grandfather died. William Juxon of Little Compton therefore had the joint care of Steyning Rectory from 1728 until his death in 1740. Robert Hesketh came of age in 1749 and died in 1796. He was the rector in 1781 when the picture by Grimm set on record that the Tudor ceiling, and therefore the panels, had reached Steyning.

The oak panels carved for the Bishop of London, Richard fitzJames, are now about five hundred years old. The workmanship is of the highest quality. This and the profusion of images representing our most famous (or infamous) king, Henry VIII, probably ensured their survival. The original setting was surely Fulham Palace, built by Bishop fitzJames to impress generations of kings, queens, bishops and celebrity guests. That the panels survived the Reformation was fortunate. Yet they would not have survived the Civil War, given their symbolism, had it not been for a brave man with a profound appreciation, who had the means to rescue such treasures from Cromwell's army. Bishop William Juxon fits the profile. Elizabeth Juxon married the Rector of Steyning, James St Amand. He was a chief Jacobite secret agent and the man most likely to have installed this rather potent relic in the old Steyning vicarage.

Today, nobody who understands and appreciates the Steyning screen needs to conceal their guilty secret. It is once again simply what it was made to be – an extravagant piece of Tudor decor and an historic treasure.

*At Steyning Museum, David Thompson has maintained a file of information and research on the subject. An illustrated booklet of research during 1990 is available for only £1.*

*Lynda Denyer*