

Understanding the 1664 Mompesson Settle at Eyam, Reflection of a UROS Project

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Abstract

In this journal article I reflect on the research I undertook into the Mompesson Settle at Eyam, Derbyshire as part of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS) at the University of Lincoln. I conducted research into all aspects of the settle to help understand if it is authentic to 1664, the date inscribed on the Settle itself. This involved analysis of the settle to identify how it was manufactured, and further research into the meanings behind the carvings of the settle. The research itself discovered a range of possibilities of how the settle was constructed and the meanings of the carvings. The exact reasoning for the existence of the settle is still unsure, but information uncovered has greatly increased understanding of the piece. A report is being written for Eyam Museum covering all details of the settle in order to produce some visitor information. The research itself was very beneficial to myself, as it covers part of what I am learning on my course in much more detail, giving me real world experience of something I could possibly do in the future.

Keywords: *Heritage, Settle, Research, Reflection, Experience*

Introduction

This UROS project investigates the authenticity of a settle at Eyam Museum, Derbyshire, England. A settle is a bench with a long back and arm rests. This settle is carved with William and Catherine Mompesson's names, and the date 1664. William Mompesson was the rector in Eyam when the plague reached the village in 1665, he and former rector Thomas Stanley convinced the village to isolate to stop the disease spreading in the local area. 260 villagers died from September 1665 to November 1666. This relation to the plague makes Eyam a popular tourist destination today. The similar dates and relation to Mompesson means this settle is one of Eyam Museums only objects relating to the plague. Little is known about the settle, so this research aimed to understand the settle in more depth, assessing its authenticity and providing information to the public through the museum. Supervisors from the College of Arts provided guidance to the research.



Figure 1 Top half of the settle as situated within the Museum. Due to the tight nature of its display a full picture of the settle could not be taken. Photo: Lynda Skipper

Background

I study Conservation of Cultural Heritage which focuses upon objects and preserving them for future generations. This project became available to students on the course through supervisors. The proposed project interested me as I wanted to experience researching in a real-world setting, which was something not covered on the course. Furthermore, I had knowledge of wooden objects from A-Level Product Design and theory classes in first year. My placement module which I undertook at Manx National Heritage gave me real world experience of practical conservation, so this project seemed a good continuation of real-world experience, as it involved looking into one object focusing on the history of it, and less so the conservation of it. It was also part of museum work that I had not gained any experience in before, therefore giving me a platform to assess my future steps going into final year studies. The research is also important for the village of Eyam and could become part of the story of the plague there. This project provided a challenge with new obstacles, but I was confident that I could produce a good quality product for the project. The timing of the placement was just before this project in 2022, giving continuation of a practical experience before starting final year studies.

Review of literature

This project provided knowledge about this specific settle, adding to the limited existing information on the settle itself. The settle was found in a second-hand shop in Cheltenham in 1954 by Cheltenham Museum. It was only at the tricentenary of the plague in 1965 that its potential significance was realised. It is said that the settle was observed by Arthur Negus, an antiques celebrity at the time who claimed the settle was not authentic. This story is anecdotal, and no evidence could be found about Arthur Negus' reasoning. Eyam Museum now have the object on loan. William and Catherine Mompesson and their time in Eyam are the focus of this settle, so understanding their story while in Eyam was important to possibly understanding the settle. Walker (2009) was a good reference to this (Walker, 2009). Chinnery's (1979) book on oak furniture from the 17th Century, introduced settles (Chinnery, 1979, pp. 234-40) along with a wealth of other information relating to oak furniture. Online resources helped to identify original pieces of furniture and markings that may be found on them (Wayne Mattox Antiques, n.d.), and helped find a known authentic example to compare this settle to (rootsweb.com, n.d.). The method of frame and panel construction was identified (Rivers & Umney, 2003, p. 94). Along with the joining methods used, of mortise and tenon joint with a drawbore to secure in place. (Hoadley & Hoadley, 2000) & (Alexander & Follansbee, 2012). The knowledge of a furniture conservator as a supervisor was invaluable in helping identify features of the settle, to then be further researched.

Methodology

Eyam was the first known example of self-isolation of an area to protect others in surrounding villages, at the detriment to the villagers. The settles relation to this make it a potentially important object to the villages' history. Three key points were made to understand the settle more to establish its importance:

1. Analysing the manufacturing marks of the settle and assessing their originality
2. Researching into the meanings of the carvings
3. Producing information to be reproduced to the public for better understanding of the settle.

By examining the manufacturing techniques and carvings of the settle, visual examination and photographic documentation assessed originality (see fig. 1,2&3). This analysis was conducted on a site visit to Eyam museum to see the settle, with notes made on the features of the settle, including measurements. Photographs of each part of the settle were taken for future reference. This method informed further literature-based research, to give a comprehensive understanding of the settle, which helped achieve the first and second key points. The literature review gave helpful reference of what to expect on the settle if it were to be original. the expertise of the supervisor was helpful with identifying markings and manufacturing techniques on the settle, alongside supplying literature and further research on the carvings. The information obtained through the project increased the understanding of the settle

and produced resources to improve visitor understanding, culminated in a report, which achieves the third key point. The report on the settle will be supplied to curator Owen Roberts, for use in creating a new display at the Eyam Museum. This will draw more focus to the settle in the museum as it is currently part of a diorama with little attention being given to it.

Results

The Mompesson Settle has lots of features in the way it is made and its carvings, which can be inferred to help identify the originality of this settle. However, without analytical techniques a trustworthy date identification is not possible.

Overall, the seat part of the settle has more original older features than the back rest. The seat section has definite marks of hand resawing and planing, but this section has been altered through the cutting short of the legs which required new wooden nails and resulted in missing pieces. Overall, the structure may contain older and newer parts and the settle has been taken apart at some stage. The repairs largely are of good quality, it is, however, difficult to tell when these may have been done. One possibility is that they were done in preparation for sale in the antiques shop in Cheltenham before it was found by the Cheltenham Museum.

The carvings do have meanings that relate to the plague and could have been meant in this way. At the same time, they can be inferred differently possibly relating to Mompesson's Christian beliefs and his family, including their newly born child in 1664. The presence of the St Andrews cross could link to the name of his church at Eakring where he was a popular and long serving rector after he left Eyam, therefore it could have been made for Mompesson or to commemorate him and his former wife Catherine in Eakring. The carving style matches that of the 17th Century, and it could simply be that the carvings were made to the fashion of the times or made to match the style of that era. More in depth but earlier analysis of the carvings on the settle can be found in my history and heritage blog here:

<https://history.lincoln.ac.uk/2022/07/29/a-uros-conservation-project-the-carvings-of-the-mompesson-settle/>

This research has uncovered lots of information relating to the settle. While not being able to give a definite answer, it has resulted in a better contextualisation for its place in the museum. It cannot be said for certain whether the main parts of the settle are original or not, as there is not one feature which clearly shows its authenticity either way, however in the 1950s it is said Arthur Negus looked at the settle and claimed it was not authentic. The settle is not authentic as a whole but could be in parts.

A firm judgement of authenticity is difficult to obtain. Opinions can be formed from reading the evidence gathered, which are likely to differ from person to person. Nonetheless this is certainly a very interesting settle whether contemporarily or commemoratively linked to William and Catherine Mompesson.



Figure. 2 Example of the edited leg on the settle.



Figure 3. Panels with Mompessons names (right) serpents (left) and wyverns (central) visible. Along with grape vines and 17th century carvings including branching trails and below the central panel on the image

UROS Experience

During this project I learnt about how to undertake and construct a research project, I also realised how much time a project such as this can take up, especially in this case. The settle had so many different clues and information to expand on in the report for the museum. A timetable was set at the start of the project, but due to the detail of the project this was soon lost. In future it would be a good idea to reset the timetable of completing parts of the project. This would help keep my research more focused. Nonetheless, this real-world experience in producing research has built on my experiences learnt during placement at Manx National Heritage and in first and second year at university. I now feel that I have covered a wide range of specialisms with the UROS scheme, providing support to develop my report writing, poster making, blog writing and oral presentation skills. I am prepared to begin third year at university with more confidence and a clearer mind when it comes to considering my next steps after university. The Student as Producer model of this project provides a great opportunity to be involved in research at an early stage at university. This is something I did not expect myself to be doing when I began my course at Lincoln, which has been beneficial with developing my research skills.

Conclusion

Overall, in this project I learnt a lot about settles and the Eyam story, along with about how to research and produce outputs from research. This project was not something that I had a yearning to do, but when I saw the opportunity, it interested me, and I am glad I decided to get involved. I feel I have gained knowledge and skills that I will use in the future from this project as this is something that is related to my course and increases my knowledge of subject areas relevant to my degree. I may not proceed into a research-based future, but it is still an important part of being a conservator, and this experience has made me feel more confident in deciding how I want to progress my career post university. Along with my placement, it makes 2022 a year in which I have learnt a large amount in the 'real world' in the sector I would like to pursue in the future. Therefore, given the chance, perhaps with better timekeeping, I would do it again. This project has been a great addition to my university work, and I have enjoyed taking part and discovering information about the Mompesson Settle at Eyam.

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