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'To Keep off the Company' – a study of a seventeenth-century royal bed rail from Hampton Court Palace

Sebastian Edwards

- ¹ This case history of the only royal bed rail [in French, *balustrade*] remaining in the United Kingdom illuminates the ceremonies of the royal bedchamber in seventeenth century England. It is an extraordinary survival of the period, an object with a working life that may span the reigns of five monarchs (**fig. 1**). This item of court apparatus has an elusive history, but its incomplete story tells us a great deal about the attitude of the English monarchs of the seventeenth and early-eighteenth century towards the formal ceremonies of court, and in particular those centred on the royal bedchamber. It is argued here that this unique object epitomises the changing situation of the kings and queens of England during the period of transition from absolutist monarchy, through republican Commonwealth to the evolution of a new 'parliamentary monarchy'. In the first section, the bed rail is described, along with new discoveries made about its design, manufacture and materials. Secondly, its history in relation to the English monarchy is traced, as it is revealed by changes made to the rail as it was re-used by different monarchs. In the final conclusion some thoughts about the distinctive character of the royal bedchamber in England are suggested, as illustrated by this important but little-known historic object¹.

Figure 1



The Queen's Bedchamber at Hampton Court, created in 1715, with parts of the royal bed rail displayed.
© Historic Royal Palaces.

The survival of a seventeenth century English bed rail

Evidence from the historic object

- 2 Today the bed rail, which is incomplete, consists of ten separated panels, 90 centimetres high and approximately 840 centimetres in total length, which have been crudely cut so that much of the evidence of its original construction has been lost (**fig. 2, fig. 3**). It is made of carved and gilded oak with identical decoration on the back and front, with two narrow panels, which appear to be nineteenth century additions made of pine. Its design consists of pairs of putti sitting under tazze of fruit and flowers, alternating with large and small classical vases of flowers. Between these larger panels are placed imperial crowns above paired letter Cs. Technical examination of the remaining sections of the rail indicate that entire sections have been lost and that it must have originally been significantly longer. Its overall condition is worn and damaged, but given its history, what survives is in remarkably original condition, and it has only been regilded once. Close examination of the bed rail by leading experts in several fields of object and building conservation have helped identify a number of significant repairs and changes that reveal information about its working life, which is not documented in the royal records.

Figure 2



A section of the bed rail, carved with putti and tazze of fruit and flowers. English, gilded oak, c 1640.
© Historic Royal Palaces.

Figure 3



Alternate section of the bed rail with vases of flowers.
© Historic Royal Palaces.

The documented history of the bed rail

- 3 Around 1878 the bed rail was rediscovered at Hampton Court Palace, and was carefully recorded by the Office of Works – the government's architects – who drew it in an arrangement which breaks forward and has a pair of gates at the centre. At this time it was displayed in the palace's new museum by its historian, Ernest Law, who mistakenly declared that it was an altar rail from Charles I's chapel, that is from the period 1625 to 1649². Prior to this period no certain documentary evidence in the extensive records held in the National Archives (Kew) can be firmly associated with this rail. This absence of information may be a clue as to its early history, which, as will be shown, spanned the enormous political and social upheaval of the English Commonwealth (1649-1660).
- 4 The bed rail was not looked at again until the 1990s, when it was first suggested that it had been made to protect a royal bed³. At that time it was assumed that it must have been made for Charles II (reigned 1660-1685) because he is the only English monarch known to have embraced the ceremony of the *lever* and *coucher*, and in addition, the style of its decoration was consistent with that date. It was proposed to display the rail around King William III's bed of 1699: King William (reigned 1689-1702) was known to have re-used an 'old bedrail', but new research has shown his bed rail was of a very different type, which is discussed in more detail below⁴. An exhibition in 2013 about the royal bedchamber at Hampton Court provided a new opportunity to display this object as a bed rail for the first time, following thorough technical analysis (**fig. 4**). The much-altered state of the rail today meant that any attempt to try and restore it to its original arrangement would not only be highly speculative, but would also destroy important physical evidence about its early construction and use. The decision was made to display it as found, and it was given minimal conservation treatment. It has been carefully examined by carving and gilding conservators; historic paint and joinery analysts; as well as a dendrochronologist who specialised in works of art⁵. At the same time further documentary research into the state bedchamber for the period c.1660 to 1760 was carried out in conjunction with this exhibition. This new analysis revealed some very surprising discoveries.

Figure 4



The bed rail when first shown in the Royal Bedchamber Exhibition, Hampton Court Palace, 2013.

© Historic Royal Palaces.

New technical and historical understanding of the Hampton Court bed rail

- 5 The dendrochronologist found that it is made of slow-grown, oak from the Baltic region, which was cut no earlier than 1638, and likely to have been constructed between 1642 and around 1650. This type of timber is only known to have been imported into England up until this later date. This ruled out the previous theory that the rail originally been made for Charles II, who was restored to the throne in 1660, after a period in exile during the Commonwealth. Instead the rail's date was put back to the reign of his father, Charles I (reigned 1625-49). Also, the wood did not match samples grown in France, which eliminated the possibility of the rail having been imported from that country, which has a longer history of kings using bed rails to receive visitors in the royal bedchamber, stretching back to the second half of sixteenth century⁶.
- 6 Examination of the rail's construction revealed that it was not typical of the very highest quality carving found in English palaces and noble houses of this period. It is made mostly using simple pegged or nailed joints, and the massive carving - more than twenty five centimetres thick in places, was built-up in a laminate of thick planks which are glued together (**fig. 5**). Another characteristic of the carpentry from the time of this earlier date is that it appears that the boards have been carved whilst the timber was still green, not long after felling. In the absence of historical evidence for its construction by the Office of Works – who usually undertook royal building in England

- one possibility that fits in with this early date is that it was made by ships' carvers, who were known to have been impressed (forced) to work for Charles I on the Queen's House at Greenwich⁷. Paint analysis revealed that the rail had only been gilded twice in over three centuries, and both times with oil gilding on a thin layer of gesso. Its relatively unrestored state – which fortunately has preserved much of the original carved detail very well – most likely reflects an object history with long periods when it was probably unused and kept in storage. This must have been the case after the ceremony of the *lever* went completely out of fashion in England after the early 1700s.

Figure 5



Detail of the rail's construction in cross section, showing its thick planks of oak.

© Historic Royal Palaces.

- 7 Another important discovery which supports the early dating given by dendrochronological analysis was that conservators found that the crowns and royal ciphers are early replacements, possibly made before it was ever used. This supports the theory that the bed rail was made earlier than the reign of Charles II, who married Queen Catherine of Braganza in 1662, which would be a likely occasion for the double C cipher to be inserted. (A similar cipher and crown appears on design for the king's new building at Whitehall Palace by Sir Christopher Wren.) However, these alterations also raise the possibility that the rail may not even have been originally intended for a king as the only other candidate beginning with the letter C is King Charles I.

Bed rails in England before the Restoration of the Monarchy

- 8 This new and challenging evidence puts the date of the bed rail's construction back into the reign of Charles I, a discovery which had all kinds of very interesting historical implications about court ceremony. It also puts into question accepted knowledge of the English royal bedchamber in the first half of the seventeenth century.
- 9 Given that Charles I, who preferred to run his court on very formal lines, is not known to have carried out the ceremony of the *coucher* and *lever* this new date for making the bed rail raises the possibility that it may not even be a bed rail at all. Perhaps the first historian of the palace was partly correct in his assertion that it was made for Charles I, but the idea that it could be an altar rail can be discounted because of the object's imagery, which is all about fecundity and fertility, rather than featuring any religious motifs. The fact that it was made to be viewed from both the inside and the outside also discredits this idea, as it would not be necessary for an altar rail in a chapel to be viewed from both sides. It can be compared with a slightly later carved altar rail from a royal chapel made for Charles II by the celebrated carver, Grinling Gibbons, which survives from his former baroque chapel at Windsor Castle, which was completed by 1682, and is now situated in the local Parish Church of St. John the Baptist. This is quite different in its design. It is carved from oak which has been varnished without gilding, a suitably sober finish for an English chapel, and it is only carved on the outward side.
- 10 The main reason why the bed rail has previously been associated with Charles II is that he is the first English king who to have adopted the bed chamber ceremony of the absolutist courts of Europe, which he had experienced for himself during his in exile from 1649 in exile in the interregnum, when he was the guest of the young Louis XIV⁸. Charles visited Louis at the Louvre, not long after his own political troubles, during the turmoil of the Fronde, when he saw the remodelled state bedchamber of Henri IV, complete with its rail.
- 11 However, there is no record of Charles I having ever receiving members of the court in his bedchamber. Such informality and a desire to be close to his most important subjects, was completely out of character and would contribute to the divide between this king and his people. This attitude would ultimately play a part in his downfall at the hand of the republicans. He had firmly rejected the French influences of his father, James I of England, and VI of Scotland, who had made his bedchamber far more accessible to his close courtiers and had a much closer affinity with French court culture⁹.
- 12 Without clear documentary evidence the bed rail itself still provides some important clues to its original commissioner (**fig. 6**).

Figure 6



Detail of the carved decoration, showing vases with lilies, roses and sunflowers.

© Historic Royal Palaces.

- 13 Unique amongst all known English, and indeed, almost all other surviving bed rails or balustrades, this example is not simply an ornamented balustrade, but a fully-sculpted piece of furniture, covered in figurative imagery. The playful putti holding up laurel cornucopia or tazze of flowers, and the inclusion of the sunflower, rose and lily prominently amongst the carved flowers can be read as symbols of a conjugal bedchamber, for use by a royal couple; and if this was not made for King Charles, then it was most likely intended for his Queen, Henrietta Maria of France. The Tudor rose of England and French lily feature prominently in contemporary imagery of his queen, and the sunflower was a symbol used by both the king of France and of England at this time (**fig. 7**).

Figure 7



Henrietta Maria, engraving by Cornelis Galle the Younger, after Nicolaus van der Horst, engraving, 1625-1635. This contemporary print of the Queen prominently features a putto, roses and lilies like the bed rail.

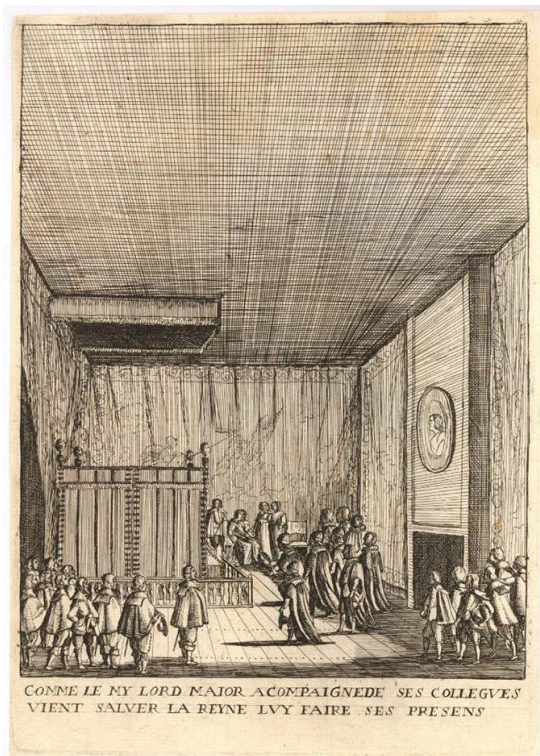
© National Portrait Gallery, London.

- 14 This rail was designed to be viewed by both the royal occupant of the bed, and her courtiers and servants, who would have understood its imagery of plenty and fertility. Henrietta Maria was certainly successful in this principal role of a queen, providing Charles I with seven surviving children. She was the only member of the royal family in England known to have owned bed rails before 1660, precisely because she was permitted to carry on in the manner of a French - and importantly, a Catholic - queen, often to the annoyance of her English subjects. She had arrived from Paris in 1625 with an enormous trousseau, which included several canopies of estate, bed hangings and tapestries. However, these were all portable furnishings. A large and cumbersome object like a bed rail, would have had to be made after she arrived in England. Indeed the English royal craftsmen soon became adept at providing the queen with items that were described as being made in the 'French manner'¹⁰. Bed rails were supplied to her at St James's Palace, where her first children were born, then later at Somerset House, which was her dower house. This also unusually featured a dais, or raised platform, beneath her great bed. A gilder, Philip Bromfield, is mentioned in 1630, gilding one of the queen's bed rails, which was decorated with crosses and flowers, perhaps in preparation for the birth of Charles, Prince of Wales (the future Charles II)¹¹. An unusual feature of these objects, three of which were recorded in the great inventory made for the sale of the King's Goods at the Commonwealth, was that two of them were silvered (that is, covered in silver-leaf)¹². The use of silver to distinguish queen's bed rail would be continued later into seventeenth-century in England, and may have been the practice in other European countries at this time.

French queens and the use of the rail in England

- 15 By this time a bed rail was starting to become more widely used for the accouchement of the queen before and after childbirth. It had both practical and symbolic significance, protecting the royal mother and child, as well as her key personal body servants (who were also French) but also celebrating her special status as the mother of a royal dynasty. At this time bed alcoves were not found in any English palaces and the rail would most likely have been fixed to the floor around three sides of the state bed, with a pair of gates in the centre. An impression of this arrangement can be found in an engraving in a contemporary publication, recording the visit of Henrietta Maria's mother, Marie de Medici, in 1638 to '41 during her exile from France (**fig. 8**)¹³. This view shows how the Queen Mother was given an apartment at St James's in which she had to place her own imperial state bed in the Presence Chamber. Although such images should not be read too literally, there is enough evidence in both the image and accompanying text to suggest that the scene is based on contemporary observations. The bed is protected by a balustraded rail on three side, and peculiarly set beneath a canopy of state, which would normally hang in this particular room. The Queen Mother sits in front of her bed to receive her guests in state.

Figure 8



Queen Marie de Medici receiving in front of her bed with a rail, whilst staying at St James's Palace. Anonymous, 1638-9, published by Jean Puget de la Serre. Inscription: Comme Le My Lord Maior Acompaigne de Ses Collegues Vient Salver La Reyne Luy Faire Ses Presens.

© The Trustees of the British Museum.

The original arrangement of the bed rail

- 16 Enough details from this bed rail survive intact to confirm that it was similarly arranged to stand around three sides of a bed, rather than stand straight across the bedroom or a bed alcove. The evidence for this are the remains of one mitred corner-joint, where the rail is not pierced right through to give it more strength. There are also the remains of iron floor fixings, set into the rear side of the bed rail, and one panel has a chamfered end-stop designed to rest against the wall. The image of Marie de Medici's audience in her Presence Chamber again raises the question as to whether this rail could have been originally intended for one of several other locations where rails were occasionally used. Rails were also used in in Presence Chambers, for public dining, for baptisms in the chapel, or to protect a royal cradle – indeed, in any place where a crowd of members of the court were invited to come close to the royal person. However, on balance the very fecund decoration of this rail suggests its most likely use was in a bedchamber, and this seems to be the case when it came to be used again by later monarchs.

Questions about the original location of the bed rail

- 17 There remains a significant gap in the history of this object: where was it originally intended to be used, and by whom? Accounts of Henrietta Maria's earlier beds and bed rails are quite plentiful, but none fit the description of this more elaborate rail. Her documented bed rails – all of which have been lost – were ordered around the times of her pregnancies. As the 1630s progressed the king and queen's political situation worsened, and having dismissed Parliament completely, they behaved in an increasingly absolutist fashion and the first rumblings of revolution began with riots in the streets of London. Henrietta Maria started to spend more time in her houses away outside the City: at Greenwich, Hampton Court, Wimbledon and Oatlands in Surrey. At this time the order of the royal household accounts begins to fail and much information is missing from them. Besides, such personal objects might also be bought using the Privy Purse, the records of which were usually destroyed at the death of a monarch. In spite of the worsening political situation in the country, there was little change in the extravagance and formality of the royal couples' behaviour even as public dissatisfaction grew, and there were several occasions when this bed rail could have been ordered. For example, in 1639, the queen made improvements to Somerset House, and that same year a short-lived, daughter was born at Whitehall in a 'new bedchamber'¹⁴. The following year the queen stayed at the Palace of Oatlands for the birth of Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester. Or it may have been made for Hampton Court in 1641, when Henrietta Maria enlarged her bedchamber to accommodate large audiences in safety whilst the king was travelling in Scotland¹⁵. If it were made for Hampton Court that might explain its later association with that palace, although it was not listed there in the inventory taken during Oliver Cromwell's occupation¹⁶. Perhaps the most obvious candidate for such a splendid object would be the celebrated Queen's House at Greenwich, designed in the classical style by Inigo Jones, but it was never completed for Henrietta Maria before she left London for safer houses.

Later history and reuse of the bed rail

- 18 The bed rail's later history reveals much about the English monarchy's ambivalent attitude to formal ceremony centred on the 'body politic' in the State Bedchamber. As mentioned, it is likely that the double Cs cipher was added at the Restoration of Charles II, and possibly at the time of his marriage to Queen Catherine. After the sale of many royal goods during the Commonwealth and state of the depleted Treasury after years of war, it is known that Charles relied on re-using furniture kept by Cromwell, as well as goods returned by royalist supporters and the seizure of some royal items through the law courts¹⁷. For Charles II's honeymoon at Hampton Court, for which the palace was specially prepared, he installed a fine velvet bed given him by the United Provinces of the Netherlands, although no mention is made of a bed rail for that occasion.
- 19 At the same time Charles II was eagerly refurbishing his most important palace, Whitehall, to accommodate his much less formal and more French style of rule, and also spending heavily on his new apartments. This included what was probably the first alcove bedchamber in an English palace, which required a straight bed rail, in the European fashion¹⁸. French manners and fashions led by the king and his leading courtiers dominated the style of the new court. Some 35 bedchamber suites were ordered over the new reign, and several of these would have required bed rails. For instance, when the king's new alcove bedchamber at Whitehall, was refurbished in 1669 it had 'carved panels before his majesty's bed', which the carver Henry Phillips decorated with laurel and palm branches¹⁹. The room also had another raised parquet floor, after the French fashion. An even richer bedchamber with an alcove and rail was designed for his unfinished new palace at Greenwich, and when Queen Catherine came to live at Whitehall in 1662 she too had a new richly-carved, alcove provided with a baluster-type bed rail²⁰. At the same time the Duchess of York, the queen's sister-in-law, was provided with another silvered bed rail. Whilst none of the descriptions of these rails matches the example discussed here, they reveal how the arrangement of the royal bedchamber begun in England by Henrietta Maria came to be regularly adopted by the English royal family during the reigns of Charles II and James II.

The 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 and its affect on the royal bedchamber

- 20 However, with arrival of William III and Queen Mary II (reigned 1689-1702 and -1694) from the Netherlands, after another, less violent revolution in 1688, this architectural style of bed rail seems to have gone completely out of fashion in England. At the start of their reign no new rails were ordered, and as King of England, William appears to be reluctant to carry out many of the public ceremonies previously practiced at court. However, when he eventually came to furnish his new building at Hampton Court, after Mary's death, he used a rather different type of bed rail, or 'bed screen' as it was now called, which was described by the lady traveller, Celia Fiennes when she visited Hampton Court around 1701:

... out of this is the Presence Chamber [by which she means bedchamber] with a low screen across the room to keep the company off the bed ...²¹

- 21 This bed rail had to be restored by the royal joiner, Thomas Roberts in 1699, whose account describes that it was made up of eighteen, hinged leaves of cedar wood, with gilded wire mesh instead of balusters. A similar rail was also provided for King William at his palace at Kensington²². These were not a new introduction, as portable rails had been provided to Queen Catherine as early as around 1676 and her successor, Mary of Modena, who even had a bed rail ordered to 'keep off the dogs'²³. This type of flexible barrier, continued to be used into the reigns of Queen Anne and George I, who ordered a similar one to protect his dining table. An early nineteenth-century view of the old King's bedchamber at Windsor Castle, featuring a state bed made for Queen Anne in 1714, may show such a plain, wire screen still standing in front of it (**fig. 9**). Such portable screens, which could be removed and stored when the monarch did not wish to hold regular *levers*, seem to be a feature of the palaces of the late Stuart royal family. Further research into other European palaces may reveal more comparisons.

Figure 9



THE KING'S EATING ROOM AT WINDSOR CASTLE, ENGRAVED BY THOMAS SUTHERLAND AFTER CHARLES WILD, c1819, WITH QUEEN ANNE'S VELVET BED, 1714, BEHIND WHAT SEEMS TO BE AN EARLIER WIRE BED SCREEN.

© HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES.

- 22 It seems probable that the adoption of such a type of rail, which may originally have been devised for other purposes, allowed the British monarchy to be more flexible in the state bedchamber, permitting the king to choose when to bring the court into his bedroom, or not. William III was however well aware of the importance of the bedchamber, as his favourite courtier, and Groom of the Stool, Lord Portland reported being given the honour of entering Louis XIV's *ruelle* within his bed rail during his embassy to France in 1699.

- 23 There is one final chapter in the history of this bed rail, from the reign of King George I (reigned 1714-1727). A Swiss visitor to St James's Palace in 1725 recalled seeing 'the bed being covered with crimson velvet, braided and embroidered with gold. The bed stands in a sort of alcove, shut off from the rest of the room by a *balustrade of gilded wood*' (fig. 10)²⁴. There are no bills for the making any gilded bed rails for George I, but one last feature from the Hampton Court bed rail which may be the clue to its final use by this monarch, is the crude adaption of the cyphers to form the letter G. It seems likely this old bed rail was once again being re-used, by a king who had so little time for bedchamber ceremony that he had refused to appoint a new bedchamber staff on his succession to the British throne²⁵. After this brief appearance this bed rail disappeared, as the political significance of the bedchamber in Britain rapidly declined with the rise of parliamentary democracy.

Figure 10



MODIFICATIONS TO THE CIPHERS ON THE BED RAIL, PROBABLY MADE FOR USE BY KING GEORGE I c 1715-1725.

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- 24 This case study of an elusive, rare object reveals how the English monarchy first adopted but soon began to reject the bedchamber ceremonies in which it would have played an important part. Whilst this object leaves many questions unanswered, its history suggests much about the use of the bed alcove and bed rail in England. It raises further questions about the exchange of ideas and fashions between the courts of seventeenth century Europe, and the particular role of the queen.

NOTES

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ABSTRACTS

This article discusses the use and evolution of the royal bedchamber in seventeenth century England, through a unique case study of a surviving bed rail from Hampton Court Palace. This remarkable survival from the royal bedchamber has recently been discovered to date from before the English Commonwealth. It had previously been forgotten for many years before it was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, when it was first shown to the public as an altar rail from the royal chapel. More recently it has been associated with King Charles II: however, new technical and historical research has revealed that this rail was in fact made much earlier, during the reign of his father, Charles I, and before the period when English kings adopted the French ceremony of the *lever* and *coucher*. It now appears likely to have been made for his French queen, Henrietta Maria, who brought many novel fashions and possessions to England, including the use of a bed rail for her accouchements. Later alterations to the rail suggest it was soon adapted for Charles II, and perhaps his Queen, Catherine of Braganza, and then again used in the early eighteenth century by first Hanoverian King of Great Britain, George I. The final section of the article discusses how this unique object contrasts with the bedchamber furnishings of other English kings and queens in the later-seventeenth century, who developed their own distinctive form of bedchamber ceremony using a very different mode of bed rail. It is argued that this was in response to the new parliamentary monarchy in England, and contrasted to the focus on the royal body placed in the palaces of absolutist monarchs of France and many other European countries at this time.

INDEX

Keywords: Bed rail [balustrade de chambre], bedchamber, palace, seventeenth century, Charles I d'Angleterre, Henrietta Maria, (Henriette Marie), Charles II d'Angleterre, William III, George I, Hampton Court, England, France, royal furniture, lever, royal ceremony, gilt wood furniture

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