

Tapestry sections depicting the Prodigal Son: how safe is an attribution to Mr Sheldon's tapestry venture at Barcheston ?

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Summary

Four tapestry strips depicting the parable of the Prodigal Son in six scenes were found in the 1880s in Embleton church, Northumberland, and later presented to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. Each scene is enclosed within an arch, itself set on a floral ground. Centrally placed top and bottom stands a small huntsman; in the corners of the upper section a man blows a trumpet, and, in the lower corners are the figures of Sol and Luna. The iconography, its source not yet identified, is paralleled on other, near contemporary, small items. The Society's pieces, their maximum size 1676 mm (66"), may originally have framed a now missing centrepiece. They probably date to around 1600 and might have been woven at Barcheston, Warwickshire, in a Flemish émigré workshop in London or possibly in south Holland.

Introduction

The remarkable pieces of tapestry now owned by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne were received in 1901 as a gift from Mrs Louise Creighton, widow of the late bishop of London, Mandell Creighton. The Society's formal acceptance described the item as 'A piece of old tapestry 5'6" long by 25 inches wide, probably of late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century date. The devices consist of a figure subject at intervals in a square with top corners rounded, the spaces between the subjects being filled in with leaf ornamentation'.

These words, however, conceal far more than they reveal; Mrs Creighton's letter, read to the meeting of the Society on 5th June 1901 by the President, Robert Blair, are far more informative:

When Dr Creighton was vicar of Embleton (1874-84), he rescued from destruction some portions of an old tapestry altar cloth. He always intended to send it to some Northumbrian museum, but through pressure of business this was overlooked. I should now like to send it to the Castle museum at Newcastle....The cover was found on a table in the vestry of the church at Embleton. It was covered with grease and

very dirty. I cut the strips of tapestry embroidery off the old cloth centre, which they surrounded as a border, and sewed them together on a strong piece of holland. I regret to say that we could find nothing as to the date or history of the cloth. One at least of the subjects reproduced seems to be the Prodigal Son, and possibly they are all concerned with his history.

It was agreed that the tapestry should be placed in a plain oak frame and covered with glass.’¹

The tapestry, which is woven, not embroidered, has since been removed from its frame, still attached to the backing supplied by Mrs Creighton. The four sections, of similar height and varying length, probably formed borders of a now missing central section.

A number of puzzles surround this piece. The scenes are indeed the parable of the Prodigal Son, and its style indicates a date in the later sixteenth or the early years of the seventeenth century. But it is scarcely surprising that even so eminent a historian as Mandell Creighton could find ‘nothing about the date or history’. At the time of the tapestry’s removal, noted with some disapproval in a later account of the church,² little research in the subject had been undertaken and the earliest survey of tapestry in England had yet to be written.³ As with so many examples of tapestry with which neither mark nor document is associated, it is virtually impossible to say where, by whom or for whom this piece was woven. Its purpose is less clear still and remains a matter for discussion. Finally, the way in which the object, in whatever form, arrived in Embleton church is a mystery.⁴

Description

¹ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne*, second series, 10 (1902), 42-43; a brief note in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, second series, 2 (1903), xix, repeats this, but describes the piece as embroidery. A fuller description of the tapestry was deposited in the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle, now the Museum of the North, where the tapestry is catalogued as SANT 1901.11. It was on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, from 1986 until 2010, Loan:Soc.Ant.NuT.1.

² E. Bateson ed., *A History of Northumberland*, vol. 2, 74.

³ W.G. Thomson, *History of Tapestry*, London (1906).

⁴ *A History of Northumberland*, 2, 72-73. If the tapestry could certainly be attributed to the Sheldon works in Warwickshire, an entirely hypothetical possibility would be that it was brought by the rector James Boulter who held the living from 1811 to 1822. His father, the Reverend George Boulter, was for a time the vicar of St John’s Bedwardine, Worcester, where Thomas Chaunce, associated in Sheldon’s will with the venture, had resided from 1571 to his death in 1603.

The four pieces, woven in wool and with a warp count of 24/25 warps per inch, 9/10 per centimetre, unequal in length and differing in composition, have been stitched together onto a holland backing, fig.1, below (© the author).



However, because the theme went unrecognized, the mounting destroyed the continuity of the story which is indeed that of the Prodigal Son, told in six scenes each enclosed by an arch. Each section has a finished top and bottom edge; the two pieces in the middle of the photograph have cut ends. In order to understand the original appearance of the tapestry, it has been assumed that the pieces originally surrounded a rectangle, much as they were found; to avoid unnecessary repetition of the possible original placing, the sections as photographed have been labelled in the following way, see figure 2, below.

STRIP C	
STRIP B	STRIP D
STRIP A	

- A the bottom piece in the photograph was the upper border of the hanging and the only one to preserve its full length. It shows on the left the son's *Farewell* to his father and, on the right, separated by a huntsman in a landscape setting, *Riotous Living*.
- B the lefthand piece in the middle row, perhaps the original righthand border, shows the *Expulsion* of the Prodigal, set amongst flowers. It is now incomplete on both right and left edges though it retains its original height between the narrow red border. It was not originally joined to its present companion piece.
- C the topmost strip in the photograph, damaged on its righthand side was originally, as the narrow red inner border indicates, the lower border of the tapestry. Separated by a huntsman, its two scenes, *Repentance* and the *Return*, read from right to left.

D the righthand section of the middle row, perhaps the original lefthand border, which has lost even more of its original length than its companion piece. As there, the scene, the *Feast for the Son returned*, is set amongst flowers and retains its original height though not its original length.

Now somewhat faded, the colours are a simple palette of reds, yellow, blue, green and cream, their effect heightened by use of contrasting shades, set on a green ground.

Section A

The upper piece (A) measures 1676 mm long and 209 mm high (66 x 8¹/₄ inches). An outer border 25 mm (one inch) high, carries, on a red ground, the trefoil and trumpet-like



flowers, repeated on the inner border, also 25 mm (1") high and some 1321 mm (52") long, lying along the central panel. In either corner, facing each other across the width, a man blows a trumpet. Both are surrounded by a composition of fruit and flowers, (fig.3 above © the author).

Behind the lefthand man are a bunch of cherries, of grapes and clusters of pears either side a large three-lobed leaf. He is separated from the first of the two arches by a selection of flowers; a spray of oak leaves and acorns, strawberry, peas, 'snowdrop', rose and foxglove; these were repeated in reverse order on the righthand side, as was the trumpeter. Each arch, inserted into the floral ground of each piece and decorated with bosses, is 191 mm high and from 191 mm to 203 mm wide (7¹/₂-8.0"). The column capital is austere decorated by triangular blocks of colour. The column itself was originally veined to resemble marble, possibly in pink, cream, blue/green; a straight line indicating the reflection of light is just visible. A circular collar sits on top of the square plinth, decorated with a red saltire, its perspective awkwardly shown.

The left side of the lefthand arch has suffered considerable damage; its lefthand column has been repaired by the insertion of felt, crudely embroidered in an attempt to recreate the original marbled appearance which has pulled the original threads both warp and weft.

This arch encloses the Prodigal's Farewell to his father. The bearded father, seated in an elegantly carved chair, holds out a purse to his son whose figure dominates the scene. Leaning towards his father, his right hand extended to take his inheritance, his short cloak thrown back over his shoulders, the boy's back foot lifts from the ground. Splendidly attired in slashed doublet and long boots, his haste to be gone is evident in the swirl of the short cloak thrown back over his shoulders. The scene is witnessed from the corner by a bearded man, possibly the elder brother, possibly the steward. In the background to the right is a figure on horseback, perhaps the departing Prodigal. Blue hills rise to meet the sky, shown here as elsewhere, in three bands of colour.

The hunting scene which separates the episodes is placed between flowers (a rose above, honeysuckle below), and a tree on either side. Between them the small huntsman stands on a grassy knoll scattered with small flowers and grasses. From his right hand hangs a dead bird while on his left arm perches a hawk. His dog, head twisted to look up at his master, stands beside him. The high ground behind the water is crowned by a row of conifers, in strong contrast to the leaves of the deciduous trees in the foreground.



On the right the arch encloses the scene of Riotous Living, where the Prodigal feasts his friends in what might appear to be an al fresco setting but for the marbled column and indications of buildings in the left background, (fig.4 above © the author). He and his lady friend are

seated at a round table, her right hand clasped by his left, his right resting on her shoulder, their heads close together. Behind stands another woman, her arms spread wide. To the right a serving maid, perhaps the best dressed of all, carries in food on a platter to the round table covered by a white cloth, already laid with two knives, two slices of bread and a single goblet. A jug stands on the floor.

The strip ends with the same selection of flowers shown on the left side, but presented in reverse order; the trumpeter, already described, faces left.

Section C

The second longer strip (C), 1575 x 209 mm (62" x 8¹/₄), which formed the bottom section, is not now complete; the righthand side has perished. It balanced the upper border in having a corner motif, floral decoration and two arches separated by a hunting scene. Details, however, differ substantially. The lefthand corner is occupied by a female figure labelled



SOL (sun) seated in a chariot emerging from fruit and flowers similar to those in the upper panel, but in a different arrangement, (fig.5 above © the author). SOL holds a mini-sun on a stick and, on the evidence of the same figures in other tapestries,

was almost certainly balanced on the right by the figure of LUNA (moon) from which only a small section of the chariot's front wheel remains. This incomplete section bore the same selection of fruit and flowers as on the left side, presented in reverse.

On the right, the Repentant Prodigal is shown tending the herd of swine. One of the better preserved areas, the detail is enormous. Seated, his hands are clasped underneath his chin; his staff rests against his arm. His lowly position is emphasized by the torn, ragged clothes, and the absence of boots. His need for self-sufficiency is suggested by the drinking horn hanging from his belt. In front of him the swine feed from the trough; in the background a narrow yellow path leads towards a substantial farmhouse in front of which two small figures stand, apparently in argument.

Only the background of the hunting scene separating the two arches closely follows that of the upper strip A. Here, the huntsman brandishes a fowling piece which has already



bagged quarry, (fig.6 above © the author)

The Returning Prodigal, in rags, kneels before his father whose left hand grasps him, the swirling blue cloak an indication of comforts ahead. A clean tunic is held by the burly servant in the background, while another is shown, apparently killing the fatted calf in front of a classically styled building. A lone figure, presumably the brother, stands in the fields.

Sections B and D

The two shorter pieces match each other but differ from the two longer sections, both in design and in the selection of flowers shown. Each displays a single scene at its centre



while an identical pattern of flowers repeats from the side of each enclosing arch to the surviving edge of the tapestry, (fig.7 left, © the author). Roughly at the centre of the floral area perches a bird,

facing left; two species have been woven. However, they are not paired on the strip but form a pair diagonally across the width of the missing centre.

The longer piece, B, 845 mm long x 209 mm high ($33\frac{3}{4}'' \times 8\frac{1}{4}''$), is the same height as the upper and lower borders. The arch frames the scene in which the Prodigal is driven out by the harlots. Three female figures are grouped on the left. The central figure rushes towards the Prodigal, one foot, apparently bare, raised to kick his shins, an arm launching a punch towards his head. A bunch of keys swings menacingly in her right hand. Her companion behind pulls the boy's hair with one hand, the other raised ready to beat him with the broom she clutches. A third woman hovers on the left of the scene, watching. The Prodigal is shown in a defensive position, one hand on his curling locks, the other warding off the blows.

The lower half of his body and the foreground has suffered considerable damage and has been repaired with red felt, now pulled and strained; his boots are now out of line with his body and some of the foreground has become entangled with his still good clothes.

In the background a small figure, presumably the Prodigal, is shown on a path approaching a small lean-to building; a female figure stands in the doorway.

The remainder of the panel displays two of the same larger flowers, the rose and the honeysuckle, which match the three of the lefthand side before the panel ends. Its full length is not known.

The same selection of flowers decorates the shorter panel (D) now only 756 mm long x 209 mm high ($29\frac{3}{4}$ " x $8\frac{1}{8}$ "'), nearly matching its companion side piece. Within the arch is the well-preserved final scene in the cycle, the feast welcoming the Prodigal home, very similar to the earlier scene of Riotous Living. Dominating the table in the centre is the Prodigal, once again in fine clothes, his father and another male figure on his left, his mother to the right. The table, covered by a white cloth, is laid with two knives, four pieces of bread, salt and pepper pots and a large bowl. On the ground in front stands a tall handled jug. All are observed from the doorway by a stout, small figure.

Original shape and function

The original arrangement of the sections is puzzling. Though catalogued by the Society as a table carpet, this is almost certainly not the original purpose for which the pieces were woven. Most examples of carpets accommodate the fact that a carpet hung over the edge of a table or cupboard by adjusting the border design so that details were seen the right way up, not the case here.⁵ Neither is it likely to have been an altar cloth, at least in sixteenth century England; the Book of Common Prayer enjoins use of a white linen cloth to dress the altar. Other options include the possibility that the strips were intended to form one long section and were stitched together; that they were part of a single object, perhaps a hanging, a bed coverlet or the covering of a bench with a back; or that they are survivals from more than one object, possibly the borders of sets of cushions.

Each strip appears to be a self contained unit, three of which are damaged on at least one edge. The episodes make sense, and complete a narrative tale, when laid out consecutively on a table when the warp threads are seen to run in the same direction. This might support the suggestion that originally they formed a single strip, sewn together, serving perhaps as a valance for a cupboard shelf.

This however, is contradicted by the fact that on two pieces there is an inner frame; it turns down on (A) and up on (C), indicating that those pieces occupied a specific position in

⁵ E. A. Standen, 'The Carpet of Arms', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 20, (1962), 221 - 231 for the Lewkenor carpet and W. Wells, 'The Luttrell Table Carpet', *Scottish Art Review*, 11, no. 3, (1968), 14-18, both made for English owners.

the whole, namely at the top and bottom respectively, thus framing a single object, the centre of which has perished. The scenes were intended to be read in a clockwise direction, since scenes 1, 2 are found on top, 4,5 from right to left along the base. The shorter sections, bearing scenes 3, 6, can thus be interpreted as the vertical sides completing the rectangle, and presenting the narrative in a continuous sequence. Pieces (B) and (D) should occupy the righthand and lefthand vertical borders respectively. In that case however, the pieces could not have been integral to the whole; the warp threads of a single tapestry piece cannot run in contrary directions in the horizontal and vertical borders. Either these pieces came from more than one tapestry or they were woven separately to form tapestry borders to a centrepiece of a different material, of whatever substance. Since each section has a finished upper and lower edge, and the incomplete side pieces (B) and (D) are consistently 209 mm ($8\frac{1}{4}$ "⁶) wide, the same width as the measurements between the red borders on pieces (A) and (C), it would have been perfectly possible to link, but not to weave, them together. Whatever was enclosed must therefore have measured some 1676 mm (66") in width with a height of at least 1245 mm (49"), *i.e.* the total length of the longest, but nevertheless incomplete, side piece plus the height of the upper and lower borders. It would have been a respectably sized wall hanging.

It is possible, but less probable, that the pieces came from more than one item, which would mean that the episodes 3 and 6 could be displayed horizontally. The pieces might then have bordered cushions, in one of two ways. Either the strips edged some more sumptuous fabric, or they formed matching borders to a set which consisted of one long and two or more smaller cushions. Certainly examples of scenes from the same story, combined or split between the differently sized cushions, are known; a possible parallel might lie in a long three-scene cushion which shows Riotous Living, Expulsion and Repentance which would have been complemented by others on either side.⁶ This disposition would be awkward to relate to the Society's fragments, implies one unusually long cushion in a set, and makes it necessary, because more pieces would have been needed, to posit a larger number of hypothetically lost sections.

Two considerations seem to me to clinch the matter: (1) pre-supposing missing cushions permits endless speculation without any supporting evidence - why save only four pieces? What happened to wear out the other sections but not the survivals which presumably were used in a similar way? Who saved some bits but threw out the rest? (2) The order of presentation seems to me to be important; scenes 4 and 5, both woven on strip C, become

⁶ Christie's, London, 11 December 1980, lots 153,154, (illus.).

consecutive only if the whole story is read clockwise and follows on from the scene on section B, that which I would place as the right-hand vertical. If there had been more than one cushion showing only one or perhaps two scenes per cushion, it would be just as valid to place the scenes in a continuous line at the bottom of each cushion. (3) This we know was not done because the first two scenes clearly belong to an upper strip because of the way in which the inner frame turns downwards, just as scenes 4,5 belong at the base because of the way the frame turns upwards. For the same reason, it is unlikely that the strips were joined together to form a single length; there is no functional, or even decorative, value to the inner red border on strips A and C, if this was the way in which the pieces were used.

The easiest, and perhaps the most logical, explanation of the evidence is that the four pieces formed a border to a rectangular hanging, and that the strips were woven separately. There is but a single objection. One might expect that the vertical sections would have carried a picture set vertically, rather than in a way which can only be viewed by twisting the head sideways.

If it is accepted that these sections are survivals from a single piece, intended to surround something at the centre, the question of what formed that central panel remains. It seems unlikely that it would have been woven tapestry, because each surviving section shows a finished edge top and bottom; if they had enclosed a continuous woven area, the warps would have continued into that area and there would now be signs of a cut or frayed edge where there are none. Whatever the article was, it would have been at least 838 mm (33") high, possibly more and some 1308 mm (51¹/₂" wide. Was it of some other expensive fabric, or something in wood or metal? Could it have been an armorial hanging, the coat of arms embroidered on a luxury fabric? The only even approximate parallel use of decorative strips, though smaller and of later date, surround a mirror pictured in the Getty Research Library Photo Study Collection.⁷

Related Tapestries

Two groups of small tapestries, all measuring approximately 50 mm square, depict the parable of the Prodigal. Both groups date to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Though the details in the central scenes are virtually identical, the groups are differentiated by the shades of colouring and the details of their borders. In the nine pieces in one group

⁷ A framed mirror, in my opinion more probably of German origin is at http://archives.getty.edu:30008/getty_images/digitalresources/tapestries/0181834.jpg

shown left below, thought to have originated on the continent, the central scene is presented in a square; the borders include the musicians, Sol and Luna while the verticals are made up of flowers and strapwork.⁸ In the second group, below right, the central scene is presented under an arch, while the vertical borders show a female grotesque between two floral arrangements; the horizontal borders contain hunting scenes. This latter group has been claimed as products of the Sheldon enterprise at Barcheston.⁹



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⁸ A complete set of six (Edward Salmon-Clarke bequest T.278-1913) is illustrated in G. Wingfield-Digby, *The Victoria and Albert Museum, Catalogue of Tapestries Medieval and Renaissance*, London (1980), no.62, plates 90a-f and at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78814/cushion-cover-unknown/>. These resemble two others, showing *Repentance* and the *Return*, in the Glynn Vivien Gallery, Swansea; another, possibly from the same set, pictured in A.F.Kendrick, 'Some Barcheston Tapestries', *Walpole Society*, 14, (1925), pl. 34, shows the *Expulsion* of the Prodigal. Then owned by Col. H. Howard and acquired in Warwickshire, it was sold Christie's London 11 May 1934, lot 160 and again, Christie's London 6 May 1937, lot 125; whereabouts unknown.

⁹ *Farewell*, on display in the British Galleries, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, T.1-1933; http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p19_creating_prodigal_son.htm *Return* in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Mallett 298; a *Farewell*, and 3 scenes as a long cushion (*Feasting, Expulsion, Repentance*) in the possession of Major Goulburn in 1933, sold Christie's 11 December 1980, lots 153,154 (illus.) with herm figures in the vertical borders; a similar, but not identical, long cushion illustrated in H.Goebel, *Wandteppiche*, Leipzig, (1933), III, ii, 125(b) then in the Kent Gallery (possibly part of the set reported in E.A.B.Barnard and A.J.B.Wace, 'The Sheldon tapestry weavers and their work', *Archaeologia* 78, (1928), 255-314, (303,n.2), with useful illustrations, henceforth Barnard and Wace; a *Farewell* illustrated in E Sachs *International Studio* 94, (1929), 78; another *Farewell* listed in the Frau Budge sale Paul Graupe Berlin 27/29 September 1937 lot 438, present whereabouts unknown; a *Repentance* and a *Return* incorrectly catalogued for the Henry Barton Jacobs sale, Sotheby Parke-Bernet New York, 10 December 1940, lot 842, now <http://metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/120045437> and <http://metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/120045438> are the two pieces with contemporary figures in the vertical borders, illustrated E. A. Standen, *European post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York. (1985), 2, no.120; another example of the *Expulsion*, now Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York, 1950-13-1.

The Society's tapestry displays characteristics from both groups described above. The upper and lower borders, A and C, contain the figures seen on the first group, separated, however, by a floral ground very similar to that found in the tapestries called Sheldon.¹⁰ Like these, each scene is set within an arch. But whereas the arch on 'Sheldon' tapestries breaks into a scroll at its centre and is always decorated with quatrefoils, trefoils and a long leaf alternating off a stem on a red ground, the Society's piece, and six examples of other themes, classed by analogy as Barcheston work, break with this format. In the *Circumcision*, the arch is decorated as on the Society's tapestry, but is a discontinuous line; in two scenes from the *Abraham story* in a private collection the arch carries the bosses also seen here.¹¹ The closest comparison lies with five small pieces, probably inter-related, showing scenes from the Biblical story of *Susanna*, separated by hunters matching the Society's two.¹² Their appearance and dimensions are very similar; each piece has ragged sides but a finished top and bottom edge with the running trefoil and leaf on a red ground. They might once have combined in the same way as the Society's pieces, to form a border containing narrative scriptural scenes.

Should these comparable, but not slavishly similar, examples lead to the conclusion that the Society's tapestry too might be attributed to the workshop thought to have been brought into existence at Barcheston?

Place of origin: an attribution to Mr Sheldon's venture at Barcheston ?

The pieces discussed here certainly call to mind the style of the items of domestic furnishing, claimed only in the 1920s as the output of a workshop in William Sheldon's manor house at Barcheston, near Shipston on Stour, Warwickshire.¹³ Long forgotten,

¹⁰ In concept if not in execution, comparable examples are the Edinburgh *Virtues* and the *Sudeley* hanging, Barnard and Wace, plates li, lv and a depiction of *Judith* where an arch frames the central theme, itself set within a floral ground, *Loan Exhibition Depicting the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, 22&23 Grosvenor Place London 26 January - March 1933, Cat no.320, illus in the deluxe edition.

¹¹ E.A. Standen, *European post-Medieval Tapestries*, 2, no. 122; . <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/228981?rpp=30&pg=1&ft=tapestry%2c+circumcision&pos=1>

¹² The Mayorcas Collection, Christie's, London, 10/11 February 1999, lot 297. One of the Society's hunters is close to the figure on an unpublished fragment in the Victoria and Albert Museum, T.645-1993, http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p24_views_huntsman.htm

¹³ Barnard and Wace, *passim*. Wood's remark reads 'Richard Hyckes was bound apprentice to a Dutch arras weaver in Holland by Ralph Sheldon (who built the great house at Weston anno 1588) and being out of his time settled at Barcheston and made and weaved those fair hangings that are in the dining room at Weston.' Bodleian

identification of its products, large or small, was unsupported by firm evidence of any sort. The workshop's existence was based on the terms of William Sheldon's will, written in 1570, and seemingly substantiated by a remark offered by Anthony Wood, a seventeenth century Oxford diarist, that *Ralph Sheldon* (1537-1613) had sent one Richard Hyckes abroad to train as a tapestry weaver. The workshop he directed on his return was, in the 1920s, thought to have employed local labour and was presumed to be a commercial enterprise. It followed that there must be products.

That research, oft repeated, is now in course of revision. In the light of more easily available documents and many more tapestries, many of its conclusions can be shown to be incorrect.¹⁴ William's epitaph, composed by his son Ralph, contradicts Wood's statement. It says that William Sheldon introduced the art of tapestry weaving and set aside lands and monies for the maintenance of the craftsmen, echoing the intriguing provisions of the will Ralph witnessed. Landowner in Worcester-and Warwickshire, four times MP and sheriff for Worcestershire and loyal servant of four Tudor sovereigns, William provided funds for loans to men once, then or in the future in the employment of Richard Hyckes and two partners about whom little is known. Hyckes, as a later antiquary hints, could very easily have been a Flemish weaver who, with his team, sought refuge from the wars of Philip II in the Low Countries. The loans, however, were available to native or stranger. The latter was a legal term denoting someone born abroad; its significance has previously been ignored. The loans were probably intended to give the recipient the chance to set up independently, having served apprenticeship, or worked, at Barcheston. Later, Sheldon gave his manor house to Hyckes rent-free, on condition that he wove or organized the weaving of arras, tapestry and a range of cloth fabrics now collectively known as the 'New Draperies'; the necessary techniques for their weaving were more familiar to Flemings than to the English. Once seen as unique, Sheldon's scheme should now take its place as one of many mid-sixteenth century ventures aimed at stimulating the economy.¹⁵ Providing capital to give young men the chance to start in business was not uncommon; neither was an invitation to a stranger master, then

Library, Oxford, Ms Rawlinson D 807, f.15. For his biography see http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP35BIOGRichard_Hyckes.pdf

¹⁴ W.Hefford, 'Flemish Tapestry Weavers in England 1550-1775', in *Flemish Tapestry Weavers Abroad*, ed. G.Delmarcel, Louvain (2002), 43-61; H. L. Turner, 'Finding the Weavers;' Richard Hyckes and the Sheldon Tapestry works', *Textile History*, 33, (2002), 137-161.

¹⁵ J Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*, Oxford (1978), 70-74.

facilitated to pass on his skills. Sheldon's intentions were out of the ordinary only insofar as weaving of arras and tapestry was not an existing industry in England, but was one which could be introduced. His motives are illuminated by two further sentences in the will; that tapestry weaving was a trade in which young men could be trained and practice of the skills acquired would reduce the amount of money paid by Englishmen to merchants abroad to acquire such goods. In the contemporary context, Sheldon hoped to alleviate the poverty of south Warwickshire and to reduce the adverse balance of payments. Both were problems exercising the minds of contemporaries.¹⁶

To what extent Barcheston was a production centre, rather a training school, is now more doubtful. The 1920s' conclusions were based on forty-six tapestries, attributed without firm documentary evidence such as contract or accounts, without marks or monograms and on very insecure grounds of assumption and association. Other, more telling, evidence was ignored. Elizabethan governmental correspondence and a range of civil and ecclesiastical documents record the large numbers of Flemings working in the luxury trades who settled in London.¹⁷ At least 110 were tapestry weavers. At Barcheston, however, only twelve weavers can be firmly traced. Eight of them, all with local ties, left at an age which suggests they had completed an apprenticeship to work in the royal tapestry repair department in the Great Wardrobe in London, of which Hyckes was the head. This may have represented a secure if unexciting livelihood, but it does suggest that Sheldon's commercial success was limited. Only three wills of weavers at Barcheston survive in Worcester diocese; another three were proved in London. The results of Sheldon's venture therefore seem to accord with his stated aims of training young men to exercise a skill once the preserve of Flemings. The presence of a hitherto unsuspected émigré community in London, and thus of an embryonic industry, means that it is no longer a simple matter to assign to Barcheston pieces which, like the Society's tapestry, demonstrate apparent kinship to the stylistic traits defining the style.

The criteria isolated for distinguishing Barcheston work were offered as a tentative reconstruction and in the knowledge that the picture would change. Nevertheless those

¹⁶ H. L. Turner, 'Finding the Weavers', 151-2; and H.L. Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House and their influence on the image of the tapestries called Sheldon: a re-assessment', *Antiquaries Journal*, 88, (2008), 313-346, on-line at <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP41Chastletonrevision.pdf>

¹⁷ R.E.G. and E.F. Kirk, *Returns of Aliens dwelling in the City and Suburbs of London*, Publications of the Huguenot Society of London, Quarto Series, 10 in four parts, (1900-1908); W. Hefford, 'Flemish Tapestry Weavers', 43-61; H. L. Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House', now on-line, n. 16.

conclusions have held the field. Three large-size sets, all special commissions and each containing a woven date, (the county *Maps* 1588, *Judah and Tamar* and the *Judgement of Paris* 1595, and the *Four Seasons* 1611), were attributed, solely on the basis of assumptions. They bear scant resemblance to smaller items. One group of the latter showed a floral ground; a second depicted figures beneath arches or arcades and the third were very small but richly woven. The Society's pieces cross the borders of the first two categories; they share the leaf and trefoil border frequently decorating the arch seen on many Sheldon products which originated with ateliers in the Low Countries, not in England.¹⁸ Certain peculiarities of presentation in the arch, already described, sit uneasily with the tapestry's floral ground, which has apparent similarity to the floral ground found in, but not exclusive to, Sheldon work.¹⁹ Most Sheldon tapestries are without a sixteenth century provenance although the majority have come to light in 1920s England. As yet, few forensic tests subject tapestry to the sort of examination routinely applied to archaeological finds, though no test is likely to be capable of isolating a particular workshop. Identification proceeds by stylistic comparison alone. No help is to be gained from the source of the narrative design, which remains undiscovered despite extensive searches. Like so much inspiration behind Elizabethan decorative motifs, it is almost certain to be of continental origin.²⁰ The models for the flowers were almost certainly copied from one of the many plant books inspired by the work of Leonard Fuchs, 1542,²¹ and the hunters derived from the *Standebuch* of Jost Amman.²²

It should, however, be remembered that the label Sheldon originated not in the sixteenth century, but with the researchers of the 1920s. It is at present debatable how much value it retains except as a cover-all phrase; designation of any tapestry as Sheldon should probably be understood as a generic term, representing work executed somewhere in England rather than as an attribution of this, or any other tapestry, to Barcheston. It is a fine distinction

¹⁸ G. Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestries*, London (1999), 185.

¹⁹ For example in a piece attributed by E.Hartkamp-Jonxis and H.Smit, eds., *European Tapestries in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*, Amsterdam (2004), no.75, is infinitely superior to most work called Sheldon.

²⁰ A.Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: the influence of continental prints 1558-1625*, Yale, (1997).

²¹ A. Arber, *Herbals, their origin and evolution*, 3rd edition revised W. Stearn, Cambridge (1986); F. De Nave, and D. Imhof, eds., *Botany in the Low Countries, end of the 15th century-ca.1650*, Antwerp (1993).

²² Jost Amman, *Standebuch*, facsimile as *The Book of Trades*, intro. B. A. Rifkin, Dover New York (1973), 46, which also inspired Burrell Collection, Glasgow, 47.24.

often hard to grasp. The evidence now available points to far wider variation in styles than might plausibly be expected of a single workshop; some examples should almost certainly be attributed to one of several small workshops run by the émigré Flemish weavers resident in London, England's consumer capital. Their presence there is at least as firmly documented as men associated with the Barcheston venture, and it is paralleled by settlements of their compatriot cloth weavers at Sandwich, Canterbury, Maidstone and Colchester.²³ The need to appeal to the English market and to follow fashion would dictate similarity of style which all too often is a less proficient version of products made in the larger, more skilled continental ateliers. Comparisons of this sort were ignored by the early researchers.

Conclusion

The fact that the Society's tapestry, undocumented and too small to carry a mark, combines characteristics which can be paralleled in tapestries of late sixteenth or early seventeenth century date, but which cannot yet be firmly associated with place or Master, makes it virtually impossible to say where, by whom or for whom this piece was woven. Its nature, as a frame or border, is unusual, and it was almost certainly a commissioned piece, not a stock item. Nevertheless, its original function remains as much a mystery as its original owner. It is likely that the piece should be ascribed to a small, anonymous workshop functioning around 1600, most probably in England, possibly somewhere in Holland.

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²³ N. Harte, *The New Draperies*, Oxford (1997).