



ENGLISH HERITAGE

THE DARNLEY STATE COACH AT COBHAM HALL

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THE STATE COACH AT COBHAM HALL

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Illustrations

1 Description

The coach [illustrations 1-2] was described in the 1957 sale catalogue thus:

THE STATE COACH OF THE EARLS OF DARNLEY. The body, for two persons, in finely-carved giltwood surrounding shaped panels of nailed black leather and with a hood elaborately nailed and bordered with brass bosses and supporting six finials in the form of earls' coronets; the doors on either side painted within borders of fruit and flowers; the frame carved in high relief with lion masks, tritons, dolphins and a variety of scrolling foliage and flowerheads, the door hinges surmounted by free-standing brass portrait busts of Roman Emperors, the support of the coachman's seat carved with the heads of philosophers wearing laurel garlands and footrest supported by prancing dragons; the massive leather braces with brass clasps with the Darnley crest and coronet and with masks of satyrs; the footman's stand also carved with the coat-of-arms and motto of the family, the lower part with the head of a warrior wearing a plumed helmet in full relief; the wheels painted red and gilt and the shafts issuing from the mouth of lions; 16ft. 5in. long excluding the shafts, believed to have been made in 1715.¹

2 Early History down to 1760

The most recent guide to Cobham Hall describes the coach as 'built about 1715...of Italian workmanship'.² The date seems very plausible, but the attribution to Italians (a traditional and widespread red herring in art history) is more open to debate.

Before his ennoblement John Bligh (1687-1728), an affluent Anglo-Irish landowner with extensive estates in County Meath, was described by Dean Swift as 'A puppy of a figure with a fine chariot'.³ It is highly tempting to relate this to the state coach now at Cobham. Bligh became Lord Clifton of Rathmore in the Irish peerage in early 1721, and then viscount Darnley in 1723 and earl of Darnley in 1725.⁴ The heraldic enrichment, in the form of painted panels on the door and brass coronets on the roof of the carriage, do not provide firm clues to the dating of the coach. They could easily have been added later in response to the rising aristocratic status of the family which followed on from John Bligh's marriage to Lady Theodosia Hyde, a descendant of the House of Stuart and heiress to the Cobham estate, in 1713.

The newly created earl, eager to establish his status and demonstrate his considerable means, would have been a highly likely patron of so grand a coach as this one. He had married greatly above his own station, and he may well have been uncertain of his social standing. A date of c.1713 might be advanced on circumstantial grounds, or perhaps a more likely one is that of 1721-25, when his advancement to the peerage made the possession of such a coach all the more desirable. The coronation of George II in 1727 might possibly provide another likely date of manufacture, shortly before the 1st earl's death in 1728.

¹ Sotheby and Co., *The Valuable Contents and Household Furnishings of Cobham Hall*, 22nd-23rd July 1957, lot 474, p.56.

² *Cobham Hall Kent* (English Life publications, 1987), n.p.

³ Quoted in Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, *This Was a Man. The Biography of the Hon. Edward Vesey Bligh, Diplomat – Parson – Squire* (1949), 34. Unfortunately the origin of this quotation have not been found in any modern editions of Swift's letters.

⁴ *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage* (1975 ed.), 729.

As to where the coach was manufactured, there are two principal likelihoods. Darnley divided his time between Ireland, his family's traditional base, and London. Increasingly, it was the later city that he dwelt in. Although an Irish peer, he spent sufficient time in London for him to have almost certainly commissioned Giacomo Leoni to design a house for him in Burlington Gardens, Mayfair in 1721 but he did not, in the event of his wife's early death, occupy it. He is also known to have been a subscriber to the Royal Academy of Music in London,⁵ and by 1729 the Darnleys were numbered among absentee Irish landlords.⁶ Stylistically, however, there is an exuberance and sheer bizarreness to the coach's carving which might well point to Irish manufacture.

The 2nd earl of Darnley (1715-1747) inherited his father's title and estates in 1728 while still a minor. He was among the most prominent of the Darnleys, serving as Lord-in-waiting to Frederick, Prince of Wales from 1742; in 1737-38 he had been Grand-Master of the Order of Freemasons, and he may have used this coach for processional purposes.

Few documentary sources survive which relate to the first or second earls of Darnley. Among the earliest possible references to the coach is found in the bank accounts of John Bligh, 3rd earl of Darnley: in 1757 he was paying excise duty in England on his silver (all 4,000 oz. of it) and on his three four-wheel carriages and three two-wheel carriages.⁷

3 Later History

The coach makes an appearance in the several inventories of goods belonging to the earls of Darnley after their deaths. In the 1781 inventory of goods of the late 3rd earl of Darnley, thirteen coaches or carriages were recorded (of which two were in London).⁸ Among them was listed an 'old state chariot' which is presumably the vehicle in question. The 4th earl's inventory⁹ makes mention of 'an antique State Chariot richly carved and gilt' as well as six others.

The coach attained some fame in 1860, when the painter William Powell Frith (best known for 'Derby Day' and other hugely popular genre scenes) exhibited a painting of the celebrated highwayman Cluade Duval at the Royal Academy [illustration 3]. It attracted much attention, and today hangs in Manchester City Art Gallery. Frith described how he came to know of the existence of the state coach at Cobham in his autobiography. He does not name his informant, but it was very likely Charles Dickens, a close friend, and a near-neighbour of Cobham Hall; after his death in 1870 his sons gave his writing chalet to Lord Darnley as a token of friendship. Frith writes:

I have forgotten who it was that told me I might find a carriage nearly, if not quite, as old as the days of the "merry monarch," at Cobham Park, the seat of Lord Darnley, to whom I

⁵ *Survey of London* 32 (1963), 451-57.

⁶ Esmé Wingfield-Strafford, *The Lords of Cobham Hall* (1949), 152.

⁷ Coutts Bank Archives, ledgers of Coutts and Campbell, ledger 32, f.106v.

⁸ Medway Archives U565/E123, *An Inventory and Appraisalment of Part of the Goods and Chattels of the late Earl of Darnley*, 1.

⁹ V&A, National Art Library, MS 86.00.9, f.155v.

immediately wrote for permission to make a sketch of it, if the news of such a relic were true. I here quote from a letter written to my sister at the time:

“Lord Darnley was very civil, and sent me permission. I went and found the quaintest old thing you can conceive, all begilt and carved, with such great leather straps and buckles, and the queerest seat for the driver and the footman behind. To think of the old carriage outliving its occupants so long! How they must have gone to Court in it, in their flounces, swords and ruffles. There it is, and there they are not....”

4 The Coach as a Victorian Curiosity

Various guide books make mention of the coach as being among Cobham’s sights of interest. It was illustrated in a tourist’s handbook entitled *The Pictorial Guide to Cobham* of 1844, which went through various editions, and which stated that the coach was kept in the stables to the south-east of the house; the guide was uncertain whether it belonged to the period of Mary, Queen of Scots, or of Charles II.¹⁰ Neither was its exact age decided upon in William Orr’s *Summer Excursions in the County of Kent* of 1847, which illustrated the vehicle [illustration 4]:

We pass through a brick gateway, contiguous to the stabling, where we will, for a few minutes, halt to obtain a sight, which is freely allowed, of a curious carved carriage, a sort of miniature state-coach, richly painted and gilt, remnanting of the olden time, and said to be the veritable vehicle in which Mary, Queen of Scots, rode, after her marriage with the Earl of Darnley; another account connects it with the time of Charles the Second; -- and, of ourselves, we freely confess that we are not sufficient antiquarians in such matters to decide between the two.¹¹

S.C. Hall’s popular *The Baronial Halls, and picturesque Edifices of England* of 1848 contained a vignette of the coach.¹² Elizabeth Jane Brabazon’s *A Month at Gravesend* (2nd ed. 1864) mentioned that it had lately been removed from Cobham Hall.¹³ Its destination is stated by John Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Kent* in 1877: ‘an ancient chariot... formerly preserved in the coach-house, is now at the South Kensington Museum on loan’.¹⁴ Henry Cole of this museum had written a long and fulsome account of Cobham and its treasures under the pseudonym of *Felix Summerly’s Day’s Excursions Out of London to Erith: Rochester: and Cobham in Kent* which was published in 1843.¹⁵ Although he did not single out the coach for special mention, he would have been familiar with the vehicle and may well have been instrumental in securing the loan from the 6th earl of Darnley. How long the coach remained at South Kensington is unclear: it cannot have been for very much longer as *Black’s Guide to Kent* in 1886 states that:

Among the curiosities of Cobham is preserved a strange old chariot, popularly supposed to have carried Queen Elizabeth on her visit to Cobham in 1559; but its workmanship contradicts the tradition, and cannot, we fear, be ascribed to a remoter date than the reign of William III. The black leather panels are lined with green velvet.¹⁶

¹⁰ Op. cit., 15.

¹¹ Op. cit. 219.

¹² Op. cit. (n.p.).

¹³ Op. cit. 140.

¹⁴ Op. cit. (4th ed. 1877), 86.

¹⁵ This appeared first in *The Athenaeum* in 1842.

¹⁶ Op. cit. (10th ed. 1886), 51.

5 Twentieth Century History

The coach spent a considerable period thereafter in Dublin, where the city museum displayed it: this may well reinforce the suggestion that the coach is of Irish origin. It was brought back to Cobham by the 8th earl of Darnley, who wished to use it in the 1953 coronation, but legend has it that it was refused a certificate of road worthiness. The *Kentish Messenger* of April 3rd 1953 ran an article entitled 'Kent Links with the Coronation' which reported the return of the coach from Dublin in 1952, and stated that it had been there for fifty years. It was subsequently stored outside, under a tarpaulin, in the west court of Cobham Hall before being despatched to a coach builder in Meopham for repair and restoration.¹⁷ At the time of Maurice Craig's inspection on behalf of the Historic Buildings Council in 1955 (in which report he called it 'a resplendent vehicle of the very early 18th century') the carriage was on display in the Picture Gallery on the first floor of the north range.¹⁸ It was here at the time of the room being photographed by the RCHME in 1954 [illustration 2].

The coach finally left the ownership of the Darnleys at the great Cobham sale in July 1957.¹⁹ It was the final lot in the entire sale, and was purchased (along with a number of other outstanding objects belonging to Cobham Hall, such as the Snetzler organ) by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works. In 1963 the state coach was one of the items lent by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works to the new occupants (and later the owners) of Cobham Hall: the Westwood Educational Trust Ltd.²⁰ It is now one of the Secretary of State's chattels for which English Heritage has curatorial responsibility.

6 Context

British state coaches are extremely rare. The earliest extant example is that of 1603, presented by Elizabeth I to Tsar Boris Godunov and now in the Kremlin Armoury Museum, Moscow.²¹ This, according to Stuart Piggott, is 'the earliest surviving English carriage of magnificence, the next being the Gold State Coach of George III, built in 1762'.²² This is not correct on two grounds: it ignores the Darnley state coach, and, even more surprisingly, it overlooks the 1757 Lord Mayor of London's state coach of 1757 which is on display in the Museum of London (and which Piggott illustrates elsewhere). Both of these latter coaches are even more sumptuous than the Cobham example, the royal coach (on display in the Royal Mews at Buckingham Palace) being designed by Sir William Chambers in 1760 and painted by Cipriani, no

¹⁷ Information from Lord Darnley, December 2000. The 1987 guide to Cobham Hall named the repairer as Mr Lesley Willis and his father.

¹⁸ A copy of report is at PRO, HLG 126/75.

¹⁹ Sotheby's sale catalogue, lot 474. Sotheby and Co., *The Valuable Contents and Household Furnishings of Cobham Hall*, 22nd-23rd July 1957, lot 474.

²⁰ Agreement dated 28th May 1963; copy on file in English Heritage's Guildford office.

²¹ Stuart Piggott, *Waggon, Chariot and Carriage* (1992), 155-57 and pl.s 14-15. There is a model of this in the Science Museum. It appears to have undergone considerable later alteration.

²² *Idem.*, 157.

less,²³ and the Lord Mayor's being designed by (Sir) Robert Taylor, with paintings attributed again to Cipriani.

7 Assessment

Stylistically, the coach is an elaborately wrought Baroque carriage which can be dated to c.17-15-20. It shows no signs of the rich yet disciplined classicism associated with William Kent's or James Gibbs's influence on the decorative arts from the 1720s onwards. Closer parallels are to be drawn with furniture and even decorative carving on ships and state barges. There is a riot of figure carving and exuberant decorative work too; there is also florid cast bronze work too. It is decoratively riotous rather than elegant, and of very considerable appeal. It appears to lie outside the mainstream of London-produced decorative art, and an attribution to an Irish workshop has certain historical justifications behind it. Its 1952 restoration had some regrettable aspects, and it could benefit greatly from sympathetic conservation. It may not be in the best of condition at present, but its rarity and intrinsic quality are not to be under-estimated. It is an outstanding vehicle, closely connected with Cobham Hall, and of very considerable rarity.

8 Further Investigation

An authority on eighteenth century coaches is David Honour, a freelance architect formerly with the Government Historic Buildings Advisory Unit in London Region (and contactable through them). The Museum of London has some information on the Lord Mayor's Coach, as does the Royal Household on the 1760-62 royal state coach. The Furniture Department of the V&A should be able to shed light on the decorative sources of the carving. Engravings of the Coronation and Lord Mayor's Processions ought to yield useful comparative views of other carriages. The literature on coaches and carriages does not appear to be extensive, but there are several titles which might repay investigation.²⁴ The Dublin Museum (or its present reincarnation) might hold material relating to the early twentieth century loan; the V&A might possibly have material dating to the nineteenth century loan to South Kensington Museum. There remains much uncatalogued material relating to the earls of Darnley at the Medway Archives at Strood which might possibly shed further light. The dendrochronology option would appear to be rather a drastic one. Detailed paint analysis might reveal whether the exiting painted panels are on top of earlier layers.

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14th December 2000.

²³ On the royal state coach see Joan Coutu, 'William Chambers and Joseph Wilton' in John Harris and Michael Snodin eds., *Sir William Chambers. Architect to George III* (1996), 179-81.

²⁴ Such as G.A. Thrupp's *A History of Coaches* (1877) and Sir Walter Gilbey Bt.'s *Early Carriages and Roads* (1901).

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 The Darnley State Coach (ex 1987 English Life guidebook, *Cobham Hall*).
- 2 The State Coach on display in the Picture Gallery in 1954 (NMR, AA54/4800)
- 3 William Powell Frith, *Claude Duval*, 1860 (Manchester City Art Gallery)
- 4 Vignette from *Summer Excursions in the County of Kent* (1847), 219.