Factsheet

Key objects in the Henry VIII: Dressed to Kill exhibition at the Tower of London

The armours of Henry VIII on display in the Henry VIII: Dressed to Kill exhibition were made to be worn by the king himself almost 500 years ago. For this reason they give us a wonderful impression of his proportions, his great sense of style and his tremendous pride...and reveal how his body changed from young man to old.

‘Horned Helmet’ presented to King Henry VIII by the Emperor Maximilian I 1511–14, Austrian (last displayed at the Tower of London in 1995)

- It is believed that the extraordinary Horned Helmet is all that remains of a suit of armour presented to King Henry VIII by the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I around 1514, probably the finest armour ever seen in England
- It was made by Konrad Seusenhofer, the master workman of the Emperor’s Imperial armour workshop at Innsbruck, as a diplomatic gift for the young King Henry VIII, who was already the Emperor’s ally against the French
- The helmet was inaccurately described in 17th century and later displays at the Tower of London as part of the ‘armour of Will Somers’, Henry VIII’s court jester
- In recent years huge academic arguments have raged over the authenticity of the helmet. Whether, for example, the ram’s horns and spectacles were originally part of it, or added later, and above all why such a bizarre object should have been given by one monarch to another. These arguments have never been completely resolved, and the helmet remains an enigmatic survival and an extraordinary work of art
- Dressed to Kill also includes a superb boy’s armour, made for the future Charles V, which gives an idea of the magnificence
of Henry’s lost armour that matched the ‘Horned Helmet’. Charles’s armour (on loan from Vienna) was made at the same time by the same master armourer in Innsbruck. It features ornamental, fretted silver-gilt panels of a kind that once decorated Henry’s armour too.

The ‘Burgundian Bard’ presented to King Henry VIII by Maximilian I about 1511-15, Flemish
(last displayed at the Tower of London in 1995)
- This horse armour, or bard, is a very fine example of armour with embossed and engraved decoration. With the ‘Horned Helmet’, formed part of the gift of armour to Henry VIII from the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I
- It is beautifully decorated and the entire surface was silvered and at least partly gilded, though little silver and none of the gilding has survived
- The maker of this piece stamped his mark, an M and crescent, on the horse armour. It had been thought that this was Martin van Royne (or de Prone) of Brussels, who was later in Henry’s own employ as master armourer in his newly formed royal armour workshop at Greenwich. However in 2006 the maker was identified as Guillem Margot, an armourer of Brussels commissioned by Maximilian I to make numerous important armours, particularly bards

‘Silvered and Engraved’ armour of King Henry VIII, probably Flemish, about 1515
(on permanent display at the Tower; redisplayed for the exhibition)
- This is the earliest of Henry’s surviving armours, dating from about 1515 when Henry VIII was a young man and only six years into his reign
• Because it would have fitted his body fairly closely, this armour shows us Henry’s athletic physique as a young man – a stark contrast with the 1540-45 armours which show his enormous body towards the end of his reign

• The decoration on the armour commemorates the marriage of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon by using their patron saints as themes for its decoration: on the breastplate a figure of St George (patron saint of England) and on the backplate is St Barbara

• The decoration of the horse armour matches that of the man’s armour, and is based on scenes from the lives of the two saints. At the front of the peytral, the piece protecting the horse’s chest, is the iconic scene of St George slaying the dragon

• The lower border of the bard is decorated with the King’s motto DIEU ET MON DROIT ('God and my Right', referring to the divine right of the monarch to rule) interspersed with pomegranates (the symbol of Katherine of Aragon) and the rose, the symbol of the Tudors

Foot combat armour of King Henry VIII, English, about 1520
(Last on display at the Tower of London in 1995)

• The foot combat armour is one of the most remarkable survivals of this type of armourers’ work. It weighs in at a staggering 42.7kg (94lb). The measurement around its chest is 111.5cm (44in) and at the waist is 96cm (38in). The armour is 1.85m (6’ 1’’) tall

• It was commissioned for Henry VIII to wear in combat at the great tournament between the English and the French courts in 1520 - the Field of Cloth of Gold, held exactly on the border between the English and French lands in northern France. However, it was never worn because the French changed the rules within
three months of the event. Work on this armour was abandoned - it remains unfinished and undecorated. The Tonlet armour replaced it at the tournament.

- The armour is technically quite remarkable. It has many features that were to become characteristic of Greenwich production and others that were highly unusual. These include sets of articulating lames inside all the joints of the body, contrived to enable all the limbs to move while protecting the entire body. For this reason NASA studied the construction of this armour with Royal Armouries experts when they designed the first space suit in the 1960s.

- In the 17th century records show that the armour was still ‘rough from the hammer’ (i.e. unpolished) but in the 18th or 19th century soldiers stationed at the Tower were tasked with ‘cleaning’ it, removing the original black finish in the process. However, one small portion of the gorget, hidden below the breastplate to which it is bolted, preserves the original surface.

**Tonlet armour of King Henry VIII, English, about 1520**

*(Last on display at the Tower of London in 1995)*

- Henry VIII wore this armour for the foot combat contest at the Field of Cloth of Gold - it replaced the foot combat armour (described above) when the rules were changed. Because of the rush to get it finished in time, it was made by adapting a number of existing pieces; only the pauldrons and the tonlet (hooped skirt) were brand new.

- The haste with which it was prepared is evident from a mistake in the etched decoration on the tonlet (skirt).

- The distinctive hooped skirt is the feature that was especially required by the new rules for participants in the combat at the
barrier

- The great bacinet is a type of helmet particularly specified for the foot combat. It was made in the famous Missaglia workshop in Milan.
- This armour is considerably lighter than the Foot Combat armour weighing ‘only’ 29.3kg (64.5lb)!
- The armour survived in Greenwich Palace until 1649 when it was transferred to the Tower of London.

Armour garniture for field and tournament of King Henry VIII, English, 1540

(on permanent display at the Tower; redisplayed for the exhibition)

- A garniture was a set of similarly decorated parts which could be assembled in a number of ways to create armours for different purposes including the joust, foot combat and war.
- This armour is the greatest of the Greenwich garnitures made for King Henry VIII. It is possible that it was intended for him to wear at a tournament held to celebrate May Day 1540. There is no record that Henry actually participated and probably his great bulk and his age (he was by this time 49) made this unlikely.
- It is one of the latest surviving armours of Henry VIII so this armour gives an exact sense of his physique later in life, a far cry from the silvered and engraved armour of 1515 when he was a young, slender and athletic man. As configured for the foot combat it weighs 35.3kg (77.9lb).
- The decoration on this armour is from designs by artist Hans Holbein the Younger - only the best for Henry, who employed Holbein as his Court Painter.
- This armour is one of two surviving with features unique to the Greenwich workshop - the earlier example is the ‘Genouilhac’ armour, probably made for the King in 1527, and
now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. This feature is a form of internal corset plate strapped to the king’s body to help support the weight of the armour. It is recorded that Francis I disclosed this secret device to Henry in 1520

- The groin defence, commonly known as the cod piece, was intended to be worn for the foot combat together with the articulated culet or rump defence. It is of considerable size – some think that this was a propaganda device to suggest Henry’s virility was not at fault despite his difficulties in fathering a son and heir. In Victorian times young women would stick pins into the lining of the codpiece in the hope of increasing their fertility...

**Wilton Anime armour of King Henry VIII, North Italian, about 1544**
*(On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1932)*

- The Wilton Anime armour was made in about 1544, and is probably Henry’s last surviving armour.
- This was one of the large armours provided for the king around the time of the war with France. Henry VIII died in January 1547, aged 55
- This large armour was formerly in the Pembroke armoury at Wilton House in Wiltshire. This collection was dispersed and the armour has been in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA for almost 70 years
- It is a North Italian armour, with a laminated cuirass of the type known as an anime. It is decorated with narrow etched and gilt bands of floral ornament. The body protection is made of many overlapping pieces, unlike the breastplates of Henry’s other armours
Sporting Gun from the personal armoury of King Henry VIII, probably English, dated 1537

- This fine quality gun bears the king’s initials HR (Henricus Rex), as well decoration including a crowned Tudor rose
- Originally this gun was fitted with a wheellock firing mechanism, but sadly this no longer survives, and now a simple matchlock is fitted
- It is thought that the initials WH may stand for William Hunt, who was appointed ‘keeper of the king’s handguns and demi-hawks’ in 1538
- It is likely that King Henry would have used this gun for target and possibly game shooting
- In the inventory made after Henry VIII’s death in 1547, there were 139 chamber pieces listed. Like this one, all were loaded at the breech using a re-loadable metal cartridge

Combination Mace and Gun, English, early 16th century

- This weapon is fitted with three gun barrels around the top spike of the mace. Their touch holes are at the base of the head and would have been fired using a hand-held match cord.
- In the 1547 inventory of Henry’s property, this type of weapon was called a ‘holy water sprinkler’, on the basis that it bore a slight resemblance to the object used by priests to sprinkle holy water at church
- In the 17th century this was nicknamed ‘King Henry ye 8ths Walking Staff’
- By the 18th century a story had developed that Henry VIII used to patrol London at night carrying this weapon!

Gun Shield, Italian, about 1540

- These experimental weapons were an attempt to combine a shield for protection with a gun for attack
These shields are believed to have been purchased from an Italian weapons dealer; Henry imported many items, including longbow staves and staff weapons, from Italy for his soldiers and he was a lavish spender in the European arms trade.

The remains of similar shields have been recovered from the Mary Rose, Henry’s warship that sank off Portsmouth in 1545, suggesting that they may have been used by troops at sea.

As well as examples of Henry VIII’s interest in technological innovation, some shields are finely decorated with classical or biblical scenes, reminding us of his role as a patron of the arts as well.

The oldest football in the world, probably English, mid 16th century
(Loaned by the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum)

- This is the oldest surviving football in the world, dating from between 1540 and 1570
- Known as a ‘bladder ball’ it is made of an inflatable pig’s bladder with a strong leather cover
- At that time football was a violent game and ordinary people were banned from playing it for fear of causing riots
- Henry even commissioned a pair of football boots for himself costing 4 shillings (about £100 today)