

No 13

HOUSE OF COMMONS GREEN

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One of the features of the Palace of Westminster which is unfailingly pointed out to visitors on a tour is the difference between the colours which prevail in the Lords and Commons parts of the building.

Green is the principal colour for furnishings and fabrics throughout the accommodation used by the House of Commons, except in some of the floors which were constructed in the post-World War II rebuilding, where a mottled brown is in use. Not only are the benches and carpets in the Chamber green, but it is the predominant colour for furnishings throughout the Commons. In particular virtually all its 19th century chairs have upholstery so coloured, Refreshment Department china has generally had green decoration, and the standard notepaper is thus printed. When the *Factsheets* series was started in 1979, nobody gave a second thought to any other colour than green being adopted for its masthead; and from 1981 volumes of *Hansard* were issued in green for the first time. In the House of Lords, red is similarly employed in upholstery, notepaper, *Hansard* etc.

The origins of the use of green by the Commons are lost in time. The first authoritative mention of its use in furnishing fabrics, however, occurs in a book of travels by one de Monconys, published in Lyons in 1663. The House, he says, *est une chambre mediocrement grande, environnée de six or sept rangs de dégrez, couverts de sarge verte, et disposez en amphithéatre...* So it would appear that 335 years ago, as now, the Commons benches were green, but upholstered in serge (or some other woollen fabric - the exact meaning of *sarge* is now lost). Then as now the rows of seats were ranged in tiers (*en amphithéatre*). A similar description of the 1780s survives from the pen of a German traveller, Carl Moritz : *All round on the sides of the House under the gallery are benches for the Members, covered with green cloth, always one above the other, like choirs in our churches...* Since the mid-19th century, upholstery has been of leather rather than cloth.

In 1670, a payment was recorded to the Serjeant Painter *for paynting green in oyle the end of the seates, and a Dorecase... at the House of Commons*. Similarly the Lord Chamberlain's accounts for 1672-3 record purchases of green woollen cloth for the Commons Chamber. As early as 1698, seats had been provided at a State trial in their distinctive colours for the two Houses. There are several references thereafter, from 1730, 1798, and 1831, and though a common 1835 print shows the benches as reddish-purple, this is probably an error - the evidence of hand-coloured prints is always quite unreliable.

It is relatively easy to explain why the House of Lords colour should be red. This probably stems from the use by kings of red as a royal colour, and its consequent employment in the room where the King met his Court and nobles. The use by the Commons of green is much less easy to explain. We know that under Henry III, the builder of St Stephen's Chapel, where the Commons sat from c.1548 to 1834, both the Chapel and the Painted Chamber were coloured green, but of course, St Stephen's Chapel was replaced under Edward I. Whether green was used in the Chapel thereafter, we are not certain. St Stephen's Chapel after 1365 must have given the impression of being a kaleidoscope of colours. The roof, we know, was blue, with gilded stars, and below the windows, above the cornice, were many painted Biblical characters and stories; the columns were decorated with *pryntes*; the east end bore depictions of the Holy Family and King Edward III and his family. Maurice Hastings argued *the whole of the building was ablaze with colour... hardly an inch of stonework was not painted or heavily gilded*. But there is no evidence that green figured unduly in these decorations. It was painted and decorated in 1346-65, in the reign of Edward III.

When the Chapel was converted after 1547 for use by the Commons, Hastings presumed that hangings or tapestry of some kind were installed to cover the religious wall decorations. Later, these were replaced by wainscot panelling. It would then have been these panels which gave a predominating colour to the Chamber, but records of their colouring do not appear to have survived.

The livery colours of the Tudors were, however, *vert and argent* - green and white; and it is by no means fanciful to imagine that just as the Tudor emblems of the portcullis and the rose (see Factsheet No 12) appeared in the Palace, so might their colours have been given prominence out of loyalty to or to curry favour with the Crown.

Before they took up residence in St Stephen's, the Commons had sat for some time in the hall of the Black Friars. There are no records of this, or of their various other meeting places, being decorated in green, but it is not, one supposes, beyond the realms of possibility that they actually brought green with them to St Stephen's.

The production of colour for cloth for hangings depended on the availability and cost of dyestuffs. The most common dyeing agent in mediaeval England was woad - extracted (though some woad was imported) from *Isatis tinctoria*, a native plant. Woad provides green or blue hues in different strengths of solution, and can also be made to produce black. Green was produced by the weakest solution, possibly from a dyebath which had already provided dye for many yards of blue or black cloth. Dull green cloth was therefore cheaper, possibly, than other colours and certainly cheaper than red, which was dyed with imported madder.

It may have been the Commons had to make do with cheaper decorations than the nobles: *the rich could indulge their taste for brilliant colours, but poorer people had to remain content with more sober plumage*, as A Chevalier sums up his *Mediaeval Love of Colour*. Perhaps, the Lords were the rich, and the Commons the poor. In any case, as Geoffrey Whitney, the 16th century poet, observed,... *our lande small choise of hues doth lende...*, so it is possible green was employed in the areas appointed to the Commons for entirely adventitious reasons.

Another, and less speculative line of thought derives from the decoration of the Painted Chamber (part of the old Palace of Westminster), which is known to have been green. Michael Davies, in his long article on the subject in *The Table*, which appeared nearly thirty years ago, postulated that the whole of the old Palace of Westminster, save the Lords' Chamber, was decorated in green. Examples from various parts of the building are cited, over a long expanse of time, though it is a little hard to believe that every refurbishing, of which there were many, and repainting over the 700 years had followed its predecessor exactly in colour.

It is not unusual for an organisation to adopt a colour as a sign of distinction. Schools and colleges, religious institutions, some companies, and political parties all do so today: in mediaeval times merchants and craft guilds, religious orders, and so on had their particular liveries. It is most probable that green became the livery of the Commons simply by association; but whatever its origins, green has become the distinguishing colour of the Commons by custom stretching over more than 300 years. There is no standard shade of green. All gradations, from pale sage to deep malachite, are in use.

The compiler of these notes has made much use of :

J M Davies: 'Red and Green', in *The Table*, 27, 1969 pp 33-40

G Chowdhary-Best: 'The Colours of the Two Houses of Parliament at Westminster' in *Notes and Queries*, March 1969, p 89

House of Lords Record Office: *The Colours of the Two Chambers*, (a note dated February 1968)

CIBA Review: Several articles on the technology of pre-industrial dyeing.

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