

Queen Victoria's Coronet - Addendum 2

A possible history of St Edward's Sapphire

Edward the Confessor who had ascended the throne in 1042 was buried in 1066 in his newly-built and consecrated church of St Peter at Westminster wearing a sapphire set in a ring. If this sapphire can be correctly identified, this particular stone will have a history that spans nearly a thousand years as a possession of the British Royal Family.

There is a legend, most probably created when the ring became a Holy Relic, regarding the origin of this sapphire written by the monk Aelred, later Abbott of Rievaulx Abbey who died in 1166. In it King Edward gave this sapphire set in a finger ring to a beggar with his blessing. The ring was returned towards the end of his reign by two English pilgrims who had received it on seeing a vision of St John the Evangelist during a visit to the Holy Sepulchre in Syria. With the return came a prophecy that the King would die within six months. The king, on recognising the ring, prepared for his death which duly took place some six months later.

The ring was buried with the king on 6 January 1066 in his tomb located before the High Altar in his newly-consecrated church at Westminster, the burial procession being depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry. On 13 October 1163 the body was transferred to a new shrine and the soon to be famous ring was removed to be shown with other Holy Relics within the Abbey; Edward's canonisation, conferred upon him by Pope Alexander III elevated the status of all the items associated with his name. He was only called 'the Confessor' after canonisation to distinguish him from a martyred saint and he is the only canonised king, the other royal saints being called Saints without due sanction from Rome.

What can be surmised from surviving rings of this early date in British public collections?

At this time many finger rings are signet rings, containing intaglio's carved into precious stones, some of which are of the finest quality. A considerable number are Greek or Roman dating from before AD 100, later mounted as a curiosity to remind a visitor or pilgrim of their time spent in the Holy Land.

In the V&A's Waterton Collection of rings, is a carved sapphire intaglio of the head of a Ptolemaic queen or goddess set in just such a later gold mount for use as a signet ring. (Plate 1) The Museum suggests that high quality Hellenistic carving was created in Alexandria just before or after the birth of Christ:

A Ptolemaic princess such as the one on this seal might therefore be used to symbolise the Virgin Mary, often shown with a veil over her head. In medieval Constantinople, gemstones engraved with subjects from classical antiquity were sometimes labelled with the names of Christian saints such as an amethyst portrait of the Roman emperor Caracalla which was recut and named St Peter.

This provides us with a scenario for the Confessor's ring which might, if one believes the legend, have contained an intaglio carved into the sapphire in Roman times; a stone carved with either an eagle, the symbol of John the Evangelist, or the portrait of a Roman Emperor, renamed for purposes of sale to a pilgrim as St John.

The Waterton sapphire ring is set in an open-backed mount, allowing it to touch the skin of the wearer. The museum suggests that direct contact of the stone with the skin was thought to convey a medicinal or amuletic benefit for sapphires were believed to have the power to dispel envy, detect fraud and prevent witchcraft.

Henry III held Edward the Confessor in great awe and reverence as both a King and a Saint, naming his eldest son, later Edward, after him. In honour of St Edward, Henry III rebuilt the Norman church at Westminster that had been consecrated by the Confessor on 28 December 1065.

It has been proposed that the removal of the ring from the coffin of Edward the Confessor may have taken place on the 13 October 1269 during the second transposition of the both saintly and royal body of St Edward the Confessor. This act was performed with considerable splendour to

a special shrine of great magnificence attended by all the prelates and magnates of his kingdom and by men from all the cities and boroughs. For many years Henry had been rebuilding the Abbey church at Westminster ready for religious services, at the same time creating a superb shrine to take the body of St Edward. The floor of this shrine was used by Holbein in his portrait of the Ambassadors. Henry intended to wear St Edward's Crown at this event but due to a dispute over the cupbearers, the arrangement was changed, but he was buried adjoining St Edward in 1272.

The sapphire ring remained in the custody of the Abbey as a Holy Relic until sequestered, as with many other Catholic objects of value, when the shrines and the Abbey were despoiled by Henry VIII at the dissolution of the Benedictine monastery of Westminster between 1538 and 1540. The Confessor's body was not on this occasion disturbed from within its coffin but it was moved and reburied in the Abbey.

Queen Mary I the daughter of Henry VII was to restore the shrine and the body of the Confessor was moved for the final time back to its original resting place on 20 March 1556. It is of interest that Queen Mary I was rarely portrayed and when a portrait is recorded she does not appear to be wearing the sapphire in its Holbein setting.

The Royal Collection website attributes the removal of the ring to the first opening of the coffin by Henry II in 1163. A possible clue to the shape and size of Edward the Confessor's sapphire may be found in the Wilton Diptych painted for Richard II before 1398 this contains a portrait of Edward the Confessor as a Saint wearing his crown and holding an over scale double cabochon, claw-set, sapphire ring, between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. (Plate 2) By this date the Confessor's sapphire ring would have been a Holy Relic at his shrine for more than a hundred years, with a religious history available to those pilgrims visiting the tomb of England's only canonised King in a then catholic Westminster Abbey.

The ring of William Wytlesey, Archbishop of Canterbury who died in 1374 (Plate 1a) suggests considerable inaccuracy in the depiction of the ring in the diptych, in the setting, to the ring itself and the ring size. An infrared reflectogram of St Edwards's left hand shows considerable changes to the position of the finger and thumb and the size of the sapphire. It is of interest that Richard II gave a ruby ring in 1388 to be used in all future coronations to the shrine of St Edward the Confessor. Was it this ring that was originally held in the hand of the Confessor for this was Richard II's personal diptych. I suggest that this ruby ring was later painted out and replaced by the sapphire in the same illustrated mount that previously held the ruby ring.

Was this done by Charles I who owned both the diptych and possibly the sapphire to give further credence to the sapphire then in his coronation ring?

The actual ring said to have belonged to the Confessor is described in an inventory of Westminster Abbey taken in 1388 as being adorned with one sapphire and eight red stones then in the custody of the Abbot.

Interestingly, of the 20 rings found in the graves of English bishops buried in medieval times, twelve are recorded as containing sapphires.

The image within the capital letter E for Edward in the Litlyngton Missal (Plate 3), which is slightly earlier in date than the Wilton Diptych, is a far less detailed yet remarkably Edward is again shown holding a sapphire ring between his index finger and thumb, whilst seated on a throne, wearing a crown and holding a sceptre.

In summary, I suggest that the Holy Relic that was St Edward's ring was probably set with an intaglio cut cabochon sapphire recut with the intaglio removed by Henry VIII for purposes of expediency regarding identification then remounted in a Holbein setting.

The Wilton Diptych shows a double-cabochon sapphire in a claw setting as the Holy Relic of the Confessor removed from the coffin of King Edward the Confessor in the Benedictine Abbey at Westminster. The ring and the diptych were not together for purposes of comparison by those visiting the Abbey and major changes appear to have been made to the painting around the ring, the finger and the thumb.

The Wilton Diptych was a treasured possession of Charles I later sold by Cromwell. There can be no doubt that his son Charles II, would have been aware of the importance and iconography of the image, the coronation sapphire ring of his father when faced with the task of replacing the family regalia in 1661.

Sitwell suggests that the sapphire may be first identified in an inventory of jewels delivered to the Treasurer and Lord Chamberlain in the reign of Edward II (1284 – 1327) to include ten crowns, two ruby rings..... and a ring containing: *A great sapphire..... If it has the virtue claimed for it, is without price.* This would suggest, although unspoken, that it was indeed the Holy Relic from the shrine of Edward the Confessor. Why it left the Confessor's chapel is unclear and as a result this reference should be considered with care.

It is of note that *A Great Saphure*, is referred to as being in the altered medieval crown of Henry VIII. Sitwell suggests that this was the jewel belonging to the Archbishop of York, confiscated by Edward IV, a stone sold for 50 pounds from the Imperial Crown by Cromwell.

General Sitwell Keeper of the Jewel House and author of *The Crown Jewels* notes:

Tradition upholds that this sapphire [In the current Imperial State Crown] is the original stone from St Edward's Ring, and there is no real reason why it should not be the same.

The answer to the problem may reside in the Cross pattée to the crown of George I which from the Grisoni illustration was set with a table cut sapphire of a similar size to that in the ring of Henry VIII. This cross pattée was remade as evidenced by a now empty frame to hold a sapphire for his coronation in July 1821. (Addendum 4, plate 15) Was the table cut sapphire then in the possession of lady Conyngham gifted to her after the death of the Princess of Wales and did the Prince Regent then substitute the sapphire for another possibly that from the cardinal's ring? (Plate 6)

I have taken the expert advice of Mr Christopher Cavey regarding the stone now known as St Edward's Sapphire currently in the centre of the cross pattée on top of the current Imperial State Crown. (Plate 1b):

7th March 2016

I was today asked to examine a sapphire and diamond set tiara which had the provenance of being designed and made for Queen Victoria in the early part of her reign.

I was asked to express an opinion as to the cut and age of the central sapphire which was clearly of a different colouration and cut from the other sapphires present in the piece.

I examined the stone in Question and my opinion was that the stone was most probably cut at a much earlier date than the construction of the tiara. It could indeed have been cut as early as the middle of the 17th Century. The stone was originally designed to be in a foil back setting as it was of shallow square step cut with the corners off. The stone also demonstrated a reasonable size culet to the rear, a common feature on earlier faceted stones.

The cut of the stone was in my opinion normal early design which lent itself for use for engraving in intaglio for use as a signet it is also similar in design renaissance stones used in other Coronation rings by monarchs of England.

I was also asked to comment on the "Saint Edward Sapphire" which is believed to be the stone set in the surmounting cross on the Imperial State Crown of Great Britain.

This stone is larger than the one in the tiara and is of obvious Sri Lankan origin, the cut is as deep as is the stone and one could easily conclude that this particular stone may well have been faceted from a deep double cabochon cut, which would in my opinion be quite likely the form of sapphire that would have been found in a 10th century ring.

It is of interest that the mount to the sapphire in the Coronet retains traces of black enamel to the rear suggesting a ring as the stone's most likely provenance.

In a recently cleaned portrait of Henry VIII dated 1542, from Castle Howard (Plate 4) now in the possession of the Philip Mould Gallery London attributed to Holbein, the king can be seen wearing, correctly, on his coronation ring finger, the first finger of his right hand, the traditional

ruby. (Plate 4a) Is this a Holy Relic using the recut Regale ruby from the shrine of Thomas a Becket or even the ruby given to the Confessors shrine at the Abbey as a future coronation ring by Richard II? On the little finger of his left hand he is wearing a claw-set ring containing a sapphire of cabochon form with many similarities to the Wytlessey ring of 1374. (Plate 4b) Is this the stone from the ring removed by the king from Glastonbury Abbey? In this context it should be born in mind that Holbein designed jewellery and I suggest that he would interpret accurately his own designs in his paintings, especially if painted by his own hand.

Philip Mould also had a portrait of a middle aged Queen Elizabeth wearing a sapphire Coronation Ring instead of the traditional ruby on the index finger of her right hand in seemingly the same or nearly the same Henry VIII Holbein mount. (Plate 5 & 5a) Is this symbol of the marriage of the sovereign to her people the historic recut cabochon sapphire ring of St Edward the Confessor, obtained from her late father Henry VIII?

General Sitwell in a reference note that is not easy to interpret but was made prior to the publication of his book *The Crown Jewels* takes the subject of royal rings to the next generation:

Elizabeth I ring does not appear to have been a new one and from the form of Charles I it appears that the ring was treated as part of the Regalia, the same being used in successive reigns.

Sitwell, in his preparatory notes for the book now in the collection of the Society of Antiquaries, states that there is a tradition that on her deathbed her Coronation Ring was sent by Queen Elizabeth as a “fair ring from a fair lady” to the future James I in Scotland.

Have we enough pictorial and anecdotal information to link the sapphire through Henry VIII and Elizabeth I via her deathbed to James I and hence to the coronation ring of Charles I and through him to his wife Henrietta Maria. Was it this ring, not the ruby-set coronation ring of James II that was put on the finger of the daughter of Thomas Coutts by the Cardinal Duke of York?

The Cardinal is certainly shown wearing a diamond-set sapphire ring, but it is not, I suggest, of the right size and shape, (Plate 6) to be the sapphire in the Coronet. The sapphire ring in the cardinal’s portrait is on the third finger of his right hand, meeting the dress code of a catholic Cardinal. The origin of that ring is of interest to us in this a most difficult quest. Did the cardinal know that this was the coronation ring of Charles I or was this an unproven history known only within the family?

The Stuart coronation ring of James II is a ruby ring that definitely descended through the Cardinal to George III and is now in Edinburgh Castle. It is a ruby “enchased” with the Cross of St George and as such it is fully described and accounted for by Sandford:

The King’s Coronation Ring is of the Figure and Dimensions in the Sculpture, being a plain Gold Ring with a large Table Ruby Violet wherein a plain Cross, or Cross of St George, was curiously Enchased

There is no entry for this coronation ring in the Jewel House accounts.

Coutts refers to the Coronation Ring of *King Charles* during his visit in 1799 without describing the stone either as a ruby or a sapphire, nor, unfortunately, did he elucidate which King Charles the Cardinal nominated as the previous owner. We do know that the Master of the Jewel House allowed for the coronation of Charles II; “A ring with a rubis” (LC 5-107 p.65). Sir Edward Walker gives a picture of this ring which is a large round stone not enchased with the Cross of St George. Therefore the coronation ring of Charles II was not that of his brother, James II. If the Coutts ring was the sapphire ring removed from the Cardinal’s finger, which would seem logical, then it may well have been a sapphire coronation ring worn by Charles I.

Charles Greville in his diary of June 24 1821 leads us towards a solution to the riddle:

...Lady Conyngham had on her head a sapphire which belonged to the Stuarts and was given by the Cardinal York to the King. He gave it [When Prince Regent in 1816] to the Princess

Charlotte, and when she died [6 November 1817] he desired to have it back, Leopold [Former husband of Queen Charlotte, who died in childbirth in 1817 was later King of the Belgians and the confidant of Queen Victoria] being informed it was a crown jewel. This crown jewel sparkled in the headdress of the Marchioness at the ball. I ascertained the Duke of York's sentiments upon this subject the other day. He was not particularly anxious to discuss it, but he said enough to show that he has no good opinion of her.

When Greville wrote this the large nearly two inches long Stuart Sapphire was in the State Crown remade for the Coronation of George IV on 19 July 1821 as per Rundell's bill:
...a very large Sapphire added to front of Crown, setting that and the large Ruby Balais around with fine Brilliants... further such a stone would be far too heavy to wear in any ladies hair.

The words used by Greville '*a sapphire that belonged to the Stuarts*' initially confused me into thinking that the stone referred to was this '*very large Sapphire to the front of Crown*' returned by the cardinal to George III.

In the context of the time the 'Stuart sapphire' was probably the central sapphire from the Cross Pattée shown on top of the Grisoni 1718 image of the Crown of George I. This was originally the new 1661 Stuart crown with the sapphire added by James II probably from the collection of his mother. This may well therefore be the stone of Edward the Confessor taken and worn by Henry VIII which has subsequently given rise to the legend of the sapphire in the centre of the Imperial crown being Edward the Confessor's sapphire.

If this famous and historic sapphire had been taken by the Prince Regent from the Stuart Crown and given to his daughter Princess Charlotte probably as early as 1816 it was on her death that the Prince Regent gave the stone to Lady Conyngham. It is recorded that on the death of George IV that the royal jewels gifted by the king were returned by the Conyngham's to the Crown on the king's death in 1830 but the stone or another very similar is in the crown a month after the ball.

When the Prince Regent decided to remake the crown in the Grisoni 1718 image prior to his coronation he may have had to find a new sapphire to replace this historic stone then in the possession of lady Conyngham. If so I suggest that this sapphire came from the Coronation Ring of Charles I as worn by the Cardinal for it is nearly the right size and shape, was this the coronation ring of Charles I or was this mere self-aggrandisement of the stone by the exiled Jacobite Stuarts either way this stone seems to have vanished.

If the ring known to the cardinal as the ring of *King Charles* contained this sapphire it was probably returned at the same time as the large Stuart Sapphire in exchange for the annuity.

With no documentary evidence the stone to the centre of the Maltese cross surmounting the current Imperial Crown of Queen Elizabeth II is stated to be the sapphire of Edward the Confessor?

It was certainly named as such long after the Imperial Crown of Queen Victoria was completed in 1838. It is not the stone in the Grisoni image nor is it the stone in the portrait of William IV in the surviving Maltese cross as it would not fit. (Addendum 4 Plates 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16a).

The question I pose to the Royal Collection is who named the large rose cut sapphire in the current Imperial Crown of England as that belonging to St Edward the Confessor and on what evidence?

Was Queen Victoria aware of the line of descent of the sapphire placed in the centre of her Coronet and was this information obtained from her uncles the Duke of York or Sussex and or the former husband of Princess Charlotte, King Leopold of the Belgians who in 1838 was her closest royal confidant?

The Charlotte/ Conyngham/ 'Stuart sapphire' from the Grisoni image, if that is what it is, is not of the quality of the sapphires set to either side in the *Queen Victoria Sapphire and Diamond Coronet* so there must be a special reason for both its incorporation and placement.

Greville in his diary on January 8, 1823 notes that the Duke of York informed him:
*... The King conceives that the whole of the late King's property devolves upon him personally, and not upon the Crown, and he has consequently appropriated to himself the whole of the money and jewels. The money did not amount to more than £120,000. So touchy is he about pecuniary matters that his Ministers have never dared to remonstrate with him, nor to tell him that he has no right so to act. The consequence is that he has spent the money, and has taken to himself the jewels as his own private property. The Duke thinks that he has no right thus to appropriate their father's property, but that it belongs to the Crown. The King has acted in a like manner with regard to the Queen's [Charlotte's] jewels. She possessed a great quantity, some of which had been given her by the late King on her marriage, and the rest she had received in presents at different times. Those which the late King had given her she conceived to belong to the Crown, and left them back to the present King; the rest she left to her daughters.
.... The Duke thinks that the Ministers ought to have taken the opportunity of the coronation when a new crown was to be provided, to state to him the truth with regard to the jewels, and to suggest that they should be converted to that purpose. This, however, they dared not to do, and so the matter remains.*

If the sapphire is the Confessor's or was even believed to be the Confessor's by George IV as indicated by the Duke of York to Greville under the sovereign it was no longer considered as a Crown possession.

The private use of such a historic stone if it was indeed given by George IV and returned by the Conyngham's after 1817 for return in 1821 or after 1821 for return in 1830 would give unspoken gravitas to Victoria's newly-created Coronet and provides an important link which would have been much appreciated by her husband Prince Albert if he had based his design of the Coronet on the coronets portrayed as crowns in the Wilton Diptych.

How the Confessor's Sapphire survived the Interregnum if still in the Royal Collection and not on the finger of Queen Henrietta Maria is unknown. Most importantly it is not considered worthy of mention by the historian Talman in his caption to the Grisoni 1718 watercolour of the State Crown of George I which would appear to contain what were later to be known as Queen Elizabeth's Pearls and the Black Princes' Balas Ruby.

The first mention of a stone that may be identified as the St Edward Sapphire is long after its inclusion in the 1838 Imperial State Crown of Queen Victoria and that was in the last half of the 19th century when these ancient stones received an uncertain pedigree; the St Edward the Confessor's Sapphire, the Black Prince's Ruby, the Stuart Sapphire and Queen Elizabeth's Pearls, make up the key historical stones in the Imperial crown, their pedigree, except for that of the balas ruby was created after 1860.

The evidence is Queen Victoria's mineralogist James Tennant who superintended the cutting of the Koh-i-Nur described in 1858 and again in 1860 without individually naming the pearls or the sapphires...

In an account of the firm of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell by George Fox, the firm's former shopman, written between 1843 and 1846, we find the following quote describing the coloured stone Imperial Crown of George IV:

The Crown of Great Britain.....was composed of Table and Rose diamonds (some of them large) indifferent Rubies, Emeralds, Sapphires & Amethysts. The Principal Jewel was a very large bad Ruby balais said (on what authority we could never learn) to have belonged to Edward the Black Prince....there was then a badly shaped Maltese Cross composed of Table and Rose diamonds and from the horizontal Arms of this Cross were suspended two very badly shaped and worse coloured Pearls.....

No mention here of Queen Elizabeth's pearls or the Stuart sapphires or for that matter a new sapphire to the centre of the Maltese Cross.

Edward the Confessor determined that coronations should in future be conducted in the Abbey at Westminster and as a result the Coronation Crown of the Sovereign has always been named after him. He deposited his Regalia with the monks at Westminster during his lifetime to be used by future English kings at their Coronation.

Logic would suggest that the recreated St Edward Coronation crown of 1661 would have been set with St Edward's Sapphire had it been either identified or I suggest more importantly available. The original St Edward's Crown was a Holy Crown set with twelve different stones including a sapphire in the band, with a continuous history from 1042 until its destruction by Cromwell under the Interregnum.

St Edward's Crown, as we know it today, is the creation of Charles II in 1661, possibly from the remnants of the Imperial Crown of Henry VIII retained in some way by Cromwell for his personal use. Cromwell was an avowed republican having refused the crown when offered in 1657 saying that *God's providence had done away with the office of king*, it taking him six weeks to come to this conclusion. If Charles II and not his mother had possession of this famous sapphire, why was it not placed in his newly created St Edward's Crown?

The answer maybe that the ring was amongst the most precious possessions of Queen Henrietta Maria mother of Charles II and that it was only available after her death in 1669 for incorporation into the crown. The few surviving documents concerning the destruction of the Regalia under Cromwell make no specific mention of the Confessor's Sapphire which means that the history of the stone was lost or that it was unavailable for him to purloin.

The Sapphire may have left the collection if taken by Queen Henrietta Maria to Europe as talisman for it could be argued that the sapphire from the Confessors Ring was the ultimate badge of sovereignty to a catholic, a Holy Relic of great value. The fact that it was taken out of the country would be seen by many as a treasonous act by the sovereign's disliked catholic wife.

This would suggest a more likely descent through the Jacobite Stuarts in exile to the Cardinal even if that descent was later based on folklore.

That such a historic royal relic should not be specifically mentioned in a Crown of England until after 1860 suggests that although Queen Victoria invoked a Stuart provenance to protect the more historic jewels in her Imperial State Crown from Salic law, she saw no reason initially to give them a history she could not accurately determine.

John Hawkins

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Plate 1. From the Waterton Collection a sapphire signet ring created from a Roman intaglio, circa 100 BC to 100 AD, mounted in England between 1275 and 1325. Collection of the V&A, Collection Number 89/1899



Plate 1a. The claw mounted sapphire ring of Archbishop William Wytlesey of Canterbury, buried in 1374, said to have been found in his tomb. It is of great interest that the ends of the oval are cut square exactly as the ends on St Edward's Sapphire in the Imperial Crown of Queen Victoria. Collection of the V&A, Collection Number 10.191/1975



Plate 1b. The Maltese cross from the top of the 1838 Queen Victoria Imperial Crown is set with this large rose cut sapphire with square ends which has no earlier history.



Plate 2. Detail of the St Edward's Sapphire showing its gold claw setting, the double cabochon shape is shown oversize to emphasise the importance of the ring which would fall off any of the fingers portrayed. The x-ray detail emphasises the shape of the claw settings to the sapphire and alteration to the painting of the stone itself.



Plate 3. The letter E from an illumination in the Litlington Missal created circa 1380, it shows King Edward the Confessor sitting on his throne with his crown and sceptre holding the ring between his forefinger and thumb of his right hand. Collection, Westminster Abbey.



Plate 4. Portrait of Henry VIII from Castle Howard dated on his Stick of Office 1542.
Courtesy Phillip Mould Gallery London.



Plate 4a. The ruby ring as would be expected on the right hand index or coronation finger of the king. Is this from the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury?

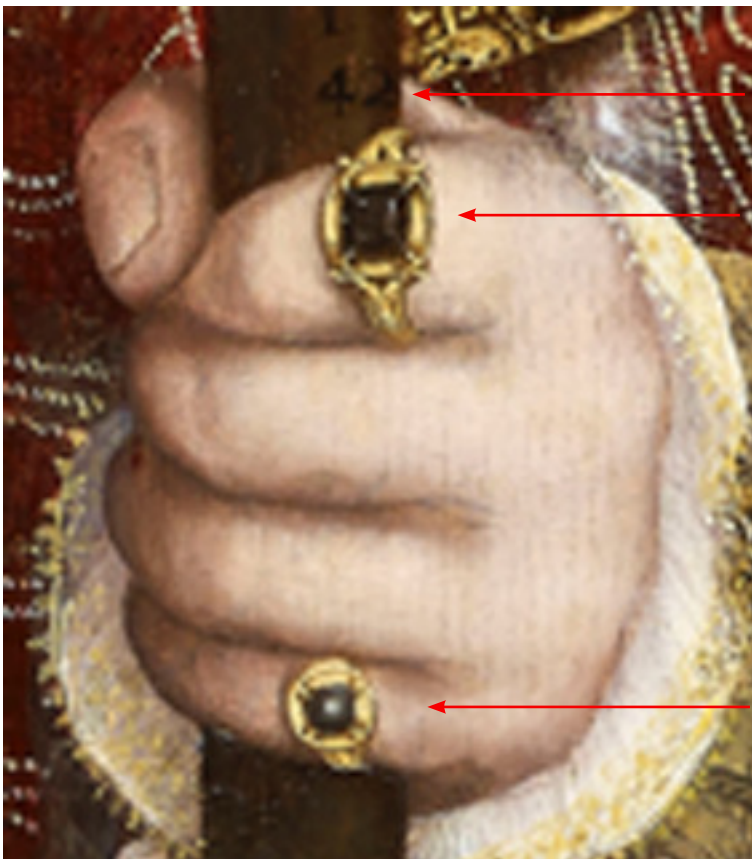


Plate 4b.
The staff dated 1542 above the ring.

A large sapphire in a Holbein setting to match the setting to the ruby above. Is this the Confessor's sapphire recut as a ring for Henry VIII?

A Sapphire in a claw mount not by Holbein the mount similar to 1a possibly from Glastonbury?



Plate 5 & 5a. An unusual late portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, wearing a sapphire as her Coronation Ring on the index finger of her right hand in a Holbein setting.

The question is: Is this the sapphire in the Castle Howard portrait worn by Henry VIII in the Holbein setting on the index finger of his left hand?



Plate 6. Cardinal Duke of York. He is wearing the sapphire pectoral cross and possibly the Charles I Stuart Coronation ring which is approximately the correct size and shape.

The single four arch small crown is slightly larger than his right hand and is still set with sapphires to the bandeau. The fleur-de-lys have been removed, but the Crown of Henrietta Maria is still apparent in the vestiges.