



## Factsheet G10 General Series

Revised August 2010

House of Commons Information Office

# House of Commons Green

### Contents

House of Commons Green	2
Symbolism of the colour green	4
The use of green in the House of Commons Chamber	4
Remodelling of the Commons Chamber	5
Further reading	6
References	6
Contact information	6
Feedback form	7

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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 are used in the Lords and Commons parts of the building. This Factsheet explains some of the reasons for this division.

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August 2010  
FS No.P3 Ed 3.4  
ISSN 0144-4689

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## House of Commons Green

Green is the principal colour for furnishings and fabrics throughout the accommodation used by the House of Commons, except in some of the carpets which were designed for the post-Second World War rebuilding, where a mottled brown was used. 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., and it is relatively easy to explain why the House of Lords colour should be red. It 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.

## Symbolism of the colour green

### Nature, faith and myth

The colour green, both before and during the medieval period, represented the bounty of nature and fertility; the colour that is all of life. In ancient myth and legend the colour appears in mysterious figures such as the 'Green Man' or the face in the leaves, the man that dies in winter and is reborn in spring, the bountiful Jack-in-the-Green, and the story of Gawain and the Green Knight. Archers wore green, all men in the Middle Ages were obliged by law to practice archery, and they became the mainstay of English medieval armies. Green was the colour of the pasture and the greenwood, of the village green used by all, in other words the colour of the countryman, the 'common' man. These legends were translated into the Christian ideals of faith, hope and charity – everlasting faith, life over death, and rejuvenation of the soul through good works. Green was used in the backgrounds of religious paintings depicting these virtues.

### The choice of medieval kings

The Plantagenet kings of England employed green for the most important rooms in Westminster Palace. Green was used in the thirteenth century by King Henry III, for his chapel of St. Stephen, and for his most private chamber – the bedchamber known as the Painted Chamber – and even for the bed itself. The back of the south wall of Westminster Hall was also painted green at this time; this was the place from which, behind a marble table upon a dais, the King made a grand display of his authority, at the coronation banquets, at the splendid feasts or presiding over the law courts.

Henry's son, Edward I, carried on the theme by building the Green Chamber, which took its name from the colour of its interior. The walls of this building were also decorated with paintings of Christ in Majesty and figures of the four Evangelists. Such a display of the colour in the principal areas of the palace must indicate a desire to show symbolically the Christian virtues. We know that the chapel was the centre of faith and that charity was dispensed to the poor in the Painted Chamber, a room of mystical significance because it was believed that St. Edward the Confessor had died there, and it was used for the lying in state of later monarchs. In addition, the State Opening was held here up to 1539 and it was the place in which the King would receive important guests.

The livery colours of the Tudors (1485-1603) were *vert and argent* (green and white). It is possible to imagine that, just as the Tudor emblems of the portcullis and the rose (see **Factsheet G9**) appeared in the Palace, so might their colours have been given prominence out of loyalty to, or to curry favour with, the Crown.

### **The colour of service**

Not only did the king use green, but the high officials of the king's household also used it for their private offices near to the Lords' Chamber. For the coronation of James II in 1685, an order was made to the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod for 'as much green serge as will hang the Archbishop of Canterbury's room, the Lord Chancellor's, the Lord Treasurer's and the Lord Great Chamberlain's, to be done in all respects as they were before.' As a calm, peaceful colour for an office it was ideal, and the noise-absorbent fabric was no doubt tacked to the walls. The House of Lords Chamber adopted crimson, but by its ordinariness, green would not challenge the authority of the king. It is not a showy colour like luxurious red, and comes as a neutral colour between the warm hue – red – and the cool one – blue. Red demands to be noticed, whilst green is camouflage, restful, harmonious, self-effacing, a chaste colour of modesty and humility lacking the spiritual and royal associations of blue.

In the background of Holbein's paintings of Henry VIII's senior courtiers, plain, unadorned green curtains appear, thereby suggesting that green was used in royal palaces such as Whitehall and Greenwich after Westminster was given up by the king in 1512.

### **Baize**

Other serviceable uses were found for green fabric, such as for covering tables where business was conducted, most notably for the meetings of the Lord Steward to manage the king's accounts at a committee known as the Board of Green Cloth – the 'board' meaning a wooden table. Presumably it was the businesslike green cloth called *baize* which was employed to cover the table.

Baize was an inexpensive fabric made at first from woven wool, and later from cotton. It came originally from France, but it was later made in England too from the sixteenth century, by refugees from France and the Netherlands. In the cloth trade it became known as 'Manchester baize' and the material was employed for serviceable items such as the coverings for the stools at the Coronation of James II in 1685. Officials in the Lords – the Lords Commissioners – even used it in 1702 in a former royal room which had been traditionally green from the thirteenth century: the Painted Chamber. A warrant ordered that the 'Chamber [be] compleatly covered with Green Manchester Bays'. The fabric was also purchased to cover the 'table where Her Majesty dines' for Queen Anne's coronation in 1702.

To this day, green baize is used to cover card tables, as well as for loose covers for dining tables before the white linen cover is put over the top of it. Eventually green baize distinguished the areas for servants who would live and work 'behind the green baize door'. It seems that the use of green in the servants quarters of the king's household extended to its use in the Commons' Chamber as well.

### **Theatres**

Theatres began to adopt the use of green from at least 1700. The colour was used widely for curtains, seats, and even the stage itself, which became known as 'The Green'. The Green Room, used for actors waiting to go on stage, has survived, at least in name, to the present time. As a theatre of debate at the centre of Parliament, it is not surprising to see the parallel employment of the colour both at the House of Commons as well as in the commercial theatre.

### The dyeing of cloth

The production of colour for cloth 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 that had already provided dye for many yards of blue or black cloth. In Elizabethan times, lichen from tree bark was used to make green dye. Dull green cloth was therefore cheaper, possibly, than other colours and certainly cheaper than red, which was dyed with imported madder. (A plant, *Rubia Tinctorum*, common to Holland)

### The use of green in the House of Commons Chamber

#### St Stephen's Chapel

Before they took up residence in the former royal chapel of St Stephen's at Westminster, the Commons had travelled the country borrowing temporarily various halls and cathedral chapter houses, but settling when at Westminster either in the refectory or chapter house of the Abbey. They also 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 beyond the realms of possibility that they actually brought green with them to St Stephen's.

We know that St Stephen's Chapel, where the Commons sat from c.1548 to 1834, had been rebuilt under Edward I (1272-1307) and Edward II (1307-1327), and completed, painted and decorated during the reign of Edward III (1327-1377). St Stephen's Chapel 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<sup>1</sup> argued that 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 on a large scale in these decorations.

When the Chapel was converted after 1548 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 decoration at high level was whitewashed to achieve a Puritan simplicity, in the same way as most other churches and chapels at this time.

The first authoritative mention of the use of green in furnishing fabrics in the Chamber occurs in a book of travels by one de Monconys, published in Lyons in 1663<sup>2</sup>. The House, he says, "*est une chambre mediocrement grande, environnée de six or sept rangs de degréz, couverts de sarge verte, et disposez en amphithéâtre...*" (is a moderately large room, surrounded by six or seven graduated rows of seats covered in green serge, and positioned in the form of an amphitheatre). So it would appear that over 300 years ago, as now, the Commons benches were green, but upholstered in serge (or some other woollen fabric; the exact meaning of serge is now lost). Then as now the rows of seats were ranged in tiers ("*en amphithéâtre*").

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Hastings *Parliament House* (Architectural Press 1950)

<sup>2</sup> De Monconys, *Le Voyage de M. de Monconys* (Lyon, 1663), p 65

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 public trial in their distinctive colours for the two Houses.

In 1685, a positive welter of green furnishing was ordered: 'the Speaker's chair and footstool to be new covered with green velvet, with a green velvet cushion, all trimmed with silk fringe; the table to be covered with a carpet of green cloth, with a silk fringe and a leather carpet to cover it; six green cloth cushions; drum lyar to draw the window curtains; the seats of the House to be mended and repaired; green serge to hang the lobby where the messengers from the House of Lords retire; green serge curtain for the serjeant's window in his little room'. [Footn. 3. Calendar of Treasury Books Vol. VIII, pt.1, p.165.

### **Remodelling of the Commons' Chamber**

Sir Christopher Wren carried out a transformation of the interior of the Commons' Chamber by installing wooden panelling, a lower ceiling and new seating. Work was completed in 1692. The medieval appearance of the chapel was thereby removed in favour of a classical style, but the use of green for some of the fittings continued. The appearance and colour may clearly be seen in a painting by Tillemans of about 1710, and a description of the 1780s survives from the pen of a German traveller, Pastor 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..."<sup>3</sup>. The Clerk's Table was also covered in green cloth.

There are several references thereafter, from 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 often unreliable. Later, green morocco leather replaced cloth for the seating. In the Victorian palace, the demarcation of the red /green into Lords and Commons areas was not so pronounced as it has become today. The Commons' Chamber only had green seating for example, whilst the curtains were brick red. Now the spread of green has taken over much decoration including wood work, fixtures and in the Commons' outbuildings, most notably in Portcullis House.

It may have been that 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 concluded in his *Mediaeval Love of Colour*. Perhaps, the Lords were the rich, and the Commons were 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 almost by accident employed in the areas appointed to the Commons.

It is not unusual for an organisation to adopt a colour as a sign of distinguishment. 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Philip Moritz, *Journeys of a German in England in 1782* (Jonathan Cape)

## Further reading

'Red and Green', in *The Table*, 27, 1969, pp 33-40

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British Monarchy website  
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