

## Somerset Decorative woodwork of the 17th century

On Sunday 18th February about 25 members gathered at Barrington Court near Ilminster in Somerset. Barrington Court is an exceptionally attractive E-shaped Elizabethan House built of local Ham stone by Lord Daubeney in 1514. Its own parkland surrounds the house and Gertrude Jekyll influenced part of the garden design. Apart from being a National Trust property, it is the home of Stuart Interiors, an organisation well known for their in-depth research of historic buildings and their carefully chosen old and new furniture and fittings to complement commissions that they are asked to undertake.

Our host was Peter Russell, a senior Director of Stuart Interiors. Peter outlined the programme for the day. During the morning he would speak about his research into fixed and portable 17th century Somerset furniture. We would then examine examples that he had assembled at Barrington Court and view his very comprehensive photographic survey. In the afternoon we would visit three churches at Mulcheney, Low Ham and Somerton where we would be able to view both fixed and portable furniture that had played an important part in his research.

Peter said that he had visited over one hundred different sites and taken three hundred photographs in his quest to learn more about 17th century woodwork in Somerset. He said that three very distinct vernacular traditions of craftsmanship could be identified based upon the following criteria. He defined the criteria as the competence of the wood carver, the degree of difficulty of his work, the inventiveness of his designs and the number of repeats he used. Broadly speaking their work coincided with geographical areas or regions of Somerset which he marked on Saxton's map of 1575. These areas were differentiated in terms of Blue, Green and Yellow zones. The Blue group equated to North and West Somerset, the Green to Central Somerset and the Yellow to the South and East of the County. The wood carver within each of these groups would have been influenced by what was around him and what he was able to observe. No doubt he would have also been influenced by pattern books and engravings from the Continent as

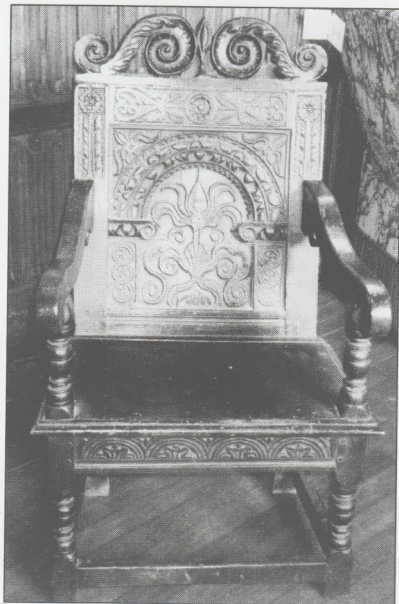


Fig. 3 17th century Somerset chair

exemplified in Anthony Wells Coles' book *'Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England'*. Peter said that a craftsman could purchase some of these patterns and engravings for the equivalent of half a day's pay.

Peter illustrated some of the design features found in Somerset by referring to a small collection of chairs that he had assembled (see Figs 3 to 5).

Cresting rails were normally placed on top of the back panel rather than being integral to it. No cresting rail ears had been found on the chairs that he had examined. Whereas arms on northern chairs tend to slope down, those in Somerset tend to be level with the seat. Both the underarm supports and the legs are normally turned. Most of the chairs feature carving below the seat rail which is not found on northern examples. Carved lunettes and quatrefoil designs appear in a number of the chairs and many of them have raked backs. Peter thought that coloured pigments may also have been used to accentuate the carving. He suggested that carving might have been produced in 'runs' and then cut in the appropriate place to fit the article concerned. He had noted its reuse as an internal structural element on a number of pieces of furniture.

Following Peter's chair discussion we were then invited to view the photographic display and some Somerset chests in another room. The high quality photographic display was a 'tour de force', superbly

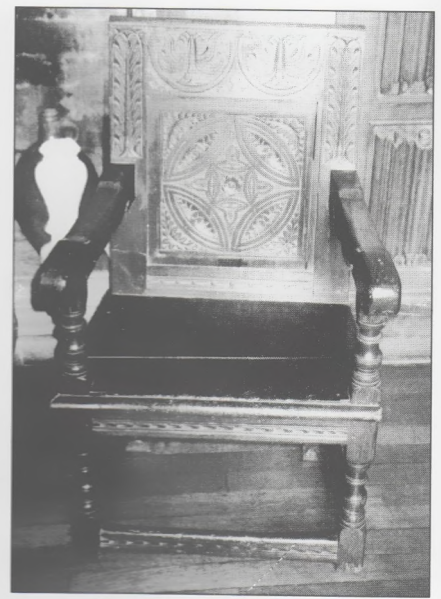


Fig. 4. 17th century Somerset chair



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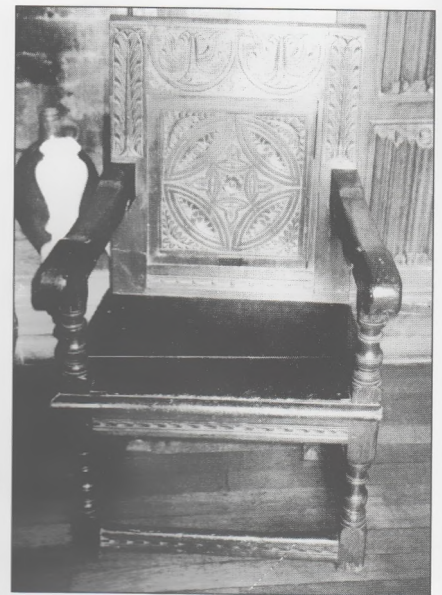


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laid out in three regional groups. Within each region both fixed woodwork such as pulpits was illustrated as well as the portable examples such as chairs, chests and tables. Detailed explanatory notes accompanied each part of the display.

Peter's findings for South and East Somerset (Yellow group) were based on visits to 15 sites. St Mary's Church, Mudford epitomised the style and technique of the carved decoration. It was competently done and quite precise in execution but lacked the freeness and adventure of the other two groups. Patterns are readily repeated, with the shell top bench ends a particular regional feature. Almost without exception the patina of this group is of a pale honey colour, with darker hues where a build-up of dirt and grease and handling had occurred. This group extends southwards and eastwards into parts of Wiltshire and Dorset, perhaps reaching as far as Salisbury.

Central Somerset (Green group) is typified by the Low Ham Church built in 1624 by the Hext family. The fixtures appear to have been little altered since 1624 and provide a useful variety of carved decorations that can be linked to over 17 other sites of fixed furniture across Central Somerset spanning a 28 year period. The motifs used are closely linked between sites. Two examples of these are the central panel from the Low Ham Pulpit, which is repeated five times in other panels from different sites. The other is the flat top to the fluted muntin carving at Isle Abbots, which is repeated five times, and is so distinctive that it suggests the same workshop, if not the same carver.

Croscombe and other parishes in north and west Somerset (Blue group) represent the most accomplished and adventurous carving of the three groups. These parishes have been grouped together on the strength of their excellence rather than a collective connection of designs. St Mary the Virgin at Croscombe has arguably the finest 17th century woodwork in Somerset. It is renowned for the quality of its craftsmanship together with the variety of motifs used. The patterns favoured in this group were more diverse and therefore repeated less frequently. Three separate parishes in this group carried out substantial carved joinery work in 1634. Mark, Thurloxton and East Brent had all installed a large pulpit, screen, gallery and in the case of East Brent, a screen with gallery above. Assuming the joiner responsible for these works undertook further unrecorded works during 1634, it is reasonable to suggest that he owned a good size workshop employing a group of skilled carvers and joiners.

Following a substantial roast lunch at The Wyndham Arms in Kingsbury Episcopi, we accompanied Peter in the afternoon on a tour of three of the churches that formed part of his research. Our first port of call was Mulcheney Church which lies in an evocative setting. Behind it are the ruins of the abbey and opposite is the medieval priest's house, one of the oldest in the country. The church was completed in the 15th century



**Fig 6 A vaulted ceiling at Mulcheney Church**

and has a spectacular painted vaulted ceiling (fig 6). This was painted between 1600 and 1620. The style of the painting is colourful and naive; that it was painted in days when such representations were frowned upon is interesting and almost unique. The angels depicted in the painting are wearing Tudor costumes and some look distinctly feminine in that they are sporting voluminous breasts! On either side of the altar we viewed two 17th century chairs; one of which had bishops' mitres as finials. We also viewed a rare working organ made c1835, which plays 25 hymn tunes and three double chants on three brass barrels.

Our next visit was to Low Ham Church. There is something incongruous about this building in that it stands not in a churchyard but in a field adjoining well-used farm buildings. It was built between 1623 and 1669 when it was consecrated. Inside we gathered round a 17th century painted pulpit (see fig 7 next page). This had a wheat-ear design in the frieze, which Peter said he had also seen used on a number of local tables. Particularly noteworthy was the arabesque pattern in the panels. Peter had seen the latter repeated five times in other churches. Surmounting the pulpit was a candle holder (see fig 8 next page) mounted on a stand with a carving of oak leaves and acorns which was thought to be contemporary with the construction of the pulpit. We moved on to examine the communion table which had turned legs at each corner joined by a



Fig. 7. Painted pulpit at Low Ham Church

moulded stretcher. The top of the table had been replaced but the frieze beneath it contained another arabesque pattern, which appeared very similar to that seen in the panels of the intricately carved Gothic rood screen (see fig 9) that was reputed to have been

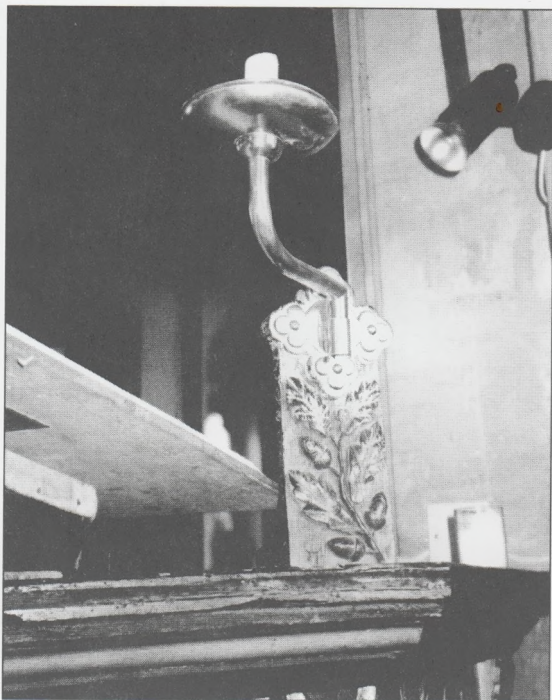


Fig. 8. Candleholder at Low Ham Church

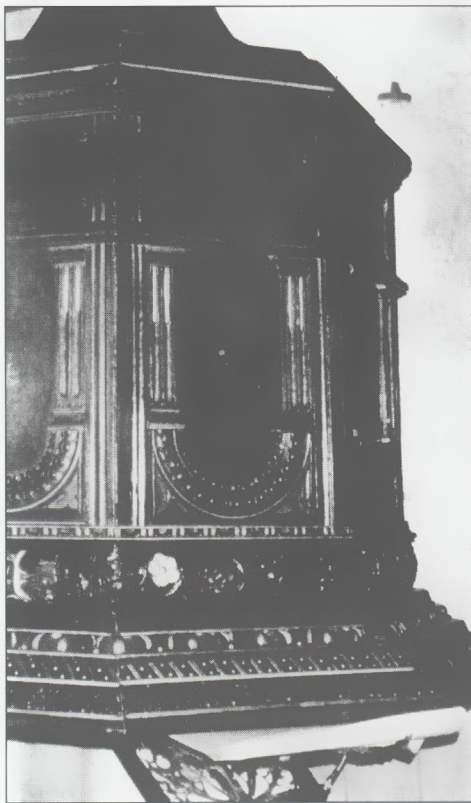


Fig. 9. Gothic rood screen at Low Ham Church

constructed in 1624. This had four light sections in the perpendicular manner with a central mullion in each section. The apex of each section was finely carved with tracery patterns. Above the light sections was a carved and gilded cornice with a quote from Proverbs 24 ' My country God and the Kings, and meddle not with them that are given to change' beneath it. Below the quote were various gilt angels sprouting wings.

Our final visit was to St Michael's Church in the small town of Somerton. On entering the Church our attention was immediately drawn to the oak roof which has a low pitch and short king posts. The roof slopes are divided into small square panels containing 700 quatrefoils. Dotted about are carved bosses. These depict a greyhound, an eel, little green men, a cat, the medieval letter 'A' which was possibly the master carver's initial, pomegranates and two cider barrels in full and half relief. Angels and men holding shields look down from the centres and ends of the tie beams. A unique feature of this roof is the treatment of the spandrels above the tie beams. They are filled with carvings of great pairs of dragon-like beasts of different sizes. These may have been inspired by the Wessex Wyvern or Somerset Dragon but more probably by a verse in Revelations: ' Michael and his angels fought against the dragon'.

The Churchwarden's accounts for St. Michael's church are the most complete that survive in Somerset from the 17th century. Peter said that he was able to glean from these a significant amount of information



**Fig. 10. Pulpit detail, Somerton**

about the joiners and carpenters who worked on Somerton Church. Apart from the ceiling it contains fine woodwork from the period, including a large painted pulpit dated 1615 (see fig 10), much panelling, chairs and a quite exceptional communion table dated 1626. The making and installation of the pulpit and

table are both recorded in the accounts. The record of the pulpit introduces the Squire family whom, in various entries, are noted as dominating the carpentry, joinery and blacksmithing trade in the town for a hundred years. Francis Squire first appears in 1599 working on the bells and is recorded as continuing in trade as a blacksmith and metalworker for more than 50 years. Thomas Squire makes his first appearance in the records of 1604 and in 1609 where he is described as a carpenter who is paid for two boards to 'put about the bells'. In the same account Francis, probably his brother, is paid for providing metal fittings for the same bell. In 1615 it was decided that the church should have a new pulpit. The entry in the church accounts is ambiguous but would suggest that Thomas Squire was probably responsible for making the whole pulpit as he is frequently described in the accounts as not only a carpenter but also as a joiner. Peter said he believed the pulpit had been both carved and painted on site. The accounts mention that 2d was paid to George Bigges for 'oker'.

During the 1620s William Squire first appears and is described specifically as 'thee joiner'. It is assumed that he was the son of Thomas. By the time the communion table was commissioned, William was doing most of the work on the church. The record of 1628 contains the following 'item to the joiner for the new communion table £3'. A previous tucked away entry in the 1627 records says 'item for carriage of the communion table from Langport 2s'. Having considered a number of possibilities as to the table's origin, Peter surmised that it had been brought from Langport in the year before

the joiner was paid £3 for making it. The final mention of the table is in the record of 1630, which says 'item for a lock for the communion table and setting it'. No names are mentioned but as all the metal work for the church at this time was made by Francis Squire, it seems likely that he was responsible for it. Having absorbed this background context we gathered around the table to examine it (see fig11).

It has a walnut top, carved frieze and carved bulbous legs joined by a moulded and crenellated stretcher. The carvings on the frieze and legs were painted in both green and red with some elements of the frieze also picked out in gold or gilt. The frieze carvings are of intertwined pomegranates and acanthus leaves. Each leg has a different carving telling the story of eternal life, resurrection and subsequent redemption. One depicts Adam and Eve, another a labourer tilling the ground, a third a shipwright or carpenter making what might be an ark and lastly a fine carving showing the activity of the church itself, showing arms from above opening a book, symbolising the scriptures or liturgy, the chalice on a loaf of bread representing the Eucharist and at the bottom, an hour-glass symbolising the preacher.



**Fig. 11. Communion table at Somerton**

The hinged top of the table encloses a space, probably for keeping vestments in, as there was no vestry in the church until 1770. All in all this was a remarkable table with an equally interesting provenance.

Finally our day ended with a warm vote of thanks to Peter for organising a very special day which it was a privilege to have attended. There is no doubt that this is a pioneering study of vernacular traditions which has not only identified stylistic characteristics and the use of iconography but has focused on the fluency of execution and application demonstrated by Somerset craftsmen. Peter's meticulous research is an important step forward in furthering our understanding of 17th century joinery. I look forward to reading about it when he can find the time to commit it to paper. Thank you again Peter for all your hard work!

*David Hannah*