

AM Visit to Hindeloopen on Tuesday 25th September 2001

After an early start from our hotel we travelled north for two hours through the autumn mists into Friesland.

As we left the motorway and travelled along the lonely raised roads, which grid the wide farmlands of Friesland, a duck took off from a canal and flew straight into the windscreen of the coach. The impact seemed tremendous, but whilst the huge windscreen was cracked, it stayed in place. Dean, our unflappable driver, stopped, 'phoned home' to order a new screen and continued the last few miles to our destination.

Hindeloopen is a compact and pretty village of small houses standing in relative isolation beside the IJsselmeer which was formerly known as the Zuiderzee. Trading with the Baltic and Scandinavian ports no doubt influenced the formation of the distinctive local dialect – Hylper and Friesian with Scandinavian influences – a splendid style of dress and, of particular interest to us, a tradition of painted furniture.

The village is dominated by a large church and tower alongside the 17th century former Town Hall. This attractive red brick, gabled building which also served as a Hall of Justice was converted into a town museum in 1919, and in accord with all the Dutch museums we

visited throughout our journey, the standard of presentation was imaginative and immaculate. The first room of the museum concerned navigation. It is regularly impressed upon visitors that the inhabitants of Hindeloopen were no ordinary seaman. They were ships' captains or master mariners. From the start of our visit we could discern the pride of place which must have differentiated it so much from its rural hinterland.

Two naïve oil paintings showed Hindeloopen from the seaward and landward sides in the early 19th century. Still looking prosperous and well manicured, we noted that the chimneys of the houses were covered as they are today, perhaps to stop storks nesting.

Whilst painted furniture is not unique to Hindeloopen, or the Netherlands, the local products are distinctive and unique. We know of traditions of painted marriage chests and armoires from Southern Germany, painted commodes from Venice and a multitude of painted artefacts from Scandinavia just across the North Sea. Even this room contained a 19th century child's chair from Norway. To understand the reasons why painted decoration became so important to this close-knit community, I will quote from the notes kindly given to us by Willem.

'The town of Hindeloopen, located in the northern part of the Netherlands, was established by the early 13th century and was an active member of the Hanseatic League; the commercial union of north European cities in the late Middle Ages. It is situated on the East coast of a large fresh water lake that was created by blocking off an arm of the North Sea (the former Zuiderzee). Until World War II, it had been a small harbour with access to the North Sea. Homes were decorated with items brought back by the mariners – wooden bowls, sea chests and furniture. Ledges were filled with Chinese porcelain, plates, bowls and serving dishes'

In the winter, the ships were anchored in Amsterdam and the Zaan area, north of Amsterdam. Since the men were at sea in the summer and at home in the winter, social activities flourished during the winter months. The men met daily at the 'Leugenbank' (bench of lies) near the sluice, to talk and decide matters of interest. Every year, after February 22nd, the Hindeloopen captains hung anchors from their attic windows. This was a sign that their ship could be chartered. Once the contract was signed and the ship made ready to sail, it departed, not returning until around November 1st. Partly because the men were home all winter and partly because of its isolated location, Hindeloopen developed its own culture and language.

The Hindeloopers were always competent woodcarvers. They carved the furniture and other small wooden items around their homes. As industry developed in the Amsterdam and Zaan area, the Hindeloopers began working as craftsmen in the shipyards, decorating the ships with figureheads, carved tillers, and decorations for the windows and doorways. The Hindeloopen seamen sailed with the ships of the East India Company that traded with Indonesia, Japan, and China. All of

these factors inevitably strengthened the contacts between the Hindeloopers and the artisans in the Amsterdam and Zaan region.

The art of furniture painting became absorbed into the material culture of the Zaan area, resulting in the exchange of sombre reddish plum interiors for lighter colours, like soft blue green and the acquisition of furniture adorned with flower garlands.

In the 17th century the Hanseatic League was dissolved and the entire fleet of the neighbouring town of Stavoren was destroyed during a heavy storm. Stavoren became a ghost town and the Hindeloopers increasingly turned to the Zaan area, where industry and business still flourished. This century was Holland's 'Golden Age'. Amsterdam was a world trade and art centre. This was the age of the Dutch Masters, including Rembrandt.

At the end of the 1600s, the Hindeloopers began to colour the woodcarvings (fig. 9 from Leeuwarden Museum) on small wooden pieces, and by the beginning of the next century, they were painting imitations of carvings and Chinese porcelain on wood. Later, they began painting on a coloured background, allowing them to substitute cheaper woods in their furniture for the relatively expensive oak. Although their favourite colour was red, they also worked in the green commonly found in glass bottles, dark and light blue, and later other colours. Originally, they copied the carving motifs – flowers, curls, and birds – in one light and two dark colours.

Hindeloopen experienced its peak in both business and cultural development during the 18th century, about a century after the rest of the Netherlands. Their merchant fleet brought home beautiful things from around the world, such as tortoiseshell objects and Indian hand painted cottons called 'sits'. With their success in business came affluence which showed in the richly decorated interiors of their homes and their very special costumes. Their art developed as a result of the contact with the art of other countries. The skills of the painters improved, introducing new flowers, more elaborate curls, more birds, various animal and human figures to their work. Lighter colours were used to achieve a different effect. Door panels might be painted with biblical scenes. Painted furniture exportation also began at this time. The Hindeloopen costumes became particularly exquisite and 'wentkes' (elegant long-waisted coats), were made of beautiful Indian sits. It is believed that the motifs on the sits influenced the Hindeloopen painting.

Hindeloopen eventually lost its merchant fleet as a result of the many wars of this period, and at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, France occupied the Netherlands. The country was plundered and poverty prevailed. With the fleet gone, there was no means of livelihood and many of the people moved to Amsterdam or the Zaan area. The remaining Hindeloopers were too poor to maintain their painted

furnishings. When the painted woodwork could no longer be maintained in a satisfactory environment, it turned darker and darker from the peat smoke issuing from their fireplaces, and finally the paint flaked off in the presence of adverse humidity. In order to raise money and survive, the Hindeloopers sold some of their painted furniture abroad, resulting in the loss of much of the old artwork.

The second 'Swiss' room of the museum contained a fine collection of painted items, displayed behind plate glass (fig 8), which included cradles, klaptafels, cabinets, sledges and rush-seated turned chairs. It was a little difficult to accurately date many of these items but some of the fabrics appeared to be 18th century. Most unusual were the oval wooden boxes made of steamed ash, rather like Shaker boxes from America, with flat lids and a handle in the centre. Similar versions were also made in Norway⁶. These were intended for the storage of ladies' head-wear, with a different box for a different occasion. The decoration and colours of the boxes are significant. Perhaps the most beautiful in this collection was an example painted white with finely painted flowers including tulips in a style which was probably intended to replicate porcelain.

Other interesting objects were the magnificently painted ladies' ice sledges, the sides with biblical scenes, which were propelled by sticks across the ice, rather like cross-country skiing. One of these sledges is dated on the side 1752. They were hung from the rafters during the summer months so the undersides were also decorated. Such sledges were, in terms of design and paintwork, quite distinct from the Friesian horse sleighs used by the local farmers. The display also included a cradle, foot warmers or Stoofs (fig 8, bottom L.H.S.) and a collection of what we would have described as wall-mounted candle boxes but which, from our lecture the previous evening, we now knew to be school boxes (fig. 8 T.R.H.S.) or Schooldozen⁷.

Once we could realise the scale of such items, we could more readily appreciate their purpose. Made more substantially than candle boxes, they had sliding tops, like old-fashioned English pencil boxes, pierced with a hole to hang them up. Their robust structure was intended to house a slate and writing materials etc. Some still retained a dark reverse which would be used like a slate, whilst others were finely decorated all over.

The remainder of the museum contained a series of reconstructed rooms, mostly with tiled walls and cupboard beds, some of which could be entered from two adjacent rooms! We quickly learned from these short beds that the Dutch slept half sitting up, since it was considered fatal to sleep lying horizontally.

Jeremy Bate

PM Visit to Popta Slot 25 September 2001

Our next visit was to 'Dr Popta's Castle' in North Friesland. Hidden amongst trees, this romantic early 17th century manor-house, built for the Haringa family,

is approached through a magnificent 1631 brick gatehouse over a moat. Inside the courtyard you could finally see the beautiful castle: unfortified, built in red brick banded courses, with steep gabled roofs and a slender square tower which becomes octagonal above roof level with an ogee tiled finial. Dr Popta, who acquired the estate in the late 17th century, was evidently a successful man. He left the castle in trust in 1712, stating that no one should live there again, as well as money to found almshouses for women in the village. Since we had arrived early, we had had a little while to wander around the delightful village in the afternoon sun and visit the almshouses.

Whilst Dr Popta was obviously keen to be remembered in perpetuity, it seems that, unlike a similar philanthropist today, he did not wish his furnishings to be retained. Furthermore subsequent trustees have altered and adapted the rooms during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. We were disappointed to learn from the custodian Mrs Hooiveld, that few of the furnishings were original. After an introduction in the narrow hall where she pointed out a mourning hatchment of 1678 with carved swags in the Swedish style, we were shown into an oak panelled dining hall with fine carved stone door-cases flanked by female figures. The condition of the panelling was eye-catching but we were unsure as to whether it was original or reconstructed. It was of an overall honey colour with no sign of patination. However, if the building had been virtually a museum since 1712, it was reasonable to suppose that it would have remained in good repair.

This room contained a massive oak cabinet (or kast) of similar coloured light oak with Popta's crest. It had a 14" deep bolection cornice and a pair of panelled doors separated by three fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals and carved bases in the form of female figures, possibly goddesses under palanquins. One was carved with the infant Christ and a cross, the second with infants and the third, possibly Diana, with a hawk on her arm.

Whilst the kast appeared to sit on massive ebonised bun feet, Bill Cotton noticed that they were a sham, and in fact could rotate. The cabinet actually stood on carcass stiles front and rear!

Small panels on the sides of the cabinet were inlaid with ebony panels but panels on the lower part of the front had an unusual texture. A day later in Harlingen Museum, two members noted the similarity to the texture and colour of a circular box made of 'baleen', a material which is in fact the membrane in the mouth through which whales sieve plankton. Whaling was a major industry for a number of Zuiderzee and Friesland ports. Could it be that the cabinet-makers had included this by-product into a major piece of furniture?

The panelled rooms had casement windows and integral shutters with finely wrought iron multi-function catches which enabled you to open shutters or

the glazed window from one catch: a superb piece of design and craft!

A small item which attracted the roving eyes of one member was a circular walnut hearth-brush, possibly late 17th century, with a wonderfully turned spiral handle.

The late 18th century drawing room is panelled and painted grey with applied carved swags in Swedish style. On more than one occasion in Friesland we noticed such swags, integral to the architecture, most memorably on the over-doors or fanlights on many of the houses in Harlingen and Leeuwarden. This room opened onto a glazed late 19th century terrace or winter garden with 1920s Dutch rattan furniture, an industry the Dutch still dominate, though it is now mostly manufactured in the Far East. In the drawing room we were shown a Friesland walnut kast which was apparently made for the house, with extensive carvings of squirrels and snakes amid foliage, standing on ebonised ball feet.

Pausing on a staircase we found an eighteenth century water closet entirely tiled in blue and white with a delightful marble basin and tap recessed into the wall.

On the first floor we entered a small suite of atmospheric rooms originally used by the guardian. First came a narrow living room leading to a slightly larger square room situated right above the entrance door. This contained a box bed with a huge drawer beneath. The drawer, about 4'6" wide x 20" high pulled out on wooden wheels. We were unsure whether this was for storage or was a truckle bed. Close by, were two exceptional examples of 18th century Leiden rush-seated ladder back chairs. The 1747 archive of the City of Leiden illustrates such a chair as being one of the masterpiece requirements of the Guild of Turners' examination⁸.

Onwards to the attics we found a large empty room, which retained two superb box beds, either side of a central door but not in situ, carved with 'Romayne' heads, inscriptions and a date 1520. Most intriguing was a small exhibition of early photographs of Popta Slot. Amongst them was a revealing photo, c.1900, of three redoubtable ladies dressed in black, possibly residents from Dr Popta's almshouses, seemingly caught in the act of stripping dark varnish from the kast!