

## VISIT TO ABBOT'S HOSPITAL, GUILDFORD, SURREY Saturday June 5th 2004

This formed the first part of the day in Surrey organised and ably arranged by Simon Green and Polly Legg. The 'Hospital' was founded by George Abbot who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1611 until his death in 1633. In creating the Hospital Abbot learned much from his close connections with several other foundations, such as Sackville College at East Grinstead, the Hospital of King James in London Charterhouse, and in particular the Whitgift Foundation at Croydon.

The first stone was laid in Guildford on 6th April 1619 by Abbot and the Hospital was ready for full use by October 1622. It was originally for the benefit of single people in need, who had been born in the town of Guildford or who had lived there for 20 years, were not less than 60 years of age, and of good health and character. Those admitted to the Hospital were called brothers and sisters. The endowment of Abbot's Hospital was to be secured by rents from land which Abbot bought, such as farms at Merrow, Ewhurst, Dorking and others stretching as far as Stillington in Sussex.

We assembled for our visit in the Common Hall and Simon Green introduced our host and guide, Bruce Watson, the Master of Abbot's Hospital. Simon also welcomed Joan Clifford the Vice Chair of the Trustees as a new member of the RFS.

The conducted tour started in the Courtyard by the front arch, when various features of the building were pointed out and we were told about the accommodation and the residents, and the fact that couples were not admitted until 1975. We then returned to the passage to the west of the



Fig. 3

Hall and ascended the interesting 17th century oak staircase to the Guesten Hall (or Hall for Guests), on the way passing a clock constructed it was said between 1400 and 1600 and installed in the north range of the Hospital in 1742. The Guesten Hall was furnished with an Elizabethan long table and some particularly interesting contemporary benches. The piece that most excited the assembled company was a chair which the Master's inventory described as a partly 18th century oak revolving chair. After detailed examination by Victor Chinnery and Michael Legg amongst others, it was decided that the chair itself dated between 1640 and 1660 (fig. 3), and the bearing on which it revolved dated to around 1800. French 17th century versions are known as *Fauteuils Pivotants*.

We were then ushered back to the Common Hall where there were two long dining tables known respectively as the Sisters' and Brothers' tables with again contemporary benches, all of which were believed to date from the foundation of the Hospital. We were grateful to the Master for allowing us to remove the tops (fig. 4), so that the structures of both tables could be examined in some detail. Whilst the top of the Sisters' table was a replacement, the ash top of the Brothers' table was original, as was the oak base which Victor said was of unusual trestle construction and made in about 1622, utilising trestle balusters in the same pattern as the staircase balusters within the Master's Apartment.

From there, we were led to the Chapel where we were told that the Chapel windows were of painted glass and had come from a demolished Dominican Friary in Guildford, and were installed in the Chapel at a later date. We were told the oak pews were introduced in 1740 when Holy Trinity Church partially collapsed, but Victor and others were of the view that only half the pews were of early construction (probably 17th century and the rest were of 19th century construction). There was an early 17th century Collecting Mace in the Chapel atop a post which had probably once been a staircase banister.

We were then invited to the Master's House where he pointed out a handsome dog-gate at the foot of an interesting staircase, which had wall balustrades that it was decided were probably Victorian replacements constructed in softwood. We climbed the stairs to the 'Presence Chamber' (now the boardroom) where we were shown the original Charter and Seal of the Hospital and discovered an Elizabethan oak draw leaf table dating to between 1600 and 1620, which had lost its two leaves. Victor identified the initials 'RB' as those of Robert Berry, who was elected Master in 1709 and gifted the table to the Hospital in that year. There was also a 17th century folding table close to the draw leaf table.

From the Presence Chamber we ascended yet another flight of stairs to the Strong Room or Treasury (otherwise known as the 'Evidence House') where there were to be found two large oak chests of early 17th century construction which after examination were confirmed by Victor to have been assembled in the room and were English, though one was of continental boarded construction and both chests bear typical trunk makers'



Fig. 4



key plates. We were then taken onto the roof of the Gate House with its panoramic view of Guildford. It was an exceptionally interesting visit thoroughly enjoyed by all, and it is to be hoped that even with all the other calls on his time, Victor might be able to provide the Master with some advice on not only the accurate cataloguing of the furniture at the Hospital, but also its conservation for future generations to enjoy.

*Robert Holland*