

Rosina: the Antithesis of Regional Furniture

One of the pleasures of RFS meetings is encountering new and sometimes unexpected information.

At the annual conference in Beverley we were suddenly faced with a new line of thought about our home town of Teddington. During Ivan Hall's superb lecture on Yorkshire furniture makers at Burton Constable Hall he mentioned that Sir Thomas Aston Clifford Constable had a mistress, Rosina, who became his second wife in 1865, and she refurbished Dunbar House in Teddington. We decided to find out more about this.

Dunbar House no longer exists. It stood on the site now occupied by the Lensbury Sports Club, on the banks of the Thames near Teddington Weir. The East Riding Archives, in Beverley, had a 19-page document, 'Copy Bill for refurbishing Dunbar House, Teddington, Middlesex, as per instructions received from Sir Clifford Constable in November 1869.'

The work was done by Richardsons of Hull, who had craftsmen equal to those in London, and could supply furniture of the highest quality. Rosina ordered opulent furniture, regardless of cost, in Sir Clifford's name, so that it would be charged to his estate, and when he died in 1870 the high cost of the refurbishment was disputed.

The bill indicates that Dunbar House was substantial. It had an entrance hall, drawing room, dining room, library, boudoir, study, housekeeper's room and butler's pantry. Upstairs were five bedrooms, bathroom and water closets. The top storey had another seven bedrooms, mainly for servants.

The dining room was the most lavish, with a 'very superior Anglo-Turkey carpet made to fit the room'. At £99.16.0d this was the most expensive item in the whole house. The room also contained, among other things: 'a black and gold dining table, mounted with ormolu; a black and gold writing table, with green leather top, mounted richly with ormolu; two black and gold tripods, mounted with ormolu and gilt; a large black and ormolu cabinet; two flower stands with dolphins in gold, silver and green gold, and two ebony inlaid cabinets, mounted with ormolu and marble tops'. This gives the general ambience; more was spent on this room than on any other in the house. Anglo-Turkey carpets, usually described as 'very superior' were laid throughout the ground floor.

Bedroom number one continues the opulent theme: 'a mahogany French bedstead, mounted with ormolu; a mahogany pedestal pot cupboard, marble top, mounted with ormolu; a superior large chimney glass, mounted with ormolu'... and so on. The fourth bedroom was distinctively furnished in rosewood, mostly embellished

with marquetry, and included: 'A rosewood inlaid French bedstead; a rosewood and marquetry dressing table with marble top; a rosewood pot cupboard with Morocco leather top; a rosewood round stand table; a rosewood and marquetry chest of drawers; a rosewood and marquetry secretaire with marble top, and a large gilt chimney glass'.

The furniture in the top storey is in many ways more interesting. One of the seven rooms (for visitors) had mahogany furniture, and all the others have birch; some seems to have been custom made by Richardsons in Hull to fit individual rooms: the wardrobes in particular have varying dimensions. The servants' rooms were consistently well furnished. They each had Brussels carpeting, a hearth rug, an iron bedstead, birch chest of drawers, wardrobe, dressing table, dressing glass, wash table and three or four birch bedroom chairs.

William Richardson appears to have supervised the refurbishment. At regular intervals in the bill there are statements of his expenses. The unpacking of goods and general fitting up at Dunbar House was done by three men over 40 days, for which £11 was charged.

A question arises about the fate of the birch furniture, made in Yorkshire and transferred to Middlesex. Did it leave the country when Rosina went to live abroad, or did it remain in Dunbar House until it was demolished in the fourth decade of the 20th century?

The more opulent furniture travelled with Rosina to Italy, but was returned by sea to Yorkshire after her death. She married twice more, in 1872 and 1876, both times to men who died soon after the marriages, which added to her wealth. She eventually died in Rome in 1908. The first item in her will is that she should be buried at Burton Constable.

Jim and Mary Green



Dunbar House from the river, circa 1924