

# Houghton Hall, Norfolk

**Thursday afternoon, 23 July**

The visit to Houghton Hall was an option on the afternoon before the conference. Those who went saw a remarkable range of furniture that has survived since the early 1700s, in the non-public rooms as well as the state apartments.

Houghton hall was rebuilt by Robert Walpole in the early 18th century, and much of the furnishing was designed by William Kent, reaching a spectacular peak in the green velvet bed, with its tall canopy towering up to the high ceiling. In the main state or parade rooms the emphasis is on important people and opulence. In the common parlour there are mahogany chairs with crimson damask covers, and in the embroidered bed chamber the chairs are of walnut and gilded gesso with green velvet covers. These are more pleasing to the eye than those encountered later in the saloon, where they are large, heavily decorated, mahogany and gilt, with crimson damask.

In contrast to the highly decorated formal furniture there are plain, elegant chairs and side tables in other parts of the hall. A set of 24 spindle backed elbow chairs survives from about 1730. Made from Jamaican mahogany, they have a robust rectilinear construction, and stretchers between all four legs, as well as floor stretchers at the sides. This structure gives them great stability, and makes them easy to flop into after a long day hunting. They are locally known as 'drinking chairs', referring to their stability.

Another chair that aroused interest was a finely made reading or cockfighting chair. The seat was broad in front, but curved inwards towards the back so that one could sit astride facing the back, which had a slanting raised board. This could support a book, or the writing of betting slips. The armrests were flattened and expanded at their ends, so that they could hold a beer tankard, or an inkpot. Such a chair could be multipurpose, and it is known that cockfights were not confined to rowdy public places, but sometimes took place in elegant drawing rooms.

A number of plain side tables (about 30!) have also survived from the 1720s. Veneered in mahogany, and finely proportioned, they have a few refinements, such as scalloped lappets on the legs, raising them above the mundane. There is also a large oval table crafted from Jamaican mahogany, dating from 1730-40. Michael Legg was heard to mutter 'finest English workmanship' when he saw it. His comment sums up the main value of the visit for members of our society. Away from the opulence and gilding of the state rooms, we saw how anonymous English craftsmen could replicate plain, honest, yet elegant, chairs and tables to a consistently high standard.