

Strangers Hall

Friday afternoon, 24 July

The building goes back to the 15th century and today houses an extensive collection of furniture and woodwork which was started in the early 20th century. Some of the fixed woodwork is original to the building, while some, including an oak ceiling, was brought in. The collection is notable for the number of dated objects. The street entrance has a pierced carved royal coat of arms over-door and a wicket door with the date 1621, and one passes another external door with a dated lintel (1597) whose lack of weathering suggests it is an addition. There are numerous merchants' marks on fixed woodwork, reminding us of the wealthy history of Norwich and the class who commissioned the work. A boldly moulded bressumer beam bears the arms and merchant's mark of Nicholas Sotherton, merchant, mayor and owner of the house in the 16th century.

The large entrance hall has a tall aumbry-like object with a projecting lintel, two central doors with pierced panels of dark oak, iron bands ending in flower heads (a continental feature) and trestle feet. John Boram identified this as a German reliquary cupboard of the 16th century or earlier. Next to it was an early 16th century boarded chest with eight incised gothic windows, and nearby was another boarded chest with two bands of nulling and large spiral-carved spandrels, bearing a 1598 date. Other dated chests were a 1637 example with a central 'inner frame' panel surrounded by perspectival arcaded panels, and a

four-panel chest carved with tulips and 'John Yearnshawe 1683' - a family most likely to be from Yorkshire according to www.familysearch.org.

A nine panel parchemin-panelled door (early 16th century), very deeply carved and with fleur-de-lis minor decoration and with two strips of gothic inscriptions, was most unusual. A very early table carpet was dated 1571. A rare beadwork layette basket in blue, green and white was dated 1661 and a large mirror with a panelled needlework surround dated from soon after that.

Among chairs, there was a striking Dutch or German 18th century ladder-back of ash with bold finials and broad closely-spaced ladders, and a comb-back mahogany windsor with cabriole legs, a three-piece seat hoop, 'primitive' rear legs and a very simply cut pierced splat which was considered to be an 18th century library chair.

A very large Dutch cupboard with two folding doors with tinned hinges (a continental practice according to Roderick Butler) and finely made panels was probably early 17th century. A late 17th century cabinet on stand made of cocus wood and burr maple and with oyster marquetry attracted a lot of interest. Its olive wood stand with six twist-turned legs (an earlier feature than four-leg stands) was considered by Michael Legg to be original. An adjacent walnut marquetry cabinet on stand with secret drawers was considered to have been re-veneered.

Reliquary cupboard, Stranger's Hall



Although many of the merchant-marked or dated pieces of woodwork are likely to have been collected in Norfolk, the only obviously East Anglian piece of furniture was a 19th century oak press with large screw above and a recess between the top drawers.

We are very grateful to John and Helen Renton for their welcome and for allowing us such good access to the collection. A visit is strongly recommended to members travelling to Norwich.

Chris Pickvance