

The Great Hospital

Saturday evening, 25 July

Our evening event at the Great Hospital began in the outer courtyard, surrounded by a complex of historic buildings: the late 14th century tower of St Helen's church and the end wall of the infirmary with its bricked-up gothic window on one side, and the 16th century chaplain's range and the back of Thomas Ivory's mid-18th century house to the north and west; beyond the entrance gates, a glorious view of Norwich Cathedral. We were given a history of the

foundation by one of the trustees, with diverting interjections from his companion. The charity, devoted throughout its history to the care of the elderly sick or needy, is one of the oldest of its kind, having been founded in the mid-13th century by Bishop Walter Suffield. Despite many changes over the centuries its extraordinary conglomeration of buildings retain some remarkable treasures, not least of furniture.

Our first stop was the refectory, with its lively dragon spandrels to the tie beams and a gallery at the kitchen end only recently discovered and revealed. The impressive central table top of a single huge oak plank, thought to date from the 15th century, provoked much interest. Against the walls we admired part of an extensive set of elm hollow seated armchairs with wavy top rails and vase-shaped splats: more of these appeared in other parts of the hospital, along with side chairs of a similar style. Altogether we counted at least 12 armchairs and 24 side chairs: so many together in their original setting may be a unique survival for chairs of this region.

St Helen's church has always been the focal building of the site and is noteworthy for the fine poppyheads on the pew ends, and for the Ivory family pew, dated 1780 and in the gothic style. This is similar to earlier carved work in the choir of the cathedral, attributed to the famous Norwich inhabitant, Thomas Ivory, who was 'carpenter' to the hospital, but also a timber merchant and architect; he was the designer/builder of the Octagon Chapel and the assembly rooms as well as houses in Norwich. Our attention was also drawn to the ceiling bosses in the lady chapel. These correspond with the 1,000 or so in the cathedral, and were miraculously preserved from the iconoclasts through being obscured by soot from a fire that swept through the building at an early date; unlike those in the cathedral they have not needed the full restoration treatment.

We were able to visit the house on the hospital site, built by Thomas Ivory for his own use and later enlarged by his son, William. This neoclassical gem is surely one of the finest mansions in the city. Its elegant circular porch and rotunda above, with its fine grisaille decorations, are matched by the domed ceiling of the first floor music room, delicately painted with radiating bands of neoclassical grotesques and candelabra. The dining room opposite also has a finely decorated ceiling, in this case, plasterwork wreaths of flowers and foliage set within a curving framework. The hospital's extensive set of hollow seated elm single chairs with 'Chippendale' top rails and vase splats is ranged round the long mahogany pedestal dining table, big enough for at least 20 people, and is now used for meetings.

Our last port of call on this round-the-hospital tour was to the famous Eagle Ward, so called from the 252 black

eagles on its chestnut boarded barrelled ceiling. These were painted to celebrate the visit to Norwich of Anne of Bohemia, bride of Richard II in 1383. They preside over the partitioned but sociable ward inhabited until 1979 by elderly women patients who, we were told, were not at all pleased to be moved into new and more convenient accommodation. Now their individual cubicles are set out with furnishings and bygone evocative of life there during the 1950s, but their communal dining table, of darkly patinated oak below but with a severely scrubbed top, dated from the 17th century and had enthusiasts crawling on their knees with their torches in true RFS fashion.

The evening visit ended with a splendid dinner in the early 20th century Birkbeck Hall, formerly a recreation room. Our thanks are due to the trustees who conducted us, as well as to the catering staff who crowned the evening's success.

Noël Riley

A corner of one of the cubicles in the Eagle Ward at the Great Hospital



One of the extensive set of elm chairs with hollow nailed seats and vase splats at the Great Hospital, Norwich

The outer courtyard of the Great Hospital, Norwich

