

Swarthmoor Hall

Saturday morning, 3 October

On a stormy and blustery morning a group gathered in the forecourt of a mid-16th century manor house in the countryside near Ulverston. Swarthmoor Hall was built in 1586 for a local landowner, George Fell, but it is really significant for its connections with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and its founder George Fox (1624-1691).

George Fell's son, Judge Thomas Fell (1599-1658) and his wife Margaret (1614-1702) inherited on the death of George and, unusually, it descended to the judge's youngest daughter Rachel and her husband Daniel Abraham. The Quaker connection came about when George Fox visited Swarthmoor Hall in 1652 and converted Margaret Fell, her daughters and some of the farm workers to his new ideas on religion. Margaret Fell suffered considerably for her faith, being imprisoned a number of times, and she eventually married Fox after the death of George Fell in 1658. Swarthmoor then became a major centre for the Quakers. After various changes, in 1912 it was bought by Emma Clarke Abraham, a descendant of Rachel Abraham, and in 1954 it passed to the Society of Friends.

Built of stone with harled walls (a form of lime based pebble-dash that is common in northern England and Scotland), the building history of the house is complex. It was probably built on a U-plan but, even with its three storeys, is possibly half the size it was when built and it had fallen into considerable disrepair by the late 18th century. When Emma Clarke Abraham took over she set about putting things back as they may have been, including putting panelling in the great hall and the adjacent study, plus chip carved decoration that was so fashionable among young women before the Great War.

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The turned wood and wrought iron chandelier

Entering the hall one drops down into the house with the great hall on the right. Straight in front is an extraordinarily rare four-newel post staircase; four square posts run vertically up to the roof – or did originally until the roof pitch was altered sometime in the past, leaving them some 4ft short – and the treads are set into and around the posts, thus creating a square spiral staircase. It is believed that there are only two or three similar. The bow-windowed great hall has been furnished in a manner

suitable to the later 17th century, as indeed have all the historic rooms in the house. Much of the furniture came from Roger Warner of Burford.

One of the star items for a number of us in this house of many fine things was a 31-light turned wood and wrought iron chandelier; there seemed to be no provenance for it but surely this splendid object must have come from a church. The chandelier was suspended above a large refectory table with a matched set of joint stools sitting underneath. The great hall also contains a fine dresser with a pot shelf below the row of three drawers and a late 17th century north country oak two-tier court cupboard with very crisp strapwork carving, split-turned balusters and turned drop pendants. Lastly there was a good late 18th century so-called lambing chair in oak with a drawer in the base, beneath the seat.

Next to the great hall is Judge Fell's study, a room that had also been worked upon by Emma Clarke Abraham who fitted the panelling and did the carved work around the chimney-piece and frieze. There were several items of great

Quaker importance: a 1541 'Great Bible' that was the gift of George Fox, and some early editions of Fox's journals, all contained in an oak standing desk. There was also a fine mid-18th century walnut wing chair in which died the prominent American Quaker John Woolman (1720-1772); the chair was the source of much discussion and



George Fox's bed with its red moreen hangings



Members enjoying lunch in the great hall at Swarthmoor Hall

explanation with Michael Legg, Keith Pinn and others. This classic English chair made an excellent comparison with an Italian example next to it, of similar date and also made of walnut. In the same room was a most unusual oak armchair of Yorkshire/Derbyshire form with turned front-legs and scallop decoration on the curved back-rails: I have certainly never seen one similar.

More treasures awaited upstairs. In George Fox's room lay a four-post bed reputed to have been given to Fox in the 1670s by Quaker plantation owners in the Barbados while visiting the American east coast. The bedposts were of *lignum vitae* and the hangings were a handsome red moreen, a rare survival, probably from the 18th century. The wrought-iron rods upon which the curtains slid were probably original. The bed was also interesting for the sliding mechanism used to tighten the bed-ropes upon which the bedding lay. Usually a bed key was used to tighten the ropes, working one's way around the bed frame pulling the ropes as taught as possible, but here the foot-end of the bed had a transverse bar to which the ropes were threaded and the bar was pulled up by two coarse-threaded screws fixed to the foot or the bed frame.

At the foot of the bed lay a most interesting and original plank coffer initialled R B and dated 1667. Finally in the bedchamber was the front panel of a coffer that retained its original lock and black-and-white hand block-printed wallpaper lining. The pattern was of swirling foliage and rosettes in a slightly neoclassical design apparently inspired by blackwork embroidery and dated to c.1680-90.

The spacious attic floor with its visible roof construction had light flooding in from all sides as it was one very large room. A large plank coffer disguised to look as though it was of panelled construction created great interest and it certainly had a most unusual early looking lock and hasp with its original key; the piece probably dated to the latter 17th century. There was a rope-bottomed settle, with a panelled back, of the sort often seen in the north of England; with the seat, roped-up like Fox's bed, it was an efficient way of making a comfortable but cheap settle, as long as the rope was kept tight. There was also a back-stool that caught the eye of several members. The seat was set high on walnut twist-turned legs and was covered in very old blue silk-velvet with large petal-like brass nails while the back was upholstered in leather; it was a most unusual chair but appeared perfectly period.

Our thanks are due to Bill Shaw, custodian of Swarthmoor Hall, for his introduction to the Hall, arranging to display documentation concerning the furniture, and for his humour and patience with our many questions.

Treve Rosoman