

Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse

Saturday afternoon, 25 July

Gressenhall started life in 1776 as a 'house of industry' where the poor of 51 local parishes were housed, working the associated 62-acre farm and living off its produce. Following the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 the institution became a workhouse, introducing a very much more repressive regime with separation of the sexes and of children from their parents. It continued as a workhouse until 1948 and, after a short period as an old people's home, was converted into a museum of domestic and rural life in 1976.

The extent of the collection is such that it would take several days for the visitor to do it justice. In scale the items range from a vast threshing machine to a drawer-full of tiny iron-founders' rods to vent the sand when casting. One exhibit that caught the eye was a 1920s Norton motorcycle

The chest from St Margaret's church, Norwich, now in store at Gressenhall Museum



whose sidecar had been converted by the local undertaker to carry a coffin. The outbuildings house reconstructions of a 19th century schoolroom, a Norfolk cottage interior and a village shop and post office, among others.

Like most museums Gressenhall holds far more material than it can display and most of what interested us was in store. First we were given access to the collection of common chairs, which had a storeroom to themselves. The room is fitted with Shaker-style pegs around the walls, from which the chairs are suspended by their top-rails. Bill Cotton told us how he had visited an antique dealer called Ron Stanley in Wymondham who had a large collection of chairs. When he decided to give up trade he rang Bill and asked if he was interested. Bill and the then curator of Gressenhall, Bridget Yates, visited him and a deal was struck resulting in about 300 vernacular chairs going to the museum. Some of them were exhibited in a 1987 exhibition of East Anglian cottage and farmhouse furniture, for which Bill wrote the catalogue.

The curator, Megan Dennis, next gave some of us access to the 'superstore' which in scale and architectural form was indeed not unlike a supermarket. Here items were held on sliding ranks of shelving up to a height of about 18 feet. One felt quite overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material. One section was devoted to the contents of the church of St Peter Hungate, Norwich, including not only most of the fittings but also its holdings when it was converted to a museum. The star item of the day, however, was a medieval chest which most of us walked past and assumed to be 19th century, fooled by its curious construction and the fact that it was in such pristine condition. When Chris Pickvance lit upon it, however, all was revealed. This was the clamp-fronted 'Kentish Gothic' chest from the church of St. Margaret, Norwich, which had been assumed missing since the church was bombed in 1942 (see Chris's article in *Regional Furniture*, 2007), which he recognized from an old photograph. One only hopes that they have the key!

Our special thanks for such a rewarding afternoon are due to Megan Dennis.

John Stabler