

The Mansion House and Fairfax House

Saturday 17 July

With football riots outside, we took refuge in the Mansion House, which was begun as a building for the Lord Mayor and civic entertaining in 1725, 10 years before the idea was acted upon in London – a cause for civic pride in itself! We were shown round by the house manager, Richard Pollitt and saw the excellent work that a partnership with the York Civic Trust has brought about by way of restoration since the 1990s.

There was much local furniture of interest, beginning with a splendidly tall walnut longcase clock made for the entrance hall by Henry Hindley of York in 1731. Here also is a suite of oak hall chairs, hallstand and side table (re-using an earlier Bakewell limestone top), supplied by John Temple of Coney Street, York about 1875. In the dining room we studied an amazing mahogany table on 10 legs, winding out to seat 42, with a massive Fitter of Birmingham mechanism. This, with a smaller matching breakfast table, two end-support dumb waiters and 24 stuffed-back chairs, came as a result of a legacy of £1,000 from George Hudson, the railway king, in the mid-19th century.

In an early George III bureau bookcase, which exhibited the unusual features of the fall resting on small drawers rather than lopers and the bookcase doors having only one visible central stile (the other being chamfered off behind), were a rare collection of ward cups for coffee or 'burnt wine'. Frustratingly we were unable to handle them to surmise if they were of British or Chinese manufacture. Another amazing survival here is the 15th century sword of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund.

Upstairs in the double-height state room are 17 Victorian rosewood stuffed balloon back chairs remaining from a set of six dozen, and a fine pair of neoclassical semi-circular side tables with a larger en suite breakfront side table with applied carved decoration which attracted much interest. Now painted brown below their banded and strung mahogany tops, they would probably have been gilded, or white and gilded, originally. Their provenance from Bootham Park Hospital, a John Carr building, brought possible links with similar pieces at other Carr houses such as Ripley Castle and Wentworth Woodhouse, and Wright & Elwick were postulated as possible Yorkshire makers.

Fairfax House

The domestic scale of much of the Mansion House is echoed in Fairfax House, built in 1755-6 and altered by John Carr in the early 1760s, with impressive plasterwork by James Henderson, a pupil of Guiseppe Cortese. After a series of owners, the house was bought by the York Civic Trust in 1983-4 and restored to house Noel Terry's collection of English furniture and clocks. Terry collected between 1927 and 1978 with an emphasis on early George III carved mahogany and a concentration on the intrinsic quality of individual pieces rather than their provenance. Although much of the furniture was intended for his home, Goddards, on the outskirts of York, unlike Frank Green he generally did not buy to furnish or for a period effect. Fairfax House is thus confronted with two problems: first, that the collection is not a 'rounded' one for such a house and, second, that it has had to be fitted into a house for which it was never intended. Nevertheless this was a feast of superb 18th century pieces.

After a brief introduction from Hannah Phillip, the new director of the house, we were able to roam freely with Hannah, Peter Brown and Adam Bowett helping us to examine individual pieces closely. Although there was little of a strictly regional nature, it was good for us all to study the best London-made work whose influence affected furniture made throughout the kingdom. Before we adjourned we enjoyed a welcome glass of wine on the terrace.

Christopher Claxton Stevens