

The Merchant Adventurers' Hall

Saturday morning, 17 July

Celebrating its 650th anniversary in 2007, the Merchant Adventurers' Hall is a superb example of a property that has benefited from guild money and dedication to upkeep. Lying behind modern-day retail outlets, only a small portion of the hall, in its delightful gardens, can be glimpsed from the street through its mid-17th century gatehouse. The wooden door is in the centre of a food shop with the curious name of the Hairy Fig – shades of the London furniture makers with addresses '*by the sign of...*'. Initially a religious foundation, a chapel and a hospital were established in the undercroft very early on and remained very much an integral part of the guild's benevolent support of the community for many years: the hospital was still in use in 1887.

Dick Reid, a past governor of the company, and now keeper of furniture and treen, welcomed us and introduced Colonel James Finlay, clerk to the company, who expertly condensed nearly 700 years of history into 10 minutes. To aid our inspection of furniture Dick had thoughtfully (and energetically) removed many pieces from the smaller rooms and placed them in the spacious hall. Our voyage of discovery was enhanced immensely by Dick's discussion of the carving, particularly on chairs. The fact that Dick is an illustrious member of a long line of York carvers which includes Grinling Gibbons and John Etty, became very obvious as he diagnosed and explained how many chisels had been used on various carvings, and how skilfully (or otherwise!) the carvers had planned and laid out their work. The 13th century iron-bound chest, a curiously cobbled together turned chair of very substantial proportions, and an exquisitely carved child's chair all caught the members' attention as they roamed among the collection Dick had assembled for us.

The undercroft is very sparsely furnished, with the exception of the chapel, but the rooms on the first floor (the same level as the hall) contained furniture of a wide range of dates, all worthy of inspection. The RFS members' penchant for crawling under furniture was rewarded by discovering that the turner of the very elaborate underframe of a drop-leaf table had used wany-edged walnut for some of his twist-turned stretchers.

Many changes have been made to the building over its long history. At one time it was the location of the York Stock Exchange. What greets the visitor today is a well exposed fine timber structure which is gracing the home of an active guild still operating under a charter issued by Elizabeth I, and continuing good works in the community.

Michael Haines