

# God's House, Ewelme, and Rycote Park and Chapel

24 April

On a beautiful spring day we met at Ewelme Rectory where the Revd Jonathan Meyer and his wife Shirley gave us coffee before Jonathan took us on our tour. Jonathan is a member of the RFS as well as being the local vicar. Not only did he give us a detailed history of Ewelme, St Mary's Church, God's House almshouses and school, but he provided us with ladders so that we could closely inspect the carved wooden angels on the canopy of Alice de la Pole's tomb and the angel roof of St John the Baptist's Chapel. How often I have wanted a ladder to get a better look at some detail in a church!

Ewelme nestles in a beautiful Chiltern valley where local enthusiasts are restoring the watercress beds. The glorious 15th century church, almshouses and school are grouped at the centre of the village. They were built and endowed by Chaucer's grand-daughter, Alice, and her husband, William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk. The flint and stone church was probably built by Suffolk masons, as was the woodwork: both have the look and feel of an East Anglian church. The light and spacious interior is divided by carved screens, which have fine ogee tracery and unusual iron mullions.

The chantry chapel, dedicated to St John the Baptist, has a wooden roof, which is diapered and decorated with feather-bodied angels with outstretched wings. Alice de la Pole's tomb, with her beautifully carved alabaster effigy, lies against the north wall of the chapel. Below it is another

Fig 1



Fig 2

Fig 1 Angel on the chantry chapel ceiling

Fig 2 A 19th century watercolour of the almshouses, Ewelme



image of Alice, this time as a cadaver with a shrivelled body, only partly covered by a shroud. The tomb canopy is surmounted by eight pinnacles with carved angels dressed alternately in feathers and robes. Some have hollowed out backs and the wings are carved from separate blocks of wood nailed to the bodies. The octagonal font has a richly carved wooden cover, more than 3m high, with four tiers of cusped and crocketed arches topped with a figure of St Michael.

The almshouses were built on a collegiate plan with a cloister around a central quad. There were originally 13 cottages, consisting of two rooms, one above another, which were converted into six flats in 1970. They are of timber frame construction within an outer stone shell and half-timber and brick on the courtyard side. There are four decorative gabled doorways with elaborate tracery on the bargeboards, the one to the west being original. On the east side, stone steps lead via a covered passage to the church. One of the residents kindly allowed us to see inside her flat.

Fig 1 Members inspecting Chiselhampton church

Fig 2 Canopy of King Charles's pew at Rycote

Fig 3 Beautifully irregular twist-turned altar rails at Rycote



## Chiselhampton Church

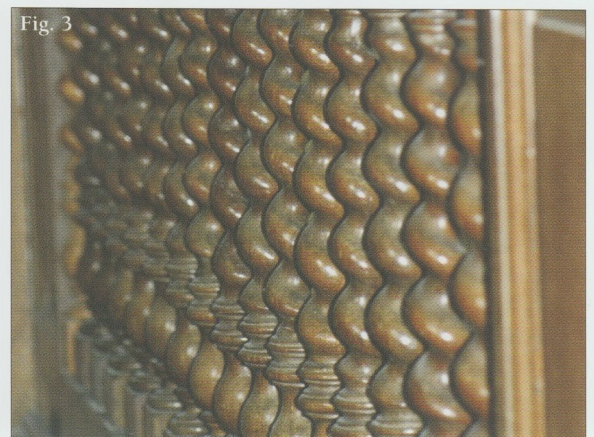
After a very good lunch at the Half Moon in Cuxham, we visited the church of St Katherine, Chiselhampton, now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. This delightful small church is remarkable for having its original Georgian fittings and arrangement. We have John Piper and John Betjeman to thank for its survival: Piper repainted the clock face and Betjeman, in 1952, wrote a poem about the church to help raise funds for its repair. It has a simple stuccoed exterior and the west gable is surmounted by a wooden clock tower.

Inside are high box pews, a clerk's desk and reading desk, and a west gallery on Tuscan columns. The only exception to the Georgian furnishings is the Jacobean pulpit. The altar rails follow the puritan arrangement of enclosing three sides of the sanctuary. The wooden reredos has texts framed by pretty rococo swags of flowers and ribbons.

## Rycote Park and Chapel of Saint Michael

We were welcomed to Rycote Park by Sarah Taylor who gave us tea in a beautifully restored barn. She gave us a brief history of the house, chapel and park before taking us on a tour of the outside of the house and gardens. The great house at Rycote was burned out in 1745 and pulled down in 1800. The remaining stable block was carefully restored in 1911 to make a moderate sized country house. She and her husband Bernard bought the estate in 2000 and have restored and extended the house, recreated a Tudor garden and restored the park. There are two especially fine old trees: an oriental plane next to the house and a very ancient yew next to the church.

Rycote Chapel was founded in 1449 as a chantry for Rycote House. Its isolation and the destruction of the house saved it from a Victorian makeover. It has a continuous nave and chapel under a wagon roof. The



exterior is a fine example of a mid-15th century church but it is the interior that catches the eye. John Piper wrote that it 'suggests somehow a sailing ship under full sail in a light breeze'. This effect is given by two exotic early 17th century pews, both ornately canopied. The Norreys' pew has round arched arcading with Tuscan balusters and an upper musicians' gallery with Islamic-looking fretwork. The south pew is said to have been built for a visit by Charles I in 1625. It is just as splendid, with an ogee-domed canopy.

Thanks to Jeremy Bate and Polly Legg for organising this wonderful day.

*Neil McClennan*