

A Private House in York

Sunday evening, 18 July

As well as the weekend's outstanding programme of visits, our AGM and the furniture surgery expertly organised by John Boram, some of us even managed to squeeze some extras into the itinerary: choral evensong in the Minster and the York Mystery Plays were special bonuses. The final treat was a visit to a fine 18th century town house, nestling discreetly among commercial buildings within the city walls. Built speculatively in 1742, the five-storey building had a succession of gentle owners but by the 20th century it had been overtaken by neglect and commerce, becoming a shoe repair shop and heel bar in latter days. The Georgian Society rescued it in 1968 and put it back into structural order before selling it again into responsible private ownership.

Its present inhabitants have lavished love and respect on the cosily-proportioned rooms, filling them with unusual examples of 18th century furniture within the framework of painted panelling, generous windows and elegant fireplaces. The result is a series of colourful and comfortable interiors setting off a very personal collection built up with passion and discrimination over several decades. There were many 'never-seen-it-before' pieces, so beloved by RFS members.

A strongly Kentian overmantel framing a 17th century Dutch painting of shipping close to shore by Adam Willaerts dominates the green panelled dining room, the iron grate below (found in Bath) displaying the heads of Roman emperors. A black japanned chair of about 1725 with an ergonomically curved back, flamboyant cresting and original caning to the back and seat was of great interest, and we discussed the origins of a stamped and

moulded leather lady's compendium with compartments for writing, sewing and jewellery, embellished with gilt metal rosette handles and a pagoda top: was it made in London or Paris?

The drawing room corner cupboard appeared to have a unique space-saving fitting – a revolving table offering, when pulled out, a half-round surface for tea or writing; beside it another Kentian overmantel with a surmounting vase and a central classical subject in relief, framed by a border of leaves and grapes. Here too there was a generously proportioned wing chair with extra large scrolls to the head and arms, and a glamorous, if retrospective, carved arched front stretcher.

Architects' tables are clearly a favourite form for our hosts: we looked at several mahogany examples, with varying forms of extension and decoration. There was much discussion regarding an idiosyncratic folding-topped dressing table, its cabriole legs carved with characterful lion faces above vigorous hairy feet; silvered metal fittings and 'quilted' veneers to the doors were additional points of interest. In the same room we noted a bachelor's chest with its lopers integral to the baize-covered slide – a practical feature rarely seen.

We debated the origins of an imposing neoclassical white-painted side table, topped with *verde antico* marble above a Greek key frieze and supported on fluted tapering legs with stiff leaf ankles and ball feet: these, somewhat unusually, had not been cut down. It was infused with the spirit of Robert Adam who, of course, had absorbed his decorative vocabulary in Italy.

All too soon it was time to tear ourselves away from this gem of a house, so generously shared by its owners for the evening.

Noël Riley