

Rural Idylls: The Cotswolds and Transylvania

Sapperton, Gloucestershire

25 September

Sapperton Village Hall, designed by Ernest Barnsley, was a fitting venue for the RFS to hear a trio of lectures by a fascinatingly diverse group of speakers. The hall retains many of its original ladderback chairs attributed to Ernest Gimson in original wormy condition, unsafe to be used, but brought out especially for our benefit.

John Plant's memories of the Jewson family were our first treat. Originally from Wales, John was a teacher of rural crafts and is a maker of rush seating. He lives nearby at Down Ampney, famous as the title of the tune written in 1901 by Vaughan Williams for the hymn *Come Down, O Love Divine*. Some years ago, as a father of two small children, John found himself living close to Norman Jewson's daughter Nancy, a retired nanny, who befriended the family and entertained the children. Members who attended the RFS day at Owlpen Manor will recall that Jewson bought and conservatively restored that wonderful medieval building as a labour of love, yet shortage of funds prevented him from enjoying the fruits of his labour.

Over the years, as John's friendship with Nancy developed, he managed to buy or was given a number of items with unique associations with the Cotswold school makers. Many of these items he brought to the hall to share with us. His genuine enthusiasm for his very personal collection was infectious. Among the items he shared with us were Ernest Gimson's bed in English walnut, a pleasingly simple coat rack by Norman Jewson, and a magnificent set of polished fire irons with subtle chased decoration by Alfred Bucknell. The true quality of these irons only became apparent on handling – the balance in the hand and the subtle feel of the chased detail a delight to experience.

John introduced us to Norman Jewson's memoirs of the Cotswold school, *By Chance I Did Rove*, a scarce item annotated by the author. For contrast, a small carved and painted wooden bird made by Jewson as a toy for Nancy was a touching personal memento, as was Nancy's gift to John of a simple ladderback chair with decayed rush seat which John told us has been hanging on the wall of his workshop for years. 'Somehow I've never got around to restoring it', he said wistfully, knowing that he probably never will, and nor would any of his audience.

Dave Walton, a volunteer guide at the Cheltenham museum, gave us an illustrated talk on the work of Ernest Gimson and the Barnsley brothers. He managed to clarify and put into context the careers of these three architect/designer/makers who shared affluent middle-class midlands backgrounds yet settled and worked in the Cotswolds, and whose careers became confusingly intertwined. He then led a guided walk to Beechhanger, built by Sidney Barnsley, and to Upper Dorval House, occupied and extended by Ernest Barnsley, situated at the top of a track used to haul the timber used in the building. Returning up the lane we entered the churchyard to find the graves of Emery Walker, the father of British printing and friend of William Morris, who lived at nearby Daneway House in the 1930s, and the graves of the Barnsley brothers side by side.

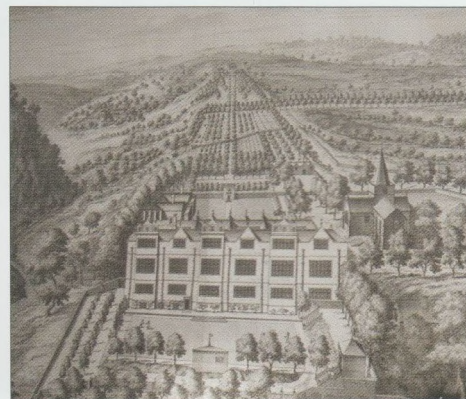
Beyond and below the church is a grass plateau, the superb site of the Jacobean Sapperton House, demolished in the early 18th century. From this house came the striking oak panelling, re-used as a gallery, and bench ends in the form of atlantes, recycled into the early 18th century extension to the Norman church. The church, which surprisingly does not appear in Simon Jenkins' *1000 Best*, also contains a magnificent trio of tombs of the Atkins family which demonstrate the evolving fashions of memorial sculpture during the 17th and early 18th centuries.



Pew ends in Sapperton church



John Plant with Nancy Jewson's chair



Engraving of Sapperton house

In the afternoon Bill Cotton introduced us to the Saxon villages of Transylvania. Bill never ceases to surprise with his studies of unexplored aspects of vernacular furniture, so most of his audience were eager to discover what he had uncovered in the depths of one of the poorest of post-communist European countries. Bill recalled how at an Amsterdam conference a couple of years ago a woman described to him an 11th century church in a Romanian Saxon village which contained 130 painted coffers in a loft high above the nave. Such a statement fired Bill's curiosity and, by chance, a neighbour of his in Cirencester, Jessica Douglas-Home, is chairman of the Mihai Eminescu Trust, dedicated to preserving the unique heritage of rural Romania. The trust is named after Romania's greatest poet and cultural freethinker who lived in the second part of the 19th century. From Jessica, Bill learned that the trust was originally set up during Ceausescu's dictatorship to give dissidents a lifeline by helping intellectuals escape and by providing writing materials. By alerting the west to his plans to bulldoze Romania's rural architecture it helped save hundreds of towns and villages from destruction. Since then it has played a prominent role in the country's academic and cultural revival. The Prince of Wales is a passionate patron of the trust, has visited the region several times since 1997 and now owns several traditional houses which are available to let. He has recognised the unique potential of the area to develop a sustainable traditional farming programme.

This part of eastern Europe has a complicated history of migration and counter-migration, famously described by Patrick Leigh Fermor in his tale of a teenage walk from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople in 1933, *Between The Woods And The Water*, describing Transylvania as a wild and beautiful region of forests and mountains secluded from western eyes during centuries of religious and national turbulence. Bill explained that the Romanian language is the closest to Roman Latin. Transylvanians are not Romanians – they are Germans or Hungarians. In the 11th and 12th centuries the Hungarians, rulers of this region, raided repeatedly by Turks, brought in German-speaking Saxons to fortify their villages. In more recent times German-speaking Romanians were recruited by the invading German SS and when the country was captured by the Soviets many were sent to forced labour in Siberia. Ceausescu, who distrusted the Saxons, tried to destroy their traditional rural life while creating a modern industrial state, then sold skilled displaced Saxons to the German state after confiscating their land. After the fall of communism the land was offered back. However at this point the government of a recently united Germany offered Saxons the opportunity to return to the fatherland, which created a stampede of 200,000 emigrants, leaving the

villages virtually empty but for the unskilled and elderly. Fortunately some have returned and the village populations are now a mix of Romanian, Saxon and Roma (gypsies). The Roma occupied the abandoned houses and now travel around the villages in horse-drawn rubber-tired carts buying scrap; many of them carry musical instruments, their traditional music having inspired composers such as Georges Enescu in the early 20th century.

Bill and Gerry flew initially to the baroque city of Sibiu, headquarters of the Ethnographic Museum, to meet the furniture curators, Simona and Michaela, who introduced their collection. With the help of an interpreter, Bill and Gerry were able to meet the owners of many traditional houses and discuss the furnishings. Later in the trip they travelled to Viscri, to further explore the work of the Eminescu Trust.

Set in steeply rolling country, Saxon villages follow a similar pattern of houses set end-on to the street, painted in bright ochres, blues and greens under hipped tiled roofs with a cobbled courtyard to one side, entered through large gates, with winter and (open) summer kitchens, vegetable patches and huge covered timber stores as much as 15ft high. Bill explained that storing firewood is a major occupation in order to survive the long cold winters; smokehouses are used to cure meats and cheeses. Behind, each yard is enclosed by a massive timber-framed barn with an orchard beyond, usually with a row of walnuts to act as a fire break and provide shelter from the sun. Arable and pasture land extends behind the villages up to woodland. The villagers divide their land into strips like medieval England; cattle are communally owned and let out daily to graze the un-metalled village streets, along with goats and geese. The streets, through which a stream runs, are planted with avenues of pear trees. Village dancing circles survive, marked out with low hurdles, alongside the fortified church.

Transylvania is a land of wood. Oak, beech and hornbeam forests extend down to the village boundaries: Bill showed a photo of the largest hornbeam he had ever encountered. He was impressed by the Saxons' ability to exploit wood with ingenuity, showing us photos of a trust-owned house built of massive horizontal sections of silver fir on a stone plinth with shingled roof and another of a flight of three substantial steps, rather like a mounting block, fashioned out of a single block of timber. The creative use of wood is well demonstrated by the fencing techniques, some thatched to protect from the rain, others of woven willow incorporating vertical paling; hurdles and chicken coops are of finely woven willow. Bill's photos suggested to us that a study could be made of this craft alone!

Bill and Gerry felt honoured to be invited into many of the houses and meet the elderly owners, many of whom

they knew had stoically survived appalling hardships during the last 60 years of political upheaval and war, even reduced to wearing their wedding dresses to work in the fields, for want of clothing. The interiors can be very dark – flashlight photography revealed details impossible to see on site. Life went on in one room heated by a tiled stove. Typically these rooms are lined with dressers, marriage coffers, chests of drawers and a bed, all arranged in a line against one wall. The density of the furnishings may suggest inherited items being consolidated from different homes as the population of the village shrank. Many dressers and chests have simulated paintwork on softwood, some with sophisticated imitations of crossbanding and inlay, in unmistakably early 19th century German style. Since his trip, Bill noticed a plumwood veneered German commode advertised for auction in the *Antiques Trade Gazette*, the style of which must surely have been the inspiration for the painted examples in Transylvania. Some painted pieces feature flowers, largely in reds, ochres and greens, similar to some of the work RFS members encountered in the north of Holland during their trip in 2001. Bill now believes that some of the items in Dutch museums may originate from Germany.

Dressers with strongly canted corners also reflect German influence, while Romanian examples have square corners. The isolation of the communities makes dating of furniture difficult. From its appearance, a painted marriage chest could have been 200 years old, but Bill learned from the owner that it celebrated her own marriage 50 years ago. A common type of chair is a solid back-stool with legs mortised into the seat. The distinctive *luther Tisch* (table), with sliding lid to contain the family Bible, sits on a trestle base and presumably reflects a Protestant background. Cuckoo clocks are abundant.

Traditionally beds had thin mattresses of woven rush, but these now only survive in museums. Truckle beds are common: Bill and Gerry had the dubious pleasure of sleeping in one themselves! However, it is the marital bed that dominates the room, dressed with hand-worked lace and woven linen throws upon which numerous cushions are stacked. These textiles proudly demonstrate the skills of the women of the house, who are seen in fine weather working in groups along the village street. Against an adjacent wall a very long painted wooden box bench doubles as seating and even as a bed for the children lying end to end.

At Rupea the Ethnographical Museum contains a good selection of furniture. Here many of the churches are timber clad, with steeply tiled roofs. The baroque interiors are painted with biblical scenes in faux marble frames. Here Bill encountered the church which had initially tempted him to travel to Transylvania. Under the floor of

the nave, a trapdoor revealed a well to provide water to Saxons sheltering from attack, while up a very narrow twisting flight of stairs, was the room housing the 130 coffers he had travelled all this distance to see, neatly arranged in rows, presumably intended to hold the grain and provisions necessary to sustain the barricaded population in crisis. Two mysteries remain unanswered: first, how did they get the coffers up the staircase? Secondly, since one is dated 1822, long after the threat of invasion by the Turks, what emergency was being prepared for?

As Bill declared at the end of his lecture, one visit merely scratched the surface of a fascinating subject. By the time this report is published he hopes to have returned to Romania and engaged the help of ordinary families to help him develop his research into the social history of the community. The RFS is considering organising a tour within the next two years. The Mihai Eminescu Trust can be explored on their website. We challenge any member not to be seduced by Jessica Douglas-Home's reprinted article on the home page. Please let Polly Legg know if you are interested in the project.

William Jefferies and Jeremy Bate