

# A Lecture, Wolfeton House and Dorchester

**Saturday afternoon, 16 July**

Bob Machin, a member of the Vernacular Architecture Group, gave a lively and informative talk on the development of old Dorset farmhouses. Using evidence from probate inventories, photographic archives and site visits, he outlined the stages of development from a basic two-unit house ('hall' and 'chamber within the hall') to the addition of service rooms and the replacement of a central hearth by a fireplace which gave rise to either the cross passage plan or lobby entry plan. He demonstrated the geographical spread of these various types by means of distribution maps.

Captain Nigel Thimbleby welcomed us to Wolfeton House. The flamboyant south range dates from the early and late 16th century, with fine Longleat- and Montacute-quality internal stonework, plasterwork and woodcarving. The stonework in the entrance passage and the staircase, possibly by William Arnold or Allen Maynard (c1580), was rivalled by the exuberance of the woodcarving of the oak chimneypiece and doorcase of the drawing room, both flanked by giant Corinthian columns - representing a west country workshop of woodcarvers.

Cherished pieces of furniture included the dining room table, the top of which Captain Thimbleby had grafted onto a 17th century baluster-legged base. It was made up from oak salvaged from the stalls of his stable block. The set of dining chairs, which came from the family's Gloucestershire property, were made by the Barnsley workshop. He was particularly fond of a late 17th century firescreen (in a later carved stand) that he had bought from

Michael Legg. Especially pleasing was the dry-scrubbed oak floor of the Great Chamber with wide irregular adze-marked boards that gave no hint of the room's ignominious subdivisions in the 20th century.

At the Dorset County Court House, which remains structurally unaltered from the mid-19th century, Alastair Chisholm brought the court vividly to life and especially its role as the setting for the trial of the Tolpuddle Martyrs (1834). The dark and cramped cells below the dock contrasted starkly with the light-filled and galleried courtroom above.

At the Dorset County Museum, members were able to examine a temporary exhibition of west country furniture mounted jointly by the museum and John Boram. This ranged from pig slaughtering blocks to country chairs, backed up by excellent illustrations and photographs of 19th and 20th century interiors. Later we watched films from the Trilith Archive which vividly brought to the screen scenes of farming life during the First World War, much of it from the local parish of Iwerne Minster; potting from the Verwood Pottery, and cider making in 'Will's Surgery' - a convivial drinking assembly in Will's barn. These agricultural scenes evoked memories of characters from Thomas Hardy's Dorset and placed cottage furniture within a living context.

*Christopher Hartley*