

Wimborne Minster, The Priest's House Museum and Lodge Farm, Pamphill

Friday morning, 15 July

The day began with a visit to Wimborne Minster. Pevsner writes that 'it is imposing, but it is not beautiful. What is it that spoils it? The spotty brown and grey stone in the first place, and the competition of crossing tower and W tower

in the second...' The guidebook says 'on closer inspection it is quite obvious the church was built by loving hands to the Glory of God rather than by great architectural expertise', which is perhaps a polite way of putting it. The combination of a west tower and a crossing tower is certainly unusual, and not a happy one.

The interior, however, contained much of interest. A rare dug-out oak chest in the north chapel was said to be Saxon, though probably somewhat later. A fine oak chest dated 1621 was designed to hold money collected for a charity for the relief of the poor and had six locks, one for each of the charity's trustees. We saw a spectacular Purbeck marble tomb of John Beaufort, 1st Duke of Somerset (d. 1444), grandfather of Henry VII. The recumbent figures of the Duke and his wife lay on top, each charmingly holding the other's right hand, he with his feet on a lion and she with hers on a dog.

The high point of the visit for most of us was the chained library. The 86-year-old librarian, Mr Frank Tandy, proved to be an exceptionally enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide, for whom the library was obviously his life's work. The books were deposited here in 1685 by the Rev William Stone, a Catholic, for safe-keeping, for fear that they would otherwise be burned as the possessions of a papist. Many of the chained books were shelved with their spines to the wall, which Mr Tandy told us was the norm until 1620.

Across the green from the Minster lay the Priest's House Museum, our next port of call. The original medieval building was extended in the 17th century to embrace three sides of a courtyard facing onto the High Street and in the 18th century the courtyard was filled in, when the house was occupied by a mercer. As the sun shone, the well cared-for garden behind served as a pleasant venue for morning coffee. The contents included two Thames Valley comb-back windsor chairs which attracted considerable interest. One, of about 1775, had front legs whose circular top ends flared to feet which were tear-shaped in cross-section, an unusual feature which Bob Parrott pointed out is shared by a two-seater windsor at Jesus College, Oxford. The other, of about 1830, had a second comb half-way between the arm bow and the top comb, the spindles passing through it, a design which none of us had seen before.

In the parlour we saw a good moulded plaster ceiling of about 1600 above a most unusual frieze of a two-dimensional incised serpentine pattern, with an inscription over the window: AL PEOPLE REFRAYNE FROM SYN. The 18th-century panelling concealed painted vertical stripes on the walls, recalling those we had seen in the Merchant's House at Marlborough earlier in the year, though much broader.

The morning was completed by a visit to Lodge Farm, Pamphill by kind permission of its tenant, Mr Steven Burden, who told us the site had been occupied since 4000 BC, though one suspects there may have been a few gaps. The house was a medieval lodge for the keeper of the deer park, part of the Kingston Lacy estate, owned by the Crown and leased to various supporters. One of these, in the mid 15th century, was John Beaufort, 1st Duke of Somerset, whose tomb we had seen at Wimborne Minster. James I sold the Kingston Lacy estate in 1603 and in the 17th century Lodge Farm was occupied by a warrener called Short, who extended the house at the back, introducing a staircase. However the original building remains: a defensive structure with narrow single-light trefoil-headed windows and splayed reveals. Upstairs is the solar with a fine screen dividing it from the adjacent room. The solar is open to the roof which has wind braces and a substantial king post, which Mr Burden assured us is purely decorative, the weight of the roof being supported by the purlins.

John Stabler