

Hotel-Dieu, Beaune

16 September

A short train journey from Dijon brought us to the attractive medieval town of Beaune, famous for its wineries inherited from monastic orders. Adjacent to the main square stands the magnificent Hotel-Dieu, completed in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin who had ruled Beaune for 40 years and was chancellor to Philippe-le-Bon, Duke of Burgundy. It was built as a hospice with no expense spared, and was Rolin's gift to the poor. The enormous stone and timber-framed buildings enclose a large central courtyard. The roofs are of almost cathedral-like proportions with gothic facades, later multi-coloured glazed tiles laid in geometric patterns, a multitude of dormers and 50 gilded iron weather vanes. External timber galleries allowed the nuns to move easily between their quarters. Many of the important craftsmen are known, the two most important being Jean Ratheau, master mason, and Guillaume La Rathe, master carpenter. In addition, numbers of artists were employed to decorate the interiors. The architectural style became popular throughout Burgundy.

We were greeted by the curator, Bruno François, and two dendrochronologists, Didier Pousset and Christine

Bruno François and Chris Pickvance at Beaune, Peter Owen in the background



Locatelli. Bruno introduced the buildings to us and then Didier and Christine gave us a detailed presentation on their work. They have access to extensive reference data for tree ring dating. Pine and oak samples go back as far as 6000 BC. Only wood from areas with varying annual climatic conditions are suitable, not areas where trees grow continually throughout the year. Trees with long ring sequences are easier to analyse where core samples can be taken. A major problem with furniture is that there is hardly ever any sapwood present due to makers' concerns about future worm infection, and a precise date cannot be established. They use non-invasive methods of dendrochronology by micro-sanding wood where the grain is visible, and taking micro-digital photographs of transverse and end grain to compare with reference data. They use methods of traceology by recording and analysing tool marks to establish which tradesmen made which pieces. X-ray techniques have allowed them to establish the speed of growth and which part of a tree was used.

Didier and Christine have carried out work for other museums in Europe and America. Their work on Boulle furniture in the Louvre proved that 50% of the items were faked and that a lot of poor wood was used. Their Baltic studies have shown that because the trees were grown at a higher altitude the grain was shorter, the rings narrower and the wood stronger. The straight grain made it more likely to split. The techniques to saw it efficiently and stack it compactly in inverted wedge-shaped stacks to deter theft, were not mastered until around 1300. After this date the Baltic trade expanded rapidly, with the wood being used for coffins in England during the plague. Ideally wood to be used for splitting should be seasoned



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4

Fig 1 Roof and gallery of Hotel-Dieu, Beaune

Fig 2 Mid-15th century oak joined linen chest with carved parchemin panels

Fig 3 Mid-15th century oak clamped-front chest, or 'arche'

Fig 4 Mid-15th century oak boarded linen chest with iron corner straps and carrying handles

for six months, and for sawing two to three years. By comparing plane marks in the Hotel-Dieu, they found that different chests contained wood cut from the same plank and that wood used in the roof was also used for at least three of the chests, although it was mainly the smaller diameter trees that were used for the roof.

Our tour of the hospital, led by Bruno, began with the Great Hall of the Poor. This is 50m long with a wonderfully decorated barrel-vaulted ceiling. The beds were originally at right angles to the two side walls, but are

now parallel to them. Each is in its own panelled compartment, with hangings and a curtain at the entrance and a small walnut centre table and side chair outside. These were in a 17th century style but dated from the refurbishment of 1875. Traditionally, long tables and benches stood in the centre of the room for meals that were served in pewter dishes.

The hospital has a large collection of medieval chests, 30 of which date to the second half of the 15th century and are part of the original endowment of furniture by Nicholas Rolin. Nine of these have carved parchemin panelling, which is also on the doors of the building. These chests were used to store linen and are known as *enchâtières*. Others were simpler, of clamped form, used to contain grain and other foods and are known as *arches*. The chests with carved tracery are recorded as containing precious objects and books. There were two bench chests with removable backs and carved parchemin panels. In the 17th century most of the earlier oak benches, tables and cupboards were replaced with new stools, chairs, tables and armoires of walnut or pine, some of which remain.

A great deal of old furniture, particularly chests, had been kept and stored in the enormous roof space and as part of the more recent assessment and restoration of the buildings, they have been brought down and put into a purpose-built store. We were fortunate enough to be able to visit this treasure trove. Some of the furniture has already been restored and placed on display, the rest is work in progress and will take many years to complete.

The earliest chest in the hospital is in the store reserve collection and we were able to examine it. It is a clamped-front chest, made from all new wood and has been dendro-dated to 1401-2. The two wide vertical stiles each have a mortise groove down their inside edge to hold the tenons cut on either end of the wide horizontal board clamped between them. Even though the board is held by pegs it has not split. Inside the chest, grooves remain indicating the position of a hinged lidded box and shelf. The chest has its original iron banding with *fleur de lis* decoration and simple single bead carving.

The hospital contains many other treasures - paintings, carvings, tapestries, interiors, numerous works of art, not least the altarpiece depicting the *Last Judgement*, attributed to Rogier van der Weyden. We were focused on furniture and had time for only a fleeting glimpse of some of these wonders.

We are greatly indebted to Bruno, Didier and Christine for their very warm welcome, their friendliness and willingness to share their expertise.

Ian and Margaret Phillips

Fig 6 Upper edge of front stile of oak clamped-front chest, 1401-02

Fig 7 Front and lid of oak clamped-front chest with original ironwork, 1401-02.

Fig 8 Interior of oak clamped-front chest showing grooves for hinged lidded box and shelf

Fig 9 Interior of 15th century oak chest with mark of the hospital, a key and castle, guardianship and safety

Fig 10 Oak chest lid with broken cleat revealing joint, late 15th century.

