

Deene Park, Northamptonshire

13 July

From the outside Deene Park looks like a Regency house with mock battlements; inside, however, there are substantial Tudor elements which have been wrapped around by additions and alterations over five centuries which make it quite a confusing ensemble, but because the house is still lived in it feels very much like a home. We were told there had been a house on the site since before the Norman conquest, owned by the Abbey of Westminster and used as a hunting lodge. It was bought by Sir Robert Brudenell in 1514, a notable lawyer who rose to become a chief justice. Northamptonshire was home to many of the leading lights of the Tudor period, including the Cecils, Spencers, Hattons and Montagus, and as the Brudenells gradually enlarged their estates they kept close to the court; their loyalty was rewarded under Charles II who conferred the title of Earl of Cardigan and it was the seventh Earl who famously led the Charge of the Light Brigade in 1854; the head and tail of his horse, Ronald, are displayed, stuffed and mounted, at the bottom of one of the staircases.

The most impressive room is the great hall, enlarged in 1572 with a fine hammer-beam roof in sweet chestnut and an oak panelled east wall with pitch inlaid frieze and topped by the Brudenell coat of arms. The fine marble fire surround and overmantel are dated 1571. Perhaps the most interesting pieces of furniture in the house for our group are the refectory table and its associated bench, believed to be contemporary with the hall enlargements. An Elizabethan oak staircase, with alterations, leads to what was once the

Conference members at Apethorpe hall



great chamber, now truncated but still with a magnificent plaster ceiling of around 1600. There were several items of furniture of note here, not least the caned day-bed of around 1680, a particularly good example of its type.

The tour took us through a series of bedrooms, some with evidence of the Tudor house in the form of oak panelling, timber framing and plaster ceilings, all quite disturbed by the 18th and 19th century developments, before descending into the mainly Georgian and later wing of the house, which overlooks a fine parterre garden laid out by David Hicks in the 1990s. There are fine paintings throughout, by artists including Reynolds, Gainsborough, Gauffier, Stubbs and Ferneley, and a striking series of 12 portraits of children by an unknown artist, c1620. A pair of side tables in the drawing room in the manner of Charles Boulle, supplied by Gerrit Jensen in around 1680, and a 'Nonsuch' 16th-century inlaid chest in the great hall were notable pieces in a furniture collection of good but rarely exceptional quality. Our thanks go to the excellent guides and to the family for allowing us to visit.

David Dewing