Visit to St John's, Trinity and Queen's colleges, Cambridge

16 April

The society is indebted to Robert Williams, historian of local Cambridge-made furniture, whose reputation secured us three visits of the greatest interest. We congregated in St John's under the genial supervision of John O'Sullivan, before moving through the ante-chapel, past a 19th century series of oak twin pedestal tables, loosely modelled on the medieval Penshurst table; brief pause in the hall; upstairs to the combination room, the former long gallery (c. 1600) of the master's lodge, furnished with a table of commensurate length. Here Robert singled out from five or six sets of mahogany chairs a large set of 26, pointing out a stamp of T.R. for Thomas Rayner II, working for the Smith family (third quarter of the 18th century). The set has serpentine front seat rails, triple narrow divided back splats, rising to a series of five interlaced curves in the top rail. The set can be differentiated from metropolitan chairs by the admixture of rails, some walnut, by a larger scantling, and a slight gawkiness in the drawing. We admired a wheeled and completely iron-bound chest of high quality, probably Flemish or German c. 1450-1550.

Earlier delights are in the library, fitted out probably by local Henry Man (1624-8). Allen Purvis explained how the two opposing triangular lower cases spacing the higher of the first bay, were heightened in the rest as more books arrived. The square panel in the bases demonstrated this. All the cases are carved with delicate renaissance ornament, not dissimilar to the narrow side panels of the swept pedimented back of a rare oak single chair, which engendered much discussion, the dating ranging from the third quarter of the 16th century to well into the 17th. The height of the seat is unusual, the elegant fluted front legs supporting the tightly moulded repaired seat, the slab back legs continuing, framing the lightly canted back. All is lightly constructed, the carved detail unusually fine. The anciently-ebonised set of six tall back armchairs with triple central flat splats (late 17th century) are not necessarily local. The legs of the long set of square tables and joined stools are slenderly turned, a late variant of 1711. More traditional is the shallow (13in) two-part oak medal case, consisting of a deep fall front over a cupboard, with fully developed pulvinated frieze, probably the 1701 delivery by the local joiner Cornelius Austin II, who at the same time was panelling Trinity master's lodge.

After lunch we filed there, entering Great Court through the 15th century Great Gate, below the statue of Henry VIII, the founder, whose sceptre is always a chair leg. Robert gave us an historical introduction, amplified by Paul Simm, who most kindly devoted his afternoon to chaperoning us.

Robert emphasised the Smith family of craftsmen, who supplied furnishings from at least 1718, but whose work is more readily identifiable in the early 19th century through the bursar's rough daybook, starting in 1805, and the inventory of the lodge of 1820 by Elliot Smith.

In the entrance hall/parlour there is an ebonised long-case clock by R. Street, London, 1708, striking not only for the design of the case, the hood as tall as the rest, but also for the fact that it was returned to the college by Isaac Newton, who had used it for his experiments. Of remark also was one of an early 18th century set of 14 single walnut chairs of 1717, with tall upholstered backs and compass seat. The underframe is rather thickly turned and,

An old photo of the book cases at Trinity Hall which have never been adapted and extended

Allen Purvis demonstrates the adapted and extended book cases at St John's College Old Library: secret flaps enclose the catalogue of the original books
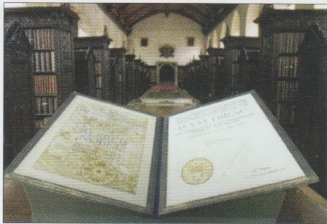
A view of the Old Library at St John's College

equally distinctive of a local hand, is the tall ribbed cabriole leg with high squashed knee. Robert had isolated too one of a set of 28 smart Regency mahogany dining chairs, of 1820, by local Thomas Rayner II or III (DEFM pl. 37 & 38); also a gilt framed stool by Miles & Edwards of Oxford Street, supplied in 1843, which could have been two decades earlier; not so by the same firm, the faded octagonal 'Elizabethan' table in the garden oriel window in the dining room. Also in that room is a fine faded mahogany side table with a shell-centred frieze, supplied in 1743, probably from London, the conglomerate marble top later supported on slate. On the north wall are a pair of harewood elliptical side tables, Smith & Sons 1795, the gilt ball feet heightening the tapering legs, added by the firm in 1807 (*Furniture History* XII, 1976). The dining table, probably late 18th century, bore out Robert's analysis of local manufacture, the frame not of beech, but pine with ash gates and joints.

Upstairs, an eccentric set of hardwood single chairs are a late gift, which excited comment, ranging from the Far East to Brazil. They are roughly made, perhaps very late 19th century. The pair of early 19th century mahogany card tables, probably Elliot Smith supplied 1820, have unusual hexagonal columns, faced with banks of chevrons. Is Doctor Bentley's walnut scriptor local or London? Surely

The library at Queen's showing the extended book cases

local are the set of four mahogany armchairs next door, with pierced anthemia in the curved backs, awkward arms, and heavily raked back legs, c.1770s.

Thence a stroll to Queen's, further delights expounded to us by Dr Diana Henderson, the librarian Tim Edgington and Dr Brian Callingham. The library of 1448 incorporates 13th century windows from the Carmelite Friary, installed in the 16th century, and has oak presses of the original foundation, later expanded. The broad planked lower part of the press ends, in profile a baluster upon an inverted baluster, with trestle feet, are original, the centre of the ends added in the 17th century, the top added before 1637. A parallel to the original configuration of the slab ends supporting a double lectern is noted by Jeremy Bate at Trinity Hall. Our host showed us an example of an original 16th century Cambridge binding, one of many, this by Garrett Godfrey. Our party could not resist assembling the stout set of six joined stools, c.1600. The pair of John Senex table globes, perhaps c. 1730, are on unusually boldly turned mahogany bases, supporting a short thick pillar, sprouting a cradle of five curved braces. It took two years to restore these by Sylvia Sumira of London. Chris Pickvance seized upon the domed coffer, the possible limewood lid eaten and sunk in the squares between the broad iron straps, the body probably of Polish pine; a notable lockplate. Chris compared it to a dendro-dated similar example of 1430 at Mendlesham, Suffolk.

We were glad our interests were thought not too narrow to encompass the magnificent chapel, a late work by George Frederick Bodley, the organ case and interior panelling by him complete; glass by Charles Eamer Kempe, with silvery canopied figures. The Flemish altarpiece, c. 1475, is in a parcel gilt 19th century presentation.

Thence to the long gallery, tea and treasures. The Edward East posted clock, a gift of 1664, in simple oak case, but with sumptuously engraved dial, caught many eyes, and lining the first part of the gallery was a fine set of six mid-18th century walnut armchairs. Transposed to safety here is the oak, two-part, high-quality cabinet of materia medica, lovingly extolled by our pharmacologist host, billed 8 August 1704 by John Austin, owned by John Francis Vigani, the first professor of chemistry in the university. The drawers are subdivided into squares, containing the various naturalia. It is remarkably complete and unsullied, the finest of the three in Cambridge, the slightly later ones of John Addenbrooke at St Catherine's, and of William Heberden at St John's. It has been published in 1933, 1952, by Adam Bowett in *Regional Furniture* VIII, 1994, and lately, by Lisa Wagner.

How grateful we are to our various hosts, putting up with our particular enthusiasms: an enthralling day.

Jonathan Harris