

Canons Ashby

12 July

We saw Canons Ashby at its best on an unexpectedly sunlit afternoon. This mellow, rambling house, home to the Dryden family since the mid-16th century until given to the National Trust in 1981, is a comparatively untouched house that fell into decline in the late 19th century and approached near ruin in the 20th.

The property was inherited by Edward Dryden, nephew of the poet, in 1708. Two inventories record Edward's improvements between his 1708 inheritance and his death in 1717. A significant number of items remain in the house from this period. Notable is the triple-plate 'Glass over ye Chimney' with arched walnut frame canted forward in the oak panelling of the dining room. In the hall a painted overmantel and a splendid dummy-board figure of a Scots guardsman (originally one of 'Two Centinells, painted on wood') survive in situ from the 1717 inventory. These are probably the work of the decorative artist Elizabeth Creed, a kinswoman of the Drydens.

The exceptionally fine walnut high back cane chairs in the Painted Parlour are probably also part of Edward's London purchases, as is the 'Large inlaid Cabinet wth chest of drawers under it' that originally stood in the Tapestry Room in 1717 and is now in the drawing room. However, eclipsing all these survivals is a remarkable set of six chairs, a settee and a firescreen, all covered with contemporary embroidery and in a marvellous state of preservation. Sold by the family in 1938, they reappeared at auction in Sidmouth and were bought by Mallett. They were acquired by the National Trust in 1983 and returned to Canons Ashby. The late Gervase Jackson-Stops, who did so much to promote the preservation of Canons Ashby,

The carved cornice at Lyddington Bede House



located the original bill for these. On 12 February 1715 the upholsterer 'Thom Phill' charged £7.10s 'for 6 walnuttree back chaires frames of ye newest fashion'. A full account of this suite can be found in *Furniture History* XX1, 1985. Adam Bowett pointed out that this is the earliest surviving fully documented example of cabriole-legged chairs in English furniture – 'in the newest fashion.'

Our thanks go to Mark Bradshaw, property manager, and the National Trust staff for opening the house and tea room especially for our visit and allowing us to wander freely about the house.

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