

Rockingham Castle

15 July

The final and, to most of us, surprise visit of the weekend was to Rockingham Castle, home of the Watson family for more than 400 years. Set on the edge of an escarpment, with dramatic views over the plain below, it has been the site of a fortification probably since the iron age, but the present buildings comprise substantial remains of a Norman castle with 16th century and later additions. Their present appearance owes much to the 19th century renovations of Anthony Salvin.

We began our tour in the impressive kitchens and domestic offices where Peter Brears guided us through the displays of food and its preparation that he had recently masterminded. A pre-1740 charcoal stove had been restored. A stone mortar on tall support had its original wooden lid. The great table in the servants' hall, supported on two massive round posts driven into the ground, attracted considerable interest. Another table, in the great hall, consists of a 16th century base with a top probably dating from the Salvin renovations of the 1830s.

Two iron-bound chests in the same room were discussed: a 17th century Nuremberg iron chest, and an armoured domed chest (15th-16th century), which unusually had two locks, and may once have had wheels. Hanging on a nearby wall was a carved panel which was or had served as a coffer front and which had an exceptional combination of features: a central chip-carved roundel, with a wreathed stag and amphisbaena (a fabulous serpent whose tail ends in two small heads – identified by David Shipton) on either side and with simple gothic tracery at each end, suggesting a date of 1500-1550.

The house, like many, contains an eclectic range of furniture, including 18th century English, French and Dutch pieces and, in the Panel Room, a magnificent Chinese coromandel screen, now split into two halves.

We are most grateful to Peter Brears and to David Shipton for their contributions to our visit – a splendid climax to yet another stimulating conference weekend.

Chris Pickvance and Noël Riley