

West Wycombe Park Windsor Chair Exhibition

13 May

We met in West Wycombe outside Church Loft on the High Street. The day - warm, bright and pleasant - was a good day to be in England.

We had a keen sense of anticipation: 34 of the best English windsors, plus one from America, awaited us. What a show! A chance to get up close and personal with superb 18th century design, craftsmanship, colour and paint. Before the exhibition opened a local resident, David Gerrard, kindly gave us a walking tour of the village. Climbing steep wooden stairs, we visited Church Loft, the oldest building in the village (15th century) and inspected the turret clock (c.1668) which Mr Gerrard looks after. Many of us also looked at St. Lawrence's Church (14th century). This building had been dramatically altered c. 1761-3. I have never been in a more vibrant church. No austerity here: pink and green paint work, wall paintings, exuberant corinthian columns, wonderful senses of space - a fine towered building on a steep hill, yew-tree'd to perfection. Carved into a headstone in the graveyard, 'I am most glad I loved thee. Think of all the suns that go to make one speedwell blue' (Oscar Wilde). Close by, the Dashwood Mausoleum, then further down the hill the Hell Fire Club Caves.

Then to the chairs. Feeling and sounding like what I imagine an 18th century election day to have been, with a brass band playing under the south colonnade, we made our way to the house. Chairs number 1 and 2 (I refer to the catalogue): a gothick arch and a round bow - great chairs. Number 3: a mahogany triple pointed arch gothick windsor armchair, probably made in 1756 for the St Aubyn family of St. Michael's Mount, Cornwall. Find the catalogue and look at this chair: a one-piece gothick back, finely drawn with a sleepy, burnished surface. Light, pert and fluid, great negative space. Number 4: a high quality, walnut low back armchair from the V&A. I'd love to have sat in it to see if it really is an exercise in how to slope; wonderfully carved, gorgeous walnut. Some years back, I remember going over and sitting in the painted windsor armchair from Enmore Castle (number 7), when it came up at McCartney's of Ludlow: the worn paint on the seat reminded me of strawberries and cream after a party, delightful walnut arms, the back owing something to the forest chairs.

The marvellous thing about this exhibition was the possibility of going back and forth from chair to chair to see how the earlier designs moved and adapted through the century. We saw the Oliver Goldsmith chair from the V&A, the rhythm of it a quiet poetry inviting rest and

contemplation. A comb-back forest chair from Captain Cook's ship *Resolution*, the aged green dappled paint redolent of his voyage from the grey of Whitby to the southern seas. A Bodleian Library chair, a line drawing of which inspired me years ago to make several chairs. Having now seen an original, 'Admirably calculated for ornament and repose' (*Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 1766) I see how far short my efforts fell. The Jesus College two-seat comb back settee; the Hewett comb back windsor armchair; three Webb-type bow back chairs; several very early forest chairs ... the exhibition went on.

A Pitt-type comb back windsor armchair, painted black, complete with the armorial of the city of Bath had great stance: finely proportioned pieces combined in the paint to give a tight yet airy chair, a heavier depth of bow than the two others here attributed to his workshop.

I went back a few days later and talked to Roy, the attendant in the 'Pitt' room. He remarked about the back legs of the Pitt chair: 'Spider-like in their angularity'. I looked, they are. There are so many ways to come at these chairs, so many ways to think about them, as indeed there were so many approaches to making them. This was a superb exhibition and I am very grateful to Bob Parrott, Michael Harding-Hill and Sir Edward Dashwood who worked it into being.

John Porritt, Spencertown, NY

John Porritt, Michael Harding-Hill, John Stabler and Marjorie Stabler at the windsor chair exhibition at West Wycombe Park

