

Newhailes

Saturday 13 July

We left the coach in the car park and walked the short distance, through some landscaped horse chestnut trees, to arrive at the entrance of the drive way. The simple yet elegant front facade of Newhailes House greeted us, and the delights inside were found to be equally impressive.

This house, designed in 1686 as either the family home of the architect James Smith or as a speculative endeavor



The main
entrance front
of Newhailes

on his part. The estate was originally named Whitehill and was purchased by Sir David Dalrymple in 1709 for 40,000 merks (a Scottish silver coin) and renamed New Hailes to distinguish it from their East Lothian family estate of Hailes. The design reflects the influence of Andrea Palladio, and as such, is a precursor to the Palladian villas that were to become popular throughout Britain. William Adam was commissioned to design a new staircase, state apartment and hall and this work was finished by the 1720s. In 1750 further additions were made with the construction of new wings and a large double height Library. More minor works were done in the 1790s under John Craig but little radical work, other than for the servant areas and stables was carried out until a restoration programme was initiated when the house was let.

The house was in Dalrymple occupation until Sir Charles let the property to Lord and Lady Shand in 1873. He insisted upon a significant programme of repairs and improvements. The National Trust for Scotland acquired the property from Sir Mark Dalrymple in 1997 and in order to maintain the untouched look of the house adopted a policy of doing 'as much work as necessary but as little as possible'.

We gathered in the Library, which seemed a little eerie, as the novel adjustable shelves, cleverly chamfered into the corners of the room and filling all the spaces above the doors, are now denuded of their books. This important library was used to pay death duties, and may one day return, as the National Library of Scotland is now home to the entire collection. Ian Gow, NTS Curator and his team gave us a warm welcome and introduction to the House, collection and its history.

Dr Adam Bowett gave a short lecture on the particular use of *laburnum alpinum* in some high style Scottish furniture. He did so with an example of a 'cockpen' chair (believed to be named after a village on the very influential Blair Atholl estate) and a fire screen. It was suggested that the preference for its use might have been as a result of both the local presence of the timber (resulting from the fashionable late 16th-century Avenue Garden style), and, the preference for the use of a now local timber. This was available in fair-sized boards, as this species grow far taller than the other species. It could also be finished to produce a lustrous deep purple coloured wood surface. Thus it was able to rival the commonly fashionable mahogany of the day. It was stressed that this is not the same species of *laburnum* which is used in vernacular Scottish and northern English furniture, which is *laburnum anagyroides*.

Some discussion was made about the misuse of the generic description of 'Chinoiserie' for furniture such as the cockpen chairs. The square section rear legs of which, often splay or kick from a higher position than is commonly



A back of one of a set of Cockpen chairs made from *laburnum* wood. Note the stripy nature of the wood on the left rear upright, typical of *laburnum*. (Courtesy of the National Trust for Scotland)

found in similar period English chairs; was this a Scottish feature? The description of sets of cockpen chairs being of only four or six was mentioned and, if accurate, it was believed to be an indication that their use was not in the formal dining room area. Was their fashion a Lothian one or more widespread?

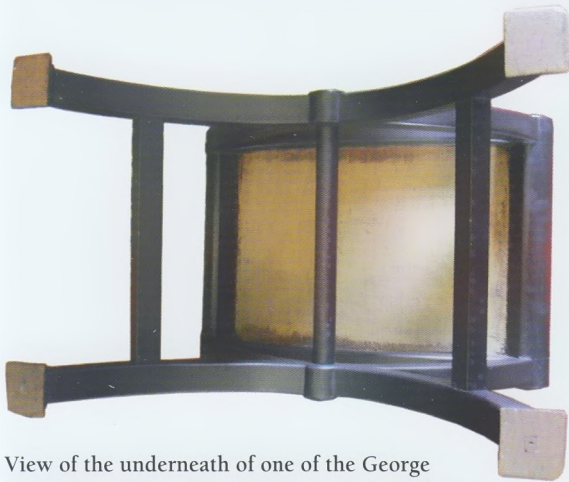
The library also contained a fascinating mahogany pedestal library table with drawers. It was unusual in not having a large one-piece top but a sectioned middle that sits between the two pedestals and is retained by special metal clips and braces. It was conjectured that this was done to allow the easier shipping of smaller sections. Made by Samuel Smith of Compton St, Soho, for the library it was invoiced in 1743 and cost £15-00, this was one year before his earliest date in the DECB. It also had quarter beaded pieces glued onto the inside edge of the drawer sides covering the drawer bottom rebate to allow for shrinkage of the bottom board. This was considered to be the earliest known document-supported example. The important fireplace by Sir Henry Cheere c. 1739 is still eye catching and the china closet a fascinating example of the importance such items had in the house of a Georgian gentleman.

Passing into the Chinese sitting room with its original wall paneling and a veined grey marble fireplace possibly

by the Adam family of Leith with its Georgian grate. A pair of early 18th-century gilt gesso tables in the style of Moore and fine lacquer cabinets (one of later century?) caught our attention. We moved with into the vestibule with plasterwork by Thomas Clayton for which there was an invoice dated 1742. We enjoyed seeing a set of eight lobby stools by the fashionable George Nix of London. Debate



One of a set of eight mahogany hall stools by George Nix. Nix was a London cabinet maker who has a complex history but appears to have had Scottish connection through the Duke of Montrose. He certainly sent furniture up the east coast to houses in Norfolk. (Courtesy of the National Trust for Scotland)



View of the underneath of one of the George Nix hall stools. In the picture you can see where the stain has leached through from the mahogany frame onto the coarse linen backing to the curved top. (Courtesy of the National Trust for Scotland)

focused on which George had made them. The father worked from 1716 to 1743 and the son, also George from 1744 to 1751 again according to the DECM.

The dining room with two sets of Chinese style 18th-century chairs and a brown oak middle 19th-century dining table provided a little contrast to the other Cheere fireplace. But this one is best appreciated in the large Versailles-influenced mirrored wall section enhancing the room's balance with its olive green and gold painted columns. This was once a drawing room. We then moved into the winter sitting room and another Cheere fireplace but here elegant sofas set off two Scottish bedroom-tables. Both in mahogany with straight legs terminating in pad feet, but one was made without the usual drawer and both displayed the signature single flap. A rare surviving metal-bound strong box veneered in walnut and rosewood (?), c. 1735, with a stand aroused much interest, with the internal fixings for when it was secured from the inside to the floor still present. The brass inset corner protectors and the lack of carry handles was an interesting security feature.

Another piece worthy of note was a simple mahogany bureau c. 1770, which had the unusual feature of bracket feet without the side faces being wider than the carcass itself. A feature found on similar pieces by Alexander Peter of Edinburgh also famous for his works in Dumfries house.

Passing a small planked-top cherry wood chest of drawers and a laburnum wash stand, amongst other items, we made our way to the best bedroom and dressing room; the former with the third Cheere chimneypiece in the house. The green bedroom with its 19th-century furniture made an interesting change in style but the fascinating survival of the alcove bed space (now with the Victorian alteration into wardrobe) was worthy of note. The really interesting fitted space was the concealed shelving unit, hidden behind a panel that matched the wall paneling, and its purpose made storage recess in the next room. We carried on to the yellow room and then on to the green alcove bedroom with an intricate early rococo ormolu mounted commode or Regence bureau de Mazarin? Probably the one mentioned in the inventory of the 1790's as a 'chest of drawers with a marble top' which was originally in the master bedroom. We left via a secondary staircase with an extraordinary curvilinear wrought-iron balustrade – very similar to one in Hopetoun, on the opposite side of Edinburgh – and this led down to the basement service corridor. We paused at the near empty old kitchen with a covered and locking coal hatch to walk along the length of the servants tunnel and emerge dazed into the strong sunlight bathing the designed landscape. Archeologists found much to amaze in the excavation pits, but under the stables an Egyptian schist or serpentine seal matrix bearing a cartouche for Tuthmosis III, c. 1400 bc was



Fine wrought iron secondary staircase, late 17th century. It was not unusual to have a wrought iron stair balustrade for the secondary staircase of Scottish houses but this is possibly the earliest in date. (Courtesy of the National Trust for Scotland)

found. It is an exciting reminder of the now stolen lead sphinx statues from the garden, which were believed to symbolize wisdom. Our gratitude goes to those who have saved this house and its collections for future generations to ponder over anew.

Simon Feingold