

# Research in progress: The Fleece Inn, Bretforton Morning Session

The National Trust's Fleece Inn at Bretforton near Evesham was the venue for the latest Research in Progress event, which covered a 14th-century chest, Durham chairs and cupboards of the mid-17th century, some Clissett chairs and a furniture surgery.

RFS member Paul Shutler had suggested the Fleece as a dozen or so Clissett chairs – of varying condition – had been found in the attic of this fascinating building. Paul introduced us to Nigel Smith who has been landlord of the Inn for the past ten years. He outlined the pub's history since 1400. The Fleece came into the ownership of the National Trust in 1977 on the death of the then landlord, Miss Lola Taplin. She was the last in line of a family that had run the pub for nearly 600 years.

We were able to start our exploration before the Inn opened, and much time was spent in the Pewter Room – so called because of the fine array of pewter on the huge dresser that almost filled one wall. Other striking features of this room were the curving settle around the fireplace, drawers' built-in under a window seat, and a cupboard fitted in under the inglenook's window seat; not an inch of space was wasted. The room contains an eclectic range of items, the highlights of the furniture being a finely turned spinning wheel, by Kerry of Evesham, and Lola Taplin's rocking chair. Bill Cotton gave us much enlightening information concerning the rocking chair including the fact that it had been made in either Darvel or Newmilns, south of Glasgow, with a seat made from imported American birch wood.

Liz Hancock, lecturer in History of Art, Glasgow University, gave the first formal talk. It was a highly detailed report on research into Richard de Bury's chest of c. 1340, now in the City of Glasgow's Burrell Collection. De Bury was a man of many parts, civil servant, diplomat, patron of letters and ultimately Bishop of the Palatinate of Durham.

The oak, ironbound chest is of plank construction with the end boards extending down to form the feet. At over 6ft in length the interior is plain but fitted with a till. It is colourfully decorated with shields bearing the coats of arms of England, France and Ralph Neville – a close friend of de Bury's – along with traces of other decoration. Until 1850 the chest had been kept in the Office of the Chancery Court at Durham before passing into private hands and eventually the ownership of Sir William Burrell in 1941.

Giving a detailed description of the research methodology Liz Hancock and in particular the scientific

examination and subsequent stabilisation of the paint. Whether the chest originated in Durham or not remains uncertain and RFS members echoed her regret that analysis by dendrochronology had not yet been permitted by the Burrell Collection.

Still on a north-eastern theme Liz Hancock was followed by Peter Brears with a thoroughly illustrated talk on the progress of research into furniture from that area – to date some 23 panel-back chairs and 17 cupboards have been identified as from the same workshop. He acknowledged the contributions made to the research by auctioneers, curators, antique dealers and private collectors and most especially his colleagues in the work John and Rosy Gall.

The detailed drawings we were supplied with clarified the many fine points he made regarding design, construction, timber type and dimensions that together confirm the origin of these pieces were from one workshop, probably in Durham. We await with interest the probable publication of this research next year.

Not content with all this, Peter has also done much work on the furniture of working class homes in Yorkshire and Northumbria. Working from his booklet on the subject, he gave a necessarily brief but fascinating resume of differences in the dwellings of coal-miners, weavers, fishermen, farm workers, estate and town workers. He has also promised details of his research on the traditional foods of different occupational groups.

And all this before lunch.

*Neil and Glynda Speed*

## Afternoon Session

The afternoon session was really all about chairs. The wonderful barn adjoining the Fleece Inn was literally encircled with them. On one side there were the Fleece Inn's collection of Clissett and other chairs made by local makers. These originated from the Inn itself and had been moved some time ago from daily use in the Inn to reside in an appropriately dusty attic and where they remain in a completely original, albeit in some cases rather distressed, condition. The other side of the room was lined with chairs brought in by members, most of which fell into that Kelly, Clissett, Gimson 'abyss' which keeps many members of the RFS awake at night pondering the connections' and hunting the missing links.

Thus, the packed meeting was riveted by the talk by Terry Rowell on *Phillip Clissett and other Clissett chair-makers*. Terry, the husband of Phillip Clissett's granddaughter has carried out meticulous research (see: <http://www.phillipclissett.co.uk/>) on Phillip Clissett, both from a genealogical perspective and in terms of the fine

details of the chairs themselves. The new information provided by Terry on the Clissett family connections to chair making both in terms of Phillip Clissett's forbearers and descendants was fascinating. For those in the audience who are convinced that the meaning of life is not '42', but being able to tell a Clissett chair from a Gimson/Gardiner chair, they finally discovered that the answer is a punched dot on the inside of the chair where the legs and stretchers meet.

With time running out the convenor for the afternoon had to rapidly move us geographically some 50 miles from the west midlands to the eastern countries for another intriguing talk on research by Robert Williams on *Chair-making in the Eastern Countries, the Lincolnshire and East Anglian Conundrum*. Many of us will know the standard hollow-seated, 'three ball back', elm East Anglian chair and perhaps the very distinctive cabriole-legged 'Spilsby' chair from Lincolnshire but Robert led us through his recent research resulting in a whole number of new chair types, both framed and turned, that can now be attributed to this general geographic area. As ever, although Robert's research, and that of others, is building evidence of strong regional chair making characteristics he extended a plea to search for those elusive chairs with the described regional characteristics but also with a maker's name mark.

Finally, in terms of formal talks, David Bryant presented his latest research on regional variations of spinning wheels. With construction skills sharing many similarities with chair making, the whole spinning wheel 'industry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been previously under recorded and documented'. David took us on a rapid illustrated tour of the basic types of spinning wheels and of the known makers. Just like with country chairs, regional characteristics in spinning wheel design and the way some of their parts are turned has become apparent and when this can be married up to spinning wheels that are marked with a makers name then bingo, hard evidence of geographic location of the craftsmen involved can be made. Of course designs did not just originate in the British Isles and well known spinning wheel types are attributed, for example, to Norway or the USA where there is of a lot of local interest as well. David, and Val Bryan who actually does the spinning, also have an excellent web site (see: <http://www.craftdesigns.co.uk/index.html>).

The afternoon finished with John Boram leading a chair surgery, in which amongst other things, he put to trial the punched dot test to distinguish between Gimson and Clissett chairs. Still unresolved however, is the precise providence of the group of chairs with strong West Midlands characteristics but including very distinctive so called 'French back rails' and curved 'côte de mouton' arm

rails which seem to be the vernacular regional country chair model for what became to be known as the 'Pass' chair 'designed' by Ernest Gimson.

*Guy Poulter*