

Sir Robert Walpole's Electioneering Chair

One of the most exciting cultural events of last year was the temporary re-hang of much of Sir Robert Walpole's picture collection at Houghton Hall, Norfolk. Sold to Catherine the Great of Russia by his heirs in 1779 to solve the debt crises caused by building and furnishing the house. It was an extraordinary coup for the collection to return temporarily to the house and hang in the arrangement planned largely by William Kent in the 1740s.

Visitors entered the exhibition via a number of ground-floor rooms, not usually seen and where was displayed supporting information to the main exhibition on the *piano nobile*. On walking through my eye was caught by an interesting upholstered seat (Fig. 1), which at first glance looked like the body of a horse-drawn phaeton bearing the Garter badge of Sir Robert Walpole. However, unlike a phaeton body, it has a flat base and swept feet, indicating it was never suspended on springs, but has various fittings for attaching straps to secure it to a flat bed. The house stewards told me that the Marquess of Cholmondeley had recently discovered it in store.

Polly Legg and I had been discussing with Paul Richards the Society's forthcoming visit to Kings Lynn. Paul had just finished guiding a series of town tours for students of political history titled 'Bob of Lynn', after a local nickname for Walpole, so proud were the locals of 'their' prime minister. Apparently Walpole was a popular MP of Lynn, adopting the Dukes Head hotel as his unofficial headquarters. The hotel became, in effect, his private club for entertaining his friends and supporters when he was in town.

Eighteenth-century elections were notoriously corrupt and riotous affairs, satirised by William Hogarth in his finest series of paintings *The Election of 1754*, (Sir John Soane's Museum) of which the final painting *Chairing The Member* depicts the victor being carried aloft through the streets amidst the usual Hogarthian chaos. The candidate sits precariously in a chair, about to succumb to the laws of gravity, while the nobles and party officials can be seen partaking of a victory feast in an upstairs room of the local inn.

Paul Richards told us that it is on record that Sir Robert, who was a large man and always depicted in both formal portraits and satirical cartoons with his legs planted wide apart, stood in front of the chair whilst being born through Kings Lynn, whilst his son Horace, who succeeded him as MP after his death, appalled his aunt by sitting in the chair, offering by explanation the waspish: 'Madam, since I cannot hope to emulate my father in great things, I see little point in trying to do so in lesser'.

David, Marquess of Cholmondeley who owns Houghton and is a direct descendant of Robert Walpole, believes that the seat is most likely to be the one used by Sir Robert for

electioneering in King's Lynn. Adam Bowett dates it to around 1725–40 and notes stylistic similarities to the hall benches by Kent at Houghton. Members visiting the house this year may like to give the seat a closer look and draw their own conclusions as to its function.

(The editor, however, is of the belief that the chair probably originally came from a horse-drawn sleigh. The second quarter of the eighteenth century was a period of many extremely cold winters where, for example the Thames froze over in London a number of times. North Norfolk would also have had severe winters and with the close links to the Dutch the use of sleighs is highly likely; indeed fen skating was a popular sport when the water froze over. This theory has yet to be proved.)

Jeremy Bate.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

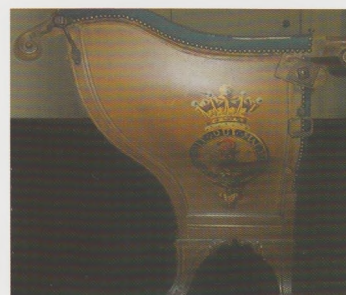


Fig. 3