

The Christopher Gilbert Lecture

John Allan: *Breton Woodworkers in Early Tudor Devon*

From Crediton we travelled a few miles further west to the village of Colebrooke, where the church hall was the venue for John Allan's lecture. The similarity between Breton woodwork and some early 16th-century woodwork in Devon churches has long been noted as, for example, by Francis Bond in 'Devonshire screens and rood lofts', *Rep. trans Devonshire Association* in 1902. By 2001 (*Continental Church Furniture in England: a Traffic in Piety*) Charles Tracy was recognising a mix of Devon and Breton workmanship in Devon woodwork. John Allan's knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, Devon churches and for the churches and towns in Brittany have led him to research documentary and physical evidence for the presence of Breton immigrants, especially woodworkers, in Devon. This account of his lecture can only be the briefest summary of a most comprehensive and detailed talk in which John considered numerous sites in Devon and northern France; fortunately much of this detail is recorded in his forthcoming article 'Immigrant craftsmen in south-west England' in *Post Medieval Archaeology*.

John began his lecture by introducing the documentary evidence for the presence of Breton woodworkers in Devon and Cornwall in the first half of the 16th century. There are three main sources: The Lay Subsidy Rolls of 1524–27 and 1545, a Military Survey of Cornwall and of Exeter for 1522, and churchwardens' accounts. The Lay Subsidy Rolls only recorded tax payers and therefore not a complete picture; the entry records if the subject was an alien but not their origin or occupation. They show considerable alien communities in larger towns and one or two aliens in many of the smaller towns and villages. The Military Survey was not limited to tax payers and was also intended to record origins and occupations; it contains evidence for many alien carpenters and carvers. Churchwardens' accounts, being researched in Cornwall by Jo Mattingley, have produced some detailed evidence, for example at North Petherwin in Cornwall in 1524 Bretons were paid £57 13s for 'our rood loft at 24s the foot'. The church had commissioned the new rood loft in 1518–19 from Peter Papyas, John Oliver and William Wyner, presumably the 'Brytons' paid in 1524. Interestingly the four dado bays that survive in the church from the rood screen conform to a standard West Country pattern of flat panels with ogee-arched heads and quatrefoils below; the spiky style of leaf carving being the only detail relating to northern French work.

John then proceeded to illustrate some of the physical evidence of the work of Breton woodworkers in Devon. Many of the examples are in churches – he estimated there are some 15 pieces of work that may prove to be by Breton woodworkers – but the first and perhaps most dramatic example he discussed was King John's Tavern in Exeter, unfortunately demolished in 1834. Originally a town house, the 16th century building appears to have been unique in a West Country context. It was considered of sufficient interest for John Carter to sketch it in the 1780s or '90s and for the local artist John Gendall and architect Edward Ashworth to record the building as it was being demolished; three carved posts in the Metropolitan Museum in New York have recently been identified as part of King John's Tavern. The carved timber house with its elaborate spiral staircase and wooden galleries is clearly a *maison à pondalez*, a form of town house unique to Morlaix in Brittany, showing specific parallels to Morlaix houses built post the 1522 sack of the town by the British. John believes that an Englishman must have commissioned the Exeter house, as Breton merchants were not allowed to own property in the city.

John then discussed ecclesiastical Devon woodwork of the early 16th century, which he illustrated with the classic Devon screen at Bovey Tracey. This is the familiar type with projecting vaulting and cornice; Hugh Harrison conjectures that today such a screen would cost about one and a half million pounds. John then outlined constructional and decorative details he considers likely to be Breton work. In 'Devon' screens the main constructional element is the vertical upright, rising from sill to cornice or coving, and into which the horizontal rails are jointed; in Brittany the horizontals appear to be dominant, the verticals being jointed into the dado. This is the case in the screens at Colebrooke and Coldridge, both of which we were to see. A second important feature John suggested, as being diagnostic is that Devon work tends to be carved in the solid, while in northern France there are many examples of laminated construction (jointing up to width or depth by glued butt joints), which we were to see on the screens at Colebrooke and Coldridge. Other features included 'flattened' arch doorheads, elaborate decorative detail of carved scales, ribbon or cable decoration on screen shafts, linenfold panelling below the dado rail, and short finials and tracery panels (dentelle work) above panelled wall benches and screens – the finials notably not lining up above the uprights in the panelling, as on the bench/wall panelling which survives at Muchelney Abbey, Somerset. John gave many specific examples of parallels between Devon and Breton work.

John's research has concentrated on the evidence from the first half of the 16th century, a time of economic

prosperity in the West Country, during which many churches were undergoing alteration. The physical proximity of Brittany and the West Country had long encouraged close trading links, for example with wool going to Brittany and linen coming to Devon. However by the mid 1500s it appears that the presence of so many French immigrants led to social unrest, exacerbated by the wars with France and the religious changes in England, and in 1554 they were ordered to leave.

The Society is very grateful to John Allan for an exemplary lecture on this important subject, as well as for his leadership of all our visits on the day. If any member would like more details on the subject, John has most kindly made them available: please email your request to events.rfs@gmail.com.

(There is a galleried staircase, c. 1522, from a *maison à pondalez* in Morlaix, Brittany, on display in the Victoria & Albert Museum, South Kensington. Just click onto the V&A website and enter Morlaix Staircase; there is also a link to the Musée de Morlaix. Editor)

Polly Legg