



Fig. 1 RFS members on the Chicago tour with John Bryan at Crab Tree Farm

Collectors and their Collections could have been the title of the Society's autumn trip. David Dewing had learned from our one-time American secretary, Jon Prown, of a cluster of avid collectors with homes in rural Wisconsin between Chicago and Milwaukee who were eager to welcome us and share their collections. The tour which David and Polly Legg devised was a fascinatingly varied insight into the tastes and ambitions of a variety of collectors over the last hundred-odd years, united by strong links to Chicago and competing amongst themselves to win the very best of early English furniture, textiles and ceramics, much of it bought through well-known London dealers.

For most of the trip we stayed in the commercial centre of Chicago known as the Loop, at the historic Blackstone Hotel overlooking Lake Michigan. For many years the Blackstone was the premier hotel of the city with a distinguished roll-call of past guests including several Presidents, film stars and gangsters.

There is an old adage that 'New York is the city that creates and Chicago the city that works'. The rapid growth from a village in 1830 to a city by 1870 was largely the

result of opening a canal system linking the Great Lakes to the Atlantic, allowing the export of produce of the rich Illinois soil. With the arrival of the railways and refrigerated railcars the city became the stockyard to the nation, with cattle being driven in from the prairies for slaughter. The great fire of 1871 devastated the city, but before the ashes had cooled the finest architects arrived to plan a new city of solid, fireproofed, commercial buildings initially built in stone, then quickly superseded by steel-frames clad in lightweight terracotta, allowing even greater height – the birth of the skyscraper.

Fortunes were made in railways, food processing, manufacturing and banking. These 'robber-barons' travelled to Europe, returning to furnish their homes with European art and furniture, much of which they bequeathed to the Art Institute of Chicago. This tradition of philanthropy is alive today, for our hosts, holding positions at the heart of American commerce, are similarly involved with collecting and preserving our material culture, and commissioning new wings for the museum, designed by the world's leading architects.

Jeremy Bate