

Peckover House, Walpole St Peter, Tilney All Saints and Wiggenhall St Germans

Peckover House

In a summer shower, we walked the short distance from the museum to Peckover House where the Reed Barn was our luncheon venue. The house sits on a great Georgian

streetscape called North Brink. This is testament to the past financial success of Wisbech. The early history of the house is unknown but the building dates from about 1722 and passed through several owners, including Henry Southwell, an important local figure and high sheriff, who took ownership in 1754. His descendants sold the house to Jonathan Peckover in 1794, a wealthy Quaker grocer who became a banker. Known as Bank House until c. 1943 when the last direct descendant, Miss Alexandrina Peckover, donated the house to the National Trust. She lived in the house with its 48-acre estate until her death in 1948.

The current furnishings are a mixture of some family pieces that survived the sale of contents in 1948, or have been returned to the house subsequently; along with items specifically acquired for the property, since then. Some of the former, but especially the latter, might well not match one's perceived view of what should be the 'simple mid Georgian manner of furnishing'. The history of the ownership and 20th-century curatorial taste are perhaps more reflected in the resultant display. This is despite the stated aim of the house interpretation.

The dining room is still the room as was used by the Peckover family, with panelling and a large fine marble

chimneypiece and plain softwood floorboards. But it has been furnished as a room setting.

A good pair of neo-classical demi-lune inlaid tables that roughly match a small inlaid mahogany sideboard, together with a pair of mahogany knife urns c. 1810, adding interest. The dining chairs and a table of George II style, c. 1740 match a nice pair of side tables. The family rectangular mirror with scrolling decoration now possibly over-painted, c. 1780? However, it seems to be a better match with a rush seated painted fancy chair c. 1800. The late Victorian Sheraton Revival mahogany bracket clock was returned to the house in 2002.

The drawing room contains the well carved painted Rococo mirror and frame above the fireplace. It is believed to be one made for this space in 1750s for Henry Southwell. The carver is unknown, but it does not match the carved work on the door case pediments and staircase. Interesting pieces include a good sofa table with a bird's eye maple and mahogany veneered top and parcel ebonised ring turnings to the vertical supports c. 1805. A Chippendale-style two seat sofa, c. 1760, a good pair of pierced and blind fretwork mahogany tea tables c. 1755 and a pair of family circular beadwork foot stools c. 1860.

The bureau-bookcase in walnut c. 1740 was also worthy of note, along with the lacquer cabinet (of coromandel work) on a later stand. Two good inlaid tea caddies, c. 1790 also drew attention.

The windows have some interesting and rare dwarf-blinds (Fig. 14). These are movable blinds with vertical slats that cover the lower half of the window in order to offer privacy but still let in the light. This would have been thought necessary for any house but more so for one situated on a public street. Similar ones by Gillows exist in several houses. Examples in Sir John Soane's house come to mind, though modern replicas. Despite the banking connection, the requirement for modesty was the real intent rather than business confidentiality. There are other sets in the library as well as the dining room.

The present morning room was originally the library. The library wing was added in 1877. This room boasts a fine carved fireplace over mantle frame and door surrounds: all the mid-18th century. An eclectic mix of pieces includes a Gillows'-style wheat-sheaf carved back mahogany chair c. 1790, a Victorian Pollard oak veneered table, a fine Victorian cabinet of curiosities, lined with cedar c. 1850, a Dutch marquetry table in the 17th-century



Fig. 14 A pair dwarf blinds, incorrectly and irritatingly termed 'snob screens' in the guidebook. It is possible to see from this picture how the vertical slats can be moved to alter the direction of the light

style c. 1880, but most interestingly a fine embroidered fire screen, with a well carved mahogany frame, the screen being the work of Jonathan Peckover's mother, Jane Jessup c. 1750 (?) with a working brass roller mechanism inside, allowing the raising and lowering of the screen for adjustment of the protection afforded by it, from the heat of the fire.

The recently redisplayed library has modern reproduction bookcases in late-19th-century style along with a set of carved back regency dining chairs each with black horsehair covers, possibly dating to 1815. The breakfast room houses a mahogany glazed top secretaire-bookcase c. 1790, which is of note. The bedroom on the first floor and the adjoining room has some interesting 18th-century modesty locks. This unusual survival of door bolts made in brass would have been attached to a cord that allowed the lock to be controlled from the bed. The servants' quarters are as one expects of a NT property, with little remarkable but lots of interest. The oak trestle table from Reephamhall, Norfolk is a good example of 17th-century style but probably dates from c. 1750. The stable block and carriage house also contain much of interest but space does not permit details.

Walpole St Peter

The church of Walpole Saint Peter was our next stop. The present tower is from around 1300, but the rest of the building was partly rebuilt after a flood in 1337 and again in 1360 and 1425, with the south porch added in 1450 and of course some later work. The font dated 1537 has a high-quality oak cover that was perhaps made when the font was moved some time in the early 1600s to its present position. The inside boasts a seven-armed golden star to the interior of the ceiling. The interesting hudd, is a sentry-box like cover, for use by the minister in inclement weather, is of painted pine and panelling construction, c. 1850 (Fig. 15). Near this is a large softwood dining table, c. 1640; in a rather decayed state but which still enabled one to see aspects of its construction.

The western screen contains a lockable door to separate the church body from the back area c. 1630 (Fig. 16). The nave pews are probably from a similar date. The pulpit is also from around 1610 and is of wine glass style with a monopod support that originally would have been boxed in? The painted panels from the chancel screen survive: c. 1450, decorated with twelve saints in the Flemish manner. The chancel stalls also boast some better carvings of debated dates, seats and rails appear 17th century but some carvings could be even earlier. The very fine brass chandelier dating from 1701 is probably Dutch and has numbered candleholders and holes. In the stalls are two



Fig. 15 An oak hudd used during inclement weather and in which the vicar could shelter when conducting funerals. The picture was taken earlier by Jeremy Bate during a Flower Festival in the church

carved misery seats. The screen of St James's chapel is 15th century and contains a spiked wrought iron gate that separates the chapel from the main body of the church. This screen is called a parclose screen. There is an interesting and unusually wide walnut chair with a rosette carving in the back. The 1634 poor box on a single turned leg is a very interesting survivor along with a good 18th-century cradle that is now used in christenings. A fine



Fig. 16 The western screen of turned and carved oak that divides the church and which dates to c. 1630

altar table, dated 1639, is also worth noting and a good small trunk, c. 1650, as well as a magnificent brass eagle lectern that sits near the St James chapel. C. C. Oman's *Mediaeval Brass Lecterns in England*, 1931, lists four main centres of production, namely Norwich, Kings Lynn, Bury St Edmunds and London. Many examples exist mostly from the 15th century onwards. A similar one is in St Peter's Church, Oundle, Northamptonshire, but one in York Minster, also very similar, but dated 1686.

Tilney All Saints

Tilney All Saints Parish Church was next, originally dating from 1180; much of the present building is medieval and later. The font is dated 1616 but remains of an earlier one are also present. The pews in the nave and the pulpit are all 19th century. The central chancel screen is suggested to date from 1618 but is more likely to be 18th century. But the sections of screen either side are earlier and debate

followed about an old photograph showing the possible earlier rood loft c. 1590 and its spandrel embellishments from the screen, which seemed present in the photograph. The now rearranged/moved Victorian choir stalls sit over some fine misericords, possibly 16th century. The communion rail may be of a similar date to the central chancel screen but around the altar are some parts of the older screen. There was little furniture of note.

Wiggenhall St Germans

Our last church of the day was Wiggenhall St Germans. The present building is essentially medieval through the name suggests a pre-Norman date for the earlier religious use of the site. The building reflects much repair and improvement? But so much was done in the 1872 restoration that dating was not easy. The font is dated 1851 but uses the bowl from the font at neighbouring Wiggenhall St Mary. Most of the windows are of 15th-century style but the west window is essentially Victorian glass in Victorian style. The pews now in the nave are good examples from the 19th-century rearrangements. The reuse of 15th-century pew ends with all their wonderful carving is varied. Most are good and depict saints, beasts and sins. This work is similar to the carvings in Wiggenhall St Mary. Some believed to date as early as 1500 and are also similar to those in Binham Priory, Norfolk. There are also 19th-century pews and carvings added into the mixture but they don't really bear comparison.

The fine oak pulpit, dated 1631 on the book rest, has an hourglass in an iron frame, for timing the sermons (possibly Victorian?) The pulpit had been made from part of what was a standard three-tier pulpit (parts now are a lectern and reading desk) that was dismantled and repositioned in the late 19th-century restoration works. The altar table had been reduced and bench seem to be 17th century and may be of similar date to the original pulpit. They also seem to match some nearby panelling. An interesting 17th-century oak chair was of note, mainly for the 'pozidrive' cross-headed screws used in the repair of the front rail. A Victorian termed Armada chest (iron bound strong box) may also be of similar date to the altar table, but more probably German, from Nuremberg or Augsburg. The best survivors were the early 19th-century oak bench pews and a good simple oak chest of drawers with crisp reeded moulding c. 1820 that matched another occasional table in the church.

Every church was worth visiting but the challenge was to continue these visits after an equally demanding and interesting morning of furniture delights. My thanks go to all those involved.

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