

Thursday 17 July Pre-Conference Visit

A dozen or so members gathered in a Fakenham car park for what was to be a most unusual RFS visit, for we had come to see the last remaining (though non-working) local gasworks. Nearly all the aspects of gas production were there, but in miniature, from the retorts where the coal was heated to produce town gas through its purifying stages and collection of by-products, to large-scale storage of the gas. Sadly only one of the two gasholders, or gasometers, now survives; these once common sights in towns and cities are fast disappearing.

The gasworks originally started in 1846 and though the gasometers date from 1888 most of the surviving machinery is early 20th century. The works finally closed in 1965 and the making of town gas was replaced with natural gas during the 1970s. The museum, founded in 1987, has a fine selection of lamps for street use, (originally the principal use of gas), and also for domestic use. Gas was also used from the later 19th century for heating and cooking and there was a fine collection of gas fires, wall-mounted water-heaters and something one rarely sees today, a number of gas-pokers – a superb way of lighting a coal fire. In the gasworks offices were some interesting but standard items of early 20th-century office furniture. This was a thoroughly enjoyable visit, though perhaps a bit 'left field'!

Raynham Hall

After lunch in Fakenham a much larger group gathered at nearby Raynham Hall, courtesy of Lord and Lady Townshend. Norfolk has many fine houses; Houghton and Holkham, for example, are both close by and very well known. However, Raynham is possibly less known even after the William Kent exhibition at the V&A last year where a number of Raynham pieces were on display.

The house was designed and built 1619–37 by Sir Roger Townshend (1595–1637) with the valuable assistance of his master mason, William Edge. They had made an extensive European tour together and what they saw, as well as studying the work of Inigo Jones, had a strong influence on what they built. The house was laid out on an H-plan with slightly projecting wings that have Dutch gables, so like those seen along the Herengracht in Amsterdam. The house has three storeys with attic and basement. It is built of brick with stone dressings and reveals both classical and Palladian influences. These were augmented inside during the 1730s when the 2nd Viscount Townshend employed William Kent, with Thomas Ripley as executive architect from c. 1727 to 1732. Kent had been working on Euston Hall, Houghton and Holkham – all houses not far from Raynham and owned by men within the circle of 3rd Earl of Burlington. However, more of this aspect later.

Because work was being carried out in the Entrance Hall we had to enter through the South Front garden doorway,



Fig. 1 Raynham Hall from the south



Fig. 2 Lady Townshend with John Stabler, Elly Macbeath and Roderick Butler

and we immediately went up to the first floor via a fine oak-panelled staircase. Halfway up there was an interesting survival in the form of a small quadrant-shaped oak shelf set into a corner and used as a candlestand. At the top of the stairs was a c. 1750 mahogany chest of drawers, raised on bracket feet and cross-banded with ebony along the verticals and horizontals, creating a strong effect. The flat surfaces were also inlaid with black (ebony?) birds and flowers of ivory or bone with added penwork decoration. There ensued much discussion on its origins, as there had been a number of Vizagapatam items in the house originally but some had since been sold off. In this case it was thought that the chest of drawers was possibly from South India. The next large, double height room, known as the Belisarius Room after the painting that originally hung there, had a fine coffered plaster ceiling, much in the manner of Inigo Jones, while the William Kent marble chimneypiece dominated the room. The room was furnished with a large Aubusson carpet on which was placed a fine gilded set of ten single chairs and a sofa, c. 1715, the sofa having a splendidly shaped, almost baroque, back and arms. The chairs were all on cabriole legs with a central shell motif carved into the front apron. Discussion centred on exactly what date they were made

and where did they come from. There was also a very good domed leather trunk, with highly decorative locks, straps and nailing, undated but certainly very early 18th century if not earlier.

In one of the small bedrooms was an interesting secretaire bookcase with geometric glazing bars, which was set into the wall next to the chimneypiece, rather as a fitted cupboard. There was also a good early 19th-century trunk stool (as Gillows called them), possibly in sycamore, with a geometric block pattern inlay on the top; it was raised on four carved, turned and tapering legs with square floral paterae carved on the two outer sides of the legs; it may have been Italian.

In a small room, awaiting their fate, was a large set of ebony and ivory inlaid Vizagapatam chairs dating from the early 18th century: we had already seen a daybed from the suite. They probably came into the family through the 1723 marriage of the 3rd Viscount, Charles Townshend (1700–67) to Audrey Harrison, who was the daughter of Sir Edward Harrison, a governor of Madras.

We descended to the ground floor by way of a splendid painted staircase with wrought-iron balusters onto which had been fitted the rare survival of three staircase lanterns, made by John Cleave for £3 7s 6d, rather than the usual

central-chain hanging type. The painting was by Kent in his usual jocular fashion – there was a particularly good rabbit – and, unusually, the paint was applied directly onto the wall rather than onto canvas and so one saw exactly what Kent had painted.

More riches lay on the ground floor. Although hardly regional the first room after the staircase was the State Dining Room, another of Kent and Ripley's improvements of the 1730s. It was decorated in white and gold and divided at one end by a bold tripartite arch (very Kentian). What was of particular interest were the two carved white and gold marble-topped side tables for which accounts had survived from the carver James Richards: for the larger one he charged £12 13s 6d. Richards had also carved the overmantel for which he charged £7 7s 4d, but the veined and statuary marble chimneypiece he charged the considerable sum of £44 17s.

In the next room we saw a wonderful padouk bureau-cabinet with paktong metalwork that included two pairs of very substantial carrying handles on the side. It probably dated to *c.* 1750 and was also probably a Canton piece made for export. In view of the Indian connection with the governor of Madras it may also have come into the family through Audrey, wife of the 3rd Viscount. In the same room was a most interesting tripod tilt-top card table made, unusually, made for five players. In the Morning Room were three commodes that reveal three differing (regional) traditions. The first was a serpentine bombé-fronted example; the use of yew-wood for the panels imply that it is English *c.* 1760–70, and possibly by Ince and Mayhew – Sarah Medlam furthermore suggested that it might relate to pieces in one of the bedrooms upstairs. The next commode, also of bombé form, probably Dutch,

although the handles had been changed in the 19th century. The third one though with a breakfront and raised on short cabriole legs was probably French but again with 19th century handles and a new top. Finally, in the Library we glimpsed one of the two wonderful oak fitted cupboards that hold the deeds, records and varied accounts, letters and receipts of Raynham.

We all gathered for tea in the room that was to be made into a new kitchen. This will make the house more workable, though the room was still dominated by the remains of a red damask and gold embroidered throne canopy bearing the arms of Queen Anne; it had been a gift to the 2nd Viscount after his embassy to Holland, 1708–11.

We owe many thanks to Lord and Lady Townshend for their generous hospitality and their willingness to allow the Society to go all round their splendid and relatively little known house containing such 'wonderful things'.

Treve Rosoman