

Whitby 21 June 2014

Before reporting on this excellent event, I have to declare a personal interest and strong link with this ancient and picturesque north Yorkshire port; since my husband's family have lived in Whitby for hundreds of years. Indeed his ancestors were involved in typical Whitby trades such as shipping and whaling, the jet trade and his maternal grandfather was a ship's carpenter and cabinetmaker who worked on the interior of at least one local church (Aislaby) in the region. He, 'little Matty Corner', was one of hundreds of men who formed a human chain to bring the stretchers ashore after the hospital ship the *Rohiller* went aground off Whitby in 1914. He returned the next day to collect oak timber which he made into a chimney piece which can still be seen in Sandbeck Hotel, which the family then owned on the west cliff, Whitby.

It was a gloriously sunny day when we assembled for coffee at Green's Restaurant before walking a few yards to the Captain Cook Memorial Museum, in Grape Lane, where Trevor Paine, education officer, and tall ship sailor, gave us an introduction to Whitby, its trades, and Captain Cook, his life and legacy, and pointed out the shipyards where Cook's ships were built. During the 18th century the present museum building was owned by Captain John Walker: James Cook was apprenticed to Walker who not only taught him the trade but gave him his first commissions.

We were divided into three groups led by Trevor Paine, Dr Sophie Forgan, chair of Trustees, and Edwin Newlyn, a volunteer. The first room displayed maps of parts of Australia chartered by the Dutch centuries before Cook surveyed the region, and outlined James Cook's epic surveying, charting and mapping work and his discoveries. The tour began in the old kitchen with its partially exposed ancient herringbone brick floor on a lower level to the present floor; also of interest was the kitchenalia display. Throughout the museum the rooms were set out using medium quality functional furniture mainly thought to date from the early 1750s, in order to illustrate a Walker inventory made 1752–54. The rooms were named after those used in the inventory such as the 'Green room' which was furnished with a corner buffet cupboard, child's high chair, oval table, and six or seven chairs. The 'Blue room' was furnished with plain good quality furniture that included an oak bureau, looking glass with candle sconces, circular table, cane back chairs, and a longcase clock.

Whereas most of the furniture was not of known North Yorkshire origin some items had been donated by local families. The 30-hour longcase clock in the 'London room' for example, signed 'W. Elliott Whitby' *circa* 1760–70 in an oak case in the Gothick style, once belonged to a lady who lived in Grape Lane. The plain panelling and doors in this room and other rooms are original. One of the most

interesting pieces of furniture was the neat oak naturalist's desk (*circa* 1770) with brass carrying handles in the 'Scientists Room'. It was made for the German scientist and naturalist Johann, Reinhold Foster (1729–98) and used on Cook's second voyage by Johann and his young son George Foster (1754–94) a talented artist. The top part had two drawers above a bureau with numerous fitted drawers and drop down writing surface, with three graduated drawers with brass swan neck handles below; it was donated to the museum by Foster's descendants. Another interesting piece, on display as part of an exhibition in the attic where James Cook and his fellow apprentices once slept, was a writing box of standard early 19th-century design, but made of *Casuarina glauca*, or she-oak. It was manufactured in 1805 by a convict in Sydney, New South Wales, and brought to England by Ferdinand Bauer the brother of Franz Bauer (1758–1841) the resident botanist at Kew Gardens in 1790, by invitation of Joseph Banks. This was a rare opportunity to see an example of Australian woods for the top of the writing box was also decorated with a string inlay of eucalyptus. Our visit to this award-winning museum ended with a vote of thanks to our informative and enthusiastic guides Trevor, Sophie and Edwin.

After a delicious lunch at Green's Restaurant we walked through the narrow streets of the east side of Whitby past the ancient market square and Market Hall with its turret clock. We climbed the 199 steps to the 12th-century parish church of St Mary's, on the cliff top adjacent to the ruins of the abbey of St Hilda (founded in 657). Here the Rev. Edmund Newlyn outlined the history of the church. There was almost certainly a church or series of churches built during the 200 years between the destruction of the Saxon monastery and the Norman Conquest. The architectural evidence suggests a date for the Norman church of about 1110–20, but a previous probably Saxon church appears to have determined the proportions of the new church since the ground plan with its considerably longer nave approximates to late Saxon churches rather than the usual aisle-less church of the 12th century. Indeed the church has continued with its aisle-less nave, never having aisles added at any period unlike many other parish churches. However, at Whitby it is the rare survival of box pews that occupy the spacious nave; galleries have been erected to provide extra accommodation over the centuries and by 1819 the church could seat 1,500 worshippers.

St Mary's church has many interesting examples of wooden furniture covering a long period of the churches history. The most striking fixed woodwork is the Cholmley Pew built *circa* 1600–25, in front of the chancel arch (Fig. 1). The Cholmleys were a powerful local family, being Lords of the Manor of Whitby, with a grand house adjacent to the abbey. They chose the most conspicuous spot in the



Fig. 1 (left) St Mary's, Whitby. A view down from the gallery where one can see the great pulpit and the white painted Chalmers Pew. Once again, note all the candle fittings around the church. From this high angle the layout of the box-pews is quite clear

Fig. 2 (below) The mahogany 'triple-decker' pulpit that almost dominates the church. Note the wrought iron candle-sconces attached to the column and the brass ones on the pulpit

church for their monument. The white painted pew rises on four barley-sugar-twist pillars of huge size with chubby faced winged putti and garlands decorating the frieze above the columns, but it ruins the view of one of the finest Norman chancel arches in the country! A fine round dial brass wall clock *circa* 1770 can be seen on the front of the pew. The three-decker pulpit with Gothic cluster columns was rebuilt in 1778 and where sat the parish clerk in the bottom tier, the priest taking the service from the second stage while the sermon was given from the top layer (Fig. 2). At the rear of the preaching box are fitted a pair of ear trumpets into which one incumbent from 1809 to 1843 would speak for the benefit of his profoundly deaf wife. The green baize-lined pews are a distinctive and well-known feature of St Mary's Church, many with their original lettering indicating the names or status of their occupants (Fig. 3). Some pews on the balcony had carved sailing ships, dates and carved on them, probably by bored apprentices during a sermon (Fig. 4). Some pews were still owned by the same families until about ten years ago. An unusual item in the vestibule is the charity bread cupboard, in the form of a bread rack. It was probably made about 1837-40 after the death of a Mrs Gallilee who left a bequest in her will made in 1837 leaving money from the income of a cottage to provide bread for the poor of the parish. One of the earliest communion tables in the





Fig. 3 (left) A detail showing the very faded green baize lining to the pews and the ornamental nailing

Fig. 4 (above) A detail showing some of the carved graffiti on the gallery woodwork

country said to date from Queen Elizabeth's reign can also be seen in the church.

In the 19th century whaling was one of Whitby's major maritime trades, and the Scoresby family were leading figures in this industry. A chair very elaborately carved about 1860 was made to commemorate William Scoresby (1789–1857) a distinguished sailor, Antarctic explorer and whaler, who later was ordained into the church, can be seen at the foot of the chancel steps. It was made from the wood from the *Royal Charter* a ship in which Scoresby had sailed (in 1856) to the Antarctic to test the effect of iron ships on a compass of his own invention, as was the crow's nest. The *Royal Charter* was wrecked on a subsequent voyage in 1859.

St Mary's Church has no electric light; therefore services are lit by candlelight, which is why so many candlesticks have survived. Many of the pews and pillars have simple iron candle sconces with drip trays, and some fine examples of brass candle sticks and sconces are on or near the three-decker pulpit. There is also a very good 18th-century two tier brass chandelier consisting of 148 brass pieces with an iron rod through the centre. The total weight of the brass is 144lb 8oz. and the cost of the chandelier was raised in Whitby by subscription in 1769.

Finally of great interest, especially after the publication of Christopher Pickvance's paper on medieval iron bound chests in Kent (*Regional Furniture* 2012) is a similar iron bound domed chest with the usual three locks, of

uncertain date but thought by some experts to be 15th century. It was one of two chests, one earlier than the other, known to have been in St Mary's Church before 1603. It was used for storage of the town's valuable plate until 1743 when robbers removed the chest and either threw it off the cliff (or more plausibly) hid it in a hole in the cliff. Further research is clearly needed in order to try and establish if this North Yorkshire East coast chest is related to the domed chests from elsewhere.

We are very grateful to Gerry Coughlan and Polly Legg for organising such a very interesting and enjoyable day visit to this historic North Yorkshire town, and to all the local people who shared their knowledge with us.

Susan Stuart