

Barnstaple Walkabout

We gathered again for the afternoon visit in Barnstaple's Chantry Chapel of St Anne and old Grammar School for a guided tour of the town that was led by Tom Evans, the wonderfully Dickensian-looking Town Crier and local historian.

The Chapel was first recorded in 1459 but had become a secular building a hundred years later and eventually became the local grammar school, which it remained until 1910. Recently an excavation was carried out inside the building that revealed more than 200 years worth of school children's litter, toys, buttons etc. A former pupil was John Gay of *Beggar's Opera* fame. We then went on past Horwood's School founded in 1659 for '20 poore maids'.

Barnstaple, as became clear to us over the weekend, was not only vibrant but also very wealthy from medieval times. There are remains of many fine merchants' houses, built on narrow burgage plots that ran down the River Taw (very similar to those that we saw on last year's conference in King's Lynn). We went into one on High Street that is now a sports clothing shop and saw the wonderful, but slightly sad, remains of a 17th-century plaster ceiling made by members of the Abbott family of plasterers. Outside there was a splendid 19th-century shop that had a third floor belvedere of turned wood columns and balusters. We also

Fig. 1 The Guildhall Courtroom. We are seated on the Herbert Knott chairs listening to Tom Evans with the Hudson portraits behind





Fig. 2 One of the Herbert Knott chairs

saw the twisted spire of the parish church; the result of using green timber that had not properly seasoned.

Then came the highlight, the classical Guildhall built in 1826 to designs by local architect Thomas Lee. As we filed in I could not help but notice an ornate red painted cast-iron fitting on the wall by the door marked 'POOR BOX S B Mayor 1897'. Behind the Guildhall was the Pannier Market with which no self-respecting West Country town could be without. It was in full swing with fruit and veg. stalls as well as local crafts; it was a large single span building of c. 1860.

Inside the Guildhall itself in the first-floor Courtroom there was a fine set of close hung paintings by Thomas Hudson (1701–79). The pictures are of the Mayor and Corporation of Barnstaple in 1739 along with other dignitaries (Fig. 1). The room is furnished with a fine set of oak single chairs, some bearing the trade label of 'HERBERT J. KNOTT, / Furnisher, Cabinet Maker, Picture / Frame Manufacturer, Etc. / 10, New Buildings & Vicarage Lawn, / Near St Mary's Church / BARNSTAPLE' (Figs 2 and 3); they had been re-upholstered but were otherwise in excellent condition. Next to the Courtroom was the Dodderidge Room, with a 16th-century carved oak chimneypiece that came from that family's house in nearby Cross Street when it was demolished in 1900; it caused much discussion. Also in the room was a small but superb collection of Napoleonic Prisoner-of-War ship models that

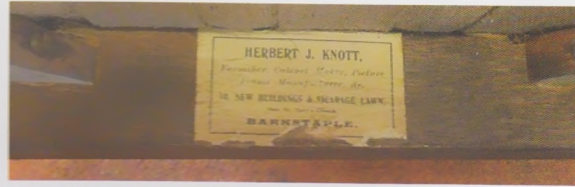


Fig. 3. Trade label of Herbert Knott stuck onto the underneath of the back chair-rail.

had come from Dartmoor Prison. The Guildhall also had a selection of locally made furniture from Shapland & Petter, of which more later.

The group moved on down to Queen Anne's Walk, a covered arcade that served as a merchant's exchange with an iron 'nail' in the centre for 'paying on the nail'. The rather baroque arcade was built in 1708 to designs from William Talman and it was surmounted by a rather outsize statue of Queen Anne given a year later by local worthy Robert Rolle. From there we walked alongside the river and saw the forlorn semi-derelict factory of Shapland & Petter on the opposite bank.

We were making our way to Litchdon Street and the Penrose Almshouses of 1627. Robert Penrose was a successful Barnstaple wool-merchant; it was interesting to compare these houses with last year's visit to the Trinity Hospital Almshouses near King's Lynn and built in 1614 (*Newsletter* No. 62, p. 17, Ed.). There was a good chapel and with 17th-century book-rests and benches while the bold exterior of the building had a loggia with short granite columns that were very West Country and inside, fixed to the wall, were three long black-painted backless benches on turned supports – the leg-turnings of which were similar to the book-rests in the chapel.

Finally we retraced our steps to the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon where the curator Alison Mills met us. She had very kindly pulled out a number of Shapland & Petter designs and stock-books as well as some furniture including a very fine white painted Art Nouveau desk that displayed strong Glasgow school influence. Shapland & Petter were in a considerable way of business, as one could tell from the size of the factory buildings, and the firm was possibly the foremost manufacturer of Arts & Craft furniture in England. Also in the museum was a fine collection of Barnstaple and Bideford area pottery. We had heard about this from John Allan on Friday night and it was particularly instructive to see so much of the yellow glazed pots with sgraffito decoration. Generically known as North Devon pottery there were some wonderful pots that complemented the Arts & Crafts furniture from Shapland & Petter.

We were hugely grateful for the information, guidance and help from Tom Evans and curator Alison Mills.

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