

Salisbury Visit

The identification of furniture with particular localities has always been one of the ambitions of the Society. The idea of looking for connections between church woodwork and furniture goes back to Cescinsky and Gribble's *Early English Furniture and Woodwork* (1922) but, in practice, has proved very difficult. The two days devoted to Salisbury furniture and church woodwork were therefore a rare opportunity. The event was made possible by Victor Chinnery's pioneer writing on the subject in *Oak Furniture* (pp. 448–454) and by the efforts of Ronnie and Candy Butler, and Michael Snell, local collectors who, inspired by Victor's work and his personal advice, had undertaken much further research. Jan Chinnery's contribution to the event and knowledge of Humphrey Beckham's carving work meant the connection with Victor was always in our minds.

The visit started with the two mayoral caquetteuse chairs in Salisbury Museum, dated 1585 (walnut) and 1622 (oak), known to everyone from their appearance in *Oak Furniture*. The second chair is believed to be by Beckham and to be a copy of the earlier chair, possibly by a Mr Rosgrave to whom he was apprenticed. Characteristic features are the six-sided seat fitted over the front legs, the angled 'dog-leg' arms, the tenoning of the arms to the front face of the uprights unlike the 'bird's mouth' joint clasping the front and side seen on French and Scottish caquetteuse chairs, the lunette cresting usually integral to the top rail that is tenoned into the uprights rather than capping them, and the cusped seat rails. Since these were the only Salisbury chairs so far recorded with fluting on the front legs and arm supports, usually seen as a 16th-century feature, its presence on the much later chair suggests that it was made to match the earlier chair. Why the distinctively French caquetteuse form came to be so popular in Salisbury

remains unclear, but trading links with France, based on the wool trade, are a likely factor.

We then walked into the city to visit secular buildings and St Thomas's church (see below). We visited the upstairs storerooms of Crew Clothing at 8 Queen Street that had remained in original condition because the building was owned by a local charity. In one room there was a carved overmantel attributed to Beckham showing the sacrifice of Isaac with an angel in a heavily curled cloud. It was well preserved and considered to be of better quality than the one in St Thomas and St Edmond Church. The wall panelling introduced us to the range of strapwork designs that we were to see on furniture and in the country churches (Fig. 1).

We then walked on to the Hall of John Halle, a 15th-century building that now forms the entrance to the Odeon cinema. It has some original features (e.g. moulded beams) but underwent a Pugin-inspired restoration in the 19th century. Our attention focused on an arched entrance that was covered with heavily varnished and dark-stained panelling and relief figures. These drew from the same repertoire of motifs as at Queen Street. We had lunch in the 14th-century Old George Inn, 13 High Street in which was preserved an over-mantel, and some rather crude square romayne panels in an upper room.

The Butlers suggested that Salisbury carvers had some unusual favoured motifs – the 'domino', the 'eye' (with intersecting opposed double arcs), reverse-gouged S's, the combination of lozenges and scrolling in strapwork – but that they also used motifs which were popular more widely, e.g. roundels linked by interlace, lunettes (sometimes inverted). It was surprising to see panels with the incised 'eye' motif adjacent to panels with more sophisticated relief carving. The argument for a Salisbury



Fig. 1 Carved oak strapwork decorated frieze. First floor, 8 Queen St, Salisbury

school was thus not based on any single identifying motif but on an idiosyncratic combination of motifs. It was not suggested that cusped seat rails were a mark of Salisbury work – they are known on chairs, chests, press cupboards more widely (mainly in the South West?) (For a parallel see the ‘Exeter’ strapwork style that is found on some Exeter furniture and fixed woodwork – see *Oak Furniture* Fig. 3.204). There is scope for further research plotting how widely particular motifs or features are found.

The Butlers had compiled a genealogy of several dynasties of Salisbury joiners using surviving accounts from the Chamberlain of the Salisbury Joiners’ Company, contemporary churchwardens’ records, and the wills and inventories of the individuals concerned. Four makers had surnames starting with B which complicates the identification of stamped initials, now thought to be makers’ rather than owners’ marks. The Butlers have charted over 50 Salisbury type chairs (some known from photos only) that they categorise into seven types, plus eleven more which were anomalous in certain respects. They had also extended the scope of Salisbury work from panel back armchairs to chests and table boxes.

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