

A Study Day in the Lake District

Tuesday 21 March 2017

The Armitt Museum, Ambleside

The Armitt is a small museum in Ambleside, Cumbria, at the northern end of Lake Windermere and is dedicated to

preserving and sharing the cultural and artistic heritage of the Lake District. It combines the functions of library, arts centre and museum, and on this particular morning it afforded a cosy, well-lit refuge from the alternating squalls of sleet and hail that swept down from the surrounding



Frank Wood discussing his research (Photo Jeremy Bate)



The Great House press, detail of the canopy frieze, showing William Longmire's initials and the date, the 'S' scroll frieze in the top rail, and the central upper door, with original hinge (Photo Jeremy Bate)

look at the buildings, typically the farmhouses belonging to the yeomen who held their farms under the so-called 'border tenure'. The 'Great Rebuilding' came relatively late to Westmorland, and the great majority of these farmhouses were built or rebuilt in the period 1660–1700; the dates coincide exactly with those most commonly found on the press cupboards, chairs and chests of the region. The relationship between the press cupboards and the floor plans of the new houses was particularly important, and indeed it was the mismatch between these two features that has enabled Frank to identify a number of interlopers or 'erratics' which hitherto had been accepted as original.

The centrepiece of the Armitt display was undoubtedly the Great House press made for William Longmire of Troutbeck in 1634, which Frank wrote up for *Regional Furniture* 2014. For most members this was their first opportunity to see this impressive piece at first hand. The other furniture offered a variety of challenges of interpretation. Neither of the chairs (from Grasmere church) was in its original form, and one of the chests was a 20th-century copy or pastiche. The special qualities of Lake District furniture were recognised even in the 19th century and numerous copies and adaptations make the historian's job that much harder. These discussions were an ideal precursor to the three-dimensional woodworker's puzzle that awaited us at Townend.

Adam Bowett

fell. In an upstairs room RFS member Frank Wood had assembled a small group of Lake District furniture – two chairs, a panelled chest and a boarded chest, together with the Great House press, which is on permanent display.

Frank began by explaining the genesis of his interest in 17th-century Lake District furniture and the methodology of his current research, which from a meagre kernel of a few published pieces, now amounts to several hundred objects, including at least 120 press cupboards. As a self-taught carver, Frank was particularly interested in the decorative carving which, although highly distinctive and possessing a strong regional accent, was mostly drawn from the same late Renaissance design sources as elsewhere in Britain. Oft-cited notions of 'Viking' influence, with dragon-headed scrolls and writhing snakes, or interlaced 'Celtic' knots, were dismissed as the products of 19th-century antiquarian imagination.

Among the many distinctive features of Lake District furniture, the most notable was the high proportion of dated pieces, resulting in a group of furniture that was both temporally and geographically defined. Frank explained that the key to understanding this phenomenon was to



Chair from Grasmere Church, detail of back panel with characteristic Lake District carving of central 'S' crossed leaf design with interlace and 'S' scroll border, initialed and dated on the crest rail MB 1703, with double-curved snake-like finials (Photo Jeremy Bate)