

A Private Collection in East Devon

Saturday 20 May 2017

I wasn't sure what to expect, as this was my first field visit with the RFS but our hosts' welcome was as warm and welcoming as their house and we were quickly put at ease. An amazing collection of hardwoods from the garden, cut and polished to show off their different colours and grains, was passed around over coffee: the generic term 'fruitwood' was immediately redundant in the face of warm pink peach wood and cool plum wood; the apple hardly got a mention. Are you sure you have never seen magnolia wood used in furniture? It was clearly going to be a day of intellectual challenge, not just indulgent enjoyment: good.

The house dates from the reign of James I. The original owner, a physician, had both the date and his profession carved in gothic script in the stone lintel of the fireplace; hints of blue, red and gold pigment survive. The Georgians had remodelled the central courtyard into a delightful staircase and flooded it with light from a glazed cupola.

Luckily, they had not destroyed the earlier house around it and I was musing whether the side by side Tudor arched doorways in the dining room, typical of earlier hall house layout, could really be as late as 1619 or were a remnant or re-use from an earlier building, when the tour and discussions on the furniture and furnishings we had come to see began.

The underside of a 17th-century oak long bench revealed simple scribed marks which linked to a second element of the bench, showing that both parts were from a single plank. We discussed the meaning and use of these frequently found marks. The conclusion was that the timber merchants batch-marked timbers using a simple hook ended chisel, a timber-scribe. They are not cabinet makers' marks.

The owners had clearly followed William Morris's exhortation to have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful and I had to focus on not drooling. We wandered from room to beautiful room looking at items selected for us to discuss, or enquired of by our fellow members. I learned so much. The age range of items varied from a gracefully designed modern chair and a 1930s kitchen utensil to a stunning misericord from c. 1350–1400. It portrayed a central clearly negroid face and the excellent carving quality extended to other secondary figures. I revisited it several times during the day to pay my respects to the carver.

I looked for a theme in the collection and concluded that, beside utility and beauty, almost all the items needed study and thought to understand. Most were not obvious and had a story to tell if you had the knowledge and enquiring mind to ask. Even the downright weird had its place, like the little chest of drawers that didn't have a right angle or a truly horizontal surface in it but was well made. Had the cabinet maker got a set square that was well off true, or was it a bet that he couldn't make it, or was it made for a room with a floor sloping in both dimensions to fit an off square corner? The knowledge and powers of logic and analysis of my fellow guests was revealed yet again. I recalled a little house in the Parco dei Mostri at Bomarzo in Italy (www.bomarzo.net) which also contains sculptures and buildings to delight and deceive, built in the mid-16th century, perhaps the first theme park. The crooked house there is called the 'Hanging House' and is full of optical illusions. It avoids allowing you an horizon or true horizontal or vertical surface, which is very disturbing, and you hold on to the floor (like Dean Martin, who said that you were not truly drunk if you could lie on the floor without having to hold on). Had the maker of the cabinet visited the Parco dei Mostri?

So much knowledge rubbed off during the day: kill woodworm by putting the infected piece in the deep freeze

for a month; cabinet makers generally didn't bother with using matched, symmetrical grain figuring in their panels before the Georgians, when it became de rigeur, so don't assume a different looking panel is a replacement before c. 1700. Accept nothing at face value; challenge even accepted explanations if they don't fully fit your data and experience.

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