

Walking Tour of Historic Ipswich

We were guided by local resident and historian, Charles Tracy, who many will know as author of *Continental Church Furniture in England* (1999).

From Christchurch Mansion we meandered through Ipswich towards the docks. The town retains a large amount of its medieval buildings since in the 18th century, when most urban building stock was re-faced, Ipswich, once a leading port with trading connections to the Low Countries, was in recession.

We visited two churches. First, St Margaret, to study the magnificent double hammerbeam roof decorated in 1694 as a tribute to the arrival of William and Mary. Plaster panels were inserted between the beams painted in faux stone and baroque scrolls and putti with texts such as 'Honour all Men', 'Fear God' and 'Honour thy King'. It appears that the town was politically adept at embracing the new Protestant regime and enhancing its trading links with Holland.

St Mary Le Tower is the civic church and the fourth on the site, built in 1860. The high-quality interior has tiled floors bearing the punning boar arms of Ipswich banker

George Bacon who funded the rebuild. We found an early 17th-century painted panel with acrostic verse inscription in a strapwork painted frame and panorama images of Ipswich, a fragment of the organ case by Rhenatus Harris of 1680 and good 19th-century gothic pew ends. The mahogany pulpit is by Edward Hubbard c. 1700, similar to one we were shortly to find in the Unitarian Meeting House. Two 17th-century oak armchairs attracted some attention.

On the corner of St Stephen's Lane stands the most famous and spectacular house in Ipswich, the Ancient House, also known as Sparrowe's House, after William Sparrowe, who bought it in 1603 and whose family owned it until 1903. It is now a branch of Lakeland Kitchenware, whose staff welcome visitors to explore the further reaches of the large site. The front building facing the street with overhanging upper floor and oriel windows – much copied by Norman Shaw, and known as Ipswich windows – was built in 1670 but behind this front range is a 15th-century hall and beyond, a later 15th-century range also with a hall.

The front is plastered and pargetted with the Royal Arms, Neptune and a pelican, a shepherd and shepherdess. The oriel windows have stucco reliefs of Europe and a gothic church, Asia with a mosque, Africa on a crocodile and America under a sunshade with a tobacco pipe. Most of the ground floor oak is restoration. The whole is more ornate and gayer than any house of its date in England.

Behind the panelling of the older part of the building to the rear we found two stained wall cloths depicting the labours of Hercules, discovered during restoration in 1984. They are probably those mentioned in a will of 1578, whilst in a first-floor room an unusually extensive scheme of painted grotesque work in red was discovered dating from c. 1700. From the interior of this part of the complex can be seen plasterwork on the rear elevation of the front range: the Prince of Wales's feathers, a relief with figures in a chariot (identified by Anthony Wells-Cole as derived from the engraving after Maarten de Vos), *The Task of the Worldly Power*, c. 1585, and a man in a fruit-laden tree.

Nestling behind Norman Foster's celebrated black glass Willis Faber building, still looking futuristic 42 years on, the Unitarian Meeting House is one of the best of its date in England. Built in 1700, it is of plastered timber-framed construction. The contractor was a carpenter, Joseph Clark, who charged £256, excluding windows, pews and pulpit and an additional £96 for the galleries. The roof is supported on wooden pillars probably from local mast makers. Typical of Dissenters' chapels, the congregation is gathered around the pulpit with a communion table in the central space. The original entrance was through an alley and the east door with a spy hole to keep watch since these houses were often attacked. We learned that it was typical

for Meeting Houses to be discreetly situated hidden behind houses away from the main street. We found a fine Dutch brass chandelier and a pulpit similar to that at St Mary-le-Tower and probably sub-contracted to the same craftsman, Edward Hubbard, whose work we had just viewed but here in pinewood.

It was a short walk to the historic quay where we refreshed ourselves at Isaacs-on-the Quay, a historic merchant's warehouse, now a funky bar/restaurant. Our coach collected us to return to our base at Leiston Abbey and pre-supper drinks in the Quad in the evening sunshine. We were accompanied by Rachmaninov from Peter Thornborrow on the grand piano and early music from Linda Hall on the nyckelharpa, a Swedish instrument dating from the 14th century that she has recently discovered. How lucky we were!

Jeremy Bate