

Suffolk Chairs

Greeting us in Huntingfield Church was a congregation of Suffolk chairs which filled the chancel to overflowing, the children's chairs obediently lining the altar rail. Soon our group were discussing these chairs whilst others lay on their backs in the pews observing the painted roof. Adding to this jolly atmosphere were tea and cakes, served around the font by the Churchwarden together with helpers for which we are grateful. Robert Williams then introduced us to Jan and Tony Howe's chairs which they had kindly brought to their local church for us. The fine examples of Mendlesham chairs were highlighted by their inlaid



Tony Howe and Robert Williams discussing the Suffolk elm ratchet chair

stringing and fine pierced splat. Selected use of elm with fruitwood, dovetails to join the arms to the seat, and scribe marks on the legs to guide the position of the stretchers, all helped us to see where cabinetmaker meets chairmaker. Robert also referred us to an advertisement in 1820 where a Suffolk cabinetmaker advertised for a turner. We then discussed a generous elm child's high chair with cabriole back legs, the exaggerated design of the latter making it fit for supporting a wriggling child. An elm ratchet chair with curved seat was of special interest, the metalwork reminiscent of earlier documented leather-covered chairs. In this chair, the high back could be reclined to suit the sitter. Support for the arms was reinforced by blacksmith purpose-made brackets housing the arm into the seat frame. This was a chair of choice offering comfort whilst dining followed by a light doze. A simple elm stool offered a generously curved rectangular seat supported by tapered rectangular legs with stretchers on all sides. The height of the stool was suited for a clerk's desk or counter, the stretchers showing wear from long service. This honest and sound Suffolk stool was much admired.

The variety of Jan and Tony Howe's extensive collection, with Robert's direction, afforded us a wonderful opportunity to handle Suffolk chairs for which we thank them.