

A Private Collection in the Midlands

Saturday 5 August 2017

The afternoon visit was to the collection of Ian and Margaret Phillips, long-standing members who have been collecting regional furniture for more than thirty years. We spent a rewarding afternoon examining pieces and hearing histories of their acquisition, including many memories of dealers and auctioneers who would be well known to members.

We saw well-known types such as a Carmarthen dresser, another from Denbighshire, and one from Brecon, as well as more idiosyncratic pieces, such as an oak tripod table with fruitwood inlays of small formal motifs, and with feet showing a cut across the top of the foot towards the end, giving the effect of the human-footed tables sometimes seen in mahogany. A walnut corner cupboard with mirrored door, of about 1720, had an elegant arrangement of shelves within, with the top one cut back in a curve to accommodate a vase or a coffee pot. In the opposite corner was another, of mahogany, with a stepped superstructure that would have allowed the display of china. An examination of three 17th-/18th-century close stools (now serving as convenient low tables) showed the variety of form of these useful, and once ubiquitous, items.

In the dining room a cavalcade of chairs was presented. Most were from South Yorkshire, with one from Derbyshire and one from Westmorland. Peter Thornborrow spoke about his belief that an important centre for chair-making was in the Huddersfield area, citing the workshop at East Riddlesden Hall. He advanced a theory that the arched shape of the back panel, with what a needlewoman would call a 'picot edge', was an attempt to re-create in wood the fashionable lace collars of the period and that the acorn pendants were a royalist reference to the Boscobel oak.

Upstairs were many delights, including two chairs (bought independently) with carving of mermaids, one from a house sale in Borth on the coast of north Wales. A walnut-veneered chest of drawers of the early 18th century showed a very shallow drawer in the place where you might expect a brushing slide; this was called a 'map drawer' by Ian, but who knows what it was designed to protect and hide.

There was more than we could possibly see in an afternoon but, after a magnificent tea, we managed a final visit to the garage, where there were yet more pieces worthy of discussion, including two almost identical miniature coffers from Carmarthenshire, made in the late 18th century, one stamped 'W. Lewis' (illustrated in Richard Bebb, *Welsh Furniture 1250–1950* (2007), vol. II,

p. 75), and a row of wall cupboards, including a wonderfully simple arched one, the outer shell a thinly cut board presumably steamed to follow the curve.

This was indeed a rich visit and we are very grateful to Ian and Margaret for welcoming us so warmly and encouraging us to discuss the collection that has been a life's work.

Sarah Medlam