

Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich

From the external view of the house you can read its architectural development over nearly 200 years. Beginning

as an Elizabethan E-shaped brick house (dated 1549 on the porch) it retains its overall shape and the ground-floor transom windows. The gabled wing on the far left is thought to have been added to accommodate Queen Elizabeth for her stay in 1561. Following a fire in 1673 the upper floors were rebuilt as evidenced by the disturbed decorative diaper brickwork at the first floor, the replacement cross-mullioned windows, and the stylish Flemish shaped gables to the attic storey. The oversized giant Tuscan columns added to the front corners of the porch follow a change in ownership in 1735, as do the sashed windows in the wings and the internal alterations made to the entrance hall. Many of the first-floor Georgianised rooms retain their 18th-century fireplaces and rare wall-papers and original furniture. An unusual Baroque feature is the opening internal shuttered windows to either side of the impressive stair-hall.

The principal features of interest to our members was the fine and distinguished collection of oak furniture, most dating from after the purchase of the house in 1892 by local brewer F. T. Cobbold who presented it with contents and grounds to the town as a museum and public park in 1895. During 20th-century town clearances many examples of complete 16th-century rooms were saved and given a home within the museum, forming perfect room settings for the growing collection of oak furniture, many received

as bequests or gifts. The Upper and Lower Tudor Chambers came from a Tudor merchant's house during demolition in 1924. These two rooms were the highlight of my visit to this fascinating museum, not only for the fine early furniture, but also for the quality of the re-created interiors with moulded beamed ceilings, the walls clad in linenfold panelling and tapestry, and the precious fragment of superb wall painting set between two windows, so carefully preserved between portions of timber-framing.

Having not attended any RFS events for over ten years I was asked why I had come to this one. I explained that in the late 1960s and early 1970s I came to Suffolk and Norfolk on several occasions to look at, and photograph, the many early Gothic chests in the churches and museums first seen illustrated in rare books by Symonds, Cescinsky, Macquoid and others. I was tempted back to visit again some of these churches and museums but in the company of experts; it was a joy and delight to hear Chris Pickvance wax lyrical on some of the furniture in the museum's 'Tudor Living Room', where we had coffee, as it was at our first church visit to Earl Stonham a few days earlier. Being able to call on such experts is the strength of the RFS!

Peter Thornborrow



The Bishop of Ely chest, showing the carved front