



Fig. 3 Built-in dresser, Corsham Almshouses

CORSHAM AND BRADFORD-ON-AVON, WILTSHIRE VISIT.

8th May 1994

About 30 members assembled at **Corsham Almshouses** on a beautiful sunny spring day. Victor Chinnery gave us an introduction to this remarkable institution which has fortunately survived largely in its original state. The six almshouses, gardens and a schoolroom, endowed by Dame Margaret Hungerford, were completed in 1668. Dame Margaret was the widow of Sir Edward Hungerford, a commander of Cromwell's troops during the 1642-51 rebellion. Members commented on the somewhat old-fashioned style of the interior and fixed woodwork, which was probably the work of a master mason/builder and estate carpenter(s). The schoolroom was also used as a chapel with a gallery for the foundress' use. Its multi-functional purpose was well expressed by the pupils desks, box pews, and especially the ingenious pulpit with built-in Warden's arm chair. The design and construction of the woodwork would make a very worthwhile starting point for anyone interested in attempting to identify local/regional characteristics.

Each apartment was fitted with a boarded dresser (fig.3), bracketed shelves, some with scratch marked decoration, and various cupboards, the metal furniture on windows, doors and cupboards appeared to be original. There was also a stone chimneypiece, scullery with fuel store adjacent, and a spiral stair leading to the chamber above. As might be expected, the Master's or Warden's House contained the most elaborate furnishings including a built-in dresser of the kind found in farmhouses of the Bristol area. Michael Legg gave a vote of thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Lock for kindly allowing us to visit this remarkable institution.

Westwood Manor, (National Trust), is a fragmentary survival of a larger medieval courtyard house, extended at the end of the 15th century, on the site of an earlier structure, and medieval encaustic tiles can still be seen in the floor of what used to be the passage to the east wing. Thomas Horton, a wealthy clothier, added plasterwork including two moulded-rib ceilings, demolished part of the building, and carried out other structural alterations and additions. Unfortunately the building was allowed to deteriorate during the 19th century. Early 20th century attitudes and perceptions have also left their imprint on the architecture, not all of which is original or authentic. Edward Lister FSA, purchased the house in 1911 and set about its restoration, influenced by his friends Percy Maquoid and Sir Harold Peto. Lister, however, developed a taste for simple small 17th and 18th century furniture and musical instruments. His taste for treen and yew wood was also apparent. David Hannah expressed our thanks to our hostess Mrs Aziz for kindly allowing us to study the furniture collection.

Beside Westwood Manor is **Westwood Church** and, as might be expected Thomas Horton's influence can be seen in it's interior. Memorable features include; the ceiling with traces of its original painting dating from 1510; a splendid crocheted font cover c 1495-1510 which resembled details on the church spire; and a plank chest with scratch decoration. The pulpit dated 1607, was however, removed from another church.

After lunch we assembled at **Great Chalfield Manor**, which Victor Chinnery described as a progressive house for the period, which was built on the site of an earlier house by Thomas Tropnell (1405-88). Unfortunately during the 18th century the house was much neglected, but watercolours by J. C. Buckler dating from the 1820-30s show the interior at that period; one shows the stone seats along the walls, which remain in part. In 1836 Pugin's pupil, Thomas Larkin Walker, carefully recorded the house before parts collapsed two years later. The Walker drawings were faithfully adhered to by Sir Harold Brakspear during his restoration of 1905-12, for Robert Fuller. The furniture was assembled by Mr. and Mrs. Fuller after 1912.

The squint holes in the form of masks in the Hall, are illustrated on a Buckler drawing of 1823; such features survive in only four or five other houses. The Dining Room at this period was an innovative idea, doing away as it did with the old high table and replacing it with a separate "eating parlour". Discussion took place about the ash panelling above the fireplace, said to be c.1560, with its unusual geometric design inlaid with holly, and close examination showed that it had been reassembled. Furniture of interest included a chest with an unusual painted simulated burrwood finish c.1675, and a small cupboard with linen fold panels. However, the RFS prize for the most ingenious use of a piece of furniture was won by a coffer with linen fold panels whose open lid revealed an early 20th century bath, surely the ultimate in bathroom furniture? One of the most discussed pieces was the drying rack (possibly used for trenchers) with an architectural style pediment dated 1684, with initial EE, and pierced fish-like shapes on either side. The piece was pronounced 'right' by several experienced members, whilst others were less certain, but such debates are the life-blood of the Society's visits.

Nicholas Somers gave a vote of thanks to Mrs Floyd who had patiently answered all our questions and had given up a sunny afternoon for us. Our thanks are also due to Gerry Cotton for her hard work in organising the visits, and Victor Chinnery, our chief guide, who also compiled the excellent notes, and to Bill Cotton and Michael Legg for sharing their knowledge and expertise with us during a most stimulating and delightful day looking at furniture and interiors in Wiltshire.

Susan Stuart