

Chetham's Hospital, Manchester

We were introduced to the history of Chetham's Hospital and its context within the environs of Manchester and Salford by Susan Bourne. The estate had become the property of the Stanleys in the 16th century and by 1654 an educational endowment had been established under the terms of the will of the former woollen merchant Humphrey Chetham.

Fixed furniture and fittings provide the most convincing provenance within the confines of what was essentially a converted double-storey cloister court adjoining the remnants of a 15th century manor house. Within the Great Hall, the most important fixtures are the medieval 'speers' or fixed wooden screens which face towards the canopy, set above the dais, at the opposite end of this 43 foot long chamber. One of our members pointed out that this canopy significantly enhanced the acoustic qualities of the hall. Similar but more elaborate devices are to be found at Rufford Hall.

In the Reading room we were able to examine one of the remaining decks of a wainscot oak press from the Gorton chained library. However the focus of attention in this room was a set of twenty four mid-17th century, leather covered, oak framed back stools surrounding a double gated oak table. Although of similar period, it was difficult to reconcile the presence of another tradition of 17th century chairmaking within such close proximity. Such carved panel backstools and armchairs, incorporating pyramid finials, are a distinctive tradition associated with North West England.

Our tour of the building also included an examination of twenty six spectacular ceiling height oak presses or library bookcases made in the 1650's by the Manchester joiner and metal worker Richard Martinscroft. By 1745 the book chains had been removed and wooden security gates added to the numerous entrances to the deep press bays. The diverse range of early woodwork in the building also includes wall panelling, carved doorheads (see fig 2) and features such as the splat baluster staircase.

Of further note, were a number of 20th century watercolours, encapsulating interior settings which no doubt existed at the turn of this century. One particular watercolour of the kitchen illustrates a scatter of rush-seated spindleback chairs about a large rectangular table. Such chairs, with their earback top rails, were produced by Charles Leicester and James Riding within workshops in the North Cheshire towns, during the first half of the 19th century. J.M.B.



Fig. 2 Carved doorhead in Chetham's library

Bramall Hall

Our visits on Saturday started at Bramall Hall, South of Manchester, which houses a superb but almost unknown collection of furniture in a spectacular timber framed home set in a municipal park. This is a mixed collection ranging from 17th century Cheshire backstools to furniture designed by Pugin.

Although the black and white houses and churches of Cheshire, with their oak furniture, were to be recurrent themes throughout the day, Bramall Hall also includes a number of noteworthy features such as a continental carved oak box bed, a large 16th century tablecarpet, an important painted 16th century room featuring figures playing musical instruments, and a chapel with original woodwork.

Recent renovations have facilitated the opening up of the servants quarters kitchens and domestic offices which provided the opportunity to examine a diversity of backstairs furniture.

S.B.

Lower Peover

After a relaxing ride through the sunlit Cheshire countryside, we arrived at the cobbled lane leading to the 13th century, half timbered St. Oswald's Church, Lower Peover.

What furniture treasures were here! Fixed woodwork included the 17th century carved screen, and 'box' pews from the first half of the 17th century, some with half doors constructed to keep the rushes, spread on the pew floor for insulation from being spread into the aisle. The front pew has a cresting rail similar to those found on some Cheshire backstools, (there are several in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester), and the Communion rail is similar to the silhouette stair banisters that we saw at Chethams. The pulpit, originally part of a three decker pulpit of 1660, had eight arches and inlaid panels in dark and light woods, set between carved frames.

Moveable furniture found in the church, but not necessarily church furniture included, just inside the porch, a small 17th century desk with foliate carving, on a later stand, and branded I.S. There was a fine collection of eight back stools of the regions, being used in the side chapel. These were variously carved, plain, turned, with and without pyramid and turned finials a true regional miscellany! There were two altar tables, both at least of 17th century origin in parts, but needing longer and closer examination.

The item causing most debate was a ladder back arm-chair, made from sections of riven ash, with back posts which curved forwards. The Most splendid thing I've seen all day (according to a beaming oak collector member in the group), was the oak dugout chest which is thought to date from the 13th century. It is of massive size, 6 ft. x 2 ft. x 2 ft., and over-weighted by massive iron bands, chains, and five locks. What credence can be given to the legend that prospective brides of Cheshire farmers were tested for their strength (and therefore marriage suitability) on their ability to lift the chest's lid with one hand, I wonder?

A whole morning would not be too long to spend here, but we were moved on to our next visit. G.C.

Tabley House

Lunch was eventually taken at nearby Tabley House where our goal was the 16th century chapel with its fitted Laudian style furniture, so reminiscent of some of the colleges we have visited at Oxford and Cambridge in recent years, and the 16th century oak overmantel from the original timber framed Tabley Hall, demolished in the 1920's. However the main

house today is a Palladian building by John Carr of York which houses the collection of Sir John Leicester a celebrated early 19th century patron of British Painting. Some members managed to race round the collection of 18th and early 19th century furniture before being hustled back on to the bus, pausing only to consider the relationship of another branch of the Leicester family, from the Plumley area of the Estate, who are recorded as supplying twelve chairs to the House in October 1810.

S.B.

Great Budworth

Our second church, once Mother church to Lower Peover, St. Mary and All Saints, Great Budworth. Here we were met by Brian Curzon, who gave us a brief history of this 15th. century church, and the Dutton, Leycester and Warburton families who at various times financed its building, alteration and refurbishment. Brian's depth of knowledge and enthusiasm, and his ability to convey the complexity, hard work, and luck involved in unlocking the long history of this church and the workmen who fashioned it were much appreciated.

We saw more evidence of early masons' work here than joiners' work. But there was an extremely fine 16th. century iron bound parish chest with four locks and five staples, and a further carved domestic chest dated 1680. There were five thirteenth century stalls in the Warburton Chapel, (There were twenty in 1819!), and two benches with 'poppyhead' ends which were thought to be from the early 15th. century, but they were not available for examination. Nor did we see, because it is kept locked in the Vestry, the Holy Table, purchased in 1703, with claw and ball feet, and a shell carved in the centre of the top rail. The 'Square topped Jacobean chairs' mentioned in the Guide to Cheshire churches were not seen either. I hope that they, along with the 17th. century altar rails also mentioned, are locked in the vestry.

These two churches, each a fine example of its type, represent the joy and sadness of Parish churches for furniture scholars. Joy that we can still find so much regional furniture, some in its original setting; that much is provenanced through church records, and that much is openly available: and sadness that it has not been systematically recorded, is sometimes in need of urgent conservation, and that it has become necessary to move furniture from the Church, into a more secure place.

G.C.

SATURDAY EVENING VISIT TO MANCHESTER CITY ART GALLERY

Saturday evening was spent in the splendid Victorian building which is the home of the main collection held by the City. After a sumptuous buffet supper, we retired to the cooler entrance hall to hear a brief introduction to the furniture on show from Ruth Shrigley, the Keeper of Decorative Arts at the Gallery. She pointed out that the Gallery has about 400 accessions of furniture of which only about 30 are on display at any one time. Some of the rest is on show at the satellite galleries in the suburbs of Manchester. Ruth told us that amazingly in excess of one hundred cabinet makers and chair makers are recorded in the Manchester gazettes of the 19th century, yet we know of the work of only a handful by name, those who had the foresight and decency (from our point of view) to mark their furniture, usually with a stamp.

The 19th century was a period of rapid growth in the population of Manchester and considerable wealth was created. This provided a ready market for the furniture of all types, from the simplest chairs to the highly decorated suites, cabinets and sideboards made by the large number of cabinet makers who had developed their own businesses along side 'King Cotton'. The big names to look out for, all of whom flourished in the last half of the 19th century include:

James Lamb usual stamp LAMB MANCHESTER with a number

Edward Goodall & Son stamped E. GOODALL & Co. MANCHESTER

Thomas Turner usual stamp THOS. TURNER MANCHESTER

Edward Hill and George Doveston, previously independent cabinet makers amalgamated in 1861 to form Doveston, Bird and Hull. These three names form their stamp with MANUFACTURERS MANCHESTER added.

Both Ogden and Lamb were sufficiently proud of their work to show it, with considerable success, at International Expositions abroad. Most of the furniture on display was by Lamb but there was a pair of chairs made by Goodalls to a design by MacMurdo which had been in the Century Guild exhibit at the Liverpool International Exhibition in 1888.

This report will concentrate on the furniture which we saw of regional interest. The main upstairs gallery, with beautiful PreRaphaelite paintings on the walls, is dominated by two Lamb sideboards, opposite each other on the long walls. The plainer one is in pollard oak; the other, much grander, is in oak with ebony and walnut inlay with brass fittings. Both are probably from designs by or after Charles Bevan. There is also a set of four oak dining chairs with upholstered backs, ebony decoration and carved effects. In the centre of this room is an octagonal table in mahogany, ebonized and inlaid with burr walnut, ebony and other hard woods by Gillows of Lancaster.

In the next room is another Lamb sideboard; an ebonized oak carcass with veneers of burr walnut and maple is surmounted by a top in Siennese marble. Alongside is a display cabinet in ebony, inlaid with walnut with gilded decoration and doors set with Wedgwood jasper type plaques.

Another painted and gilded display cabinet adorns the next room. (Incidentally for those who love pots as well as furniture, these cabinets are filled with brilliant Royal Lancastrian lustre wares by their best artists in their best period). In the last room is another Lamb cabinet in mahogany; this one inlaid with oak, sycamore, mother of pearl and brass. This room is where the pair of Goodall chairs mentioned earlier are to be found.

Many complimentary remarks were overheard from members who were perhaps not familiar with the quality of manufacture and excellence of design of this Manchester-made furniture. We should visit the Town Hall next time; Alfred Waterhouse's Gothic splendour has much of its original furniture still inside, the bulk of it made by Doveston, Bird and Hull. The reason why is another story for another day.

We are greatly indebted to Susan Bourne and Simon Feingold for organising this weekend event.

Dr. T Myers