

DURHAM CONFERENCE AND AGM

17th – 19th July 1998

Friday 17/7/98

This year's conference was at Durham, based in one of the University colleges, St Cuthbert's Society, in the South Bailey, just a few minutes walk from the Cathedral. St Cuthbert's was founded for postgraduate and mature students, and we later learned that Christopher Gilbert had studied for his MA here. It proved to be a super venue for our visit to Durham and the staff and remaining students made us most welcome. Local members attending the conference had arranged to meet us in Newcastle upon Tyne; the rest of us met for lunch at St Cuthbert's. As the South Bailey is too narrow for a coach, we had the added bonus of a walk across Prebends Bridge, with the classic view of the Cathedral rising above the River Wear, on our way to board the coach. Then off to Newcastle, passing the Angel of the North, truly a journey into the unknown for most of us, when our coach-driver from Middlesbrough, announced he had never driven into Newcastle before!

Anthony Wells-Cole, in his recent book, *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England*, recognized that 'something very interesting was going on at Newcastle in architectural decoration during the thirty years from 1605, something very different, it is beginning to seem, from anything happening elsewhere in England at the time'. Our visits, suggested and guided by Anthony, were designed to introduce us to this work and to the houses and institutions of the wealthy merchants whose patronage and contacts were responsible for it. We visited several of the merchant's town houses: Bessie Surtee's house in two timber-framed houses of the mid 17th century; Alderman Fenwick's house, built

in the mid 17th century by the merchant Thomas Winship and one of the first all brick houses in the town, recently restored by the Tyne and Wear Building Trust and with a charming stencilled bedroom on the top floor; and 28-30 The Close, a late 16th-early 17th century merchant's house, the long rooms on the first and second floors with close-set plastered beams decorated, in a style reminiscent of Scottish painted ceilings of the 16th century, with designs in plaster copied from a series of 12 engravings published in 1601 by Theodore Bang, a Nuremberg engraver and master goldsmith. This last house is currently undergoing restoration by the Tyne and Wear Building Trust; the lack of staircase meant this was a ladder-based visit and numbers had to be limited. The intrepid members who did ascend said the climb was really worthwhile!

We visited the Merchant Venturer's Hall, integrated into the more recent neo-classical Guildhall. The hall itself had been rebuilt in the 19th century, but still retains its magnificent carved chimneypiece and overmantel dated 1636, the large reliefs of the Judgement of Solomon and the Miraculous Draught of Fishes after Sir Peter Paul Rubens. The stately Court of the Merchant Adventurers was described by William Grey in his 1649 survey of Newcastle as 'of the Old Staple, resident at the flourishing city of Antwarps in Brabant; since removed to the more Northern Provinces under the States. Their charters are ancient, their priveliges (sic) and immunities great; they have no dependence upon London, having a Governor, 12 Assistants, 2 Wardens and a Secretary'

Still within the Guildhall we visited the 17th century Mayor's Parlour, with its painted panelling and plaster ceiling, one of the paintings depicting the Guildhall as rebuilt by Robert Trollop, a York mason, in the mid 17th century.

From the Merchant Venturer's Hall we went to Trinity House, home of the Company of Masters and Mariners of Newcastle, who acquired the site in 1505 for the purpose of a chapel, meeting house and almshouses. They have functioned as a private corporation, responsible for the river and lighthouses since 1536.

Within the banqueting hall of Trinity House we were able to examine a set of twelve comb back Windsor chairs designed in 18th century style; an interesting conjunction of early design and later construction.

There are still almshouses on the site, while in the chapel the complete fittings of 1636 remain. During the afternoon we had seen several examples of a bird-in-branch motif in the decorated plaster ceilings; here in the Banqueting Hall we saw the latest in the sequence, this time dating from 1721.

Our thanks for a most enlightening and fascinating insight into 17th century Newcastle are due to Anthony Wells-Cole, Brian Jobling of the Tyne and Wear Building Trust and his wife (Alderman Fenwick's House and 28-30, The Close), English Heritage (Bessie Surtee's House), The Freemen of the City (The Merchant Venturer's Hall), and Captain Blake (Trinity House).

Friday evening
17th Century Furniture-making in the North East
Lecture by Anthony Wells-Cole

After an excellent afternoon studying some of Newcastle's remarkable 17th century buildings led by Anthony Wells-Cole, members were keen to hear his illustrated talk on North Eastern furnishings of the same date.

Anthony, known particularly for his work at Temple Newsam, Leeds, is also the author of the magnificent book, *Art and Decoration in Elizabethan and Jacobean England*, sections of which were referred to in the second part of his talk relating to the influence of continental prints on Newcastle furnishings.

For those who like their furniture moveable, Anthony made a concession by showing two interesting examples before moving on to the church furnishings of Brancepeth which was on the itinerary for the next day. The first was a fine oak wainscot chair of 1630 now in the library of Durham cathedral. As the North East is not renowned for vernacular furniture in the way that neighbouring Westmorland and Yorkshire are, it was good to hear that this piece, characterised by a triple-hooped top rail with intermediate pyramids, was one of several found locally and currently being studied at Beamish Museum, our Sunday venue. The other was a communion cupboard of very simple design with Latin texts carved rather randomly on the drawer panels and which, as part of the early furnishings of the cathedral, is assumed to be of local construction.

The church at Brancepeth, once open to anyone who cared to collect a very large key from the unusual Post Office within Brancepeth Castle, provided a unique chance to study a fascinating scheme of North Eastern 17th century furnishings. Under the auspices of John Cosin, chaplain to Bishop Neil of Durham from 1623 until 1626 when he became rector of Brancepeth, the concept of the 'beauty of holiness' which he shared with Archbishop Laud, became reality in a profusion of fine woodworking. With teams of local craftsmen, including the well-known joiner Robert Barker, he combined gothic and classical elements with an overall late Mannerist style. This was particularly evident in the elaborate font cover and the pulpit, which was swagged with garlands of fruit and angel masks showing a definite continental influence. The benches, with rusticated ends, similar to those we had seen in Trinity House, Newcastle, the 5 bay gothic screen topped by spectacular pinnacles with incised piers, echoing the Romanesque examples in Durham cathedral and misericords decorated with classical motifs, exhibited a quality and variety of carving to provide endless interest.

A 1630 monument to Cosin, with later embellishments introduced the theme of the second part of the talk, being based on the format of the title page from a printed book depicting a Flemish tomb of 1550 and executed in the Mannerist style.

Moving back to Newcastle to the 1636 carved chim-

neypiece and overmantel in the Merchant Venturer's Hall in the Guildhall, which we had seen earlier in the day, it was fascinating to see slides of the prints which had so influenced this and many other major local works. Scenes depicting Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist were taken from a 1590 Antwerp print by Maarten de Voss while the large central relief of the Judgement of Solomon and the Miraculous Draught of Fishes came from a print after Rubens by the brothers Boetius and Schelte a Bolswert.

In Northumberland at Chipchase Castle, the influence of the print was apparent in a superb 1625 overmantel, also originally from Newcastle, with panels depicting the Four Continents, including a brilliant crocodile after de Vos and a magnificent interpretation of Maarten von Heemskerck's Triumph of the World scheme. Slides of similar carvings with fascinating iconographical schemes, too complex to detail here but which are discussed and illustrated in Anthony's book, were shown from Hunswick Hall, Beamish, Burton Agnes and the Beehive Inn in Newcastle.

In the 17th century, Newcastle was a flourishing and wealthy port sending coal to the south and overseas and local merchants like Alderman Fenwick, whose house we visited, were able to commission work of the highest quality, linking them with progressive trends in continental art and literature and which also reflected their growing personal prestige and that of their city.

As one of several North Eastern members attending the Conference, learning so much about the superb furnishings and traditions of our region was particularly appreciated.

Jill Harrison

Saturday 18/7/98

Our visits on Saturday morning, to Durham Cathedral and Castle, illustrated the 17th century work to which we had been introduced by Anthony Wells Cole in his lecture the previous evening, but first our guide in the Cathedral introduced us to the historical role of the settlement which had emerged from the times of St Cuthbert and the Venerable Bede to become a religious and defensive centre which had rapidly taken shape under the control and good devices of the Prince Bishops. This unique Romanesque structure combines with the former Benedictine monastery to house diverse artifacts, sculptures and early furniture. Foremost amongst these are the tombs of St Cuthbert and the Venerable Bede; standing beside them one is aware of how much we owe to these men and to this area.

We visited the Dean and Chapter Library, converted from the monastery refectory in 1684 and fitted with high and low book presses, very similar to those in contemporary Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Here a long table supported on trestles generated considerable interest and debate; the local story says this table was part of the furnishings of the monastery refectory and remained in-situ on conversion to the library. In the 19th

century the area which had previously been the monks' dormitory was restored to house the modern books in the library and here we examined some 17th century backstools with contemporary turkey work covers.

From the Cathedral we walked to the neighbouring Castle, home to the Bishops of Durham from the late 11th century until the establishment of the University in the 1830s when Bishop van Mildert gave it to the University for use as a college. The very complicated history of this building, from a defensive motte and bailey castle of the Norman period, to a gracious residence of the 17th and 18th centuries, to a University college in the 19th century has resulted in spectacular and surprising survivals, such as the Norman doorway in Bishop Tunstal's Gallery, originally in an exterior wall but since the mid 16th century protected from the elements by being enclosed in the gallery built to the south of the original wall.

The college kitchens are still those built by Bishop Fox in the late 15th century and we would have appreciated more time to examine the kitchen itself and the Buttery hatch, with Bishop Fox's motto and the date of 1499 carved in the woodwork. Unfortunately the kitchen was in use during our visit and close examination was not possible. We were able to look closely at some early 16th century pew ends in Bishop Tunstal's Chapel which, together with some misericords, had been brought from Auckland Palace by Bishop Tunstal. We also examined the Black Staircase, built in the early 1660s on Bishop Cosin's return from exile on the Continent. This full-blown Baroque staircase with carved panels of garlands of flowers and leaves is very different to Cosin's work of the 1630s which is Gothic revival in a Jacobean/Mannerist framework.

Our visit to the Castle finished in the Norman Chapel beneath Bishop Tunstal's Chapel. This small Chapel is one of the oldest parts of the Castle, dating from c1080, although it has only recently been restored to its original function following building works in the 1950s. The six columns supporting the floor above have capitals carved with grotesque masks and animals; the carvings on one of the capitals depicting a hunting scene with deer, hounds, hunter and horse. The unusual scale and sense of tranquillity seemed to heighten our perception of the remote age to which the building belonged.

Afternoon visit to St. Brandons, Brancepeth

Just six miles from Durham City we visited the village of Brancepeth with its church, a Grade I listed building, and castle. A church has been on this site since 1085 A.D. with a rector monk called Haeming. The tower is 12th century, the 13th century nave was extended in the 14th century, when the transepts were built and the aisles widened and extended to enclose the tower. The chancel, south chapel and a vestry were added at the end of the century when the nave was heightened and the clerestory built.

A stone effigy of Robert Neville 'the Peacock of the North' who died in battle in 1319, sits in the chancel and the area above his head is decorated with priests

praying for his soul. Two wooden effigies of the 2nd Earl of Westmorland and his wife retain traces of original paint and remnants of carved monks seated before lecterns, again praying for their souls remain, and date from the 15th century.

In 1626 John Cosin became rector and a series of major works was carried out. He added the northern porch (see fig. 8 page 13) and the parapet and decorated the church with fine carved oak work including the altar table, reredos, chancel screen, ornamented stalls, font cover and pews in about 1632; the style is Laudian with late Gothic flourishes. A drawing of 1639 shows the women seated separately from the men at the back. On the east wall of the nave are two pieces of panelling, one of which may have been part of the rude loft, shows the instruments of the crucifixion. The other, consisting of 27 differently carved geometric panels, is thought to have been part of the Jesus altar in Durham cathedral removed in Cromwellian times. A fine tablet on the north wall was fitted for his own memorial but was left blank as he was made Bishop of Durham and buried in Auckland castle. A black wooden knights' helmet fixed near the main door was used as a coffin mask for the elite until the 18th century.

The Lady chapel contains a new altar table by Thompson (mouseman) of Kilburn built in 1979 incorporating the front from a fine 14th century carved Flanders chest. The modern carved infill for the lock recess area seems a pointless way to hide this, despite its inappropriately invented 20th century style lion carving. A very successful visit which was to be marred a few months later by the news that a fire had devastated the church, shortly after a major restoration and conservation project had commenced.

Simon Feingold

Fire at St. Brandon - report by Anthony Wells-Cole

One night in the middle of September 1998, two months after the RFS visit there, fire broke out in this church, a building of national – even international – importance because of its superb woodwork commissioned by John Cosin whilst he was Rector in the 1630s. By the time the fire engines arrived, it had been completely burnt out, with collapsed roofs and furnishings reduced literally to ashes.

Members of the RFS who attended the Durham Conference in July 1998 will certainly have taken photographs of the building during their visit. Although I was unable to participate on that day, I had been to the church a few weeks earlier and took many colour transparencies of the Cosin woodwork.

The present Rector is now calling for photographs of the church and its furnishings. These may provide invaluable evidence if restoration of the building is – as everyone concerned with 17th century furniture and decoration must hope – found to be feasible. Would anyone who has photographs please contact the Rector at the following address: Canon Adrian Dorber, Diocese of Durham: Board of Ministries and Training, The Cross Gate Centre, Alexandra Crescent, Crossgate, Durham DH1 4HF. Thank you

Our guests for dinner on Saturday evening were from Beamish, the North of England Open Air Museum. Rosemary Allan is Senior Keeper and John Gall is Director of Museum Services. After dinner they gave a combined presentation on the origins of the Museum and of the aims behind this effort to record the cultural heritage of a region. In 1958 a Yorkshireman, Frank Atkinson, was appointed Director of the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle. Arriving in the North East he recognised the scale of the economic and social changes then under way and realised that it would soon be too late to preserve evidence of this cultural heritage. His enthusiasm, energy and sense of urgency persuaded the Bowes Museum Committee to authorise the collection of objects for a future museum of the life and work of ordinary people, and this was the beginning. From the start it was considered insufficient to collect only objects and documents: to bring them to life, it would also be important to record people talking about their lives, skills and customs. Now, 40 years later the Museum is established in the Beamish Valley, a perfect situation for a record of the North East, a rich agricultural valley with remnants of former collieries and iron foundries.



Fig. 6 Tram visit

Sunday 19/7/98

Despite the previous evening's introduction to Beamish, I think many of us were amazed when we arrived at the Museum on Sunday morning and saw the scale of the site. Rosemary and John met us on our arrival and put us on two trams for the journey to our first visit, to Pockerley Farm. The farmhouse on the hill at Pockerley, which is one of the Museum's most recent projects, incorporates a medieval defensible strong house, with original roof timbers of 1441 and a vaulted basement chamber. From this hill we were able to look out over the valley, to the colliery and pit cottages, the town and, in the far distance, the railway station.



Fig. 7 17th century oak armchair from N.E. England

From Pockerley we walked or took the tram to the town (fig. 6) where we were taken into the Bank, a current project not then open to the public. Here Rosemary and John had assembled the Museum's collection of 17th century oak armchairs (fig. 7), a distinctive type thought to have been made in this region. These chairs had many similarities to an example in the Cathedral Library which Anthony Wells-Cole had introduced us to on Friday evening. Beamish now houses several examples, some with interesting later alterations, and it was a marvellous opportunity to examine these at close quarters. We also saw another example of carver's work from 17th century Newcastle, a carved overmantel of the 1630s, originally from the Beehive Inn, Sandhills, Newcastle, incorporating two allegorical figures flanking a well carved relief; the whole articulated by columns. The two allegorical figures have been recognised by Anthony as after the prints of *Gratia Dei* and *Eternity* in Philip Galle's *Prosopographia*, published in Antwerp c1590.

After a break for lunch and a chance to visit some of the other sites ourselves - after a shopping expedition to the Co-op and look in at the garage, we made for Home Farm where we enjoyed a few minutes around the kitchen fire, learning about the intricacies of 'proggy' and 'hooky' rug making - Rosemary and John rounded us up for our ultimate visit to Beamish Hall, where the extensive photographic collections, oral histories and archive are held. This was a fascinating finish to our introduction to Beamish and it was very difficult at the end of the afternoon to prise members away from studying details in the amazing collection of photographs or from the large table in the archive, laden, for our benefit, with furniture catalogues taken from the Museum's extensive collection of 19th and 20th catalogues. Our thanks are due to Rosemary and John for all their hospitality and for their dedication to showing us the aims and aspirations behind the Museum at Beamish. We all came away determined to make a return visit in the near future.

P.Legg

ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

3rd November 1998

As a result of a measure passed in 1990, every Church of England church and cathedral has, very sensibly, been instructed to make an inventory of its possessions. Our member Noel Riley has been working on the furniture in St. Paul's Cathedral for over a year now to produce a document which seems never to have been attempted before. Given the apparent paucity of records, this is proving no easy task. A keen group of members spent a fascinating day with Noel touring public as well as private, and downright hidden, parts of the fabric, discussing her findings.

One piece that is documented is the original oak altar table, now in St. Dunstan's Chapel, carved in auricular taste, for which J. Smallwell was paid £14 in September 1696. The parquetry top was charged for by the square foot. The presence of grapes set upside-down raised speculation about alterations. After studying five that remain from a fine set of mid 18th century dining chairs in the Minor Canons' Vestry, we were able to have a thorough look at Bishop Compton's chair from one of two Bishop's thrones in the Choir with Adam Bowett. This is a caned, carved walnut armchair of much better than usual domestic quality, which was traditionally thought to have been supplied in 1697, but was in fact probably one of three provided by Charles Hopson in 1709 for £12. On several points this date fits stylistically and the chair is probably one of the earliest in England to have raked back legs. The back exhibits three sets of stamped initials of different journeymen involved in its production.

In the resident carvers' 'shed' we met the enthusiastic Tony Webb and Hannah Hartwell who were very appropriately involved in a long-term project of restoring Grinling Gibbons carving, particularly from the Choir which had been poorly reassembled after the last War. All the replaced wood, lime and oak, that they use is left 'in the white' to tone down gradually in colour closer to the original. Tony is convinced that the surface of the lime was left this way originally, although the application of linseed oil has considerably darkened the oak in later years. There was much alteration to the Choir in 1861, when Gibbons' choir screen was divided in half and moved.

The Chapter House was rebuilt in the 1950s and is said to have been refurnished by Charles Gibbs-Smith of the V&A. (Noel would appreciate any information on this man). Here we debated the age of a large gilded mirror in George II style labelled by Trollope and found an excellent quality two-stage cabinet crisply carved in mahogany which was reminiscent of the work of William Vile of the 1760s.

After lunch we ascended to the upper floors of the Cathedral (although the wonderful cantilevered staircase at the south-west corner is currently unsafe for use), and after examining some early 18th century grained oak benches brought in from St. Peters, Cornhill in 1989, we visited the fascinating Library which houses some

14,000 volumes, and were met by one of the Librarians, Elizabeth Norman, who had kindly helped with the arrangements for the day. Besides various 18th century chairs and tables, 19th century bookcases, triangular oak library steps on wheels and remnants of the 1870's rush-seated ladderback Nave seating, there was speculation as to whether a large oak table, used since the late 19th century as a stand for showcases, dates from the Jacobethan Revival of the 1830s or is original of the period of Wren. Similarities with a table at Hampton Court will be followed up.

One of the most intriguing pieces that we encountered must be the Mylne Pulpit, supposedly of 1803. This in fact incorporates a very elaborate carved oak base, perhaps of the 1760s, and a shaped circular satinwood top with crisply carved neo-classical paterae and panels of what might be early 18th century oak parquetry. An odd confection indeed! We saw a pile of steps from this pulpit at our next port of call, with Maria Sanchez the Conservator. Maria looks after, amongst other things, some sixty models of the Cathedral of different periods, and untold fragments of stone, some from the original Cathedral, and woodwork by Gibbons and others, much brought in from City churches.

Although we saw during the day the results of quite recent, ill-advised restoration, we can hope that, with Maria's and Noel's influence, a better conservation system will safeguard St. Paul's rich heritage for the future. We are enormously grateful to Noel and to Adam for arranging this unique opportunity for us.

Christopher Claxton Stevens



Fig. 8 Porch at St. Brandon's, Brancepeth