

RFS VISIT TO WINCANTON, CASTLE CARY AND BRUTON 22th April 1999

For the twenty members fortunate enough to make this visit the day started in the bar of Wincanton's Dolphin Hotel, with coffee and a potted history of the town by Gabriel Olive. Between the granting of the Town's charter in 1556 and the first race meeting in 1865 there were two noteworthy events: Nathaniel Ireson (1686-1769), a Warwickshire man and both a potter and a master-builder, settled in Wincanton and, in addition to a building business, started the Wincanton pottery - notable because of its unique decoration (Gabriel showed an example - which he maintains is better than that held by the V&A!). Nathaniel's home, Stourhead House, still stands and the local museum has several references to him including a copy of the probate of his will dated 24th September 1765. In 1832 another builder walked into Wincanton, this time from Bristol, and he founded the building business of 'Greens' which, six generations later, still exists in premises close by the Dolphin Hotel. Before leaving Wincanton we were able to visit Green's premises to see the nineteenth century workshop, including its contents, and to look round the town's small but very interesting museum which houses chairs from the former Union workhouse as part of its collection.

After lunch at The George in Castle Cary we visited **John Boyd Textiles Ltd** at Higher Flax Mills, the only surviving mechanical weavers of horsehair in the world. John Boyd set up his business in 1837 in premises nearby the present three storey building; previously a Victorian ropeworks. Of his original looms forty remain in use, now 130 years old. These looms have a unique hair picking device invented by John Boyd in 1870; previously children had been used to pick the hairs one at a time for threading into the loom. The number of hairs (the weft thread) per inch varies between 90 and 120, and the warp is of either cotton or silk (800 or 1600 threads respectively in the width). These factors determine the fabric's retail price which can be between £70 and £300 a metre. During an eight hour day each loom will produce about 1.5 metres of fabric with a finished width of 26 inches if black, or 22 inches if white or coloured. The hair is obtained from the far east, mainly China, where horses are still widely used in agriculture. Only the hair from healthy live mares and with a minimum length of 27 inches for brown and black hair and 26 inches for white is used (dead hair is brittle and impossible to dye). The mill uses about 650 lbs of hair each month. (A note for the concerned: tails are docked to prevent them getting caught up in machinery and a horse's tail will grow back fully four or five times in its lifetime.) Before use the hair has to be topped-and-tailed to get an even spread of texture (horsehair is thicker at the top and finer at the ends), and colour (all tails are stained with urine at the bottom). It is then repeatedly combed through a hackle to eliminate knots before being bleached, dyed or overdyed. The result is a range of beautiful colours including white, reds, greens, blues and yellows; a grey-mix (which is various shades of brown), and dense black. The historical designs first used in 1837 are the most popular horsehair fabrics. The three basic styles are sateen (one side showing mostly horsehair): rep (both sides the same and usually with cotton warps of different colours) and damask

(with a woven pattern). Hand embroidered fabrics and special woven designs are also produced.

Then on to Bruton for the last visits of the day; first to Sexey's Hospital, followed by a short walk alongside the river Brue before crossing the packhorse bridge to see St Mary's Church.

Hugh Sexey's Hospital was founded in 1638, nearly 20 years after his death. Born c1527, he was an attorney in private practice and had acquired large estates and made a fortune from property dealing by the time he became Auditor General of the former Bishopric of Bath and Wells in about 1583. From 1599 until his death twenty years later he was one of seven Auditors of the Exchequer, first to Queen Elizabeth I then to James I. Having no heir, though twice married, Hugh Sexey vested all his property in Feoffes in Bruton for charitable purposes. In 1638 the Trustees founded Hugh Sexey's Hospital to provide a home for twelve poor aged persons, seven men and five women; today it has twenty two flats for the elderly. The Hospital also included a school for twelve boys who were maintained and educated there for three years before being apprenticed for seven years, mostly as carpenters and blacksmiths. The Jacobean Chapel within the Hospital contains original woodwork, stalls and pulpit. The suggestion that the woodwork had prior origins in the Parish church and local monastery is more difficult to reconcile with the evidence. It is Puritan in character with plain glass in the windows and lit by candlelight, the only concession to the present being an electric organ. Services, based on the Book of Common Prayer, are held on five days of the week. The original school building is now the meeting place for the Master and the Twelve Visitors who are responsible for the ordering of the Hospital as well as the estates and revenues. It has two rooms divided by a screen, the lower part of which is original to the building. Furnishings include a refectory table and an Armada chest in the outer room and in the parlour, an early chest with six locks arranged as three pairs, a cupboard with doors made up of carved panels, and a longcase clock by Nicholas Roper of Oakhill.

St Mary's Church, Bruton. Prior to the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 it was the church of the Augustinian Abbey which stood to the south of the church. It has two towers; that alongside the north aisle is thought to be late 14th century and the great west tower of 1449-1456 which is 104 feet high and houses a peal of six bells, the earliest dated 1528. Inside the west door is a screen dated by the carved names of the churchwardens to 1620. The roof over the nave is a fine example of a Somerset king post roof with richly detailed colour remaining at the eastern end. The Victorian pews incorporate many Jacobean bench ends reflecting the Laudian influence evident in the pulpit in spite of missing its sounding board and pedestal. The rood screen is of recent date, 1938, and commemorates a respected choirmaster. Nathaniel Ireson of Wincanton was responsible for the rebuilding of the chancel, retaining the original altar rails and box pews and creating the spectacular plaster reredos which covers almost all the east wall. The work was commissioned by Sir Charles Berkeley in 1743.

Ted Street