

HEREFORDSHIRE CONFERENCE

2nd – 4th July 1999

Friday afternoon

Our first visit was to Clisset Wood. Mike Abbott and Gudrun Leitz, two of the owners and trustees of the woodland, welcomed us, and explained that the wood had been re-named 'Clisset' in honour of the local chairmaker admired by the Arts and Crafts movement. Clisset himself had used timber from the wood. Forest management has now been re-established after 60 years of neglect. It was a thrill to discover the simple woodworking equipment set up beneath an awning and to see how green ash billets were quartered, trimmed and shaped with traditional axe and draw-knife, and turned on the pole-lathe. The simple method of manufacture needed only four tools and a handful of shavings to turn a polished spindle. Chair arms which match naturally are produced by splitting with the grain. We also saw methods of steaming and bending back-slats and hoops. The tools, and some finished chairs, were on display. RFS members were able to experiment with the process themselves, and left happily clutching a variety of turned pieces as souvenirs.

In the afternoon the Clisset theme continued. When we arrived at Ledbury Community Centre, an amazing sight greeted us - two rows of chairs each running almost the length of the hall. (Equally amazing was the wonderful lunch of sandwiches and cakes provided by the local WI). Prior publicity for the 'Clisset Day' had done its work well. Local people had brought between 40 and 50 chairs to the Surgery for diagnosis by Dr. Cotton. Some chairs had also been brought by RFS members. A descendant of Philip Clisset had brought a collection of newspaper cuttings. The crowd of chair owners and others gathered round eagerly and listened intently to the exchange of information. There were fascinating tales of how the chairs had been acquired (or made!). The pointing out of clues as to the origin of the furniture - the wood used, stamped initials, shape and structural elements - all helped to define the history of the chairs. In addition, Peter Brewer demonstrated his 'borescope', a mechanism for peering inside upholstery. This furniture Surgery was the best yet for the Society, and rewarding for everyone. A local resident was heard to comment, "That was a good show".

In between times, we visited a variety of interesting places. At Stanton Bishop church, the main attraction for furniture hunters was St. Augustine's chair. This unusual structure was of uncertain age but its history (or legend) was extraordinary. Could the saintly man really have sat in it? Christopher Claxton-Stevens had found a book of 1898 relating the strange events of the chair's disappearance and rescue. Now its guardians have screwed it to the floor to prevent it wandering.

Bosbury yielded Elizabethan tombs and a debatable pulpit in its handsome church. The panelled room of New Court was inspected (some of us went to Old Court by mistake!). At Ledbury the Painted Room was to be seen in Church Lane near the Market House and finally at Canon Frome Court we examined an even more debatable Jacobean chimney piece, now the glory of a flat within a converted 18th century mansion.

Jo and John Lumsden

Friday Evening

Timberwork in Herefordshire Buildings:

a talk by Jim Tonkin

We were fortunate to have Jim Tonkin to talk to us on Friday evening. Jim is author of the book 'Herefordshire' and a past president of both the V.A.G. and the Woolhope Club. He showed us some fine examples of timber-framed buildings, featuring exterior and interior details representative of the region.

He outlined the typical Herefordshire roof as having an arch-braced collar beam truss (this being the standard medieval style) rather than a tie beam. The collar beam and the struts above were often decorated with cusps to form a trefoil or quatrefoil.

In the 15th and 16th centuries beams were often heavily moulded on their undersides for visual effect and as an expression of the status and wealth of the owner. The heavy mouldings were replaced by more simple mouldings or large chamfers in the late C16th and these were gradually reduced in size on buildings constructed through the C17th.

Cruck buildings still exist from the C13th, and box framed buildings from the C14th. Wall framing is in the 'Western Style' and is generally of square framing, initially, mainly of two panels per storey, but with three or four panels per storey becoming more popular in the C16th. Close studding with a mid-rail was introduced in the C15th, and decorative framing (of which there are still many fine examples) date from the mid C16th, quatrefoil, quadrant and herringbone being the most popular. Buildings with a combination of different wall framing-styles date from the mid C16th, at around which time straight braces took over from curved ones.

The scene was set for our visits the following day.

Ian Phillips

Saturday 3rd July

After an excellent breakfast we left the bells of Belmont Abbey behind for the Old House Museum in the heart of Hereford. This is a restored three storey timber framed town house with profusely decorated barge boards displaying carved heads, flora, fauna and a date of 1621. In the first floor parlour is a fine joined mantelpiece with a carved double arcade with shields and terminal figures. The ceiling beams have stopped ovolo mouldings which match those on the transomed and mullioned windows.

The museum houses a large collection of 16th to 18th century furniture. A joined armchair of the mid C17th had a large leaved quatrefoil carved on its back panel, a style often associated with Somerset. A press cupboard, also with carved leaved quatrefoil motifs, is said to have belonged to a Hereford family. The earliest type of joined English work was represented by a large clamped-front chest, with its single wide board front fixed across its width, and with the inevitable split clearly evident. Its lid was the centre of much debate and served to demonstrate the difficulty, sometimes, in determining the difference between certain types of oak and chestnut. A vigorously carved boarded chest had unusually flamboyant spandrels. A much smaller one had two false front panels imitating joiners' work, a fine collectors' piece rarely seen for sale these days.

One bedroom contained seven chests and no seating! Maybe a more authentic furniture layout could have been arranged.



Fig 8 Close scrutiny of a 16thC withdrawing table at All Saints, Hereford

A short walk in the warm sunshine brought us to the church of All Saints. This was largely rebuilt c.1400, but more recently with the help of funding and public support, it has been saved from possible demolition and restored to a living church and centre for the community. The fine C14th stalls had panelled backs, misericords and canopies with semi-nodding cusped ogee arches. We were able to examine the back of one range of stalls and observe the change in the angle of the pit saw marks which illustrated how the first few important cuts were used as a guide to maintain the accuracy of subsequent sawing.

A superb late C16th oak withdrawing table was the centre of attraction for many members. Its high quality was apparent by the flatness of its top, on which the marks of a broad scraper could just be seen. A fine, joined oak pulpit with arcaded panels exuberantly carved with masks, ribbons, scrolls and lozenges was dated 1621. On a wall in the nave was a large bookshelf looking very Jacobean, but dated 1683 – an indication of how long some styles persisted.

We had lunch in these splendid surroundings, served in the award-winning restaurant that helps support the church's upkeep.

A short drive took us to a more tranquil part of Herefordshire and the Church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck, a site of worship since 650 AD. Nearby was a castle mound and a yet to be excavated lost village. The church's red sandstone walls were probably plastered white originally, with the exception of the high quality stonework of the decorated elements.

There have been many, very varied attempts at interpreting the symbolism depicted by the superb workmanship of the Herefordshire School of Carvers c.1142. However, whether the inspirations were of Celtic, Scandinavian, Continental or Eastern influence may never be known for certain.

Running above the enigmatic external corbels was a rope carved string course, a feature which was to be seen on some furniture during the weekend. Inside the church, the wooden gallery appeared to be a composite structure with square section C16th pillars, a C17th moulded beam and early C18th turned balusters. Sadly, as with most early churches, the origi-

nal wooden fittings and furniture had long since disappeared.

Next, we crossed the border into Wales where our conscientious lady coach driver took us with some trepidation down the long approach to Llanvihangel Court. This stone-built Tudor Manor was substantially re-modelled in the late C17th and occupies a splendid elevated position. Our hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, expressed alarm at our large numbers, worried that their 'small house' (their rather modest description) might not accommodate us all. However, after a brief introductory talk, we split into three groups for guided tours of the house and its splendid eclectic collection of 16th to 20th century furniture and artifacts.

As well as some fine period furniture there were a few very pleasing reproduction and restored pieces, adding to the interest of the visit. A high quality, early C20th oak joined armchair with high scrolled cresting, ears and inlay generated some interesting discussion. A pair of South Yorkshire-type back stools of potentially rare form, with a moulded panel set below a carved arched back rail had, in fact, been very well restored. A painted sundial on a panel used as an internal division in a large press cupboard was an unexpected find. But perhaps the most memorable feature of the house was the magnificent solid yewtree open well staircase, with twist turned balusters, and turned finials and pendants. We descended the staircase to be served a splendid afternoon tea, a fitting end to a most interesting visit.

Crossing the border back into England we travelled to a peaceful site in the Golden Valley where in 1145 a great Cistercian Abbey was established. The parish church of St. Mary, Abbey Dore, dates from 1175-1220, and occupies what once was the crossing, transept and chancel of the former abbey. Our guided tour revealed some interesting features including a fine piscina with a pointed trefoiled arch and an adjacent aumbrey. A C13th oak door still had some of its original foliate ironwork. Lord Scudamore financed its restoration in 1633 and it is from this period that most of the furnishings date. A rather ambitious screen had large columns, with mirror image turned balusters between them, supporting a thick cornice. This had applied angled dentils, and above these were coats of arms and obelisks. The joined oak pulpit with double blank arcades and applied mouldings had a cleaned look, as had a C17th joined armchair with similar decoration and stamped IG. It was pleasing therefore, to find a superb large church chest, tightly constructed of quite substantial timbers. This had a fine dark oak patination and, perhaps because it was hidden away in the vestry, had been missed during some recent restoration programme.

With the late afternoon sun lighting up the crossing and the wall paintings, we enjoyed a delightful evening reception provided by some of the Friends of Dore Abbey.

Ian Phillips

Saturday night

Talk on Herefordshire Chairs by David Jones

Being in the right place at the right time is something many collectors of antique furniture hope for. For a scholar of furniture such as David Jones to come across a country church at the foot of the Golden Valley near the Monmouthshire border as he said "crowded to the gunnels with chairs, largely 17th

Century" must have been an amazing experience. Luckily for us he had the foresight to make a photographic record of some 17 chairs which were the genesis of his talk.

David visited Dulas Church, a few miles to the south west of Abbey Dore, in 1981. The church had become a repository for chairs brought here from other Herefordshire churches following their closure. He explained that the extreme number of tiny parish churches without villages was a regional characteristic of Herefordshire and these were prone to closure from the 1930s and particularly during the 1970s and 80s. By some curious mischance this fairly unremarkable Victorian Gothic Revival church had become a 'refugee camp' for Herefordshire chairs. They were a varied collection in mixed condition lacking individual histories; though an un-provenanced group they were a starting point for the study of Herefordshire chairs.



Fig. 9

He began with the only dated example of 1640. This had a box construction with an arcaded panel with characteristic flat, almost horizontal, arms. Other examples had cable moulding with a deep chamfer on the inside of the arch – a feature observed in some churches in the south-west of Herefordshire. Three examples (fig. 9) had panels carved with four leaves swirling around a central quatrefoil, a feature which appears on the pulpit in Dulas church. Ten of the chairs had a curtailed 'S'-shaped scroll, a square panel decorated with characteristic rope moulding. During the 1640s, single panelled chairs, decorated with a flower head and four-leaf motif, featured straight crestings. Other distinctive characteristics were; mason-mitred mouldings framing a single panel carved with a lozenge decorated with radiating foliage or a bunch of faggots; lush palmete motif within a columned arch; wide margins around the central panel. The similarity with Gloucestershire furniture was illustrated; gun-barrel turned front legs and arm supports decorated with punched lozenges using an 8-pointed punch tool, also used in the background carving where three different kinds of punch work were observed. Paired 'S'-scroll crestings fretted through (similar to nos. 20 and 21 in 'Oak Furniture from Gloucester and Somerset', Temple Newsam, Leeds exhibition catalogue, 1976) showed similarities with Somerset chairs. The chairs as a group used a Celtic vocabulary, often featuring swirling circular movement generating from a central point. One chair (fig.10) had a cresting decorated with paired dragons with swirly tails and back-to-back heads, simi-



Fig. 10

lar to a stone doorhead decorated with dragons dated 1675 in Morton-in-the-Marsh. The chairs were sold in 1986 at an auction in Leominster. For a brief period they formed a collection recorded by David Jones which in his excellent lecture held our attention after a particularly good meal following an enjoyable but tiring day.

Peter H Thornborrow

Sunday 4th July Visit to Hereford Cathedral and the Mappa Mundi Exhibition

Following the AGM on Sunday morning, and an excellent luncheon, delegates assembled outside Bishop Booth's Porch on the north side of Hereford Cathedral. We were ushered in and seated at the front of the aisle to a flurry of organ notes as the organist decided at that precise moment to give an impromptu recital.

Douglas Harding welcomed us on behalf of the Dean and Chapter and regaled us for well over half an hour on the history of the church, plenty of time to gaze aloft at the magnificent Norman nave with its three orders of semi-circular arches on drum piers with delicate interlaced Celtic decoration to the capitals. It was rebuilt from c1140 – exactly the same date as Durham which it superficially resembles. However, much of the church we see is a Victorian rebuild, and the clerestorey and painted vault are 18th century. The choir dates from the last quarter of the 11th century, built originally with an apse flanked by towers; the lower portions of the towers are still visible. It was a Teutonic design popular in the Rhineland.

The great glory of the church for me is the North Transept built c1250-70 which has very angular arched windows, and was the first example of new French ideas spreading into the provinces by way of Westminster Abbey.

During the 18th century the medieval choir screen was swept away. When Sir George Gilbert Scott came to restore the cathedral in the 1860s he designed a new wrought-iron screen made by Skidmore of Coventry. His exquisite Gothic Revival design was decorated with copper and brass inset with semi-precious stones. When it was installed in 1863 it was described as 'the grandest and most triumphant achievement of modern architectural art'. Sadly it was removed in 1967, an act much decried at the time by Pevsner and Betjeman, to open up the Choir to the Nave. Over the last eight years the cathedral has been re-ordered and the pulpit re-positioned.

The focus of the church is now under the crossing-tower where a raised podium has a large suspended crown-like

corona carried above it. Centre stage, so to speak, was the so-called King Stephen's Throne which members had to wait patiently (some impatiently) to be allowed to inspect at close quarters, and up-end it – a particular RFS habit – to observe the faint traces of paint and gilding surviving in its joints. The chair is supposed to have been used by Stephen on Whit Sunday 1142 (though other authorities say it was at Pentecost in 1138) making it one of the oldest timber chairs in England. Victor Chinnery authoritatively discusses the chair, which is illustrated by an excellent photograph, in his book *'Oak Furniture, The British Tradition'* (pp98-101) which no serious student of oak furniture should be without. He was also our guide, pointing out its particular characteristics. Over the weekend many of our 'experts' had become more and more suspicious about the origins and supposed dates of pieces we inspected where everything seemed to be tarred with the 'Wardour Street' brush. I'm afraid this great chair was treated with the same scepticism.

The one remarkable thing about it that impressed me was its great width, which gave it presence. It reminded me of the chair illustrated in the Bayeux Tapestry when King Harold is informed of the sighting of Halley's Comet. This chair is also wide, as it would have to be to accommodate a King's cloak or a Bishop's vestments.

This leads me to think that this chair is not an archaic production in an earlier style, but is genuinely early. Whilst discussing the chair with Victor, subsequent to our visit, he said there were three things that impressed him about it: 1) its medieval form, 2) its turning profiles, and 3) the timber itself. During the 20 years subsequent to publishing his book he has had an opportunity to handle many medieval pieces, particularly oak chests, where he has observed in particular the wear and attrition of the timber surfaces. This is where the soft wood sinks back leaving the medullar rays of the oak as hard raised ridges. This was something that we observed on this chair leading us to conclude that this is indeed a medieval piece and just possibly the **real thing!** Indeed, it was to some extent the reason for the RFS pilgrimage to Hereford Cathedral; it is a great chair that should be suitably venerated and treated with respect, not cynicism.

Close by is the shrine of St. Thomas Cantilupe of c.1287. It is perhaps the finest 13th century shrine, with figures under arches, to survive in the country. Just behind it in the North Transept is Bishop Aquablanca's (died 1268) tomb with the most beautiful canopy with steeply gabled screen with Purbeck shafts and bar-tracery in the arches. These magnificent 13th century treasures received scant attention from our members whose interest was directed to the Chantry chapel of Bishop John Stanbury with its intricate fan vaulting of the 1470s. It is a tiny jewel set on the north side of the cathedral with an original door with metalwork.

Unfortunately time did not permit a visit to the unique 13th century crypt, the only one of that date in England. A brief visit to the Early English Lady Chapel, one of the finest of its period in the country.

Just time enough to inspect the superb medieval choir stalls with their Gothic canopies and fascinating misericords, and the amazing Bishop's throne – the 'cathedra'. The choir stalls

are Victorian and are some of the finest examples of carving of that period I have seen.

Before we were ushered down to the Bishop's Cloister to see the Mappa Mundi I led a number of members into the Vicar's Cloister, built by Bishop Stanbury in c.1470. It has a richly decorated timber roof covered in carvings including one of a lady naked except for her wimpole! I made this discovery the day previous to our visit when I made a quick 'recki' having been asked to write our visit up.

During our visit to see the Mappa Mundi, housed with the chained library in a building opened in 1996, we were also fortunate to see other medieval world maps as part of a unique temporary exhibition. Interesting interactive displays aided our understanding of this map of the 1280s. Housed in a special case set in the junction with the new building and the library which now has a permanent home for its some 1500 chained books contained in their triple tiered bookpresses. The books have their spines inwards with the foreedges outwards, the 'wrong way round' to us today. Their original arrangement has been restored, arranged in two rows with six double-sided book presses with back-to-back benches used as pews when the library was split up. Also exhibited were a few medieval oak chests, like parish chests with three locks, but these were bookchests. Concluding our visit members took tea in the cloister, or in the town, on this glorious sunny afternoon following another highly successful and well-organised annual conference.

Our thanks go to those who put all the hard work into preparing it and the excellent and informative conference notes.

Peter H Thornborrow