

VISIT TO ESSEX

11th March 2000

Some twenty members began the day with a visit to Paycocke's in Coggeshall, a 16th century wool merchant's house with restoration work carried out in 1909-10 by Ernest Beckwith, a local carver and cabinetmaker. Noël Riley introduced us to Paycocke's, and described work Beckwith had done in the house using a variety of materials from wood to glass and metal, and how this had led to other commissions in the area and beyond. We heard a brief history of the house



Fig 4. Andrew Beckwith discussing the work of his grandfather

from 1500, including its division at one time into three (there is still evidence of three entrances to the house), subsequent extensions, and Beckwith's 20th century alterations and restoration. We were introduced to Beckwith's grandson Andrew, also a craftsman in wood. After talking to various members of our group, Andrew said he was glad we were 'ordinary people' - he'd been expecting a lot of academics.

Our next visit was to the museum in Braintree. After coffee in the museum shop, Robert Rose introduced us to the exhibition '*Country Practice: the Business of Ernest Beckwith 1872-1952*'.



Fig 5. An extract from 'Gothic ornament' by A.C. Pugin

There were some fine examples in the main display gallery - culled from all over East Anglia, - of carving: on a screen memorial and peel boards, oak brackets, and a completely reassembled pulpit. There were illustrations of large works such as lychgates, Gothic screens, linenfold panelling (figs 5, 6 and 7), to name but a few. We heard from Noël Riley of the long association between Beckwith and the Crittall family, and we looked at furniture designed by W. F. Crittall and made by Beckwith; in particular an octagonal mahogany dining table (fig. 8) with fluted frieze, pierced and reeded legs



Fig 6. Detail from the chancel screen of St. Peter's-in-the Fields, Bocking, Essex; loosely based on Pugin's vine pattern illustrated above

and brackets carved in the form of Red Indian heads above geometric bosses, the legs joined by octagonal and radiating stretchers, and one of a pair of walnut armchairs with a green leather drop-in seat with ebony cappings over a cross-banded central rail. We saw various other pieces ranging from bedside tables to walnut cabinets, towel horses to music stools; some created from others - a mahogany stand from a bed-post, for example - and some from designs of an earlier time - a writing chair in provincial Chippendale style. There were examples of furniture made by Beckwith's son Edward, and grandson Andrew, such as a sideboard in English cherry with limewood carving. A splendid lunch was served in the museum's Victorian classroom during which Andrew Beckwith explained his techniques of drawer-making to Michael Legg.

The Essex Craft Society was holding a small exhibition in Braintree Town Hall which we also had the opportunity to see. The work varied from that of potter, textile artist and bookbinder, to ceramicist, quilt maker and stained glass artist. In addition, there were more examples of Andrew Beckwith's furniture.



Fig. 7 Fireplace surround, overmantel and wall panelling carved by Ernest Beckwith for Leez Priory, near Chelmsford, 1914

Our last visit of the day was to The Working Silk Museum, built 150 years ago by Daniel Walters to accommodate his hand looms; ten of which have been restored to their current working condition to produce exquisite silk designs for the Humphries Weaving company set up by Richard Humphries in 1971. Frances Harper explained the many processes between raw silk from the silkworm and a finished, brilliantly coloured silk Jacquard fabric, maybe destined for a stately home or Royal Palace. We watched a demonstration of weaving a damask fabric by Richard Humphries, and saw the 'flying shuttle' in operation. In addition we looked at a display of historic silks specially woven for clients all over the world, and surviving static power looms from the 19th century. The mill produces plain silk, woven patterned silk and hand-cut silk velvet fabrics, ranging in cost from £100 to £600 per metre.

An excellent and really good value day, crowned by a quick look on our way home at Crittall's Bauhaus-type houses in Silver End, some of which are in their original condition, others festooned with satellite dishes and adorned with 'Georgian' doors.

Denise Bearne



Fig. 8 Octagonal mahogany table. One of the numerous items of furniture designed by W. F. Crittall and made by Ernest Beckwith