

## VISIT TO TWO NORTHWEST HOUSES 21st October 2000

A small group assembled at Turton Tower on a cold damp morning. We were soon able to warm up with coffee beside the stove in the medieval hall which forms part of the second phase of building of this complex house. Turton Tower started in the 15th century as a massive, square, defensive structure, but major additions were made in the 16th and 19th centuries. The timber framed addition of 1596 has elaborate barge boards carved with griffins and serpents.

A diverse range of 19th century furniture is to be found within the tower. This diversity includes the Courtenay four poster bed which is essentially an antiquarian concoction, a panel backed Victorian revival armchair (fig. 12) of ash and elm derived from earlier North Country traditions, a table designed by Pugin and made by Crace, an Ashbee wardrobe, and the Kenilworth chair, by Amy Robsart from Leicester. Members may wish to refer to the critical appraisal of the Courtenay bed which is to be found on page 564 of 'Oak Furniture – the British Tradition' by Victor Chinnery. In the top of the tower a room is devoted to ultra-modern furniture designed by local students.

After an excellent buffet lunch we made our way to Heaton Hall, now part of the Manchester Museums Service.

Heaton Hall is an elegant building, extensively rebuilt to a design by James Wyatt, and continued by other members of the Wyatt family. It thus has a continuity of style that is lacking in Turton Tower. Again there is a great variety of furniture, but some items attracted particular attention from our group. A small charming spinning wheel by John Planta, c.1800, provoked discussion about the uses of its various refinements. A cheval glass appeared at first sight to have the maker's name (SLEIGH) stamped on the front. Then we realised it was on the back. Somehow the curators had arranged the brass candleholders on the wrong side, and the crossbanded, decorated front had been overlooked.

A beautifully made mahogany washstand, with a classical urn as water reservoir, and a Sheffield plate bowl, caused us to wonder about its practicality. It appeared unused.

Gillows furniture was evident in various rooms. The ante-library had bookcases curved to fit the walls. The bookcases from the main library have been removed to the Central Reference Library in Manchester, but the room is now filled with a range of late 18th and early 19th century furniture. One notable piece was an estate manager's desk with a drawer containing alphabetically labelled rent boxes.

Both houses have much in addition to their furniture. The curators intend building up the number of rooms on display and the range of the exhibits. Each place was deserving of more time than we had; it was a day well spent.

*Jim & Mary Green*



Fig 12 A Victorian revival chair based upon earlier North Country traditions