

ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND AGM, STRATFORD-
UPON-AVON AND BIRMINGHAM
20th– 22nd July 2001

Visit to Stratford on Friday 20th July

The day of visits in Stratford focussed on the work of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and got the AGM weekend off to a very good start. After being welcomed by Roger Pringle, Chairman of the Trust, Victor Chinnery, who is consultant to the Trust, made a masterly presentation of how the Trust was planning to change the presentation of the six houses it owns. Essentially he is drawing on the latest research on wall finishes, wall coverings, and the use, arrangement and types of furniture within houses to recreate characteristic environments. A 'time band' will be fixed for each house and close attention will be given to how houses occupied by households of different social statuses varied in their furnishing. Victor Chinnery showed with illustrations some of the sources of this research, e.g. the internal decoration of other houses of the same period or in the same region, inventories, and paintings (using continental ones where English ones were lacking). This lecture gave real insight into the choices involved in this type of reconstruction. A second lecture, by Professor Alice Griffin, was on furniture in Shakespeare's writings. Alice Griffin is a noted Shakespearean authority who recently retired as Professor of English at the Hunter and Lehman Colleges of the City University of New York. It was a very erudite lecture and among other things raised the question as to why Shakespeare had left his wife his 'second-best bed'. Was it because she already had the best one?

The lectures were a good preparation for the visits which followed. The first was to Shakespeare's Birthplace which is the only house to have been subject to the full transformation. Since Shakespeare's father was a glove maker the décor and content of the house (including his workshop) have been presented in line with what research suggests would have been appropriate to a glove maker's house in the 1550-1600 period. This has meant a wholesale replacement of the pieces bought in the 1950s from the dealer Sam Wolsey. Particularly striking was the use of painted cloth hangings on the walls (known in the period as a poorman's tapestry) which had been based on extant designs e.g. such as those to be found in the Pizza Express part of the Golden Cross Inn, Oxford. The painting technique does not allow retouching and this contributes to the boldness of the result. The furniture mostly consisted of stools, benches, trestle tables and boarded coffers with the occasional livery cupboard. The furniture was all of relatively low status with little carved decoration to be seen. Essentially backstools and armchairs were scarce. This gave a clear sense of the less expensive furnishing of a small manufacturer's house. In addition there are some unpatinated replicas

of early furniture (e.g. the Mary Rose stool) which has been included to demonstrate the appearance of new furniture in the period.

We then went on to Hall's Croft which belonged to Shakespeare's daughter and son-in-law, a doctor. Although this house has not yet undergone transformation, immediately one sensed a step up in quality and cost of the furnishing. One suspects that only a limited replacement of the existing furniture will be needed to make it conform to a doctor's house of 1600-1650. Among the many interesting pieces here were two contrasting Salisbury caquetteuse chairs, mural livery cupboards with inlay and spindles, a Welsh bread cage, French and English linenfold coffers, and a turned chair of yew, recently acquired. Many of the pieces appear in *Oak Furniture – The British Tradition* by Victor Chinnery.

Our last visit was to Palmer's Farm (formerly known as Mary Arden's House) at Wilmcote. This too was a house awaiting a rethink but contained simpler, less ornate furniture than Hall's Croft. Victor Chinnery diagnosed a trestle table, with 'bench' stretcher, as a fake, and Bill Cotton identified a large ark as Welsh and of pendunculate oak on the basis of the very dark colour of the heartwood produced by acid soils on hill slopes. A plain mid-16th century press cupboard had been enlivened by the later insertion of a pair of stunningly carved 'romayne' panels of the same period depicting a woman kissing a lover.

By the end of the day we could look back on a superb lecture by Victor Chinnery and a wonderful array of furniture. I was most struck by the Trust's project to differentiate its houses in terms of knowledge about how different social groups lived. The project had obviously raised new questions and stimulated research. The day was well planned, for which Victor Chinnery, Ian Phillips and Polly Legg deserve our warm thanks.

Finally I was left with two thoughts. At none of the three houses did there seem to be any information for the visitor on the content of the rooms. While detailed labels could slow down the flow of people through the narrow spaces of the Birthplace, for those interested one hopes adequate information will be made available. Lastly is the nagging question raised by another member: had we seen any West Midlands furniture during the day?

Chris Pickvance

Saturday morning – visit to Aston Hall

Sir Thomas Holte completed Aston Hall in 1635. It was one of the last great Jacobean houses to be built in Britain. Sir Charles Holte in the 17th century and Sir Lister Holte in the 18th Century both undertook extensive remodelling; both with sympathy for the original decoration and much remains today. There are notable plaster ceilings, chimneypieces and panelling in many of the rooms. In 1817 James Watt Jr. son of the engineer, rented the house. He commissioned furniture in the Jacobean revival style by Richard Bridgens, who had trained in the workshop of George Bullock. The house was bought by Birmingham Corporation in 1864 and now forms a branch of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

The contents of the house were dispersed in the 19th century and few pieces have been reunited. The house today has been furnished with period pieces as described in the 17th and 18th century inventories. The house is too large and the furniture too numerous to give a full account here so I have just picked out the pieces that seemed to have prompted most interest.

From the Great Hall, which now acts as entrance hall, we entered the Great Parlour. A large dining table of distinctive design attracted much interest. Dating to the early 1600s, it had a trestle base with turned supports. The top was constructed of large parquetry. Victor Chinnery informed the group of a description for this type of tabletop and how it was the best surface for playing shuffleboard, being very flat and smooth. This example came originally from Brereton Hall another Holte house in Cheshire. It was at one time used as a kitchen table, which explained its current, poor condition. There were also six late 17th century backstools of South Yorkshire/Derbyshire type.

The magnificent Great Stair is very similar to one at Brenthall Hall in Shropshire. The newel posts are elaborately carved with masks, strapwork and flowing foliage. The balustrades are pierced strapwork and the string is carved with more flowing foliage and winged beasts. The design was an adaptation of Robert Peake's 1611 translation of Serlio's 'Architectura.' Alongside the staircase is an interesting understair cupboard. It looks like a small settle but is hinged to form a door. It was one of Richard Bridgens' designs and possibly reused panelling to form the door.

Continuing up the stairs, we entered the Long Gallery. This is 136 feet in length and the plaster ceiling, arched panels (fig. 12) and large pilasters are all original. There are a number of fine pieces of furniture, several backstools and a handsome dresser base of c1590s with deep geometric mouldings. A Florentine pietre dure table top of c1575 on a later English chestnut frame c1600 interested the group. As did the chestnut-framed settee with cut velvet upholstery of c1650.

King Charles' Room is an attractive chamber which was substantially remodelled in 1750 but retains its original animal frieze. The wallpaper is a reprint of a

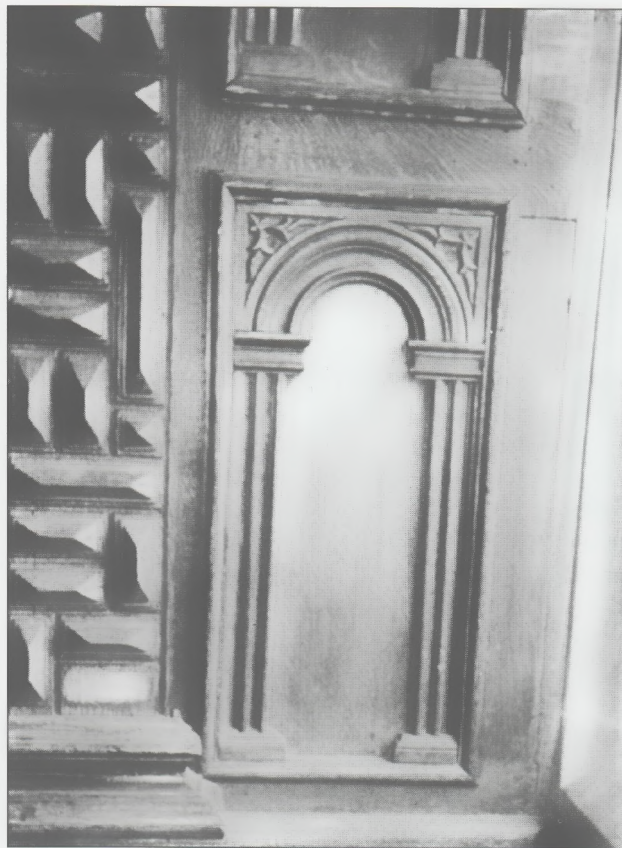


Fig. 12. Panelling in the Long Gallery

1720s design discovered elsewhere in the house. The room is so named because the King stayed here in 1642 before the battle of Edgehill. The beautiful walnut cabinet on stand with its elaborate tortoiseshell, ebony and ivory inlay is known to have been in the room since 1771. There was also a 'Chinese Chippendale' style settee and two chairs in the room.

In the House-keeper's room several people noticed the inset cupboard in the chimney breast, with its original iron hinges. There was a small but interesting collection of 1/4 sized furniture for dolls including a chaise longue, drop-leaf table and boarded rocking chair in the Nursery.

Back downstairs in the Johnson Room, a tilt-top supper table carved with dishes and shells, caught many people's eye and prompted typical RFS investigation. A label on the underside was from Miller and Beatty of Dublin. There was general agreement that it was an 18th century table with 19th century carving on the tabletop and knees of the tripod base. A diagonal barometer by Edward Scarlett of London was also greatly admired.

The Best Drawing Room had an interesting mixture of items; two large portraits flank the fireplace with intricately carved limewood frames attributed to Laurent van den Meulen c1700. A satinwood étagère attributed to Gillows and a dwarf bookcase from the workshop of George Bullock were also admired. Many of the smaller pieces and grate furniture were designed by Richard Bridgens.

In the domestic quarters the Servant Hall held a lot of furniture, including a vast box mangle by Gabriel of Birmingham c1800. In one corner was the oldest piece of furniture in the house, a 14th century dugout chest with original ironwork. Around the central table was a harlequin set of Windsor chairs including Prince of Wales feathers, roundel, star and shield design back splats. The visit was very enjoyable and a surprising survival, the Hall being in the shadow of Aston Villa Football ground.

Alison Lee

Saturday afternoon – visits to Soho House and Oak House

Soho House stands on high ground overlooking the valley where Matthew Boulton built his Soho Manufactory.

The grounds, originally over one hundred acres, are now reduced to under an acre and Victorian terrace houses surround the house. This was the home of Matthew Boulton from 1766–1809 and was remodelled by James and Samuel Wyatt between 1796–1805.

The interior reflects the taste of Matthew Boulton who was a man ahead of his time. Today the house has newly woven carpets, wallpaper, painted oilcloths and marbled columns with printed marbled curtains to match, based on the original scheme. Curious holes in the stairs are part of a warm air heating system which was run from a furnace in the cellar. Two waterclosets, one upstairs and one near the entrance, show a very modern house for its time.

The diversity of products made by the manufactory is well represented, and includes buttons, buckles, châtelaines and furniture fittings displayed in the exhibition area, to the Argand lamp, candlesticks, candelabrum vases and a double spouted tea urn displayed in the adjoining rooms.

A bill survives in the Birmingham Archives for twelve chairs c1798 made by the London cabinetmaker James Newton. The surviving japanned and parcel gilt cane-seated chairs with squabs formed part of the original set for the Soho drawing room. In the dining room, where members of the Lunar Society dined together and discussed science and technology as well as their social and political interests, Susan Stuart discussed the dating and design of the Gillows dining chairs and the desk in Matthew Boulton's study – also by Gillows. We look forward to her book. It is also worth noting the Klismoss chair c1800 in the study which is one of a pair; the other being in the V&A. Bearing in mind the interests of the Lunar Society, the 18th century pastel drawing titled 'The Face of the Moon' by John Russell no doubt had special significance.

After a short drive through Handsworth we visited Oak House at West Bromwich. The earliest documented reference to the house is when John Turton bought it from his brother Thomas in 1634. The construction and plan of the house dates it to about 1500–1540 when the area close to the house would have been woodland. Exactly when the unusual belvedere was added is uncertain but deeds of sale in 1634/5 implied that

substantial improvements had been made to the house. These included an extension at the back between the wings giving the house a staircase, another reception room and two additional bedrooms.

Inside the house, the long-case clock made by Thomas Brown of Birmingham c1785 interested members. The folksy 'Jacobean' staircase some members felt might not be quite so – possibly a Victorian fanciful idea of how a Jacobean staircase could look. Amongst much fine oak furniture a painted day bed stood out. The back-rest was painted on both sides – a floral decoration on cream ground with applied split turning decoration – and headed an unusually long day bed! The coverlets and mattress over a strung piece of canvas prevented a really good search, but it was felt that here might be an interesting find. Our thanks to Ian Phillips for all his work.

Daphne and Mike Todd

Furniture Surgery – Saturday evening

Following dinner on Saturday evening some time was set aside for delegates to discuss any of the furniture seen during the day. A session of this nature is particularly useful when visits have been made in several groups, allowing the comparison of findings and observations. A consensus of opinion is not always forthcoming, but at least all the viewpoints have an opportunity to be heard!

Of particular interest was an early 17th century oak 'day bed', seen in Oak House, which retains a large amount of what appears to be original painted decoration. Most of those present agreed that it had lost one panelled end, and that the paint, whilst of some considerable age, was possibly later than the bed itself.

Further debate on the authenticity of the belvedere and staircase at Oak House ensued, whilst the fine staircase at Aston Hall was admired by most. The restoration of a mid-17th century chest of drawers at Oak House and the fine shuffleboard table at Aston Hall also came up for discussion.

The Furniture Surgery produced its usual miscellany, including stools of many varieties. It was suggested that a rush-seated stool stamped 'BB' was typical of the early 20th century stools made by Berrys of Chipping, Lancashire.

While some types fell neatly into categories that most agreed on, others did not! For example there was a degree of uncertainty about the origins of a painted stool which had features which one might associate not only with West Country but Scottish traditions. Traces of paint on a 2nd quarter 17th century joint stool came under close scrutiny; its originality being dismissed when paintwork was seen to be present over areas of wear and damage.

David Bryant talked in detail about a German spinning wheel that he had brought along, drawing our attention to the construction of the rim.

We then examined a number of chairs of different styles. These included a rush-seated ladder or splat-back armchair (fig 13) which incorporated a number of



Fig 13 Ladderback armchair attributed to N.W. England

stretcher was felt to be 'more finished' than usual, and it was suggested to be similar to those made by Wilcox for Gillows.

There was little dispute over the place of origin or date of an Cheshire oak candle box (figs. 14 & 15)

features that one associates with North West chairmaking traditions. Reference was also made to the spherical finials, the sausage turned front legs and in particular the chamfered ladders which have parallels with the chairmaking traditions of the Low Countries.

A low-back Windsor of Thames Valley style with an almost flat crinoline

Sunday afternoon at Selly Manor

Selly Manor and Minworth Greaves were the last two buildings in our busy schedule for the Conference, and perhaps I am not alone in confessing that by Sunday afternoon I was suffering from information overload! The house has had a chequered history since its first mention in the Court Rolls of 1327, and although George Cadbury and his architect, W. Alexander Harvey, dismantled it with great care after 1907 at Bournbrook Road and re-erected it in 1912 as a centrepiece of the Cadbury's model village of Bournville, it is now virtually impossible to make an accurate interpretation of its structure. There was no pretence at a faithful reconstruction of Minworth Greaves, a two-bay cruck-framed hall house rescued from north of Birmingham by Laurence Cadbury and rebuilt in 1929. Instead timbers were re-used to build a three-bay hall with a gallery, which gives an attractive impression of a 13th or 14th century cruck building. One wonders what negotiations with the planning authority and English Heritage would be necessary now to achieve such a result.

The Manor contains a fine collection of 16th to 18th century furniture gathered over a lifetime from all over Britain by Laurence Cadbury, with additional pieces of continental origin. Ian Phillips produced a detailed inventory of the furniture in each room in the excellent set of notes he provided for the Conference which doubtless are still available to the earnest seeker after truth, and so I shall not repeat it here. The furniture has been arranged as, by conjecture, it might have been found at the beginning of the 18th century, though the present layout is not always what is depicted in the short guide to the house. Notable items were a one-handed bracket clock striking on the hour and dated 1690; a splendid late 15th or early 16th century chest, its front carved with mythical beasts and an early version of a green man (considering how numerous, and by this time how sophisticated, are the stone carvings of green men to be found in churches, this wooden version is rather crude, but powerful nonetheless). The kitchen is full of interesting items; furniture and a wide range of cooking and eating utensils. Upstairs, in the chamber above the hall is a fine tester bed found in North Wales, a Welsh tredarn dated 1773, and a fine Nonesuch chest of the early 17th century inlaid with holly and bog oak with architectural views of Henry VIII's great palace. In the solar is a pair of early 18th century oak side chairs, thought to show stylistic signs of Scottish origin, a fine dining table (17th century), and a handsome ark with three carved panels. Finally in the garret is a collection of crossbows and helmets said to have been worn in the English Civil Wars, and the room is dominated by a huge Breton chest (early 17th century).

In Minworth Greaves, a few steps away through a charming small garden, is a large refectory table with a 1600 and something date inscribed on its long rail. An early party of RFS members, including myself, confidently dismissed it as a 19th century fake, but I learn later that Victor Chinnery considers it to be genuine. I was too far away by then to show a red face!

The inhabitants of Bournville Village are lucky indeed to have two such attractive buildings in their midst, filled with such treasures.

Nick Abbott



Fig. 14 Candlebox inscription

Fig. 15 (below) Oak candlebox

inscribed with 'Richard Watkin, Smith, Maker Pulford, July 11 Year 1854' in extremely precise incised letters.

By contrast an elm top table proved to be one of the most contentious items; the rounded six lobed top over six turned columns above a shelf standing on carved hoof feet, made it unconventional to say the least. However the materials, construction and finish all pointed to an 18th century piece, albeit of rather an eccentric form!



C. Currie