

VISIT TO THE GEFFRYE MUSEUM AND THE FREDERICK PARKER COLLECTION

21st April 2004

The buildings occupied by the Geffrye Museum were originally almshouses, built by the Ironmongers' Company in 1716. The museum has recently restored one set of 4 residents' rooms on one 'staircase' (the only one left fully intact) consisting of two rooms showing history and interpretation and two rooms which have been furnished to show the living conditions of pensioners in about 1780 and 1880. The rooms have been furnished with almost entirely authentic items from the time and allow comparison of the sparse furnishings of the generally poor inmates of the 18th century (creating a very sparse, even cold, feel) with the rather more comfortable surroundings of the better-off pensioners of the late 19th century. Evidence of RFS input to the exhibition was plain to see from the fine bed made for the exhibition by Gerald Cole, a member of our society. The curator responsible for the research and presentation of the almshouse part of the museum was Kathy Haslam who gave, at a moment's notice due to a misunderstanding, an interesting account of how she decided to spend her £5000 furnishing budget. The research was hampered by a lack of anything specific for the earlier time and she resorted to studying the wills of former residents and paintings depicting the poorer classes. This showed a similarity in the interiors of working class houses between town and country and also a high level of improvisation, for example in using bottles as candle holders. This is a rare opportunity to see directly the living conditions of residents in an almshouse setting and I recommend it to all members as a significant enhancement to the pleasure of a visit to the museum.

We were also able to see Part 2 of Home and Garden which was the current exhibition at the museum. This exhibition brought together some eighty paintings illustrating urban, middle class, domestic interiors and gardens over two hundred years with part 2 dealing with the years 1830-1914. This was a welcome contrast to the ubiquitous exhibitions of the living spaces of royalty and the aristocracy. The paintings were interpreted not as works of art but as historical documents revealing fascinating insights into the culture, tastes and values of the middle class. Unfortunately we had only just started on the paintings, so evocative of the Victorian era and some so familiar from greetings cards, when it was time to move on.

In the afternoon, after a good lunch at the museum, we took our lives in our hands and boarded a number 67 bus to Aldgate. The bus seemed to have only two speeds, fast or stopped and changed rapidly and frequently from one to the other!

A short walk along Commercial Road brought us to London Metropolitan University and our visit to the Frederick Parker Collection at the Sir John Cass Department of Art, Media and Design. The collection is

a success story by a few dedicated individuals and trustees who rescued a significant part of the chair collection from auction. The 170 chairs and archive are used by the department as a teaching and research aid and can be visited by arrangement.

Jonathan Arnold, a long time employee of Parker Knoll and chairman of the trustees, gave a succinct account of the history of the collection as created in the late 19th/early 20th century for the education and inspiration of the company's designers and makers (Michael Legg tells us that the term craftsman was not an accolade at the time). Michael then gave his customary well-informed and fascinating insight into some aspects of the collection and his experience (from the age of 10!) in dealing with all manner of furniture. The chairs discussed included silvered (apparently often mistakenly gilded during restoration), splayed-leg, imported knock-downs, carved, child department and misnamed wig chairs. Dr John Cross, another trustee and also a member of the university staff, gave us a quick but impressive tour of the furniture-related parts of his department. If all this whets your appetite, then take the time to visit Sir John Cass.

This was another successful visit by the society ably organised, as always, by Polly Legg.

David Flynn