

RFS South West Region Group meeting in Wiltshire

Sunday 11 September

A dozen members attended this most interesting day, in which we visited two National Trust houses with mixed collections of early and antiquarian furniture. The first was Westwood Manor, south of Bradford-on-Avon. This limestone manor house is currently occupied by the tenants, Mr & Mrs Azis. Mrs Azis kindly met us and showed us round the house, providing a very effective history of the building and its occupation. Originally comprising two 16th century buildings, the premises underwent a major expansion resulting in the joining of the original two buildings under one roof, forming two sides of a courtyard. The last modification, in the early 20th century, added the servants' quarters to the rear of the complex. During the period 1911-56 the house was the residence of Edgar Lister, who treated his ownership as a hobby, restoring the house and filling it with 16th-18th century furniture, none of which was originally there in 1911. It was claimed that much of the embroidered upholstery in the house was Mr Lister's own work.

Mrs Azis generously allowed us to roam the premises freely and inspect the furniture closely. The house is a most interesting survival of a small medieval manor, altered in the 17th century and restored in the 20th. There was much to see and to become excited about, especially a 17th century oak long dining table on chamfered legs, the polished top being removable so as to allow the scrubbed underside to be used as a kitchen cutting board as occasion demanded; a good pair of oak joint stools of West Country pattern, possibly Salisbury, and a rare Italian virginals, marked and dated Mantova (i.e. Mantua) 1537.

The Music Room, originally the upper part of the hall, which was floored over in the 17th century and decorated with rich plaster mouldings, contains some fine pieces, including a cedarwood gateleg table, c.1720; a pair of early 18th century Scottish laburnum tripod tables (recognised by members who had worked with this timber), and an English spinet, dated and signed by Stephen Keane of London in 1711. Next door is a double-dome wardrobe of c.1720, in oak with yew cross-banding; and a rare, plain, posted field bedstead. All in all a very exciting visit.

We lunched in a local hostelry at Lacock, where we were delighted to find a very rare built-in dog-wheel running a spit arrangement in the adjoining hearth, together with a fine array of auxiliary iron cooking equipment such as spits and fire tools.

Our second visit was to Great Chalfield Manor, in the countryside between Holt and Atworth. This is another

limestone manor house, of which the elements of the main front are of classic medieval form, remarkably well preserved, though the interiors and large parts of the structure were later heavily restored. The visit was in the form of a guided tour given by the tenant. Fortunately we had the opportunity to roam fairly freely and, as is so often the case, our small group knew more about the furniture than the guide (who was more than pleased that we could enlighten him about some of the contents).

Among the objects drawing our attention we found an early 17th century Italian cypresswood drop-front cabinet; an early 16th century oak cabinet with gothic tracery carving, possibly French, but with the inevitable restoration and later reduced in height, and a very rare oak trencher plate rack dated 1684 (an unexpected bonus). Victor Chinnery gave us a list of reasons why a large oak refectory table was not a 16th century example, as claimed by our guide, but was in fact a later copy dating from the early 20th century. The collection houses a number of antiquarian 'fakes' in the early manner, including a boarded 'aumbry' with pierced gothic tracery, and a small boarded cupboard with figures in the pierced decoration of the door.

The day amply underlined the merit of organising smaller local event groups, not only for the purpose of recording so far unlisted and rare items, but also to create the opportunity for local members to meet without being deterred by long distance travel. We look forward to the next occasion.

Victor Chinnery and Willem Irik

Visit to the Geffrye Museum's Cotton Collection and the Merchant's House at Marlborough

Thursday 13 October

On a dull October morning we assembled at Wroughton airfield, near Swindon, and arrived at the purpose-built storage building to find ourselves surrounded by a bizarre group of objects including a 1902 tractor, an 'Ernie' premium bond machine, a model cow and King George V's refrigerator - all the property of the Science Museum. We, however, were there at the invitation of David Dewing to see the Cotton Collection of regional chairs.

The 380 name-stamped examples were acquired over 35 years by Bill and Gerry to illustrate the regional diversity of 19th century English vernacular chairs. This nationally-important collection, the basis of Bill's magnum opus, *The English Regional Chair*, provides an invaluable resource whereby unmarked chairs can be attributed to particular



A drawing of the Merchant's House by Vic Chinnery, who has been closely involved with its restoration and the museum trust from its inception.

localities and makers. Bill always intended the chairs to be available for research and on view to the general public. As a first step, the Study Centre for Regional Furniture was set up at High Wycombe Museum in 1995. After this had to close in 2000 it became a matter of urgency to keep the collection intact. Discussions between Bill and David led to its donation to the Geffrye Museum for eventual exhibition in the planned library and learning centre.

The transfer of the collection to its temporary home at Wroughton was efficiently organised by Ananda Rutherford. She showed us how the chairs were fixed with webbing to pallets and stacked on industrial racks using a fork-lift truck. The sight of the chairs towering above us was most impressive. Their condition was remarkably good, partly due to the dust-free atmosphere but also to Bill's insistence on annual woodworm treatment and beeswax



Old meets new: a fork-lift truck being used to move a pallet of chairs at Wroughton.

polishing. Bill encouraged us to handle various chair parts and discussed the collection's database and how this might be improved.

In the afternoon we visited the Merchant's House Museum in Marlborough. This tile-hung timber-framed building was constructed for Thomas Bayly, a silk merchant, following the 1653 fire that destroyed most of the town. The custodian, Michael Gray, showed us round, pointing out its many interesting features. A grand staircase, once painted to resemble stone, together with its balustrade mural, led up to a splendid panelled room overlooking the street. This contained much contemporary furniture, including an altar table possibly rescued from St Peter's church during the fire. There was also an interesting panelled chair, dated 1624, once in St Fagan's collection, and a delightful cabriole-legged bureau with a japanned and simulated tortoiseshell finish; this was thought to be German.

The dining room had been restored with a bold striped decoration based on an original design discovered behind a fire surround. It also contained some replica chairs, as mentioned in the original inventory, which will eventually be covered in turkeywork using naturally dyed wool. Altogether, considerable progress has been made since our previous visit.

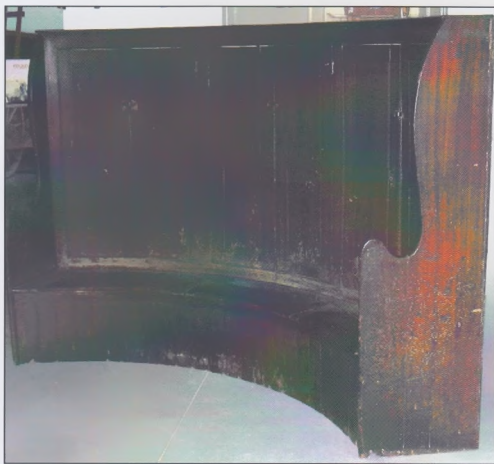
Bob Parrott

Visit to the Museum of English Rural Life, Reading

Thursday 27 October

The museum is now in St Andrew's Hall which was built by Alfred Waterhouse in the 1890s for Alfred Palmer of Huntley & Palmers fame. The curator, Will Phillip, took us round and showed us a number of interesting items. The first gem to be debated was a beautifully grained bacon settle, dated 1888 and bought for the princely sum of seven guineas from Lord Leaze Farm, Chard, Somerset, in 1963. Will was able to find the original documents of its provenance, use and how it was transported. There was also a very interesting sewing treadle machine, made by Fearnought, which was housed in a veneered walnut davenport.

We had a tour round the museum, which is actually quite small: wagons and other farming items hang overhead, and videos explain craft processes such as coopering and wheelwrighting. In the store area we were able to pore over farming implements that are no longer used. John Boram pointed out that the shape of a threshing shovel is very similar to that of an adzed Windsor chair seat. He also brought a photocopy of a lace maker's support frame cushion he had seen in a catalogue



The dated Somerset bacon settle, with grained mahogany paintwork (on pine) from the Museum of Rural Life, Reading. Photo by John Tuffrey

and we were able to compare it to a similar piece in the museum store. There were also beautiful smocks, willow work for baskets and an interesting hurdle maker's brace.

We did spy some Windsor type chairs and a number of Lancashire lambing chairs, some with drawers, but we could not climb up to read their labels or dates. The items in cases downstairs did have more detailed information, but difficulties are inevitable for casual viewers in the open store who are not seeking specific items. This must be every curator's dilemma: what to show and with how much information.

A team of volunteers helped to put the displays together and continues to work on the cataloguing. The museum is certainly a very useful resource for researching rural life and for those interested in our agricultural heritage. Thank you to Will Phillips who led the visit, Peter MacShane from the library and archive, and Zoe Watson who arranged a small exhibition of printed material and photographs for us.

Phoebe Shaft

Visit to the V&A Store

Monday 28 November

Our visit to the Victoria & Albert Museum's celebrated store in Blythe Road, Olympia, was ably led by a purple-gloved Nick Humphrey of the museum's Department of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion. Also leading the divided party was his similarly-attired colleague, Lucy Wood, author of The Lady Lever Art Gallery's *Catalogue of Commodes* (1994) and about to be the author of the Gallery's *Catalogue of Chairs*.

The beautifully planned Olympic storage conceals the national collection of architectural woodwork, since the V & A's former architectural court has for decades been occupied by a shop, and most of the collection was buried for half a century in the vaults of Osterley Park, Middlesex.

Fortunately some was unearthed for Charles Tracy's publication, *English Medieval Furniture and Woodwork* (1988). To assist with the study of the furniture and linenfold panels, Nick had kindly made available photocopies from the furniture department's green scrap-books. Our attention was first drawn to the patination and clothes-pegs of an early 17th century clothes press that had been hidden for many years behind a wall in a Northamptonshire cottage.

Among the items available for our close inspection was a superbly carved and quatrefoiled late 14th century chair-stall panel from Lincoln Cathedral,¹ shown alongside a 19th century gothic revival panel. A 17th century panel was flowered with the badges celebrating the union of England and Scotland issuing from foliate scrolls and surmounted by an earl's coronet; while a petrifying mask, which appeared on a corbel, would have delighted Giulio Romano (d.1546). An equally scary serpent accompanied Adam and Eve on a formidable gothic chest.

Lucy took particular delight in her regimented line of chairs from the 'Age of Oak' to the 'Age of Mahogany', which included a rush-seated walnut chair that Newport Church, Essex had loaned to the V & A stores. This bore the 1740s label of the celebrated Clerkenwell cabinet-maker Giles Grendey (d.1780).² Nearby was an India-back walnut parlour chair that had been prized in 1929 as bearing the crowned WR cipher thought to be that of William III, but now recognised as the coronet-ensigned cipher of Thomas Wentworth.³ Lucy, whose *Commodes* has greatly increased our knowledge of the 18th century cabinet-maker, Hill of Marlborough, thought she recognised the Marlborough maestro's hand, and perhaps that of a Dutch employee, behind the manufacture of a richly carved walnut chair that the South Kensington Museum acquired in 1890.⁴ Standing among her Windsor chairs was the armorial-bearing Percival-Compton chair, which Diana Taylor recently illustrated in *Regional Furniture*.⁵

We are most grateful to Nick and Lucy for a very interesting and enjoyable afternoon, but I can't help wondering how different the discussions might have been if W.A. Thorpe's 1950s start on the study of regional furniture had been continued after his departure from the woodwork department, and if the 1960s proposal to rename the V & A's woodwork department as the Department of Architecture & Furniture had actually been carried out.

John Hardy

¹ W.102-1924, illustrated by Tracy.

² See Christopher Gilbert, *Pictorial Dictionary of Marked London Furniture 1700-1840*, FHS/Maney, 1996, Fig. 436.

³ See R. Edwards, *English Chairs*, 1965, Fig. 43.

⁴ Museum number 680; Edwards, *ibid*, Fig. 58.

⁵ vol. XVIII, 2004.