



Owlpen Manor, our first visit of the RFS conference weekend.

Owlpen Manor

Thursday evening, 27 July

The stone-built Cotswold manor of Owlpen was a well-chosen prelude to the more weighty material of the RFS conference weekend. We congregated under the shadow of the huge clipped yews in front of the manor as our guide explained how the triple gabled facade was the result of a variety of building projects ranging from 1450 to 1719.

Norman Jewson, the disciple of Ernest Gimson working nearby at Sapperton, discovered Owlpen on a bicycle excursion and fell in love with the manor. In 1925 he finally succeeded in buying it and restored it using Arts & Crafts principles. He was, however, unable to afford to live in the house and in 1926 he was forced to sell. In 1974 the manor was bought by Nicholas Mander, a member of the same family who, as patrons of William Morris, built Wightwick Manor, Wolverhampton.

Photographs of the interior of Owlpen in 1985 show a sparse arrangement of mostly Arts & Crafts furniture on Norman Jewson's bare board floors and a scattering of sympathetic textiles. It came as a surprise to enter the house and find a highly personal eclectic clutter of furniture and bibelots of many periods: the present Manders have inherited from a family of compulsive collectors!

The house contains pieces by Sidney Barnsley, Peter van der Waals, William Morris and an oak work-table in the solar by Ernest Barnsley with 'hayrake' stretcher and wishbone tension braces, strangely mannered with its over-chamfered frame. Of particular interest to our members was the newel stair in oak, similar to those found in the houses of Morlaix in Brittany.

On the first floor in Queen Margaret's bedroom was a remarkable set of painted wall hangings depicting Joseph and his brothers in a bosky landscape. Originating from the early 18th century modernised east wing, cleaned, trimmed of their lower border and rehung, they made a lively substitute for tapestry. Appearing older, the linen canvas was found to be duty stamped 1712. Thought to have been common in English houses of this period, few of these painted hangings survive. One set at Munslow Farm, Shropshire, and a further set at Packwood House Warwick (NT), are believed to have been bought by Baron Ash along with the oak bedstock of Queen Margaret from the Owlpen sale in the 1920s.

The visit culminated in a delightful supper in the great barn adjacent to the manor, dominated by a twenty-foot-high early 18th century wooden cider press, the uprights retaining some of their bark, known curiously as 'cheeks' or 'sisters'. Our thanks go to our guide, and to Nicholas Mander, for a fascinating evening.

William Jefferies