

The Geffrye Museum Shoreditch

5 February

The Geffrye Museum is housed in a listed building of 1712-1714 which was formerly a set of almshouses. It was converted in 1912-13 to a museum of woodwork and furniture, the local industry. It is now dedicated to English domestic interiors. Since 1991 it has been an independent trust and has flourished. A prize-winning new extension was opened in 1998. One of the original almshouses was restored, and opened in 2002. The newly refurbished period rooms were opened in November 2006.

We were welcomed by David Dewing, the director, and Eleanor John, keeper of the collections. David gave us an illustrated talk describing their aims with the new period rooms, showing some of the historical sources used for reference in the design. These included paintings, drawings and documents such as accounts, diaries and inventories; as far as possible, specifically London sources were used. Surviving London interiors formed the basis of the three most recent rooms. Advice was sought from scholars with specialist knowledge of the periods. Every aspect of the interiors, including panelling, paint, flooring, floor coverings, curtains and furniture is based on historical sources.

The interiors illustrate the changing tastes of the middling classes, business people and merchants. They represent a very English group whose interiors have been not been extensively researched. The recreations focus on the hall or parlour, the main social room of the house, often above the business. Some of the furniture was specially acquired for the rooms,

including a pair of walnut chairs (c.1725) one labelled Old & Ody. This is the only known example of a chair with documented provenance from St Paul's Churchyard.

After the talk we spent time in each room with David and Eleanor who talked about the contents and tried to control detailed discussions.

In the room of 1630 the walls are covered with new oak panelling based on a drawing of a house in Aldersgate Street. There is a draw-leaf oak table and a set of six oak stools, the only such set in a public collection. The room of 1695 is based on an interior in Soho. The furniture includes a set of seven walnut caned chairs (c.1690) and a walnut-veneered desk (with a label from John Guilbaud c.1695).

The dimensions and panelling of the room of 1745 are copied from a house in Covent Garden. This room includes a set of four walnut India-back side chairs (c.1735). The room of 1790 has wallpaper re-created from a fragment in the museum's collection. It was hand printed on made-up sheets. The floor is covered with a specially made replica cut-pile Wilton carpet. There are tables and a bureau of c.1780 and a set of mahogany Chippendale style gothic-backed chairs (c.1770).

In the final part of the visit we were given the chance to inspect a number of items closely. There were lively exchanges of ideas around an oak stool, a chair of c.1685 with Turkey work seat removed (a piece of turkey work from the seat showing well preserved colours on the reverse side), a cane chair of c.1685, the India backed chair with the Old & Ody label, and finally an India-back chair with interesting constructional features.

David Learmonth proposed a vote of thanks to David

Dewing and Eleanor John for giving up so much of their time and this was heartily applauded by the visitors.

John Burman



A pair of chairs covered in Turkey work circa 1685. The gimp and fringe are replacements (Geffrye Museum).