

# Wycombe Museum, High Wycombe and the Wormsley Library, Stokenchurch

Thursday 22 March

High Wycombe has long been associated with chair making and the Wycombe Museum is well known for its collection of vernacular, especially Windsor, chairs. The recent display by the museum of an important new exhibit was the primary reason for our visit, although this was just the start of a day in which we were to see several rare chairs and some even rarer books. Our visit began with a brief introductory talk by the curator, Dr. Catherine Grigg, who outlined the role of the museum and described some recent changes. She explained the requirement both to serve as a local museum and to display the furniture collection. Activities are arranged for schoolchildren and facilities are provided for the general public, as well as for specialists who wish to carry out research.

The chair gallery was reorganised in 2006 with new simplified labelling and an emphasis placed on the social history of furniture making. Lighting has been improved, the bodgers display reinstated and the chair store made accessible to accompanied visitors. Although the museum has a good collection of 19th century High Wycombe chairs, the plan is to extend the range to include examples from the Chiltern and Thames Valley regions.

Catherine is particularly keen to include more 18th century chairs and is delighted with the recent acquisition of the unique cabriole leg Windsor attributed to the Slough maker John Pitt (1714-1759). This important chair was discovered by Michael Harding-Hill who brought it to the museum's attention. Contributions from the V&A purchase fund, the Beecroft Bequest, the Art Fund and Wycombe District Council secured it for the museum. The chair, which is a black-painted comb-back, is unique in retaining its original gilded decoration, including the arms of the city of Bath on the splat. Michael was on hand to point out its salient features and answer questions.

We also had the opportunity to view the chair store and some pattern books from local furniture makers such as Glenisters and Bartletts. The 75th anniversary of the museum is this year and will be celebrated by a display of 75 selected items. Mr Pitt's chair has been chosen in the name of the RFS, and Catherine took a photograph of us all to mark the occasion.

In the afternoon we visited the remarkable Wormsley Library built by the late Sir Paul Getty in 1992 within the grounds of his estate at Stokenchurch. In the lobby are four highly important painted low-back Windsors (c.1720) that, happily, have not left the country. These impressive

sturdy chairs with large saddle seats and turned legs are the earliest-known examples of their type and were examined with great interest.

The library itself had many more delights in store, including a table from Fonthill and a clock designed by Pugin. However, it is the magnificent book collection (over 8,000 volumes) for which the library is renowned. Bryan Maggs showed us

round, drawing attention to the many superbly bound examples on view. The treasures included several medieval illuminated books, possibly the earliest English manuscript (mid-7th century), Anne Boleyn's psalter, a fragment of the Gutenberg Bible (c.1455), a first folio edition of Shakespeare (1623) and a first edition of the *Canterbury Tales* printed by Caxton. There were also curiosities such as a book concealing a pistol, six books folding into one (c.1570) and an 1886 French text worked in silk on the Jacquard principle using 106,000 punched cards. This is just a smattering of the treasures that we were privileged to see on what turned out to be a very special and most enjoyable day.

Bob Parrott



Fig 1. One of the Wormsley chairs

Fig 2. Outside view of the library

