

Study Day at Hampton Court Palace

Saturday 13 October 2007

This study day at Hampton Court began with lectures in the Clore Learning Centre by Marc Meltonville, coordinator, and Robert Hoare, team photographer and furniture maker to the Historic Royal Kitchens Project. Hampton Court is regarded as having the largest surviving Tudor kitchens in the world and over the last 11 years this project has sought to research, interpret, experiment and present how they operated during in the past.

Located on the cooler north side of the palace, the kitchen complex once covered over 36,000 square feet (around one third of the ground floor) and over 250 staff produced more than 600 meals daily within its 55 rooms. Now, one weekend monthly, a more modest staff of 12 experimental archaeologists, charged with the task of 'learning through doing', bring the kitchens to life using replica equipment. The form of this equipment has been based on surviving examples, finds excavated at the palace or other suitable sites, and where no surviving examples are known, inferred from documentary or pictorial evidence. It comprises a vast range of items: treen, pottery (some fragments excavated at the palaces being made from London clay, others originating from Farnham or imported from Germany), and diverse items of metal ware including 'steeled' iron knives with boxwood handles. Each member of the team has a complete wardrobe of clothing appropriate to their relevant role, made with authentic materials. Recipes used by the team are drawn from documentary sources like the 1570 recipe book of



Elm table in the Great Kitchen, the single slab top dovetail-housed to the bearers beneath. The massive hearth behind is the single survivor of six known to have once existed.

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Bartholomew Scappi, the Pope's cook, or that produced by the courtier Sir Hugh Platt.

A great deal of furniture has been made for the kitchens over the course of the project, including cupboards, chairs, chests and a variety of tables and stands. Surviving 'below stairs' furniture from the 16th century is, unsurprisingly, very scarce, so inventories (like that taken of Henry VIII's goods during the reign of Edward VI) have been used to give some indication as to what might have been found in service rooms, while images that include kitchen scenes (like the 16th century depiction of the Field of the Cloth of Gold in the Royal Collection or *The Wedding at Bermondsey* by Joris Hoefnagel) have been used to demonstrate the form such utilitarian furniture might have taken. Robert Hoare brought several pieces made for the project to the learning centre for close examination, and many others could be seen on the tour of the kitchens that he and Marc guided us through following the lectures.

The hands-on application of the research undertaken by the team has given many insights into the way the kitchens functioned, how items were used and why they took the shape they did. For example, the efficiency with which a bronze cauldron conducts heat (bringing two gallons of water to the boil in 12 minutes) and the complementary role of pipkins for gentler simmering has become apparent, while the care needed in preventing iron knives from rusting or ingredients reacting with the material used in making utensils are subtleties that only come to light through use. Likewise, the dirt, soot and grime picked up by those carrying out many of the kitchen duties has suggested that white hose were only likely to be worn by those involved in the cleaner tasks. Yet black was notoriously difficult to dye, and therefore expensive, so would have been reserved for those of higher degree, such as the clerks of the kitchens.

Much has been learnt through the active use and demonstration of artefacts made for this project and undoubtedly a great deal also through the process of their manufacture. This is probably an area that those interested in furniture, tool and woodworking history would like to see expanded. A number of institutions, particularly Colonial Williamsburg and Plimoth Plantation in the United States, have applied the same principles of experimental archaeology being used in the kitchens at Hampton Court to workshops producing furniture for use in their displays and demonstrations. It is likely that many would welcome an organisation of the calibre of Historic Royal Palaces championing this approach on this side of the Atlantic, particularly in relation to the late medieval and early renaissance periods.

In the afternoon kitchen furniture was left well and truly behind when Sebastian Edwards, Deputy Chief

Curator and Head of Collections, carried us about two centuries forward with a tour of the Queen's Apartments. This suite of rooms was begun in the 1690s by Christopher Wren for Mary II. The apartments contain a feast of late 17th and early 18th century furniture including stools, chairs, tables and chimney pieces, along with a notable selection of pier tables, glasses and stands. Some of these are covered in detail in Bowett's *English Furniture 1660-1710*.

Items singled out by some were a particularly fine chimneypiece by John Nost and a gilt mirror bearing the maker's name, Gumley. Above the Queen's Staircase approaching the rooms hangs a huge brass lantern commissioned from Benjamin Goodison who also supplied a silvered chandelier in the Queen's Audience Chamber. As Goodison is usually associated with carved and gilded furniture it seems he may have passed these commissions on to a specialist metalworker. Four long oak tables in the Queen's Guard Chamber aroused some interest, appearing to many as being Victorian gothic, yet they are known to have been in the chamber at least as early as 1819 from a watercolour in the Royal Collection by Richard Cattermole. They are remarkably similar in design to tables in Lambeth Palace and the library at St. Paul's Cathedral, forming a group worthy of further investigation: a fifth and matching table for the chamber was commissioned from me in 1993.

Chris Currie