

Merchant Princes and Merchant Palaces

Friday evening, 25 July

The title disguises the true nature of the presentation by Elly Macbeath and Joseph Sharples. Elly was concerned mainly with the Waring side of the Waring and Gillow partnership, and she had traced the family back to an emigrant from Lancashire to Ireland in the 17th century. The family became successful tanners in Belfast, and one of the sons, William, became a landowner by buying land from Cromwell's soldiers. He then established his own fortified house and a surrounding village, with cottages for tenants. His son, Samuel, was one of the founding trustees of the Irish Linen Board, and is reputed to have persuaded Flemish weavers to bring their looms to Ireland, so raising the quality of the local product.

William's great, great, great grandson, J.M.S. Waring, a wholesale cabinet maker, arrived in Liverpool in 1835, and his son, Samuel James Waring, took over the business in 1866. He was a skilful entrepreneur, taking over several other companies, and building up an impressive list of clients. The contracts included Bootle and Birkenhead town

halls, Liverpool Conservative Club, and ships' fittings for the P & O, Cunard, Blue Star and other shipping lines. Other prestigious contracts included fitting the royal yachts of Queen Victoria, the Kaiser and the Sultan of Turkey.

Waring and Sons also provided a complete furnishing service for the mercantile élite: people who had made fortunes from ship-owning or importing various products ranging from sugar to guano. The best woods and the finest craftsmen were what the clients wanted, and Waring had the capacity to supply both.

Meanwhile the firm of Gillow was designing similar interiors, and in 1897 the two firms merged. The success continued, and Samuel Waring increased publicity by commissioning a noted photographer, Harry Bedford Lemere, to photograph the interiors of merchant palaces furnished by the firm, so giving a unique insight into the environment created for the mercantile élite. The client list also maintained its status, with Queen Alexandra (wife of Edward VII) and Empress Marie (wife of Czar Alexander III) as customers.

This is a very condensed account of the detailed story that Elly and Joseph presented with panache. It was a fitting end to our visit to the European Capital of Culture, 2008.

Jim Green