

The Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight

Sunday afternoon, 27 July

The visit was led by Lucy Wood who had already given us a useful introduction the evening before. The gallery was open, as usual on Sunday, but one room had been reserved for us, and some chairs taken there for closer inspection.

The gallery houses the large collections of fine and decorative art made by Lord Leverhulme and other acquisitions. Lord Leverhulme's wealth came from the chemical industry, especially soap. A model village to house employees surrounds the gallery.

Lucy Wood's intention was to explain, with specific examples, how her work on provincial chairs showed they were provincial and not London made and, if possible, where the chairs had been made. Also, did any previous catalogue details need revising in line with recent thinking?



Lucy Wood pointing out distinctive characteristics in some 18th century provincial chair seats in the Lady Lever Art Gallery

A set of very useful notes was provided, using accession numbers. Two examples to show methodology follow, then others in less detail. The gallery has many large sets of chairs but can only display a pair in most cases; by studying the whole run in detail, a picture of workshop practices can sometimes be built up.

We looked at a pair of armchairs of mahogany with beech frames and red velvet covers over the original upholstery structure from a set of six (LL4624-29). Some gilding and a little oak were evident as well. They were previously considered to be 18th century and the carving and upholstery support that date. However, the steep rake of the back, insubstantial back legs and over-use of screws in the construction raise doubts, and the ogee corner blocks, although not unknown in the 18th century, are unusual before 1820. The upholstery is probably original but the jute webbing is post-1840. Machine stitching of the covers indicates late 1840s. The dome-headed screws used were made from 1815-1860. A safe dating for these chairs is now 1840-65, which is supported by the level of wear and repair. They are provenanced to the earls of Chesterfield and then Caernarvon and were sold in 1918. A near matching chair, photographed for *Country Life* in 1902 at Sudbury, Derbyshire, is probably from an unassociated set, and could mean that both sets have a Derbyshire origin.

Next we considered a set of eight English chairs of walnut, solid and veneered on beech, with some oak and pine, and beech drop-in seat frames; the (?) original needlework was remounted on 1933 upholstery (LL4327-34). Lucy's observations revealed the back profile with 'bended splat' and straight raked styles, the restrained curvature of the seat fronts, the use of beech for much of the frame and not just the seat rails; awkwardly placed veneers on the splat, the continuation of the seat rail veneer onto the sides of the back stiles, and the use of nails to fix

back corner blocks and front braces to the seat frames. All these points are at variance with London practice. Documentary evidence showed that they were purchased by Leverhulme from Beaudesert, Staffordshire in 1905 (demolished 1932). Surviving bills from Joseph Stafford and Samuel Ogden, furniture makers of Lichfield, record purchases by the Earl of Uxbridge at Beaudesert in 1742. Ogden's bill refers to 18 round-seated leather bottomed chairs at 30 shillings each. Lucy favours an attribution to Ogden based on the form of the rounded seat and the fact that Ogden purchased a walnut tree from Beaudesert in 1742. This would have produced seasoned veneers in time for use before Lord Uxbridge died (1743), perhaps on this set of chairs.

In addition to focussing attention on these two chairs, we looked at two marquetry chairs attributed to Henry Hill of Marlborough, c.1778, a Masonic chair made c.1760 to a well-known London design but by a provincial hand; chairs and a sofa of crabwood (*carapa guianensis*), extensively carved c.1766, by William Davidson of Berwick-on-Tweed, and two from a set of four chairs, c.1750, from Drakelow Hall, Derbyshire, carved by at least three different carvers (not a London practice); the low backs, square proportions and thick members also indicate a non-London origin. A chair with a back precisely copied from Chippendale's *Director*, purchased in Chester, c.1898, illustrated the point that accurate copies like this are considered provincial: London makers used the *Director* for inspiration rather than direct reproduction. The oak seat rails and 'cylindrical stump' back legs suggest a northern origin.

Our intense scrutiny of these chairs with Lucy Wood made for a stimulating final visit on this very hot conference weekend.

Phil Holland