

Grosvenor Museum, Chester

Saturday evening, 26 June

One of the great joys of travelling in Britain is the extraordinary quality of many of our regional museums. This is certainly true of the Grosvenor. Being a Roman town, there are of course splendid Roman antiquities including a unique collection of Roman tombstones all excavated locally. There is also a fine collection of English silver, much assayed in Chester.

Adjoining the rear of the museum is a three-storey townhouse, originally built in the 16th century but with a Georgian façade, which has been laid out as a series of period rooms. Accessed through the gift shop of the museum at an intermediate level, we missed the essential experience of arriving through the front door and progressing through the house in the way the builder intended and were separated from the exhibits by rather heavyweight glazing.

Fig. 1



On the main staircase of the museum hung two fine examples of mid-18th century mahogany sword rests emblazoned with arms of local mayors.

The highlight of the museum, for us, was the art gallery on the first floor. This is an elegant rectangular room filled with pictures mostly of Cheshire people and places or by artists connected with the county.

Hanging a diverse collection of pictures of many subjects, scale and periods in such a cohesive and restful manner is a great skill, and from his witty introductory lecture the curator Peter Boughton revealed himself to be an enthusiast in the imaginative framing and hanging of pictures. As he so eloquently put it, 'the frame should release a picture rather than constrain it'. The label under every painting stated whether the frame was original to the work or an accurate copy appropriate to the picture and the date the frame was commissioned. The diversity of mouldings and finishes, whether these were water gilt, oil gilt or ebonised woods, was both interesting to the eye and a potted history of the development of the picture frame. This was particularly interesting to those RFS members who had experienced the visit to the framing workshop in Liverpool the day before.

Such attention to detail is a very contemporary trend which we had only come across previously in the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery in London. Peter revealed in conversation how demanding he has to be with frame makers and found the frame he commissioned for the triple portrait of Mary Done by William Dobson c.1635 (Fig.1) arrived as a 'Sunderland' fashionable from 1660 rather than an 'auricular' from the first half of the 17th century: it had to be remade!