

Visit to Rodmarton and Kelmscott Manors

Friday 30 May 2008

This visit attracted more than 40 members from all over the UK. Rodmarton Manor was designed by Ernest Barnsley for the Biddulph family and built over a period of 20 years from

1909. We were divided into two groups led by the present owners Simon Biddulph (grandson of the original owner Claud) and his wife Christina. Christina's party was joined by Mary Greensted, latterly of Cheltenham Museum and the principal author of the guide book. Rodmarton is regarded as one of the finest examples of arts and crafts architecture in England. In addition, the interior and its furnishings are prime examples of the same tradition. The furniture was designed by Ernest and his brother Sidney Barnsley following William Morris's tradition of hand crafting.

The arts and crafts idea of a local community of craftsmen led to the establishment of the Rodmarton workshops, which was responsible for a good deal of the furniture, the rest being made in the designers' own workshops. At first the designs were provided by the Barnsleys and later, after 1919, by Peter Waals, but the Rodmarton craftsmen became increasingly adept at interpreting them to produce their own versions of the Cotswold style. Oak was the principal timber used but there were good examples of furniture in walnut and blackbean (an Australian hardwood from the Moreton Bay chestnut). The furniture exhibited all the trademark features of the arts and crafts style: exposed dovetails, dowelling, butterfly joints on table tops and hayrake stretchers beneath tables. The later designs from Peter Waals show inlaid work and double fielded panels in the doors of cabinets and wardrobes.

The whole house was a feast of wonderful 20th century furniture. To pick out just a few pieces does scant justice to the whole, but there is an imposing built-in dresser in the dining room designed by Sidney Barnsley and made on the estate in 1924. Instead of one huge table, to allow flexibility, he chose to design three dining tables with through butterfly joints on the top boards and chamfered hayrake stretchers beneath.

Not content only with the original furniture made for Rodmarton, the Biddulph family have through the years bought examples by the Barnsleys and William Lethaby, chairs by Philip Clissett and a pair of rocking chairs by Ernest Gimson among others. Several of the bedrooms are furnished with pieces made in the 1950s in blackbean by Edward Barnsley, the son of Sidney who had first become associated with Rodmarton in the 1920s when he made three daybeds to his father's designs. Furniture was also commissioned from local craftsmen, one example being an inlaid walnut display cabinet with inlaid floral panels by Oliver Morel made in 1972. The gardens at Rodmarton are also interesting and the photograph shows part of the group looking up at the lead work of the downspouts that was being pointed out by Mary Greensted.

From Rodmarton the party moved on to Kelmscott where lunch was taken, followed by an introductory talk on the

many achievements of William Morris. The house is set up to show all of Morris's talents, and the concentration on furniture is less obvious than at Rodmarton. Morris only rented Kelmscott, using it as a summer residence from 1871 until his death in 1896, so it contained few of his possessions. Most of the furniture belonged to the owners and consisted mainly of 17th century oak; some of it is still there.

Before coming to Kelmscott, Morris had lived at the Red House in South East London, built for him by Philip Webb. He did not live there for very long, and he later had a house in Hammersmith which he confusingly called Kelmscott House! Some of the Webb furniture from the Red House is now at Kelmscott. This includes a high back settle with painted decoration, a cabinet, the famous ebonized adjustable chair and a large centre table. In one room was a rather plain table designed by Webb specifically for Kelmscott. Scattered through several of the rooms are examples of chairs made by Morris and Co; the Sussex pattern was much in evidence.

The walls at Kelmscott are hung with examples of Morris fabrics (modern copies) and some of his tapestries. In the attic are examples of plain green-painted furniture designed in 1861 by Ford Madox Brown and considered simple enough for a workman's dwelling. The pieces at Kelmscott are believed to be the only examples that survive. Elsewhere in the attics are cases showing the printed calligraphy produced by the Kelmscott press, one of Morris's later enterprises. The cases are surrounded by swathes of fabrics and curtain materials in William Morris patterns, and tapestries adorn the walls.

The contrast between the houses could hardly have been greater. Kelmscott dates from the 16th century and Rodmarton the 20th. Kelmscott is a temple to William Morris; Rodmarton is still home to the descendants of the builder. I found the coherence of the Rodmarton furniture more pleasing than the range of styles shown at Kelmscott. Nevertheless seeing both houses together on the same day proved to be most illuminating and instructive.

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