

# Painted Interiors and Furniture Study Day at the Merchant's House, Marlborough

2 April

During a passionate introduction Michael Gray, the historical adviser to the trust, outlined the complex history of both the building and its occupation and use. Built by the Bayly family, parts date from 1580 and a mid-17th century room plan exists from 1653. The details of the house's ownership, modification, conservation, research and trust formation revealed the continuing challenge and fascination that historic buildings can give us. This was the ideal setting for the day's programme.

James Ayres gave a masterful and most comprehensive talk on the art of the painter. His overview condensed many years of research into a clear and delightful precis of his knowledge in this field. Starting with the guilds, he delineated which trades carried out the various types of work. Then followed illustrations of the use of paint, distemper, lime-washes and so on, followed by decorative applications such as painted hangings, floor-cloths, window transparencies, blinds, oil cloths (upholstery and carpeting), painted floorboards, plastering, sgraffito, faux sgraffito, leaded lights, glazing, putty, oil paintings, black-work decoration, faux marble, graining, simulated carving, over-mantel painting, signs, coachwork, frescoes and chimney boards as well as items like brushes, bladders and other means of applying the materials.

Linda Hall then stood in for the wall paintings conservator, Jane Rutherford. She gave an equally profound example-based lecture on the use of painting in buildings. This covered some of the historic legacy left in many old buildings. There were examples that revealed building structures hidden by the decoration or used as a feature in its own right. She managed to show decorative stripes and lines, geometric and naturalistic designs, simulated panelling and framing of varying complexity, graining, simulated marble and stone, sgraffito, bare plaster, decorative friezes, gilding techniques and shadowing (baluster turnings and newel posts finials). This was a perfect complement to the previous lecture from the viewpoint of a building historian.

Without a break, John Boram then gave his paper, *An approach to identifying original decorative finishes on chairs*, revealing the interesting and challenging problems of using modern techniques of paint sample analysis on complex historic surfaces. The difference between the traditional antiquarian research with examination and a scientific approach exposed some of the difficulties encountered when then trying to make consistent meaningful interpretations. This was a fascinating first step into the

challenging and much-needed symbiosis between the analyst and the historian, a very helpful lecture which answered some questions about these painted chairs but raised many more.

After a much-needed break for lunch we had the pleasure of a complete view of the house. This tour was enhanced, not just by the open access of all areas from the roof space to the 'closed' rooms, but by the generous and wise guidance of Victor Chinnery and the morning's lecturers. Discussions about the timber-work, staircases, conservation, interpretation, future plans and furnishing continued until tea and long after. My thanks go to Vic and all involved for a wonderful day in an amazing property.

*Simon Feingold*