

The Gentleman's House in the British Atlantic World 1680–1780

Stephen Hague. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 8 Colour plates and 53 b&w, 233 pages. £60.00

The study of what we call, in England, the smaller gentry house has been rather neglected in recent years, especially as regards their contents. However, across the Atlantic it has been a subject of great study as revealed in the 2013 book, *The Chesapeake House* edited by Cary Carson and Carl Lounsbury. Stephen Hague's book goes a long way to redress this imbalance as the author concentrates on English houses in the Bristol and Gloucestershire area and also what to many British readers are smallish country houses on the Eastern seaboard of the USA – the old colonial area roughly from Virginia to Philadelphia and a bit either side. A significant plus to the book is that there are a number of maps showing the houses and their relationship to major centres.

The book covers the people who owned such houses in both England and the USA, usually merchants. The buildings themselves – the economics of building, who built what where etc. and their contents, possibly the part that interests most Society members, as well as much else concerning the status that was confirmed upon the owners of such houses.

In 2006 the RFS had its annual conference in Bristol, the Severn and the Bristol Channel and one of the houses visited was Frampton Court (RFS Newsletter 45, p. 13–14). This house and its contents figure quite prominently in *The Gentleman's House* as its contents are unusually well documented for a small English house, this in contrast to, for example Stenton, Philadelphia, a building of similar size and date to Frampton. One of the best illustrations in the book is of a table-full of broken tea-pots and teacups that had been dug up in the grounds – there must be at least seven small 'bullet' tea-pots' from the middle of the 18th century indicating how popular tea drinking was then. This was a point made strongly by Professor Amanda Vickery in her 2009 book, *Behind Closed Doors*. There are some excellent house plans showing room arrangements and the inventory of contents alongside with, in some cases, their values; this is a very good idea.

Christopher Gilbert was always very keen to show that there were regional variations in modest houses, and not just in what are misleadingly called vernacular buildings. This book goes some way to revealing aspects of Christopher's view and linking it to what was going on in America at the same time. An example of this view may be

seen in page 105 that shows one of a set of fine compass 'India-back' chairs, c. 1730. Long thought to be made from walnut, as one would expect by a casual glance, the RFS visit in 2006 established them to be in fact made from ash with burr ash-veneered splat; therefore probably not London made but by a very competent local chair-maker working in the latest fashion but using the timber that he was used to. There is also illustrated in the book an annotated sketch, c. 1735, of a chest-on-stand by cabinet-maker Henry Viner where he wrote that it was to be made from 'Bannut', a local Gloucestershire name for walnut.

My only caveat to the book is that it is expensive, but that is not the author's fault. There are extensive notes that are not just book references, and an excellent bibliography. There are eight colour plates, numerous black and white pictures and a number of tables and floor plans. Altogether the book is a welcome addition to the study of smaller country houses and their contents.

Treve Rosoman