

# Saturday 13 July

## Pitchford and Benthall Halls

Although Pitchford and Benthall are two very different houses, they share a history of great tenacity of tenure by long-lived families with Catholic and Royalist sympathies.

In the case of Pitchford we were thrilled by the sight of the finest timber-framed house in Shropshire, built from 1473 by Thomas Ottley, a Shrewsbury merchant, and remaining in his family through various relationships for over five centuries until the sale of house and contents in 1992, when nearly everything was carried off. The highly decorative brown and white framing with trademark carved vines, heads and spiral columns is almost certainly the work of John Sandford of Shrewsbury, whom we encountered in the town and at the museum. The exterior was unified and interior remodelled in an antiquarian 'makeover' in the 1890s by George Devey.

We were divided into small groups for a thorough tour, including the attics, orangery and incredible early seventeenth-century tree house perched in a lime tree, with its gothick interior probably by the ubiquitous T. F. Pritchard, *c.* 1760. As for the present contents of the house, after years of abandonment, descendants of the Ottley family managed to buy the house back in 2016 and some of the previous furniture and other chattels are gradually being returned by gift, loan or purchase, along with other suitable pieces. For example, one of two oak presses (dated 1682), along with a table, which had gone



Timber-framing at Pitchford Hall, built from 1473. *Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens*



Oak press dated 1682 in the main hall at Pitchford Hall. *Photo Jeremy Rycroft*



T. F. Pritchard mantelpiece of 1756 at Benthall Hall. *Photo Christopher Claxton Stevens*

to Preston Hall in North Shropshire in 1922, are back in the main hall. However, as Christopher Hartley put it so elegantly in his vote of thanks in the presence of young children of the family, it will be a multi-generational task to return the house to its hey-day, but what an heroic one!

In contrast, Benthall as it stands is a sandstone-faced building, largely of the late sixteenth century on an earlier site, built by a gentry family who had taken their name from the place, on the profits of coal mining. Having been narrowly sold out of the family in 1844, it was saved by Mary Clementina Benthall when it came up for sale again for £6000 in 1934. She gave it to the National Trust in 1958, although the family still have the upper floor, up the fine early seventeenth-century carved oak cantilevered staircase which rises two floors. Despite a couple of fires, there are several oak panelled rooms, ill-fitting in parts through alterations, with elaborate seventeenth-century overmantels, along with Pritchard mantelpieces of 1756.

About the only piece of original furniture is probably the mid-seventeenth-century carved refectory table in the hall which returned to the house in 1963, along with Benthall heirlooms from other houses. One such is the fine mahogany open bookcase (c. 1740) in the Great Chamber/Library. This came from Lindridge in South Devon. Its four pilasters all open with locks to reveal labelled compartments for 'bankers' books' etc.

Otherwise we saw a good melange of country house pieces including some fairly local ones, such as some carved panel-back chairs of Cheshire type and a Welsh chest with rising lid later adapted with shelves for a display of Welsh pewter, shown with its polished back-sides to the fore. One of two turner's chairs, its blackened surface rubbed through to the ash, was by tradition owned by the Bishop of Neath Abbey (dissolved in 1538, so unlikely perhaps). Other pieces that stood out included a late seventeenth-century black-japanned cabinet with drawers, its Stalker and Parker derived decoration of great quality, two fine mid-seventeenth-century veneered and inlaid chests of drawers and an elaborate Continental cradle, seemingly of early seventeenth century date but inlaid with English

names Elizabeth and John (twins?) in 1680 – an early example of recycling!

*Christopher Claxton Stevens*