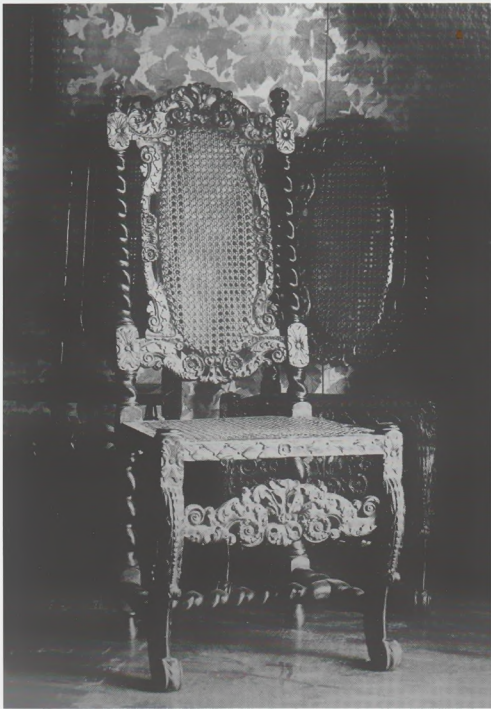


Sunday 14 July

Jeremy Bate: *The Gatacres, a Shropshire family and their collection dispersed*

The theme of the conference was the study of the houses, churches and guildhalls of the Shropshire gentry and the powerful Guilds of Ludlow and Shrewsbury. These distinctive buildings and their furniture were largely constructed of oak from the forests of the remote Welsh Marches.



left to right A chair from the suite of 'Charles II' walnut and caned chairs, photographed at Gatacre in the early twentieth century – behind it can be glimpsed the walnut chair in the adjacent photo; walnut chair c. 1700, at De Wiersse in Holland – purchased from the Christie's Gatacre Hall sale in 1945, it may have been at Dudmaston previously. *Photo Jeremy Bate*

Jeremy Bate's illustrated talk on Sunday morning was created at short notice when he feared the Furniture Surgery looked a bit thin. His talk provided a unique insight into the history of one gentry family, the Gatacres (of whom Jeremy is a descendant), their varying fortunes through the centuries, and final abandonment of their seat in 1945 and dispersal of contents.

Our first visit of the conference was to Dudmaston, a rare example of a Shropshire gentry house accessible to the public. The Wolryches of Dudmaston were neighbours to the Gatacres, the families intermarrying on several occasions over the centuries. But whilst the Wolryches invariably failed to produce a male heir and their estate often passed to distant cousins, the Gatacres enjoyed the stability of a direct line of descent in the male line for around 1000 years.

In the medieval world the Gatacres prospered as they have never prospered since. By the end of the feudal period they had amassed a considerable fortune and were a family of some local importance. The unrest on the Welsh Marches in the middle ages gave place to peace enforced by the Tudor government. Although the family retained its position in local government by a series of strategic marriages, a host of new problems were caused by the politics of the Reformation. In Elizabeth's reign, Francis Gatacre, 'an obstinate Papist,' fell foul of Lord Cecil and was imprisoned as a rebel recusant in 1575, his estates being administered by nominees of the Crown for 24 years and heavily fined in 1595. During the reign of Mary, Francis' younger brother, Thomas, declared himself a Protestant, was disowned by his family, gave up his inheritance, becoming a pauper, later achieving fame as a learned Divine. Both brothers showed a high degree of moral courage and obstinacy but failed to master the techniques of adapting to the alternating political climate. By contrast, their sister Dorothy shrewdly became the third wife of Robert Brooke of Madeley Court. Brooke was a self-made local man who became

Speaker of the House of Commons under several monarchs. We had glimpsed his magnificent alabaster tomb, depicting him flanked by his two wives as on a great bed, in Claverley church.

By the seventeenth century, one after another of the family estates, scattered over Shropshire, which had taken more than 400 years to accumulate, had been sold to pay the debt until in the end only Gatacre remained. During the following two centuries the family lived the quiet but comfortable life of country squires, however one squire, so skilled at raising fighting cocks, was appointed Cockmaster to James I. Their ancient house was a well-recorded local curiosity described by Camden: 'It was built of dark grey freestone, coated with a green vitreous substance about the thickness of a crown piece. The hall was nearly exactly square and most remarkably constructed at each corner; in the middle of each side and in the centre were immense oak trees hewn nearly square and without branches, set with their heads on large stones laid about a foot deep in the ground, and with their roots uppermost, which formed a complete arched roof. The floor was of oak boards 3 inches thick.' This description may sound fanciful, but Jeremy produced an example of one of the surviving glazed stone fragments. This Hall, of which no image survives, was demolished in the early nineteenth century.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the fortunes of the family started to improve. In 1767 the charming Edward Gatacre married Mary Pitchford (d. 1815), the illegitimate daughter of Col Weld who was the brother of Elizabeth Wolryche of Dudmaston. Edward's courtship of Mary is recorded in the records of everyday life at Dudmaston, when the embarrassed estate was managed by Elizabeth Wolryche on the deaths of her wayward son and that of her husband. Mary Pitchford's dowry included much of the important Dudmaston furniture and silver which she took to Gatacre. Jeremy presented several examples of cookery books and prayer books, beautifully inscribed by Elizabeth Wolryche and Mary Pitchford.

Edward's teenage son, we learned from a letter from his mother dated 1769, was dissuaded by his parents to join Lord Clive in India. His chance for military action came in 1802 when he was one of the gentry to rally to the call to set up the Shropshire Militia to protect the country from French invasion. As Colonel he commanded the Militia at coastal ports around Britain until the fall of Napoleon, equipping himself with all the latest officer's kit including a London-made mahogany writing slope which Jeremy brought to the conference. We also saw photos of Col. Gatacre's French prisoner-of-war ship model, rescued by Jeremy's father from the abandoned Hall in 1945. After 70 years in pieces in a shoe box, it has finally been restored by an Italian craftsman in Edinburgh.

Marriage to a wealthy heiress made the Colonel richer than any member of the family since the Reformation. A harder character than his father, he was better travelled and his society more fashionable. There was more money to spend but he spent it recklessly, enlarging and refurbishing the compact mid-eighteenth-century Gatacre Hall. The enlargement of the house included a new dining room furnished with

a fashionable 3-pillar mahogany dining table and semi-circular hunt table, bearing all the hallmarks of Gillow's work. These are now in Holland. He bought beautiful hand-painted china tea and dinner services from Coalport, in the Ironbridge Gorge a few miles north of Gatacre, and glassware from Stourbridge, the centre of the fine glass industry a few miles to the south in Worcestershire. The Colonel sent his son, Edward Lloyd, to Rome on a Grand Tour, well equipped with maps, sunglasses and medicine chest. We saw images of a number of souvenirs he brought back from Rome which Jeremy's grandmother had carefully preserved in the cupboards of her London flat.

Edward Lloyd, a keen sportsman, joined the aristocratic set, stalking deer in the Scottish Highlands and marrying the daughter of Sir William Forbes, a self-made industrialist from Aberdeen whose fortune was founded on supplying copper bottoms to protect the wooden hulls of ships of Britain's navy from attack by sea termites. Two sons became generals in the army, serving in India, whilst the eldest was Squire, never happier than hunting whilst leaving the administration of his estates to agents.

The estate never recovered from the overspending of the 1820s and the agricultural recession in the 1870s. The death of the Squire in 1911, followed by the death of his charismatic eldest son, Edward, at the Somme in 1916 was the final blow. His younger brother Galfrey, already farming in Canada, shut up the house, which an entail prevented him selling. Jeremy's grandmother, married to a vicar in Dorset, became, in effect, head of the family. Touching postcard photo-portraits posted to her by the Gatacre staff from the deserted house suggest the sadness and uncertain future common to so many English estates and their staff following the devastation of the war.

In 1945 after the house was vandalised, two sales of the principle contents were held by Christie's in London, followed by a house sale at Gatacre. After these sales, Jeremy's father and grandmother (an enthusiast for oak furniture) were invited to remove anything remaining. Jeremy's father had been invalided out of the army following injury in Normandy and enjoyed the therapy of woodwork. Various neglected pieces of oak, elm and mahogany furniture were scavenged from the attics and restored by his father to become the furnishings of his first married home.

Recently, at a chance meeting in London, Jeremy met Peter Gatacre, a distant cousin, who provided more information about the dispersal of the furniture. Peter's father, Major William, son of General Gatacre of Boer War fame, was a German prisoner of war from the early months of the first world war. In 1918, being short of food, the Germans handed allied prisoners over to the Dutch to work on the farms of eastern Holland. At a soup kitchen he met, and later married, Alice, the teenage daughter of Victor De Steurs. Victor was a lawyer, amateur architect and collector, closely involved in the creation of the Rijksmuseum, a hero of the Dutch conservation movement. Alice, a creator of gardens from a young age, inherited both her father's beautiful moated seventeenth-century house, De Wiersse, and his passion for collecting. She attended the Christie's sales in London where she bought several pieces of furniture from Gatacre and installed them at De Wiersse.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Gatacre family treasured a suite of 'Charles II' walnut and caned chairs, having them photographed in the drawing room. These chairs went elsewhere at the Christie's sale, whilst more modest but undoubtedly period examples from Gatacre look entirely at home at De Wiersse. Alice also bought the 'Gillows' tables and a pair of seventeenth-century gilt picture frames with entwined initials, reputed to have been made for the Dutch ambassador in London. Sarah Medlam recognised them as closely resembling an example in the V&A collection which she tells us had been assumed by John Cornforth to be of Dutch origin. A mid nineteenth-century circular mosaic marble table also attracted Sarah's attention. It has since been confirmed by Kate Hay of the V&A as likely to be from the Darmanin workshop in Malta. Malta was a regular port of call of army personnel travelling to and from India; the table may have been bought by either Gen. Sir John or Gen. Sir William Gatacre on one of their voyages home.

Whilst the Gatacre chattels have long been dispersed, Jeremy was pleased to discover many of the finer examples secure in Holland, but more research is needed to discover how much, if any of the surviving furniture originated from Dudmaston.

William Jefferies