

# Friday 25 June

## Gainsborough Old Hall

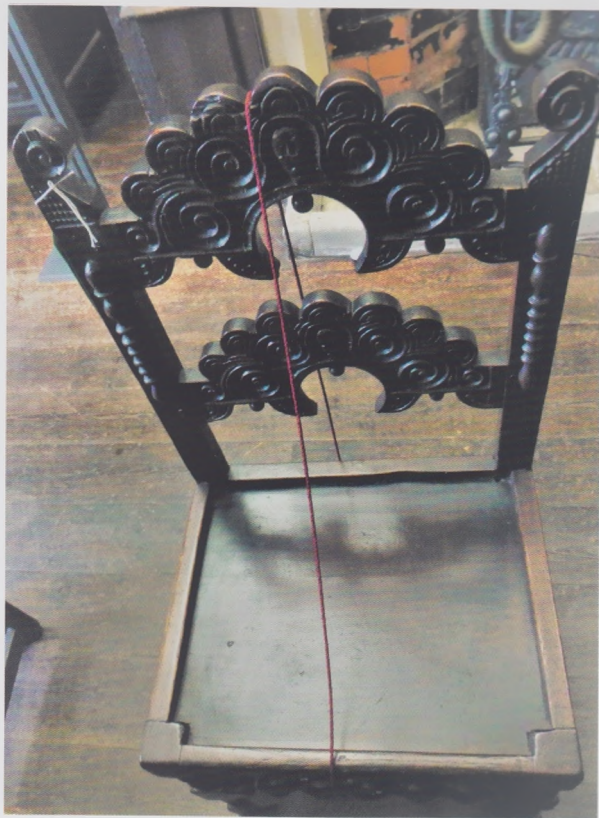
Built on the site of an earlier house, Gainsborough Old Hall was erected by the Lords Burgh in the second half of the fifteenth century, but ceased to be occupied by a major family around 1720. Over the next 250 years it was used for tenements and a variety of public purposes, and so was never subject to periodic remodelling. In the twentieth century its importance as one of England's finest late medieval houses began to be recognised by being scheduled as an ancient monument in 1924 and opened to the public by the Friends of Gainsborough Old Hall from around 1949. It passed into State ownership in 1970, after which the Friends and Lincolnshire County Council used it as a visitor attraction and educational resource up to last November, when it was taken over by English Heritage.

On the day of our visit the Hall was still in the hands of the restoration contractors and closed to the public, but through the much-appreciated representations of Kevin Booth, the English Heritage curator for the north of England, we were able to see its collection of oak furniture. This had been gathered together in the parlour wing so that, amid busy tradesfolk, we could closely examine about two dozen items. Previous accounts stated that these were Yorkshire pieces. However, it became immediately obvious that it was an artificial assemblage of no regional character. It comprised a mixture of totally authentic, partly restored, partly made-up, partly re-worked and totally invented pieces, many showing no sign of any practical use after being restored or manufactured.





One of three caned walnut chairs, probably London c. 1680, at Gainsborough Old Hall. *Photo Jeremy Rycroft.*



A 'Yorkshire' chair with the face-mask associated with the workshop of Francis Gunby of Leeds, mid-late seventeenth century. *Photo Jeremy Rycroft.*



Oak four-poster bed, Gainsborough Old Hall. *Photo Peter Jefferies.*



The original pieces, still in their original condition, included three fine walnut dining chairs with caned backs and seats dating from around 1680, two being stamped 'RB' and one 'S?' on the backs of their rails and splats to identify their probably London-based carvers. There were also three 'Yorkshire' chairs of the mid-late seventeenth century, two having the face-mask associated with the workshop of Francis Gunby of Leeds and his successors. Other items included cupboards, chests, dining chairs, tables, a table-desk and a spectacular four-poster bed, many having a remarkably similar dull, dark patination and evidence of restoration. Some cupboards, for example, had been given new tops, cornices and internal shelves, while a mule chest had been fitted with new drawers and runners, but such additions showed no sign of practical use. Similarly, additional carved decoration was still as crisp as ever. The panels on one piece had been given the cross-hatched lobed motifs of the Leeds six-leaf group (*Regional Furniture* XXXIII (2019), p. 32), the same hand reproducing it again on the most remarkable bed. We had insufficient time to trace the bed's complex genealogy, but its exceptionally fine period posts, inlaid panels and parts of the tester had come from good-quality originals. However, these were completely swamped in a mass of heavily-carved, dark-stained face masks, caryatids, mouldings and pendants in rich Wardour Street style to produce a most impressive example of its kind.

From this evidence it was obvious that this entire group of furniture had been purchased as a job lot from a Wardour Street workshop/shop at a date yet to be determined to provide an instant ancestral inheritance where none existed. In this it resembled similar collections at houses such as Nostell Priory and Cotehele. Returning to the history of the Hall, it went under a major restoration by Denzil Ibbotson for Sir Hickman Beckett Bacon, in the late 1840s. The purchase of the furniture would have provided the finished touch for this extensive programme of works, and it is entirely appropriate that the current head of the family has maintained this loan, which after some 170 years, represents an important part of the history of the property.