

Auction Round-up.

"Anything by Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson is enjoying great success in auction at present" commented Richard Winterton Auctioneers following the company's January sale, at which a consignment of early 1930s Mouseman furniture totalled over £25,000. The pieces were the last remaining items of Mouseman furniture from St Joseph's Convent, Haunton, Staffordshire. Robert Thompson's archives in Kilburn contain full details of the original commission from the convent, indicating the meteoric rise in value of Mouseman furniture. At the Winterton sale, an octagonal library table, which in 1932 cost £5, sold for £4,200. A 'Lang' settle, which, the archives show, originally cost the convent £8, reached £5,400 at Winterton's. One of the most interesting smaller pieces

was a pair of bookends, one depicting a serene monk, the other a grimacing devil with a mouse peeping out from between his horns. The bookends were commissioned specially for the convent's Mother Superior, perhaps to act as a constant reminder of the battle between good and evil. They sold at the auction to a telephone bidder for £2,250.

Sotheby's Fine 20th Century Design sale in October included two Mouseman items, both of which smashed through their guide prices. A rare oak panelled lounge armchair from the 1930s, estimated at £2,000 - £3,000, reached a hammer price (including the buyer's premium) of £6,000. A panelled 1930s wardrobe, estimated at £3,000 to £5,000 reached a hammer price (with buyer's premium) of £12,750.

Dates for your Diary



The T Café and Visitor Centre are open from Easter. Opening hours are as follows: between Easter and September we open every day from 10am to 5pm. In October and November, we open from Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 5pm. During December, we open Wednesday to Sunday from 11am to 4pm.

If you're visiting Kilburn, why not pause for a cup of Taylor's Yorkshire Tea or freshly ground Taylor's coffee, and a slice of home baked cake, at our T Café. On a summer's day, the view of the White Horse from our alfresco terrace is simply charming.

Picture by kind permission of Richard Winterton Auctioneers

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Museum Update image: Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum

Newsletter No 6
Spring/Summer 2010

Robert Thompson's Craftsmen Ltd.

Welcome

I am delighted that this newsletter gives me the opportunity to make sure that all our special customers and friends are the first to hear about a unique, strictly limited piece of Mouseman furniture, which will be produced this year. The story of its creation weaves together my family's history and that of one of the most beautiful country estates in Yorkshire, Hovingham Hall. In 1924, my great grandfather, Robert Thompson, produced two very special octagonal coffee tables with burr oak inlay tops, one to celebrate the birth of his first grandchild, Jean Cartwright, and the second for his daughter Elsie.



Robert Thompson and his daughter Elsie



The unique pattern of the Hovingham Octagonal Coffee Table. 1/99

Now, 86 years later, that original design will be brought back to life as the limited edition Hovingham Octagonal Coffee Table. It is not just the design that marks these tables as uniquely collectable but also the material from which they will be crafted: the oak for these exclusive pieces of furniture – of which only 99 will ever be made – comes from 250 year old trees grown on the Hovingham Estate, the childhood home of the Duchess of Kent and her brother, Sir Marcus Worsley.

Each table will be numbered and supplied with a signed certificate of authenticity, outlining the history behind this creation. Table number one will be auctioned at a sportsman's dinner at Ampleforth College on Saturday 3 July, which is being organised to help raise funds for a new all weather pitch at the college. If you are interested in

reserving one of the limited edition Hovingham Octagonal Coffee Tables, please contact my office on 01347 869100 or email info@robertthompsons.co.uk

I hope you enjoy reading our brief history of the Hovingham oaks and the other stories in this newsletter. The Mouseman visitor centre is now open for another season. As always, we look forward to welcoming you to Kilburn village.

Ian Thompson Cartwright

250 Years of Hovingham History on the Table

The oak trees (Quercus Robur), from which the limited edition Hovingham Octagonal Coffee Tables are fashioned, have been witness to some wonderful passages in Yorkshire history. Between 1750 and 1770, the oaks were mere sapplings and it was at this time that the Palladian house at Hovingham was created by Sir Thomas Worsley. The house was built to Sir Thomas' own design and uniquely entered through the riding school. Sir Thomas was a keen horseman and is reputed to have taught his close friend, King George III, to ride. It is not



too fanciful to suppose that Sir Thomas and the King may have enjoyed pleasant gallops across the vast estate,

past the young oak trees.

Hovingham's grounds have also played host to notable figures from the world of cricket as matches have been played in front of the house since 1858. The fourth Sir William Worsley captained Yorkshire in 1928 and 1929 and was President of the Yorkshire County Cricket Club for many years. Illustrious players such as Herbert Sutcliffe, Len Hutton, Freddie Trueman and Geoff Boycott have all played on the pitch and it is easy to imagine them relaxing under the majestic oaks whilst waiting their turn to play, or hitting a six out of the pitch only for the ball to be lost among the leafy branches.

In 1961, the noble ranks of Quercus Robur witnessed the arrival of many of the crowned heads of Europe to the reception at Hovingham, following the marriage in York Minster of the only daughter of Sir William Worsley to HRH The Duke of Kent.

Today Hovingham is home to William Worsley, the great, great, great, great grandson of the Georgian hall's first owner. He maintains the Estate's very long tradition of forest management and woodland conservation within a landscape that has been designated an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Now, the beauty of those historic oaks, which have seen so much change yet so much remain the same, will live on in these special Mouseman tables for future generations to treasure.





Going Back to College

In February this year, Robert Thompson's installed four choir stalls and two choir frontals in the chapel of St Mary's College, Durham University. The company has a long tradition of work for the college having, in the 1950s, provided a complete fit-out of the newly built chapel, which was designed by the esteemed ecclesiastical architect George Pace.

St Mary's has a proud tradition of providing university education originally for women. It was established as the Women's Hostel in 1899, adopting its present name in 1920. It moved to its current location on Elvet Hill in 1947 where the foundation stone for the college buildings was laid by HRH Princess Elizabeth. The new site opened to students in 1952. In the 1970s the idea of becoming a mixed college was first mooted although it met with strong resistance. However, in 2005, the college eventually opened its doors fully to male students, ending over 100 years as a bastion of education for women only. The presence of the carved mouse on the chapel furniture is one tradition that remains alive.

It's a Family Business

In February, one of the company's longest serving craftsmen, John Haw retired, after 50 years, from full-time work at the Kilburn workshop. His retirement marks the end of an amazing, unbroken record of 90 years of the Haw family working at Robert Thompson's. John joined the company in 1960 as a 15 year old apprentice, following in the footsteps of his father Leonard, who became a craftsman at Thompson's in 1920 and worked there until his retirement in the late 1970s. John's younger brother also followed him into the business and remained working there until, sadly, he died a few years ago.

Recollections of the workshop at Kilburn are amongst John's earliest memories. He recalls that, as a small boy of six or seven, he occasionally accompanied his father to work on a Saturday. There he met the company's founder, Robert Thompson, who was then nearing the end of his life although still active in the business. John remembers him as 'a kind, old man, sitting by the fire in the office. He gave me a bit of pocket money each time I visited.'

No doubt influenced by those childhood visits, John excelled at woodwork at Thirsk School and it was his teacher, Mr Coddling, who suggested that he should apply for an apprenticeship although, at that time, John harboured youthful dreams of joining the police or air force. However, he followed his teacher's advice and was accepted as an apprentice at Thompson's. John was fortunate to serve his time under a master craftsman - his father – working mainly on ecclesiastical commissions, which at that time formed the major part of the business. The

young apprentice enjoyed this work so much that he soon forgot his dreams of chasing villains or flying above the clouds. Father and son continued to work together for over a decade, one of their last joint jobs being the installation of a screen at Meanwood Church in Leeds in the mid 1970s.

Working on ecclesiastical installations gave John the opportunity to travel widely throughout the UK and overseas. In 1994, he journeyed to the USA to help install the complete furnishings of a Lutheran chapel in Monroe. (Details of this prestigious commission, to commemorate the founder of the La-Z-Boy furniture company, were covered in Newsletter 5: Spring/Summer 2009).

Despite being involved in some of the company's largest, most prestigious projects, John's favourite piece of work was the creation of a vestry door for the Parish Church of St John the Divine in Menston, West Yorkshire. The church's original Mouseman furnishings had been installed in

the 1940s by John's father but there was another reason that John was delighted to be asked to produce and install the later vestry door: this was the very church in which he had been married years before, having met his wife at a dance at Ilkley's Cow and Calf Hotel.

John will continue to work three days a week at Thompson's and hopes, in the future, to emigrate to New Zealand, where his son now lives. He will then have ample opportunity to see more of his young grandson, Lucas, who is already a dab-hand at woodwork. Clearly it's a skill that runs in the family.

Right: With a steady hand, John Haw carves a trademark mouse.

Below: Father and son, John and Leonard Haw (far left and second left) with fellow craftsmen in the Kilburn workshop in the 1960s.



Left to right: Lindsay Tonge and David Sharrod, Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust, with Ian Thompson Cartwright and author David Joy.



Trees are Made from Books

Woodlands are an important feature of the Yorkshire Dales, providing an essential wildlife habitat for birds and animals, and allowing rare plants to grow safely and away from the danger of grazing. These essential woodland environments are now directly benefiting from the recently published book Mouseman: *The Legacy of Robert Thompson of Kilburn* (Patricia Lennon and David Joy, Great Northern Books) . All royalties received by Robert Thompson's Craftsmen Ltd from sales of a special limited edition of this book, and books sold at the Mouseman visitor centre in Kilburn, are being donated to the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust Tree Planting scheme.

Copies of the Mouseman book are available from the Mouseman visitor centre or through the website www.robertthompsons.co.uk. For more information on the work of the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust, visit www.ydmt.org

Museum Update

The renowned Arts and Crafts Movement Collection at Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery has recently acquired a number of Mouseman pieces for public display, including a chair, corner cabinet, wall sconces and two carvings. In the museum's description of its collection, Robert Thompson is described as 'an important craftsman who bridged the gap between traditional furniture makers and the designer/makers of the Arts and Crafts Movement'.

For more information on the gallery, visit www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk

