

Newsletter No 5
Summer 2009

Robert Thompson's[®] Craftsmen Ltd.

Welcome!

Summer has arrived and, as always, we are pleased to welcome regular and new customers to our showroom, visitor centre and the T Café. The murmur of 'industry in quiet places' returns to Kilburn for another season.



In this newsletter, we are pleased to highlight one of our longest serving craftsmen, Mike Cole, who has semi-retired from the company after 50 years of 'mouse' work. Mike started here when I was just a small boy and my father was running the company with my uncle John. In the 1970s, I was apprenticed to Mike and I will always be grateful to him for teaching me my trade. Now my son, Simon, is working here as well.

The tradition of fine wood working that was started by my great grandfather, Robert Thompson, is kept alive not just through the family but also through highly skilled craftsmen, such as Mike, who pass on their know-how to the next generation. Long may it continue.

Ian Thompson Cartwright

50 Years of Craftsmanship

After 50 years in the Kilburn workshop, one of the company's longest serving craftsmen, Mike Cole, is 'retiring' although, as is often the case at Robert Thompson's, he's finding it hard to hang up his adze and will continue to work for the company a couple of days a week.

Mike joined the company in 1959, when he was fifteen, straight from Easingwold School. As he lived ten miles away from Kilburn, it was agreed that he would take 'digs' in the

village during the week and return home at weekends. He remembers being homesick – but only for one night! He started his six year apprenticeship under Ken Smith who is now a well known figure in the Mouseman Visitor Centre where he demonstrates the company's traditional woodworking techniques. Mike recalls his early days as an apprentice:

"I was really lucky to work under Ken. He is a brilliant man and taught me a great deal. He specialised in commissioned work, particularly pieces for churches and boardrooms. At that time, there was a large demand for Second World War memorials. For me, as a young lad, it was a perfect apprenticeship as I was involved in a wide variety of interesting work and often travelled to assist in installing pieces, which took us all over the country. It was hard work but we enjoyed it."

Just one of the many interesting ecclesiastical pieces that Mike worked on during his apprenticeship was the superb screen in the Cordwainers chapel at Brecon Cathedral. Commissioned by the London architectural practice of ADR Caroe, with whom Robert Thompson had established a strong working relationship. It was installed by Mike and his colleagues in 1963 as a continuation of a mediaeval screen which runs along one side of the chapel.

In the same year, Mike was involved in the remodelling and re-siting of the superb 1936 Mouseman panelling at the head office of the mail order company Grattan in Bradford. The panelling has recently been removed and sold at auction as detailed in a separate article in this newsletter. Another interesting

commission was destined to travel far from Kilburn to the country of Nepal. Two ornately carved Speakers' chairs were commissioned from Robert Thompson's by the Foreign Office for presentation to the Nepalese Parliament. In 1992, Mike and other colleagues who had worked on the chairs were invited to the special presentation ceremony at the Foreign Office in London where they were delighted to meet Betty Boothroyd, then newly appointed as the first woman speaker of the British House of Commons.

A couple of years later, in 1994, Mike was engaged on his most far-flung project when he travelled to Monroe in the USA to help install the complete furnishings of a Lutheran chapel, which was commissioned by Edwin Shoemaker, the multi-millionaire founder of the La-Z-Boy furniture company, as a memorial to his late wife. The commission included a lectern, font, altar rails, pulpit, kneelers, chairs and panelling. Everything was made in Kilburn and shipped to the USA by sea. The craftsmen from Robert Thompson's then flew out once the pieces had arrived. Mike recalls his Stateside experience:

"Three of us worked six days a week, for three weeks, fixing everything together. Just the items I made consisted of 2000 pieces of wood so you can imagine the scale and complexity of the job. But the amazing thing was that it all went together perfectly. There was no 'bodging' to get it to fit."

Despite having worked on such a wide range of prestigious commissions, the piece of which Mike is most proud is a noticeboard



commissioned for a church in Cape Town, South Africa. Measuring just 3' x 3', the piece has a special place in his memory as it was the first item that he was asked to produce completely when aged just 16 or 17.

But perhaps the one job that stands out amongst all others was the six week fit-out of a modern circular church in Leyland in the 1960s, as it was here that Mike met his

future wife, Susan. They have been married 43 years and are looking forward to spending more time together - that is when Mike isn't building a garden room at home or working on his allotment. Hands that have been busy for fifty years find it hard to be still.

Historic Mouseman Panelling Heads to a New Home in Shropshire



The Spring Sale at Tennants Auctioneers in Leyburn included a large number of Mouseman pieces of which the most notable was the original oak-panelled boardroom from the Bradford

offices of mail order company Freeman Grattan Holdings. The boardroom, comprising panelling, an integrated fireplace, inglenook seats, fender, door and floor, was commissioned from Robert Thompson in 1931 by John Enrico Fattorini, chairman of Grattan from 1912 to 1924.

The Fattorini family are long-standing customers of Robert Thompson's, sharing a mutual connection with Ampleforth College. The boardroom was originally housed in the Art Deco Grattan building (known as North Side) in Bradford. In 1963 it was removed and remodeled at the Kilburn workshop and then re-installed in a new modern office block at the Grattan site, which is now called Otto House.

In addition to seven of Robert Thompson's famous trademark carved mice, a number of humorous touches were incorporated into the design, including a possibly unique 'nodding' mouse at the end of one of the

inglenook seats and two carved heads, one depicting a devil poking his tongue out, the other as a monk with eyes shut, suggesting slumber.

Due to the unique and historic nature of the Mouseman boardroom, its removal from Grattan was overseen by an expert from English Heritage. Ian Thompson Cartwright estimated that the original commission would have taken around 10,000 hours to make. The initial order cost just over £342. Following keen bidding at the Tennant's sale in April, the piece was sold for £16,000 to Shropshire Brewery, Joule's, and will take pride of place in the company's new brewery in Market Drayton.



The 'nodding' mouse (below) from the Grattan boardroom is thought to be unique.





History in Every Piece of Furniture

Every piece of Mouseman furniture has history running through the grain. Earlier this year, Ian and Simon Thompson Cartwright travelled to Shropshire to purchase trees from a managed forest in Oswestry. The trees were estimated to be about 200 years old and came from an estate traversed by the famous Offa's Dyke. This important barrier, stretching 130 km, was constructed about 1200 years ago by Offa, King of Mercia (757–796 AD) as a means of defending his kingdom from the Welsh.

Robert Thompson's sources trees from managed estates, where tree felling is controlled and complemented with new planting, as part of its commitment to maintaining the country's ancient woodlands. The 'journey' of the trees purchased in Oswestry is typical: after felling, they are sent to saw mills either in Sewston near Grantham or Ampleforth. Once sawn, the planks of wood are left to season naturally, drying at the rate of about ½ inch per year. The wood

for a table top takes about two years to dry. At any time, the company will have a stock of about 750 trees seasoning and it is currently making furniture from trees felled in 2001. So, in about 2017, timber from the magnificent oaks that graced the wild country around Offa's Dyke, will emerge as Mouseman furniture for future generations to enjoy.

A selection of oak trees from the parcel, recently purchased through A&J Scott Ltd timber merchants



Look Back in Time

A mystery has been solved. The recently published *Mouseman* book featured a photo of Robert Thompson with some of his craftsmen at the entrance to an impressive but unidentified country mansion. The house



Robert Thompson (far left) and his craftsmen outside Skutterskelfe Hall

has since been named as Rudby Hall, formerly Skutterskelfe Hall and once home to Robert Ropner Jnr. who served as High Sheriff of Durham in 1896 and, from 1900 to 1910, represented the constituency of Stockton-on-Tees in the House of Commons. Sir Robert was a member of the wealthy Ropner shipbuilding dynasty. His father, Robert Ropner Snr., was born c1838 in Magdeburg, Prussia. He emigrated to England where he worked for a coal export concern before building up a fleet of colliers and then founding in 1874 the Ropner Shipping Company in Hartlepool. It was said that the Ropner fleet was second only to the Royal Navy.

The Ropner company started to decline after the end of the Second World War and parts of the estate were later sold to many of its tenant farmers. In 1952 one farmer moved, by train, his entire farm, including machinery, animals and men to Sussex from Scutterskelfe Hall Farm. The move was recorded in a documentary film *Farmer*

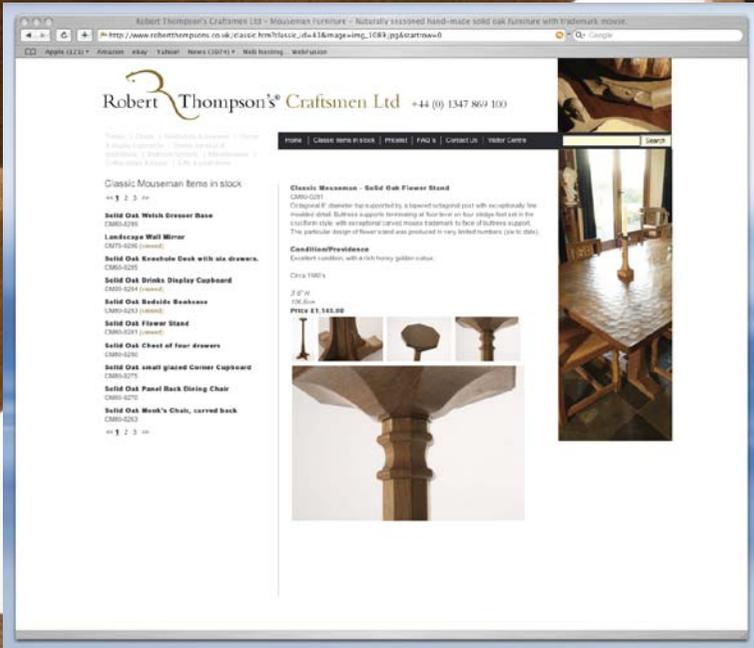
Moving South which has been described as one of the finest examples of the early British Transport Films. It was funded by the British Transport Commission Railway Executive and produced by Edgar Ansty.

The photograph of Robert Thompson at Skutterskelfe Hall appears to have been taken in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Sir

Robert Ropner Jnr, died in 1924). At this time, Robert Thompson had not yet started to 'sign' his work with his trademark carved mouse. Enquiries are now ongoing to discover if any early, unidentified, Mouseman pieces remain within the Hall.

Skutterskelfe Hall now called Rudby Hall as it is today.





The Classic Mouseman area is now live on the website and is regularly updated as new items become available or are sold. Each piece is displayed with several images and a clear description of condition, vintage and price. The URL below will take you direct to the Classic Mouseman pages or use the easy-to-navigate menu bar on the Mouseman website.

<http://www.robertthompsons.co.uk/classic.php>

Classic Mouseman

Robert Thompson's offers refurbished, previously owned Mouseman pieces for sale. Customers are assured that these Classic Mouseman items have been verified, accurately dated and carefully refurbished in the traditional way. To view a current list of Classic Mouseman pieces go to www.robertthompsons.co.uk. Items move quickly so you are advised to enquire as soon as possible if you are interested in one of the pieces



A very fine example of a Classic Mouseman smoking chair. Dated 1970s and priced at £1,330.

The company is always interested in buying back items of Mouseman furniture and will be pleased to hear of items for sale.

Classic Mouseman Welsh Dresser base unit dated 1980s and priced at £6,055



Dates for your Diary

The T Café and **Visitor Centre** are now open. 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.

November: Ian Thompson Cartwright will be talking to members of English Heritage at a lunchtime event at the Abbey Inn, Byland, near Kilburn. For more details, contact Sarah Parsonage on 07834 240730.

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