

Robert Thompson's[®] Craftsmen Ltd

Welcome!

At this time of year, our thoughts inevitably turn to friends and family and the memories we share. In this newsletter, the pictures of a small chapel in Monroe, USA bring back particular memories for me as it was the first major scheme that I designed, working alongside George Weightman who was actually trained by my Great Grandfather, Robert Thompson. Like all our craftsmen, George Weightman's legacy is not only the pieces he created but also the skills he passed on to a new generation, ensuring a continuing tradition from Robert Thompson to today's young apprentices.

In the following pages you can also read about two very special projects that we are working on with Ampleforth College and Magdalene College, Cambridge, both of which have selected Mouseman pieces as an opportunity for alumni and friends to keep alive memories of time spent within these historic seats of learning.

The subject of apprenticeships and colleges brings to mind a quotation by Nelson Mandela, a man who has been in many people's thoughts this year, who said, *"It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another."* Mandela was referring to personal growth through learning, but it is a philosophy that we also acknowledge here in our workshop in Kilburn when we see how a simple piece of oak can be shaped by skilled hands and creative minds into something completely different, something beautiful, something lasting.

It is pleasing to all of us at Robert Thompson's to know that many of the pieces created here in Kilburn will be passed on from one generation to another, carrying with them memories of people, places and special times.

Ian Thompson Cartwright



A Monk and a Devil Return to Kilburn

These striking bookends were carved in the 1930s by Robert Thompson as a personal gift to his friend Mr Briscoe, a Yorkshire-based solicitor.

The combination of a grimacing devil and a serene monk is a theme which Robert Thompson was particularly fond of, using it to give a humorous twist to both large-scale and smaller, personal items. A similar pair of bookends was produced in the early 1930s for the Mother Superior of St Joseph's Convent, Staffordshire. On a larger scale, a devil and a monk also featured within a scheme of panelling and fixtures, produced in 1931 for the boardroom of the Bradford mail order company, Grattan. This was recently removed and may now be seen at Joule's Brewery in Market Drayton. (Newsletter 8 Winter 2012). In its November sale this year,

Tennants Auctioneers in Leyburn offered for sale two very fine monk's chairs from the 1930s, which also bore tongue-wagging devils accompanied by serene religious figures. The chairs fetched £6,500 each.

Mr Briscoe's devil and monk subsequently travelled to Malvern in Worcestershire with his widow, where they were much admired by a neighbour, Mrs Iris Abbott. When Mrs Briscoe returned to live in Yorkshire during the early 1950s, she gave the bookends to Mrs Abbot who treasured them until her death in 2007.

The pair were subsequently inherited by her daughter Shirley Abbott, who recalled her Mother saying, "*it would be nice if one day they could be returned to Robert Thompson's*". This year, her mother's wish became reality when the bookends were donated by Shirley Abbott to the Mouseman Visitor Centre in Kilburn, where they will be displayed.



Thompson 'Mice' are Heading to Cambridge Dining Hall

Magdalene College, in the University of Cambridge, has embarked upon a complete rebuild and refurbishment of its 1960s kitchens and has taken the opportunity to review its catering arrangements and to consider new furniture for the sixteenth century dining hall.

A number of different companies which manufacture chairs were considered, with a range of samples being delivered to the College for trial. The Fellowship and the students of the College were consulted on whether the existing benches, which have seated many generations of students, Fellows and their guests, should be replaced by chairs. The result was that ninety five



new chairs from Robert Thompson's Ltd have been commissioned. A spokesperson for the College explained that the enduring heritage and quality of the furniture was instrumental in this decision.

The College hopes to involve its alumni body with this historic change in its dining practices by inviting them to 'sponsor' each chair. Recognition would be given in the form of a bronze plaque, acknowledging the sponsor, inserted discreetly at the rear of the chair.

The College has commented that it is pleased to be starting a new relationship with Robert Thompson's Ltd and Ian Thompson Cartwright shares this enthusiasm saying, *"We are delighted and honoured to have been selected to provide such a large number of chairs for this historic and prestigious centre of learning. It is humbling to think that our 'Mouse' will be part of the fabric of this wonderful building for many years to come."*



The history of Magdalene College can be traced back to 1428 when Abbot Lytlington of Crowland Abbey near Peterborough was licensed by Letters Patent of King Henry VI to acquire a site in Cambridge as a hostel for Benedictine student-monks. The Benedictines wisely chose a site north of the river in order to be away from the temptations of town. Today the College has some 320 undergraduates, nearly 180 graduate students and around 60 Fellows and other teaching officers. Throughout its history, the College has attracted some of the greatest minds of each era from Thomas Crammer who was appointed as a lecturer in 1515, to Honorary Fellows such as Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, TS Eliot, C S Lewis, Seamus Heaney and Nelson Mandela.



Remembering Bruno

On 2nd June this year, Ian Thompson Cartwright and his son, Simon, joined in the last day of a sponsored cycle ride from Doncaster to Ampleforth. It was the final leg of some 700 miles of pedalling that started in Cologne, Germany.

The ride was organised by Jozef Mycielski, Director of Development at Ampleforth College, as part of a fund-raising mission to start a bursary in memory of his son, Bruno, who was born and died in January 2012. The bursary will give a vulnerable

or disadvantaged child a place at Ampleforth College.

"When we first came up with the idea, I needed a target to help with my grief," explained Jozef. "Now a very small idea has become something truly special." He and his wife, Vivian, chose to start the ride in Cologne, the birthplace of St Bruno.

Jozef rode alongside 12 other cyclists who covered the 710 miles in just eight days, on one day pedalling as far as 120 miles in order to meet the schedule. During the journey, they suffered several crashes, 27 punctures and Jozef was knocked off his bike by a car. He said, *"We were battered and bruised, but never bowed. I never thought we wouldn't make it because I knew the people around me would get me back."*

The highlight of the epic journey came on the final day, when 60 cyclists joined them at Doncaster and a further 30 at York for the final push to Ampleforth where more than 400 people turned out to welcome Team Bruno home.

The cycle ride raised £401,000, which is more than half the target of £600,000 required to establish the bursary fund.

The Amplemouse Box – a Limited Edition Piece to Support Bruno's Fund

Robert Thompson's Craftsmen Ltd is currently working with Ampleforth College on the production of a unique, limited edition, keepsake box which will be available to past and present pupils and their families and friends of Ampleforth. Hand-crafted in oak from the Ampleforth estate (one of the oak butts being prepared at Walls Ampleforth Saw Mills pictured below) and bearing a marquetry Ampleforth crest and a carved, relief mouse, the suede-lined box measures 260mm x 200mm.

Production will be limited and the number will be announced on our website before the launch next year. Sales of the box will help to support the Bruno Bursary Fund. To enquire about purchasing a limited edition Amplemouse Box, please contact Claire Evans, Development Office, Ampleforth Abbey & College, York YO62 4EY. Tel: 01439 766777 Email: cee@ampleforth.org.uk





Monroe Revisited

In 1994, craftsmen from Robert Thompson's flew to the small town of Monroe in the USA to help install the complete furniture and fixtures of a chapel at a Lutheran old people's home, which had been commissioned by Edwin Shoemaker, the co-founder of the La-Z-Boy furniture company.



Every item for the chapel was produced in the workshop in Kilburn and then transported by road, rail and sea to its final destination in the US state of Michigan.

As the images show, nearly twenty years after its installation, the furniture looks magnificent and is complemented superbly by the specially commissioned stained glass windows created by the Judson Studios in Los Angeles.

It is perhaps no surprise that the Thompson oak work and the Judson glass sit so well together as both companies share a similar history and ethos. Judson Studios was



founded circa 1897 by the English-born (Manchester) artist William Lees Judson and his three sons, at around the same time Robert Thompson was starting out in Kilburn.

William Lees Judson was a highly regarded portrait and landscape painter who became a leading figure in the Californian Arts and Crafts Movement. In the 1940s, Judson Studios was described by The Highland Park News-Herald as 'a medieval

guild secluded from a hectic modern world by the vine-covered building.' The management of the company was then in the hands of the founder's grandson, Horace T Judson, who echoed 'Mousey' Thompson's belief with his own words, *"Here there is no rush. We work slowly and for perfection as they did six centuries ago."* Like Robert Thompson's Ltd, the Judson Studios remains family-run, from the original site, and employs its own craftsmen who continue to use 'techniques that have not changed much since the craft began to flourish in the 12th Century' (Los Angeles Times). It is interesting that these two companies, thousands of miles apart, have, for over 100 years, continued the traditions of medieval craftsmen and the pursuit of 'industry in quiet places'. It seems almost destined that these two companies should find each other and so they have, at the small chapel in Monroe.

Seeking the Craftsmen of the Future



There has been a continuous tradition of apprenticeships at Robert Thompson's Craftsmen since the early years of the twentieth century, and it is as strong today. As we prepare to say goodbye next year to one of our long-serving craftsmen

(who is retiring after 50 years) we also welcome our latest trainee, Richard Warren, pictured here in our Kilburn workshop. The company is seeking to appoint further apprentices in 2014. Applications are invited from young men and women who have a keen interest in working with their hands and ideally have experience and a passion for working with wood. Further details of these job vacancies may be found on the company's website.



The Beauty of Burr

In spring this year, Robert Thompson's acquired a magnificent oak burr from a tree felled at Ireby, near Kirkby Lonsdale in Cumbria.

It is estimated that the tree was more than 400 years old and the burr is considered by the company to be one of the best examples it has seen in many years, indeed company records show that the last burr of this standard bought by Robert Thompson's was in the 1960s.

Burr is a fascinating material and is highly prized for its beauty and rarity. The burr effect of swirling, irregular patterns within the oak's grain, is the result of stress often caused by damage to the bark at some stage in the tree's growth. Fungal growth then develops within the tree, creating a bulbous mass either attached to the roots or as a protrusion beneath the bark on the trunk of the tree. In the Ireby tree, the burr measured 8 feet in diameter and extended through to the middle of the tree. Burr wood is extremely dense making it ideal for the creation of bowls, table tops and cabinet panels.



The massive dimensions of the burr are clearly shown here.

It is fascinating to think of the tree in its earlier years and what might have caused the damage leading to the creation of the burr. Perhaps, at the beginning of the 17th century, the sapling was knocked by a farmer's cart

travelling on the old turnpike road from Yorkshire, through Ireby, to the bustling market at Kirby Lonsdale. Or Cromwell's Parliamentarians mustering to the siege of nearby Thurland Castle in 1643 may have damaged the young tree in their haste to battle. Two hundred years later, the stately oak's bark could have been impaired by a pine martin, widely hunted in the region at that time, scrabbling to escape the hounds of the famous Cumbrian huntsman and Ireby resident, John Peel. Whilst we will never know what event gave cause to the burr, what is indisputable is that this magnificent oak has stood witness to four centuries of change in the picturesque Lune Valley. Now the beauty concealed for all those years beneath its bark is set to be fashioned into unique Mouseman pieces that will give pleasure for many years to come.



*Classic Mouseman –
Restored Items for Sale*

Robert Thompson's Craftsmen offers items of classic Mouseman furniture for sale. All items have been verified as genuine, they are fully dated and professionally restored by the company's craftsmen using traditional methods and materials. Here is just a small selection. Other examples may be viewed on the company's website.



1930s wardrobe (ref: 30-0590)

Mouseman on TV

TV cameras rolled into Kilburn this autumn to film Robert Thompson's as part of a feature for the popular BBC Two TV programme, *Flog-it: Trade Secrets*. The programme is expected to be broadcast as part of the next series, which starts in February 2014. The company will also feature in an upcoming edition of the BBC programme *Escape to the Country*, also expected to be on our screens in February 2014.



Oak pew from the 1950s (ref: 50-0640)
www.robertthompsons.co.uk/classic.php



*T Café and Visitor Centre
Opening Hours*

During December, the T Café and Visitor Centre is open Wednesday to Sunday 11am to 4pm. The Visitor Centre and T Café close for Christmas on Sunday 8th December 2013, reopening on 18th April 2014 (Good Friday).

The Office and Showroom opening times for December will be: Monday to Thursday 9am to 5pm; Friday 9am to 3.45pm; Saturday 10am to 12 noon. Please note, the Office and Showroom will close for Christmas at 12 noon on Saturday 21st December and will reopen at 9am on Monday 6th January.

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