

Newsletter No 13
Winter 2016

Robert Thompson's[®] Craftsmen Ltd

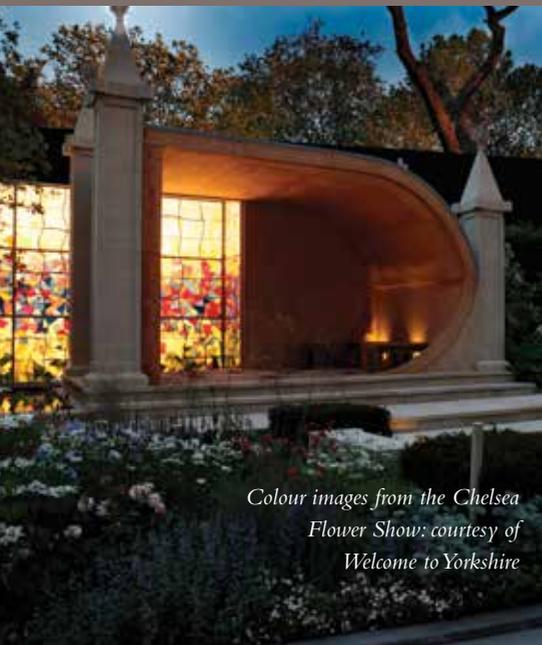
WELCOME!

At this time of year, I always enjoy reflecting back on the highlights of the previous twelve months. One that immediately springs to mind was the RHS Chelsea Flower Show and our creation of a bespoke oak bench for Welcome to Yorkshire's show garden which set out to create a sense of God's Own County in the buzzing heart of London. Looking at the photography in this newsletter, I am sure readers will agree that this vision was realised quite magnificently by the garden's designer Matthew Wilson. My favourite image from the event has to

be that of Dame Judi Dench sitting on the Mouseman bench – quite literally poetic.

During the summer we were delighted to welcome to our workshop the TV presenter Dave Myers who had swapped his usual guise of Hairy Biker for that of an equally hirsute Builder. Like many visitors to Kilburn he was amazed that our business still operates from the same premises established by my great grandfather. This sense of the past is indeed palpable in the workshop and inspires everything we do. The Mouseman legacy is also kept alive through our tradition of employing apprentices, each of whom learns their skills from an older craftsman. It's a tradition that goes back to Robert Thompson's time ensuring that his methods and techniques are passed on from one generation to the next. In this newsletter we say goodbye (or rather au revoir) to one of our longest serving craftsmen, Ray Harding, who joined the firm as an apprentice in 1967, and we introduce four young people who are at the start of their careers with Mouseman. And so continues the cycle of craftsmanship reaching back to my great grandfather and beyond to the medieval wood carvers of Ripon Cathedral that inspired him.

Ian Thompson Cartwright



*Colour images from the Chelsea
Flower Show: courtesy of
Welcome to Yorkshire*

A Garden For Yorkshire - Made In Chelsea

Earlier this year we were delighted to be involved in the creation of Welcome to Yorkshire's contribution to the RHS Chelsea Flower Show - 'God's Own County - A Garden for Yorkshire' – which showcased the region's wealth of stunning scenery, iconic heritage and skilled craftsmen.

The garden's designer, Matthew Wilson, was inspired by the Great East Window of York Minster, the largest single expanse of medieval stained glass in the country. This was reflected in the colours and shapes of the planting, whilst the cathedral's pews, benches and ornamental tombs were referenced in the garden's stone and timber elements. The space successfully combined the old with the new: gnarled, medieval stone pinnacles originally from the Minster were loaned by the owners of Newby Hall and juxtaposed alongside modern, cast stone features; York Glaziers Trust, which is currently undertaking the 10-year restoration of the Great East Window, created a stunning contemporary panel of stained glass using the same methods employed in 1405; and the techniques used by Robert Thompson's craftsmen hark back to those of medieval wood carvers.



Adam Bowers, working on the Chelsea Bench

The contribution from Kilburn was a large oak bench curved to fit within one corner of the open-sided pavilion. The piece, which is 2.7 metres wide and 1.5 metres deep, took two craftsmen 120 hours to complete. It incorporates an inscription from the headboard of Robert Thompson's own bed - 'Deep Rivers Move in Silence. Shallow Brooks Are Noisy' - as well as three signature carved mice.





At the end of the garden's construction, Mathew Wilson summed up the sense of peace he hoped it invoked: "I had five minutes, sitting in the garden refuge, on the beautiful Mousey Thompson bench yesterday, looking at the view and feeling, despite all the craziness going on around, very calm. That's exactly the spirit and feel I want to get across. That's what I felt in front of the Great East Window in York Minster."

It seems that many others shared Matthew's vision as The Garden for Yorkshire was awarded a silver medal and the prestigious RHS People's Choice Award.

The bespoke bench made for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is available for sale. For details, contact Robert Thompson's on 01347 869100 or email info@robertthompsons.co.uk

Judi Dench and Matthew Wilson seated on the Mouseman bench at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show



The Hairy Builder Meets Wooden Mice



Ampleforth College library c1960s

The association between Ampleforth College and Robert Thompson's Craftsmen goes back nearly 100 years to the seminal meeting in 1919 between Robert Thompson and Father Paul Nevill, priest of Ampleforth village church and later headmaster of the school. From this developed not only a great friendship but also a working relationship which lasted throughout their lifetimes and still continues between the company and the school today.

The Ampleforth collection of Mouseman work - the largest in the world - was featured recently on TV as part of the BBC Two programme *The Hairy Builder*, which looks at the restoration of large-scale, architecturally significant buildings. Programme presenter Dave Myers visited Ampleforth where he practised his brick-laying skills alongside the builders currently working on the major restoration of Giles Gilbert Scott's art deco masterpiece Bolton House. In the school library, he was captivated by the quality of Robert Thompson's work and by the wooden mice that appear everywhere throughout the school. During a visit to the Mouseman workshop in Kilburn he saw a present-day mouse being carved and chatted with Ian Thompson Cartwright about how the legacy of Robert 'Mousey' Thompson is being kept alive by the company's skilled craftsmen.

The programme is available on video download from www.store.bbc.com.

Record Price For Sideboard

The summer sale at Hartley's Auctioneers in Ilkley saw a record hammer price of £20,000 for this beautiful Mouseman sideboard from the 1930s. The piece had been acquired by the seller at a previous Hartley's auction in 1993 at what was then considered to be a 'very full' price of £3,400. According to Hartley's, the auction in 1993 also recorded the same 'sold' price of £3,400 for a classic Georgian mahogany bureau bookcase, which today would appear with a pre-sale estimate of around £500-£700.

*Image courtesy of
www.andrewhartleyfinearts.co.uk*





Historic Hostelry Is Brought Back To Life

In previous newsletters (Summer 2009 and Winter 2012) we detailed how a large collection of 1930s Mouseman furniture, originally installed in the boardroom of the Bradford business Grattan, had found a new home in the visitor centre of Joule's Brewery in Market Drayton. The brewery's 'Mouseroom', as it became known, went on to win the prestigious National Pub Design Award by CAMRA and English Heritage.

Like so many other Mouseman collectors, Steve Nuttall, Managing Director of Joule's, has become passionate about early Robert Thompson furniture and has made it the centrepiece of another refurbishment project, the Grade II listed Rose & Crown pub, which opened in Ludlow in July.

At this historic inn, which is believed to be over 400 years old, the bar

has been furnished from reclaimed Mouseman timbers and panels including pieces sourced directly from Robert Thompson's in Kilburn. Some of the sections of panelling have a very personal connection to Robert 'Mousey' Thompson, having originally formed the doors to an understairs cupboard which Robert made for his own cottage in the 1920s. Other Mouseman pieces in the new bar area include a 16' long church pew dating from the 1950s and twenty-nine large oak panels, carved with beautiful linen fold detailing, which were acquired at auction by Joule's from the local sale room, Trevanion & Dean.

These diverse Mouseman pieces have been skilfully installed by Joule's craftsmen to create a cosy, relaxed atmosphere in the bar, which is entirely harmonious with the historic building. And, of course, hunting down the seven carved wooden mice, which are discreetly nestled amongst the furnishings, has become a popular challenge for the inn's visitors.

Welcoming The Craftspeople Of Tomorrow

Since its earliest days, Robert Thompson's has employed apprentices who learn their trade under the watchful eyes of an older craftsmen. This year, Jessica Brown became the first female apprentice to join the firm. Jessica knew from an early age that she wanted to work with wood and first applied to Robert Thompson's for a work experience position when she was just 14 years-old. Her determination paid off and in August this year, aged 16, she moved all the way up from Jersey to begin an apprenticeship. Jessica is working under the tuition of Richard Balderston who has 49 years' experience under his belt at Robert Thompson's (Richard started his apprenticeship in 1967 alongside Ray Harding - see separate article). Asked how she feels making history as the first female apprentice to join the Mouseman tradition, Jessica replied simply, "it's pretty cool".

Our other new apprentice is Thomas Lewis who also joined in August, aged 16, straight from Northallerton College. Thomas applied to Robert Thompson's by sending photographs of his own work, following which he was given a week's trial, then a three-month trial and finally secured a full apprenticeship. Thomas says that his most enjoyable task is learning to carve the mouse, which he found difficult at first with some early "mishaps" but under "good guidance" it is now coming along well.



A study in concentration: Trainee, Anthony Cockerill

In addition to our new apprentices we have also appointed college-leavers Tim Dixon and Anthony Cockerill both of whom had previously studied together on a two-year cabinet making course at Newark College in Lincolnshire. At the end of the course, the two friends went their separate ways and are now delighted to find themselves working alongside each other again in the Mouseman workshop in Kilburn. Summing up his new job, Anthony says, "I'm loving it, it's exactly what I wanted to do."

We are always pleased to see young talent develop. Today's trainees will in turn be the senior craftspeople of tomorrow. The company will be seeking further apprentices in 2017 and welcomes applications from young men and women who have a passion for working with wood. Details of job vacancies may be found on the company's website.

Fifty Years Ago . . .

In November 1967 the Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras Railway Station, designed by George Gilbert Scott (grandfather of Giles Gilbert Scott) became a Grade 1 listed building; Charles de Gaulle vetoed British entry into the European Economic Community; and a new BBC Radio 4 panel show, *Just a Minute*, was about to air for the first time, chaired by Nicholas Parsons. That same month Ray Harding, a 15-year-old lad from Ripon, started his apprenticeship at Robert Thompson's.

Ray recalls the early days of his apprenticeship as a happy time, "We were paid £3 per week wages, which all went towards my lodgings in Thirsk. The bus fair to work cost me £1 per week and I also gave money to my mum for my laundry. Fortunately, I got a government apprenticeship grant so I had some spending money left over."

Kilburn today is little changed from when Ray first arrived on the bus from Thirsk. The village shop has gone but the church and pub are still at the heart of the community. Back then the original blacksmith's shed, where a young Robert Thompson had worked with his father, was used only for storage. Today it is the Mouseman Visitor Centre and T Café. One of Ray's first jobs as an apprentice was to help dismantle the old workshop, salvaging the wooden roof beams which were turned into work benches for a new bigger workshop, which remains the centre for production today.

With regard to production techniques, Ray notes that little has changed during his years at the firm, "The changes have been progressive, rather than revolutionary," he says. "The workshop is bigger and more modern but the old practices, such as adzing, are just the same as when I started."

After half a century at Robert Thompson's, Ray is now hanging up his adze – but not for long; in January 2017 he will return to the workshop on a part-time basis and will continue to pass on his skills and experience to the next generation of Mouse craftsmen

Craftsman, Ray Harding



New Mouseman Book

A forthcoming, new publication, authorised by Robert Thompson's Craftsmen Ltd and written by Patricia Lennon, is set to become the definitive book on Robert Thompson and early Mouseman work, including

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Classic Mouseman – Restored Items for Sale

Robert Thompson's regularly purchases items of pre-owned Mouseman furniture for refurbishment and resale. These items are professionally restored, using traditional methods and materials, by the company's craftsmen in Kilburn. Purchasing from Robert Thompson's provides an assurance of authenticity and becomes an important part of an item's provenance.

Individual pieces from our Classic collection may be personalised with an inscription. This year we were honoured to be asked by the family of the late Cardinal Basil Hume to incorporate an inscription into one of our Classic Mouseman pieces, a 1930s Prayer Desk. Once finished, the piece will be installed in Westminster Cathedral where the Cardinal is buried in the Chapel of St Gregory and St Augustine.

A Monk's Chair from the 1970s, restored and reupholstered in new Hammersmith Tan cow hide (ref: CM12).

To view more Classic Mouseman pieces, visit www.robertthompsons.co.uk/classic.php



photographs and drawings never before seen in public. A special Mouseman Collectors' Edition will be available with a personalised bookplate signed by Ian Thompson Cartwright.

Publication 2017. For more information, visit www.mousemanbook.co.uk



T Café and Visitor Centre Opening Hours

The Mouseman Museum and Gift Shop will close on Sunday 11th December and reopen on Saturday 1 April. The T Café will close on Sunday 4th December and reopen on Saturday 1st April 2017

Office and Showroom

The office and showroom will close for the annual Christmas holiday on Friday 23rd December 2016 and will reopen on Monday 9th January 2017.

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