

Visit to Beauchamp Community and Madresfield, September 2016

A coach full of members set off on a beautiful late September day for Worcestershire. On arrival at our destination, we were greeted by the Community Archivist. He was a highly knowledgeable and genial guide who gave us detailed information on the history of the buildings and the characters of those who had played a part in the creation of the community. After a brief walk around the quad, the clock struck eleven, signalling the end of mass. We went into the boardroom where a delicious breakfast was laid ready for us. Suitably refreshed, our tour got underway.



The idea for the Beauchamp Community and Church was conceived by Charlotte, Countess Beauchamp, in the 1840s to benefit workers from the Beauchamp estate at Madresfield. Unfortunately, she died before realising her ambition. However, her husband, the 3rd Earl Beauchamp, set aside the value of her dowry for this purpose. It was the second son of the 4th Earl, Frederick Lygon, a leading Tractarian, who finally saw her wishes realised.

An adherent of the Oxford Movement, Frederick's vision was that the almshouses and church be a "Gothic Heaven". In this, he certainly succeeded. The interior of the church is glorious, with every surface decorated. Stunning frescoes cover the walls above the dado, and below it are mock tiles of flowing foliage and designs typical of the Gothic Revival Movement. It is a feast for the eyes. The grade 1 listed frescoes were devised by the Revd James Skinner, the first vicar warden of the Community, and executed by Clayton and Bell of London. The encaustic floor tiles were designed by William Godwin of Lugwardine, whose authentic reproduction of medieval designs was also favoured by George Gilbert Scott and GE Street in their church restorations.



After visiting the church and the rest of the interior we had a tour of the quad. Our guide gave us lots of interesting information about the purpose of each building and the history of the choir school, including the many duties of the choristers. Apparently, the fact that the choir school was attached to almshouses made it unique amongst such ecclesiastical institutions. After a sandwich lunch at the Swan Inn we had a short coach ride to Madresfield. If The Beauchamp Community was a heaven for lovers of the Gothic Revival Movement, then Madresfield was equally enticing for those whose passion is the Arts and Crafts Movement. Although, I find Gothic Revival architecture and decoration exciting to the senses, my first love is Arts and

Crafts furniture and artefacts because of the choice of materials, coupled with the skill and loving attention to detail with which they are executed. I was not disappointed.

Madresfield Court has been the ancestral home of the Lygon family since at least the 12th century. It has been remodelled several times over the intervening centuries and the moated house we now see is a result of the 19th century reconstruction in the Victorian Gothic style. The setting is lovely, the house being surrounded by beautiful countryside and well-tended, stylish gardens. We were blessed with the finest weather, which added to the attractiveness of the whole. My only reservation about the tour was that we were rather "rushed around" and didn't have time to examine the rooms and artefacts closely, and the gardens hardly at all.

The seventh Earl Beauchamp was a considerable patron of the Arts and Crafts movement and there is much in the house to evidence this. The chapel and the library are said to be examples of some of the finest work carried out in this style. Almost all the painting, stained glass and metalwork in the chapel was carried out by teachers from the Birmingham Municipal School of Arts and Crafts. Every surface is decorated and the effect is stunning. The frescoes are beautiful and depict the children of the family amidst a profusion of flowers. Equally lovely are the tiny stained-glass windows behind the pews, the gold embroidered altar cloth and altar cross inlaid with champleve enamel. It is a feast for the eyes.

The library contains some of the finest carvings designed by C R Ashbee, a hugely important figure in the Arts and Crafts movement. The carvings on the four doors and two bookcase ends were executed by Alec Miller and Will Hart, who were very highly regarded Arts and Crafts craftsmen. In many of the rooms are wonderful Birmingham Arts and Crafts standard lamps.

Throughout the house are very many fine paintings and precious artefacts. Amongst the most notable paintings are a portrait of Edward Gibbon by George Romney, one of only three known portraits of Gibbon. Also, there is an early Joshua Reynolds, a fine portrait of Elizabeth 1 and a charming Dutch or Flemish work depicting Orpheus playing to the animals.

In the Staircase Hall, a fine top-lit galleried room with very unusual crystal balustrades, there is a huge alabaster fireplace, a gift from Bendor, Duke of Westminster to his sister, the wife of the 7th Earl. Roosting on top of it are a lovely collection of Meissen birds.

In other rooms are several important pieces of Boulle furniture collected by the first countess after the defeat of Napoleon, together with a number of highly polished tables inlaid with parquetry and marquetry. Everything collected through the centuries is of the highest quality including many pieces of more recent date. The present occupants of the house are Rosalind, Lady Morrison and her young family, and it feels very much like a family home where every piece, historical or current, is much loved and cared for. The exception perhaps being the odd pair of "distressed" curtains.

Overall, I would give the visit five stars; it was a truly fascinating and stimulating day out.

Janet Havercroft