



Ellys Manor House

A 16th century wool merchant's home

We have mentioned in the past the 'wool churches' of the south east England, built by medieval wool merchants, but until recently have not heard of any merchant's houses. We have assumed that these have either been destroyed or altered to such an extent that they are no longer recognisable. However, a chance meeting, just before Christmas at the Celebration of British Livestock, directed us to a house which gives a good indication of the wealth accrued by the 14th to 16th century wool merchants.

In medieval England wool was big business. There was an enormous demand for it from the weavers in Flanders, and anyone who had land, from the peasants to the Lords of the Manor, raised sheep. The English did make cloth, but it was mainly for domestic use; very little was exported. It was the raw wool, reputed to be the best in the world at that time, which became the driving force of the English economy and the major source of income for the Crown. Even today the Lord High Chancellor sits on a large square bag of wool known as The Woolsack, a reminder that wool used to be the main source of England's income.

As the wool trade increased the great landowners, including Lords and Bishops, counted their wealth in the numbers of their sheep. Large tracts of land, especially in the north, were owned by monasteries. The wool produced was, of course, taxed by the King. Over time the large land owners developed

direct links with the manufacturers but the smaller producers still relied on local wool merchants. The single-masted 'cogs', developed by the merchants of the Hanseatic League to carry goods along the coasts of Northern Europe, filled the ports.

To understand the organisation of the wool trade we must go back to the reign of Edward I who first realised how much revenue he could make from the trade. Realising how valuable this revenue was Edward III went to war with France partly to protect the trade with Flanders. After Calais was taken in 1347, 26 traders were incorporated into the 'Company of the Staple of Calais' and in exchange for its cooperation in payment of taxes, the company was granted a total monopoly of wool exports from England. Flemish and Italian wool merchants were familiar figures in the wool markets of England, ready to buy the bales of wool which were then transported to English ports such as Boston, King's Lynn and London.

The upper classes were much influenced by the Renaissance in Southern Europe and imported Italian ideas and works of art. Henry VIII owned one of the original sets of the tapestries woven from the cartoons by Raphael and in the early 1600's Charles I acquired the cartoons themselves. The merchants and traders, however, were much more influenced by Northern ideas.

Contemporary pictures of Edward VI

The house is open for visitors between Easter and October 31st. Check website for more information. <http://www.ellysmanorhouse.com>



Trees and a border



The fox and the crane



The lion



Detail of the deer

Coronation Procession from the Tower of London to Westminster Abbey in 1527 show a good number of buildings built in the Flemish style along Cheapside, one of the main thoroughfares of London, where the merchants lived at that time. This type of architecture, with the crow-stepped gables, is common even today in the Low Countries and into the Baltic States frequented by the Hanseatic traders. The Great Fire destroyed all trace of them in London. However in rural Lincolnshire, just south of Grantham an almost perfect example still remains – Ellys Manor House, near Grantham, Lincolnshire.

The manor house, with some 14th century features, was enlarged in the early 1500's by Anthony Ellys, a member of the Ellys family, wool merchants of the Staple of Calais. The house is constructed with dense stone walls, deep mullioned windows with shallow Tudor arches typical of the period and, in typical Flemish style, the crow-stepped gable end. The house was fairly modest in size with four main rooms. There was a 21 ft high medieval 'Great Hall' and a parlour on the ground floor and a solar and bedroom above. The ground floor rooms would have been used for entertaining visitors and conducting business and possibly accommodated servants. The upper rooms, originally reached by an external staircase, were the private quarters. All the rooms had high ceilings with moulded oak girders and chamfered joists which still retain traces of original black, ochre and red

paint. Each room had a massive fireplace which dominated the room and would not have looked out of place in a castle.

The manor house has been altered several times. It was possibly reduced in size in the 17th century, altered again and extended c1826. By the early twentieth century it had become two cottages, which were reunited in 1921 and purchased by the Church Commissioners two years later for a rectory

The Great Hall has been divided to make a corridor and two smaller rooms and upstairs a corridor gives access to the solar which is now a bedroom, accessed from the 'new' 17th century turret stairwell. In spite of the alterations, including raising floors, the original structure remains more or less complete.

Ellys Manor House is now owned by Clive Taylor who hopes to be able to return the building to its original 16th century glory. The main emphasis of work at present is uncovering a series of 16th century wall painting on the upper floor but it hoped to also remove the partitions. It is amazing that the house has retained so much of the original structure but even more so that the wall paintings

have been preserved. They were first discovered in the 1930's when the Rector's son knocked away a little bit of plaster from the main bedroom wall. In the 1940's it



Pillar capital, Autun Cathedral



Part of the Coronation Procession of Edward VI

was reported that the walls were running in water and the rector's wife was told to just mop up the pools. Although looked at 'professionally', the cost of uncovering the paintings was prohibitive and the rector, with a little bit of training was told to try to uncover them himself!

The wall paintings are a little reminiscent of the French verdure style of tapestry and, though feint, show stylised foliage, flowers, fruit and leaves. The paintings, in red and yellow, are set in an architectural framework with what appears to be a parapet at the base and a series of columns separating stylised scenes with trees, animals, foliage and flowers topped by a frieze of elaborate scrolls. Each scene has a central group of three trees – possibly representing the Trinity, but other than this the scheme is purely secular. The scheme includes a peacock, deer, a lion and a very clear representation of one of Aesop's fables – that of the fox or wolf and the crane. This was a fairly common theme in architecture in mediaeval times as seen on the capital of pillar in Autun Cathedral and the Great Fountain by Pisano in Perugia. In this painting it is the fox who has a bone stuck in his throat. The story goes that the fox, in terrible pain, asked the other animals to help him, promising a reward. They were all too scared of the fox. Eventually the crane agreed to try to remove it by putting his long

beak down the fox's throat. Once the bone was removed the crane asked for his reward but the fox refused, saying "you have put your head in my mouth and taken it out safely, that should be reward enough". The fable is possibly a reminder that an ally may not always be willing to reward a friend for their assistance.

There are also traces of paintings in other areas of the upper floor which are still to be uncovered and even more may have been destroyed. The canopies of the fireplaces show evidence that they were plastered in the past and were probably also painted.

In another article we have mentioned that tapestries are more common than wall paintings in Northern Europe, however, there are other examples in England, at the Tower of London, at Hill Hall in Essex and at North Mymms Park, Hertford. They are certainly not 'poor men's tapestries'. Ellys House was clearly built by a wealthy man. The size of the fireplaces suggests that the cold would not be a problem so the high quality of the paintings suggests confidence, stability and prosperity.

This prosperity is also shown by the fact that Antony Ellys also built or rebuilt a tall pinnacled tower on the adjacent 13th century church in 1519. At the top of this is a small bespectacled Gargoyle that is possible of Anthony Ellys himself who is known to have been partially blind if not completely blind.

Clive Taylor continues to work on the history of the house and its place in the Northern Renaissance and

There are also traces of paintings in other areas of the upper floor which are still to be uncovered and even more may have been destroyed



Replica of a 'Cog'



'Recognition', an Allegory of the Northern Renaissance. by Stewart Taylor

has recently commissioned a painting of an Allegory of the Northern Renaissance entitled 'Recognition', by internationally renowned artist Stewart Taylor, based near Hull. This shows the sheep of Lincolnshire, the Church and the house with a vignette of Clive and the wall paintings on one side of a broad river. On the other side several cog boats sail in to London: and another vignette shows President Obama being shown the Woolsack in the Houses of Parliament. In the faint background a cog sails into the misty

distance, spreading the influence of the Renaissance northwards. ■



Besppectacled Gargoyle gargoyle that is possibly of Anthony Ellys



Wolf and Crane fable on Perugia Fountain