

The Arts Society Sevenoaks – visit to Firle Place and Charleston, October 2021

Undeterred by the petrol crisis, 23 of us, mostly members, travelled independently to Firle Place. Before our guided visit, the decorative paper textile artist, Stephanie Smart, spoke to us about her exhibition 'The Regency Wardrobe', a collection of costumes in paper, which were dispersed through the house. It was difficult to believe that all these costumes were made of paper, especially the military uniforms. You can read more about this astonishing work here: <https://firle.com/the-regency-wardrobe/>

Remarkably, Firle Place has survived as the home of one family, the Gages, for over 500 years. Our guide was well-versed in the family history. The present house dates from the early 18th century, but parts of an earlier Tudor house were retained and recast in the Georgian style, notably the Great Hall in which our tour began. Being a wet and blustery day, we paid little attention to the exterior of the building. The original building material, a white stone from Caen in Normandy, is believed to have come from Lewes Priory, following its dissolution by Henry VIII.



The architecture of the house seemed less interesting than the art works it contains. The Gage family were not great collectors themselves, though the Georgian rebuild included a Long Gallery for the display the 1st Viscount's pictures (few of which remain at Firle today). The more significant collections came to the house by way of inheritance and marriage, notably the Cowper collection from Panshanger Hall in Hertfordshire, which was demolished in the 1950s, and the Grenfell collection, originally at Taplow Court, Buckinghamshire, which came to Firle in 1952,

For the guided tour, we were divided into two groups of a convenient size for guiding and viewing. We began in the Great Hall, with two of the house 'treasures' before us: Van Dyck's monumental group portrait of the Nassau-Siegen family, and two Beauvais Tapestries, fascinating depictions of acrobats and theatrical characters (part of the Grotesque series produced between 1688 and 1732). You can view more of the art works here:

<https://firle.com/house-visits/the-art/>

Next, the Billiard Room. Portraits of family members seemed to overwhelm many of the rooms.





Greater variety is to found in the Long Gallery. Especially pleasing was Reynold's portrait of *Peniston, William and Frederick Lamb*, sons of the 1st Lord Melbourne (William became the famous prime minister), a *Coastal Scene* by Salvator Rosa, and Zoffany's engaging portraits of the 3rd *Earl Cowper* (with raised hat) and his fiancée, *Miss Anne Gore* (depicted as a Savoyard peasant girl with hurdy-gurdy).

Also of considerable Interest in the Long Gallery was a display cabinet containing rare *Sevres* porcelain, including the *Firle Vases*, a pair of unique *bleu lapis* ground bulb vases, decorated with scenes imitating Japanese prints by Dodin in 1763. We were also drawn to another cabinet displaying the *Melbourne Service*, a beautifully decorated Sevres dessert service, purchased by the 1st Viscount Melbourne in 1771 for his new wife. You can view these and other treasures of Firle Place here: <https://firle.com/firle-treasures/>



There was a noticeable gap above the fireplace where the *Wine Harvest* by David Teniers the Younger used to hang. Alas, to help pay for a new roof, this was auctioned off at Sotheby's in December 2020.



The Upstairs Drawing Room seemed the loveliest of the interiors, furnished with some good French pieces and the fabulous Panshanger cabinets: two exquisite marquetry cabinets in the Neoclassical style, attributed to Thomas Chippendale the Elder. They display part of a dinner service painted with bouquets of flowers, from the Sevres manufactory again. The room doubles as a second picture gallery. Portraits by Puligo and Venetian views by Francesco Guardi caught our eyes here.

You can get a closer view of the Panshanger (or Melbourne) cabinets here: <https://firle.com/panshanger-cabinets-context/>

The walls of the Drawing Room and the Staircase Hall had been painted for the filming of *Emma* here a few years ago. The colour scheme did not seem to enhance the appearance of the rooms and the workmanship was no match for the finish maintained in other rooms.

The Staircase Hall at Firle is known as the Little Hall, though it seemed very grand to us. Most of the interiors at Firle seemed rather plain, but the work of an architect is more evident here in the staircase design and the stucco decoration on the walls and ceiling (comparisons were made with the interiors of large London houses by architects in Lord Burlington's circle). The staircase is much enhanced by the elegant crystal chandelier (attributed to William Parker and made between 1770 and 1800).



The only evidence we saw of the original Tudor building was a carved stone doorway In the Hall below the staircase, thought to have been the entrance to a chapel adjoining the Great Hall. You can see a close-up of the Tudor doorway and other treasures of Firle Place here: <https://firle.com/firle-treasures/>

The conservation status of the house contents, both art works and furniture, was most impressive, and seemed to compare very favourably with houses owned by the National Trust.

Rather too soon, we left Firle Place to drive to Charleston, where lunch awaited.
