

Gems of Corsham

A BACAS excursion to Corsham

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In planning the BACAS Excursion to Corsham, historian Dr. Negley Harte was able to identify for us the real 'musts' of this small historic town. The number attending was restricted to twenty fortunate members of BACAS who met together on the morning of July 1st 2012, in Church Square, Corsham. Apparently this was one of the oldest areas of Corsham, and originally, in about 1600, had boasted four inns. Now it is a circular parking area, with the Church of St. Barnabas being the only building remaining there besides the Court. Our first port of call was to Corsham Court. We were fortunate to have as our Guide, James Methuen Campbell, who is the present owner of the house. He told us that the property had been in the hands of his family for eight generations, having originally been bought by Paul Methuen in 1746. The Court stands on the grounds of a former Saxon Manor which became a ruin and was replaced by a handsome Elizabethan manor, built in 1582. Subsequently in the 17th Century, it was owned by the Hungerford family before it was eventually bought by Paul Methuen of Bradford-on-Avon in 1746. The purpose of this purchase was to house the large and very fine collection of pictures and artistic objects that had been collected, in London, by Paul's famous cousin, Sir Paul Methuen. Paul was the godson and heir of Sir Paul.

In 1760 'Capability' Brown, the landscape-gardener and surveyor, was entrusted with the enlargement of the house and park. He designed a picture gallery, the dimensions of which were set to display the huge works of the Van Dyke and Guido Reni pictures as well as others; it is a 'three-cube' room, 72ft (21.95m) by 24ft (7.32m), and it has a marvellous plastered ceiling. Today, the collection is regarded as being possibly the finest privately owned collection in the country. James Methuen Campbell explained the significance of the pictures to us, and also told us about the furniture and ornaments. He took us through the State Apartments, explaining the interesting details in the pictures and art works, the problems of hanging and loaning large paintings and also other points such as the immense thickness of the wall separating the Cabinet room from the State Bedroom. This wall had been the exterior wall of the original Elizabethan manor. When we reached the Music Room we were treated to a lovely rendering of baroque music played by James Methuen-Campbell himself on a Muzio Clementi 'fortepiano'. We finished the tour in the dining room, where the Sheraton table was laid with a silver gilt dinner service set out for a smart dinner party.

After lunch at the Flemish Weavers, we set off for a tour of the main High Street of the town with Dr. Negley Harte as our leader. Dr. Harte is an Hon. Research Fellow (in history) at University College London. Starting from the gates of the Court, we passed the Corsham Court Folly, a high ruined wall that had been built to gain greater privacy for the occupiers of Corsham Court, when the present houses were built in Church Street. Dr Harte then pointed out the former Market Hall, built in 1783 to revive Corsham Market, and which was later turned into the Town Hall.



Until the early 19th Century, wool was Corsham's principal industry. Spinning and weaving took place in the homes as there was no water power in the area. However, when the wool trade began to decline, stone quarrying became the main industry. The Box Tunnel, constructed by Brunel, was to become a major source of stone.

Figure 1
A view of the west front of the Alms-houses.

In Corsham, particularly in the High Street, there are very many fine buildings of the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries, many of which are listed Grade II. Parkside, set back a little from the road was, for some years before 1970, the home of Michael Tippett, the composer. Other houses, some of which are now shops, show evidence of their owners' building activities in the form of the owners' initials in the gables. Dr Harte explained to us that Corsham had an interesting educational history. Besides the very early example of a 17th Century schoolroom in the Alms-houses there had also been, in the same close vicinity, a Victorian school, a 20th Century senior school (now an arts centre) and two modern Primary schools, one being Roman Catholic.

Finally, we came to the Lady Margaret Hungerford Alms-houses. These are situated at the far end of the lime tree avenue which goes from 'The Square' at Corsham Court to Lacock Road. The avenue, which is now a grassy walkway, ends with a fine pair of high metal gates. We were taken around the Alms-house complex by a team of volunteers who brought the history of the buildings alive for us. Lady Margaret was the wife of Edward Hungerford, who was the commander of the New Model Army in the 17th Century and the first Hungerford to own the Corsham Court estate. Lady Margaret willed £60 from her estate, to give £20 for the Schoolmaster, £30 for the poor people in the alms-houses and another £10 for the provision of gowns for them; the Endowment was also meant to cover the cost of repairs to the premises. The buildings lie in an L shape position. In the centre of the Western front there is a fine and elaborate entrance porch which leads into the schoolroom on the right and the master's room on the left. The schoolroom appears unchanged with its original panelling and 17th Century furniture, the Master's Pulpit and the desks for pupils. There is also a box pew and a gallery where Lady Margaret sat when attending services. Early graffiti can be found on the desks and benches, the work no doubt of bored pupils! The Schoolmaster, as part of his stipend was obliged to teach 'ten needy scholars' in the Free School, as recommended by Lady Margaret. On the south side there are six alms-houses, originally built for six poor people. Each had a tiny enclosed area or garden. The houses are connected at the rear by a delightful Cloister or Pentice walk where the poor people could walk in the dry. Close by was a well and a pump which, as their only supply of water, they had to share.

The quality of the workmanship was high, and the proportions of the buildings luxurious. Although the individual dwellings have been internally modernised, the Alms-houses today stand almost exactly as they were built and are regarded as being unique and among the finest medieval complexes in the west of England. Constructed according to Lady Margaret's instruction, the site offers a wonderful example of 17th Century social provision. Her 45 ordinances for the government of the charity, and which had to be read aloud to the inhabitants twice a year, throw light on the way poor people lived at that time. Anyone found disobeying the ordinances at that time, faced a fine or worse, expulsion. However, I do not suppose the inhabitants, today, have to face that ordeal!

And so our day in Corsham ended. We had been given a fascinating glimpse into its past, which enabled us to imagine what life was like in a small Wiltshire town during the past 500 years. For anyone who did not manage to go on this tour, a visit to Corsham should be a high priority.

Figure 2
Corsham Court. South view from 'The Square'.

