

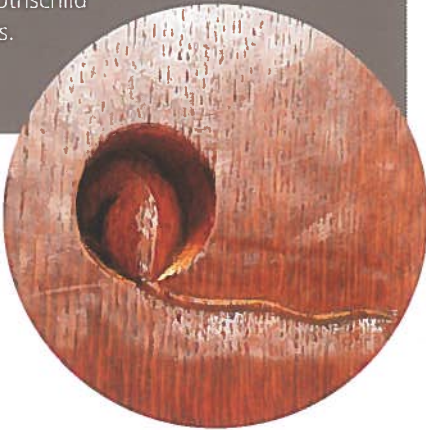
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Robert Thompson's[®] Craftsmen Ltd

Welcome!

During his lifetime, Robert Thompson's work was sought out by some of the finest architects of the day for commissions in grand public and private buildings, yet he stuck by his ethos of 'industry in quiet places' and lived and worked all his life in the village of Kilburn in North Yorkshire. Today, we continue that tradition: in this newsletter we are pleased to reveal details of a major commission that the company has recently installed within the new London headquarters of banking giant, NM Rothschild & Sons.



The building, which has been designed by the leading international architecture practice OMA, is a strikingly modern, glass and steel construction. It is particularly satisfying to see how our furniture, which is rooted in a heritage of traditional design, materials and craftsmanship, sits comfortably within this setting.

Commissions for private homes are also an important part of our business and, in this edition, we reveal how specially commissioned pieces of Mouseman furniture are now gracing the homes of the Queen of Jordan and rock star Bryan Adams.

I feel sure that my great grandfather would be pleased that the tradition of fine but simple furniture that he established would be showcased in such illustrious settings. Very fine homes indeed for the mouse of Kilburn.

Ian Thompson Cartwright

A Home for Rothschild History

Robert Thompson's recently completed one of its most prestigious, secular commissions of recent times, to provide bespoke bookcases and furniture for the Archive at the new headquarters of NM Rothschild & Sons in the City of London.

The commission is particularly exciting as it places the company's work at the heart of a striking, new building, which is destined to become a landmark in the City. Whilst the architecture is impressively modern, the location at New Court on St Swithin's Lane is steeped in history, having been the base for the Rothschild business for over 200 years, since Nathan Rothschild first arrived in London in 1809. This is the fourth iteration of Rothschild's London headquarters to occupy this site.

The new glass and steel skyscraper has been designed by Rem Koolhaas and Ellen van Loon, Partners-in-charge at OMA, one of the world's leading architectural practices. It will provide 21,000 square metres of space. One of the notable features of the building's design is that it takes full account of its historical setting and other buildings in the vicinity. Most of its mass has been lifted up from the original medieval streetscape, reinstating the visual connection between St Swithin's Lane and St Stephen Walbrook Church, which had been hidden from view following 200 years of development. A roof top garden and Sky Pavilion provide magnificent views across London.

The Rothschild Archive is a charitable foundation with a mission to preserve the history of the Rothschild family and to make it available for research and education.



Robert Thompson's is particularly proud to have been selected to provide furnishings for this important part of the building, which so skillfully links the past with the present.

The history of the Rothschild business, as preserved within the Archive, is fascinating. It is interesting to discover that at New Court in 1875 the company completed one of its most celebrated transactions when it advanced the sum of £4 million to the British Government, enabling it to secure a controlling interest in the Suez Canal. The transaction was vital to British interests in the Suez region and enabled Disraeli to declare, famously, to Queen Victoria, "You have it, Madam." One year after these momentous events, far away from the financial deal-making of the capital city, Robert Thompson was born in the small Yorkshire village of Kilburn, where he lived quietly for the rest of his life and where, 135 years later, furniture was designed and crafted to fit the latest reincarnation of Rothschild's headquarters at New Court.

The Archive bookcase comprises timber from 20 oak trees and took 5,500 hours to produce. Installation at New Court took 1,000 hours.



Furniture fit for a queen . . . and a rock god

Robert Thompson's has a reputation for creating fine, hand-carved furniture referencing designs of a former age. Whilst the company remains steadfast in its commitment to traditional methods of production and materials, it also embraces new aesthetics. A recent working relationship with one of this country's leading interior designers, Jonathan Reed, has been particularly exciting. Jonathan Reed works on both sides of the Atlantic for a star-studded client list, which has included David and Iman Bowie and Elle Macpherson. The design ethos of Studio Reed has always had a strong focus on incorporating the work of craftspeople and smaller makers to bring a different level of interest to a project.

Having grown up in North Yorkshire, Jonathan Reed had long been familiar with Robert Thompson's workshop in Kilburn and so when he commenced work on a personal project, to renovate an old house on the North York Moors, he approached Robert Thompson's to enquire whether the company would be interested in producing bespoke items of furniture to his own designs; in essence, reinterpreting the historical Mouseman trademark in a contemporary way. He was delighted with the positive response from both Ian and Simon Cartwright, who were intrigued and excited by the idea of stepping outside

the company's traditional design arena. Unfortunately, the initial project was never completed as the house on the moors was destroyed in a major fire. However, the interest in working together remained.

Jonathan felt that Robert Thompson's furniture would work exquisitely within the home of Queen Rania of Jordan, for whom he works, as she shares an appreciation of beautiful materials and skilled craftsmanship. When he explained the Mouseman ethos



to Queen Rania, she was delighted and a large settle was commissioned for her private area within the home. Jonathan Reed took a personal interest in the

production of this piece, which was monumental in scale, he was involved in the timber selection and visited the workshop several times as it was being made.

Jonathan subsequently asked Thompson's to make a table, to his own design, for his new home in Yorkshire. One of Studio Reed's clients, Bryan Adams, the Canadian singer-songwriter, guitarist and photographer, saw a photograph of the table and commissioned one twice the size for his London home.

The next joint project on the horizon is a commission for Thompson's to provide furniture, panelling and other fittings for a Grade 1 listed Lutyens house, which is being completely refurbished by Studio Reed.

The marriage of Thompson's traditional skills and Jonathan Reed's vision, enables discerning clients to enjoy furniture that is truly distinctive and long-lasting; a refreshing approach in this age of disposable everything and one that would surely have met with the approval of Robert 'Mousey' Thompson himself.

Above: The Mouseman table made for Bryan Adams

Left: Dave Bowman working on a bespoke Burr Oak table top



BBC Antiques Roadshow and the plywood question

On Easter Sunday this year, the popular BBC TV programme, *Antiques Roadshow*, was broadcast from Winchester Cathedral and two items of Mouseman furniture were star pieces. The furniture – a small chest of drawers and a buffet sideboard – belonged to a local couple who had inherited them many years earlier. They had no idea of the value of the pieces, indeed a general insurance assessment, ten years previously, by one of the leading auction houses in London, had valued the small chest of drawers, at a few hundred pounds.

On the day of filming, the *Antiques Roadshow* expert, Adam Schoon, immediately recognised the pieces as interesting examples from the Mouseman workshop in Kilburn. The use of plywood in the drawers led Adam Schoon to suggest that the pieces may have been made 'after hours' by one of Robert Thompson's craftsmen, rather than being designed by Robert Thompson himself who, it was felt, would only have used solid oak. It was an interesting question and the owners of the two Mouseman pieces were directed to Kilburn to find out more.

A few weeks later, on a family visit to Yorkshire, they decided to visit Robert Thompson's showroom where they left photographs of the two items of furniture along with a question regarding the use of plywood in their manufacture. Ian Thompson Cartwright takes up the tale:

"The photographs indicated immediately to me that the items of furniture were early Mouseman and of a very fine quality,

featuring intricate carved detail. The sideboard is similar to one in our museum made by my great grandfather. The presence of plywood is by no means unusual. Robert Thompson was very impressed by the qualities of this relatively new material, particularly its rigidity, which made it ideal for use as drawer cases so there is no reason to assume that these pieces would not have been designed by him. In my opinion, this misapprehension about the use of plywood has led to these Mouseman pieces, and possibly others like them, being undervalued."

The owners of these two very fine pieces have no intention of selling them as they are so much part of the family history. As an interesting conclusion, they were later contacted again by the BBC with a request to lend both items for an *Antiques Roadshow* exhibition planned to take place in London. Interest in the Mouseman story continues to run and run.

Opposite: The small chest of drawers that intrigued Adam Schoon.

Detailed carving on the buffet sideboard featured on Antiques Roadshow





Questions over the veracity of Mouseman furniture arise frequently as fake examples appear on the market with alarming regularity. One way to purchase Mouseman furniture with absolute confidence is from Robert Thompson's 'Classic Mouseman' selection, which is updated regularly on www.robertthompsons.co.uk. All the pieces of pre-owned 'Classic Mouseman' offered on the website have been dated and verified by the company and are fully restored. Generally speaking, one can also have confidence in items of Mouseman furniture offered for sale by reputable antique furniture dealers and auction houses. Mouseman items that are offered for sale on online auction sites should be treated with caution; the phrase 'caveat emptor' should be very much in mind.



Moving on

50 years ago, two young lads at Thirsk School were looking forward to taking their first steps into the world of work, having both gained apprenticeships at Robert Thompson's in Kilburn. Little did Mike Slater and Victor Jarvis know then that they would remain working together until their retirement from full time work this year.

During most of his time with the company, Mike Slater specialised in carving small pieces, such as wall lights, napkin rings, money boxes and three mice book-ends. Each pair of these book-ends takes around two and a half days to carve and, due to the amount of detailed carving involved, they were Mike's favourite pieces on which to work. As a result of his focus on small pieces he believes that, during his time with the company, he has carved more mice than any other craftsman. He also recalls one particular

project in which he carved nothing but lattice backs for a consignment of 100 chairs. By the end of that job, he says, his eyes were going funny and all he could see were criss-crosses! Despite that, and half a century of close-up carving work, he is pleased that his vision is as good now as when he joined the company with no need for reading glasses.

Mike Slater is now looking forward to pursuing his many interests including fishing, ballroom dancing and riding his motorbike. His fellow schoolmate from all those years ago, Victor Jarvis, pictured, continues to work part-time at the company.

During their years at Robert Thompson's the hands of these men have carved hundreds of mice onto pieces that are now spread across the country and possibly to the other side of the world. These mice are testament to their makers' fine skills and their many years of industry in quiet places.



New home for old timber

Work has now been completed on a new shed in our timber yard, which will be used for storing timber and large pieces of furniture. It may seem like a mundane building but Robert Thompson's is rather excited about it as it is at the heart of the company's ethos. The tradition and heritage imbued in each piece of Mouseman furniture starts long before the craftsman begins carving; it commences with the selection of individual oak trees purchased from managed estates the length and breadth of the country. Once the oaks have been selected and felled, they are transported to a sawmill in Yorkshire, which has been used by Robert Thompson's for many decades, where the trees are sawn into large planks. These planks are stored outdoors for a minimum of seven years to allow the timber to season naturally. The seasoned planks are subsequently removed to the new timber shed for the final selection and preparation process, by which pieces of timber are identified for individual items of furniture and moved to the workshop. Only then can the craftsman wield his adze. It's a long process and it cannot be hurried but that's what makes each Mouseman item unique.



Cup of tea anyone?

The Mouseman Visitor centre and T cafe have now closed for the winter months; they will re-open for the 2012 season on Tuesday 3rd April. For information on open times visit: www.robertthompsons.co.uk



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