

“Exploring Heraldry” Interest Group Visit to Thrumpton Hall, 20th October 2011



Figure 1 : Mrs Seymour regales us with House History

Our first group “away-day” seemed, for all members able to make this visit, to surpass all expectations and overcome a few wobbles over arrangements. We had needed to change from our usual Friday sessions, as Thrumpton Hall likes to have Fridays free to prepare for weekend weddings held at this delightful early-17th-Century mansion. Introducing the house to us, the Hon. Rosemary Seymour, the charming 89-year-old resident (in effect owning Thrumpton Hall jointly with her daughter, the author Miranda Seymour), quickly got over some minor memory-lapses to give us a ten-minute résumé of the involved and meanderingly-connected ownership of the property, developing from the Wescombs around 1700, as background to what we then learned from Vic’s summary of the vellum roll (*on table in Figure 1*), a pedigree - dating back to before 1300 - of earlier Wescomb marriage-heritage, a history progressing from Somerset/Wilts/Devon to Nottinghamshire. The names “Emerton” (first owner after the local Stuart family of Pigotts) and “Wescomb” then become used in different combinations in the line of Thrumpton owners up till 1838, because of the inability of the males to leave direct heirs.

We then went from the roll into looking directly at the shields as a representation of family history, and at how John Emerton Wescomb (the last with that final surname as owner) refurbished the loggia by 1838. He would have used, from the house Library, Edmondson’s “Heraldry” (1780), combined with names of those from the vellum roll who married into the Wescombs, to construct the array of shields around the East, West & South Walls. The line of more recent (post-1700 or so) family coats of arms on the South (“Library”) Wall is broken early on by an enigmatic “Halsey”, arguably a financial enabler for how John Emerton and then Wescombs became Thrumpton owners. This Emerton was almost immediately superseded as owner via his sister’s marriage into Wescombs, who became the major “dynasty” to own Thrumpton Hall & Village. The shields serve together to show how marriages and association with **“Families of Consideration”** (ie “people to know”), a key feature of 18th-Century society in particular, are reflected in the heraldic collection. The remaining (North) wall owes the provision of its shields to later owners - Byrons (the same family as the Newstead Abbey poet); and Seymours (related to Henry VIII’s beloved Jane’s family, via Fitzroys, Dukes of Grafton, the latter descended from one of Charles II’s “official” bastard offspring).

Around this point in the morning, Mrs Seymour had remembered to get the promised refreshments going, aided by the sterling energy of her helper Joan, and they conjured up a superb morning coffee-and-cakes session in the beautiful Dining Room (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2 : Mrs Seymour joins us for excellent Morning Coffee & Cakes, while others admire pictures & roses

Following this delightful break, we then looked at the North Wall escutcheons, including a lovely rose-backed quatrefoil window containing marriage-arms either of Lucy Wescomb & Philip Douglas or, arguably, of her father, the Rev. William Emerton Wescomb, to Jane Douglas.

This latter Rector links Thrumpton with another Wescomb estate down in SE Essex, where other connections shown in the shields are found, from within the large, broadly NE-sector Home Counties estates (in Bucks, Herts, Hunts, Cambs, Essex, and merging into greater East Anglia) that Wescombs and their associates inhabited, including Mr Halsey above, and notably the prestigious Marshalls, to add to the Thrumpton lands along the Trent and their earlier West Country “spread”: one family of arguably humble origins, developing via trade, especially brewing (a prestigious industry ironically protective of health, in view of almost universally dangerous water-quality), had spread its wealth and possessions up through England.

Some of the family relationships and associations are a puzzle, and so are some of the coats of arms – for example, by virtue of witty design (e.g., a Fair**fax** family has **fox**-heads in its coat, an example of how some “canting” arms contain pictorial puns or sound-play). The mega-puzzling “Emerton” has arms (**Figure 3 below**) not shown in either Burke’s “General Armory” (where one goes to names of persons or families to find their coats) or Papworth’s “Ordinary of Arms” (where one uses the *blazoning* - verbal description - to find the name of an owner), but clearly appears to have invented arms based on colours and shapes in the coat of various “Emersons”. Another puzzle had been the blazoning of the Wiseman coat (**Fig. 4 below**), and a member of our group had beforehand posed an intriguing, maybe tongue-in-cheek but plausible explanation for how the “Christmas-cracker-crowns” could reflect the idea of the “Three **Wise Men**” – what **might** have happened is that the shield-painter (or shield-designer or shield-commissioner) perhaps didn’t know what “*cronals/coronals*” (tips to blunt lances in tournaments) were in the blazoning in Edmondson, and mistook this word for “coronets”, thus making an over-imaginative jump into thinking up another example of punning arms! An irony of it all is that the Wescombs (**see “Descendants” coat at foot of article**), eager to appear pukka gentry, also mis-translated the Edmondson blazoning for their own coat, getting the alternation of colours in the bands the wrong way round!

The “Emerton” coat in the Hall is attractive, though, and we looked briefly at others of an interesting design, such as the neat Byron coat (**Fig. 5**), with its “*bendlets enhanced*”, or the more elaborate but nicely symmetrical Blackett arms (**Fig. 6**):



Fig. 3 “Emerton”



Fig. 4 Wiseman



Fig. 5 Byron



Fig. 6 Blackett

Thus our visit exemplified, but also raised questions about, what heraldry does and how it goes about it, very much in the vein of our group’s ethos of “*exploring*” – Vic himself found something new at the last minute as he looked over the vellum roll pedigree before the session began.

More important, though, was the enjoyment of the visit that many of the group expressed to him, and to Mrs Seymour, especially because our host, maybe to compensate for her very inconsequential memory-lapses, gave us the great bonus of a “freebie” tour round the house, by which we were able to see, amongst other fine artefacts and furnishings from the mid-17th-century onwards, some excellent portraits of figures or families represented in the heraldic display. Part of the tour included the fine staircase, the gorgeous oak restored to its sandy-red splendour after some ugly Victorian ebonising, and thus revealing two versions of **Pigott** arms (one of them, with its three **pickaxes** “canting” or punning on the surname, also found embossed on the rain-hoppers at roof level) carved into its ornate 17th-Century woodwork by the owners from whom John Emerton had taken over the mortgage of the Hall. As one of our members put it, “I absolutely loved [*the visit*]. What a very good introduction to heraldry ‘in the field’ ”. The beautiful sunlight shining through into the house, Mrs Seymour’s hospitality, with the bonus tour, and the interests developed, all contributed to a good morning out, which should take us comfortably into our next “home” session in the Feignies Room on Friday November 18th.



Wescomb-Emerton Descendants

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