

# Robert Thompson's<sup>®</sup> Craftsmen Ltd

## WELCOME!


As the nights draw in and Christmas approaches, I, like many people, find myself looking back and taking stock. This year more so than ever as I have been spending time delving deep into the company's archives, unearthing material never before seen in public which will be featured in the forthcoming Mouseman book currently being compiled. It seems the more we dig the more we find. And what a fascinating treasure trove it is. One of the most intriguing items in the archives is a cache of postcards sent during the 1920s and '30s to my great-grandfather Robert Thompson from friends travelling abroad. Robert never had the opportunity to journey beyond

the country of his birth so these postcards offered him a rare glimpse of foreign architecture and design. Robert treasured these cards and was inspired by them. Pencil markings on the cards show how he adapted these black and white images of medieval carvings and gargoyles for later use in his own work.

I was reminded of how the creative design process reinterprets classic motifs through our collaboration this year with the Spanish luxury brand Loewe. This was an exciting and illuminating project to be involved in, not least in seeing Mouseman pieces given a new design twist whilst remaining true to the traditions established by Robert Thompson and the skills of our craftsmen. The media coverage of our collaboration with Loewe has been truly global, with pieces from the collection illustrated in international design magazines, newspapers and via the internet. I hope this exposure will inspire a new audience to appreciate the beauty of handcrafted work and perhaps to find out more about the Yorkshire woodcarver who, in the early decades of the last century, worked quietly at his craft in the village of Kilburn inspired by many sources - including an occasional postcard from abroad.

Wishing all our Mouseman friends across the world a joyful Christmas and a happy New Year.

*Ian Thompson Cartwright*



*Robert Thompson at work*

## *From Kilburn To Milan*

In April this year, and for the first time in the company's history, a collection of new, specially designed Mouseman pieces were exhibited outside Yorkshire at an international furniture and design event, the Salone del Mobile in Milan. The showcase was the result of a collaboration with the Spanish luxury brand Loewe, and was the brainchild of its Creative Director, Jonathan Anderson, who is also internationally renowned for his eponymous fashion label JW Anderson. For his third and most extensive homeware collection, *This is Home*, Anderson drew on his self-declared obsession with craft, presenting an eclectic mix of ceramic, leather, metalwork, cane work and wood pieces described as 'an investigation of novel forms for the interior, articulated through a mix of materials, hands, techniques and cultural references'. Central to the collection was a group of hand carved oak objects, the result of a collaboration between Loewe and Robert Thompson's Limited.

Handcrafted by Thompson's skilled artisans at the company's workshop in Kilburn to the specifications of Anderson and his design team, the pieces playfully interpreted the company's traditional single mouse signature by featuring multiple mice scampering across a range of items, from classic candlesticks to a tall, elegant ladder; a solid cube seat-come-occasional table; an imaginative cane and oak room divider and, perhaps the pièce de résistance, a large bowl within which

a dozen or so small, carved mice chased their tails. Anderson, is an avid collector of craftwork particularly ceramics and also includes some early Robert Thompson pieces in his personal collection. In an interview with *The Telegraph* he revealed, "I had this vision of mice crawling over everything, there's something slightly Dickensian about it. Wood carving is such an amazing skill and very underrated; once you cut it, it's hard to go back."

Simon Thompson Cartwright, great-great-grandson of Robert Thompson, worked closely with the Loewe creative team and was instrumental in realising their designs into hand carved oak. He explained, "We were a little surprised when an email arrived one day, out of the blue, from the Loewe studio in Spain. Once we heard more about the personal passion that Jonathan Anderson has for handcrafted work, and that he himself owns historic Mouseman pieces, things quickly fell into place. We are honoured to have had the opportunity to collaborate with such an incredibly talented designer and his team and with a company which, like our own, is steeped in a rich tradition of craftsmanship."

*Below: Carving one of the large bowls for Loewe's Mouseman collection. Opposite: The finished article.*





## *London Craft Week*

Following the launch of Loewe's *This is Home* at Milan's Salone del Mobile, the collection, including the specially designed Mouseman range, moved in May to London's iconic Liberty store as part of London Craft Week. With its own place secured in the history of British Arts and Crafts, Liberty - the store once described by Oscar Wilde as "the chosen resort of the artistic shopper" - was a uniquely complementary setting for Jonathan Anderson's celebration of handcrafted work. Indeed, the store's Tudor revival interior, little changed since its construction in the 1920s, is one in which Robert Thompson himself would no doubt have felt at home.

During two days of the three-week Loewe installation, Simon Thompson

Cartwright gave a hands-on demonstration of the wood crafting skills which have been practiced by the family business for five generations. The demonstrations proved so popular that Simon has been invited by Liberty to do further demonstrations as part of London Craft Week 2018, which is due to be held from 9th to 13th May 2018.

*A rapt audience for Simon Thompson Cartwright's demonstration at Liberty.*





## *Remembering Cardinal Basil Hume*

In our previous newsletter (Winter 2016) we recorded that Robert Thompson's had received a commission from the family of the late Cardinal Basil Hume for a 1930s Mouseman prie-dieu. The commemorative piece was subsequently personalised in the Kilburn workshop with a carved inscription of the words of the Suscipe – *Receive me, Lord, in accordance with your word and I shall live* – the formula used by the Benedictines in their monastic vow. The desk is now installed in the Chapel of St Gregory and St Augustine at Westminster Cathedral, London where Cardinal Hume was buried in 1999.

This piece of classic Mouseman furniture was selected by the Cardinal's friends and family due to the special connection between Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson and Ampleforth, where Cardinal Hume was, in turn, a pupil, a monk, a teacher and, from 1963, Abbot.

As a new pupil at Ampleforth College in 1936, young Hume, like generations of

*Photo of prie-dieu in Westminster Cathedral chapel*

pupils after him, would no doubt have been intrigued by the carved mice on the newly installed library furnishings, which Robert Thompson had commenced just two years previously in 1934. Thompson continued to create furnishings for Ampleforth Abbey and College for many years, culminating in 1955 with his final piece, a plaque to commemorate Old Boys who had perished in the Second World War. The memorial will have been particularly poignant for Basil Hume. On finishing school at the age of 18 in 1941, he wrestled with the decision to become a monk at Ampleforth Abbey as this meant taking exemption from military service at a time that the country was in the depth of war. "It was a terrible choice," he told John Mortimer decades later. "If it happened again, I think I'd have gone into the Army."

The simple prie-dieu, carved by an unassuming, country craftsman whose work is imbued with the spirit of Ampleforth, is a fitting tribute to a Cardinal who, it is said, liked to be addressed as 'Father Basil' rather than 'Your Eminence'.

## *Hampsthwaite Children Rescue 'Mr Mouse'*

In November last year, villagers in Hampsthwaite, North Yorkshire, were delighted to see the return of the restored lychgate which for many years has welcomed visitors to the church of St Thomas a Becket. Commissioned from Robert Thompson in 1938 by Lady Aykroyd in memory of her parents, the structure had proudly withstood decades of Yorkshire weather but in recent times had started to appear a little the worse for wear. Fortunately, in 2014, the pupils of Hampsthwaite Church of England primary school came to the rescue.

As part of their curriculum, the school's infants were taken on a tour of the village and items of interest were pointed out. When they arrived at the church, the children were sad to discover that one of the mice was missing from the small side entrance of the lychgate. They asked their teacher why the mouse had been lost and whether it could be found. On being told that it probably could be returned but that it would cost a lot of money, the children thought it would be a good idea if they could raise some funds towards this.

The teacher took this thought back to school and the children then wrote to 'the Mouseman' to let him know what they planned and whether the repair

could be made. The answer came back in the affirmative and the company also donated a cheeseboard as a raffle prize to set the fundraising on its way.

After deliberations about how to raise some money, the idea of making a film was agreed. The children were divided into groups and given an area in the village from which to film. Each group decided what the storyline would be at that venue, created a storyboard and then enacted it. Music was added to complete a wonderful DVD, which was then sold widely.

Word of the film spread through the village. It was shown at a Hampsthwaite film night at which further copies of the DVD were sold and a fortunate person won the donated Mouseman cheeseboard. At the local retirement village, the residents were so impressed with the efforts that they took up a collection and made a handsome donation towards the fund.

In total, £425 was raised and so, thanks to the children, the missing mouse was back in place on the refurbished gates.

The school and villagers attended a rehangng and rededication service, conducted by Rev Chrissy Wilson, at which the children arrived dressed as mice.



*St Thomas a Becket Church:  
As the autumn sun shone down  
on the restored lychgate, the  
children were excited to welcome  
their mouse back home.*

## *Ripon Cathedral*

On 15th October this year, Ripon Cathedral held its Founders and Benefactors Service, celebrating the contributions to the cathedral's mission and ministry made by people over 13 centuries. At this year's service a number of new commemorative pieces were dedicated by the Bishop of Leeds, one of which was a missal stand donated by Norman Kitney in memory of his late wife, Ann. Mr Kitney, who has acted as a server at the church for over 70 years, commissioned the stand from Robert Thompson's in Kilburn.



It now sits alongside other Mouseman pieces made for the cathedral over several decades by Robert Thompson and his successors.

The earliest entry relating to work for Ripon Cathedral in Thompson's ledgers is noted in 1935, although a pair of tall, early 1920s candlesticks in St Wilfrid's chapel are, despite the lack of a carved mouse, also identifiable as Robert Thompson's work by the rugged, adzed finish. But the connection between Robert Thompson and Ripon Cathedral goes even deeper as it was the medieval misericords in the cathedral choir, carved by William Bromflet and his followers between 1489 and 1494, that first inspired a teenage Robert Thompson to eschew his engineering apprentice and take up the tools of a wood carver. Little would that young craftsman have known that, more than 120 years after his first sight of Ripon's medieval carvings, his own descendants would still be producing ecclesiastical pieces to sit alongside Bromflet's carvings in the ancient cathedral.

*Image courtesy of the Chapter of Ripon Cathedral*

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## *Classic Mouseman – Restored Items for Sale*

This beautiful, fully restored sideboard is an example of the type of furniture that will be available for sale in the Classic Mouseman showroom when it opens in the spring (see opposite). Pieces may also be viewed on the company's website which is regularly updated as new pieces are added.



*To view more Classic  
Mouseman pieces, visit  
[www.robertthompsons.co.uk/classic.php](http://www.robertthompsons.co.uk/classic.php)*

*New Showroom  
For Classic  
Mouseman  
Pieces*

Plans have now been confirmed for work to start on the conversion of a former garage building, alongside the company's current showroom and workshop in Kilburn, which will become a dedicated retail space for pre-owned Classic Mouseman pieces. Peter Cartwright regularly travels across the UK, acquiring only the finest examples of the company's work and those with a sound provenance for inclusion in the Classic Mouseman range. These items are then professionally restored, using traditional methods and materials, by the company's craftsmen in Kilburn.

Classic items for sale have previously been showcased on the company's website and this will continue but, from next year, visitors to the new showroom in Kilburn will be able to purchase from the range of Classic pieces displayed there. In this era of internet sales, the move to open a physical showroom could be considered unnecessary. Peter Cartwright disagrees: "As aficionados of Mouseman furniture know only too well, the tactile quality of the furniture's aged finish is truly distinctive and is enhanced as it

acquires the patina of age. This can best be appreciated by seeing an item 'in the flesh' as it were."

The rarest and most sought-after items of Classic Mouseman furniture are, inevitably, those produced from the 1920s to mid '50s during Robert Thompson's lifetime. However, furniture from more recent periods is also much in demand as customers appreciate the solid nature of the construction and the fact that these pieces can be a sound investment. The Classic showroom is due to open in spring 2018.



## *Forthcoming Book And Limited Edition Reading Table*

Ongoing research within the Robert Thompson's company archives, as part of the production of a new publication on the Mouseman and his work, continues to reveal fascinating information and never-before-seen-in-public drawings, photographs and visual references. The high quality, hardback book, which is authorised by Robert Thompson's Craftsmen Ltd and is being written by Patricia Lennon, will be an essential information source for serious collectors and a delight for all lovers of Mouseman furniture. A specially-designed, limited edition table is being produced by the company as an accompaniment to the book. Ian Thompson Cartwright, who is designing the bespoke table, explained that it is being created so that the book can be displayed open, inviting readers to turn a page each day to display a new visual from the Mouseman archives. "My vision," he explains, "is to produce a special table for a special book, one that facilitates the publication as an ongoing window onto the work of my great-grandfather. Just as Mouseman furniture is designed to be used – and gets better with age - we hope that this table will make the accompanying book a frequently-visited friend, one that inspires new insights and fresh reflections on his work."

***The new book and the limited edition reading table are due to be launched during 2018. For more information or to register your interest, visit [www.mousemanbook.co.uk](http://www.mousemanbook.co.uk)***



### *T Café and Visitor Centre Opening Hours*

The Mouseman Museum, Gift Shop and T Café will close on Sunday 3rd December 2017 and reopen on Saturday 24th March 2018.

### *Office and Showroom*

The Office, main Showroom and Workshop will close for the annual Christmas holiday on Friday 22nd December 2017 and will reopen on Monday 8th January 2018.

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