

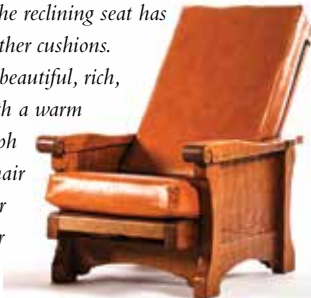
## Online sales

New furniture and gift items, as well as restored Classic Mouseman pieces, may be purchased through our website. Items can be delivered to almost anywhere in the world. Postage and packing are charged at cost. For larger items, we will be happy to provide a quotation from our shippers.

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

*A restored, 1930s reclining smoking chair, very similar to that pictured, is one of the Classic Mouseman pieces currently available. It has adzed panels and frame with scrolls to each arm. The reclining seat has two new tan hide leather cushions.*

*The chair displays a beautiful, rich, golden oak colour with a warm patina. The photograph is not of the actual chair for sale. Please call for details of this or other Classic pieces.*



## Forresters Arms Reopens

The Forresters Arms is at the heart of Kilburn village, immediately adjacent to the Mouseman showroom. The centrepiece of the inn is a magnificent oak bar, made in the 1960s in the Mouseman workshop, which our craftsmen have recently restored as part of a major refurbishment of the property. As this newsletter went to press, the reopening of the Forresters was imminent.

Visitors can check details and opening times at [www.forresterskilburn.co.uk](http://www.forresterskilburn.co.uk) or telephone 01904 947570



*An ever-popular gift item: hand-tooled, oak bowl, 30.5cm diameter, with a central carved mouse.*



## T Café and Visitor Centre Opening Hours

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the Mouseman Visitor Centre, T Café and viewing gallery will remain closed until further notice. Please accept our apologies for any inconvenience caused by this temporary closure.

The showroom and sales office remain open for visiting and the collection of gifts and items of furniture. Opening hours are Monday to Friday, 9.00am-3.45pm.

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Newsletter No 17  
Winter 2020

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

## WELCOME!

At the start of this year, none of us could have imagined that the world would be where it is today. The global pandemic has affected all of us in different ways, presenting challenges that have tested individuals, families, communities and nations. Here in Kilburn, we have made changes in our workplace to comply with Covid regulations and ensure the health of our staff and customers. While our Visitor Centre and T Café have sadly closed temporarily in response to the current situation, we have managed to maintain production in our workshop and some of the pieces produced during this period are featured in this newsletter. One particular project, the creation of furniture for a new chapel at the British Armed Forces' Chaplaincy Centre in Oxfordshire, inspired thoughts of my great-grandfather, Robert Thompson. During the two great

military conflicts of the 20th century, the Mouseman workshop, never closed; Robert Thompson and his team of craftsmen, who were classed as working in a reserved occupation, continued to operate on the same site in Kilburn we use today. It reminds me that despite the hardship and heartbreak suffered in 1914-1918 and again in 1939-1945, people and communities were resilient. Life went on. It is something I shall keep front of mind as we move forward in the new normal.

Sending all our Mouseman friends across the world warmest wishes for good health and wellbeing in 2021.

*Ian Thompson Cartwright*

*Two generations of Mousemen, Simon Thompson Cartwright and his father Ian, at Beckett House at the start of the project to create furniture for the new chapel at the Armed Forces' Chaplaincy Centre in Oxfordshire.*



## *A new chapel for the Armed Forces*



*The bishop's chair from Ark Royal arriving at the Armed Forces' Chaplaincy Centre.*

Over the past 100 years, the Mouseman company has developed a proud legacy of work reflecting Britain's military history in the 20th century. Some of the earliest recorded pieces by Robert Thompson were memorials to commemorate those lost in the Great War of 1914-1918 and, later, in the 1939-1945 conflict. The company was honoured, therefore, to be commissioned by the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom to create a number of pieces for a new chapel at Beckett House, the home of the British Armed Forces' Chaplaincy Centre at Shrivenham in Oxfordshire. In March this year the Chaplaincy relocated

to Beckett House from its previous home at Amport House in Hampshire. With the move came an altar table, carved by Robert Thompson's workshop in the late 1940s or 1950s, which had previously been located at St Alban's Church at Mansergh Barracks near Gutersloh in Germany. As part of the British Forces' gradual withdrawal from Germany announced in 2010, the Gutersloh site was handed back to the German authorities and the altar returned to Britain where it was



*The Mouseman altar returning from Germany, where it had served for many years in St Alban's Church at Mansergh Barracks near Gütersloh.*

The Mouseman credence table served as an altar for outdoor services at Beckett House during lockdown.



*The Mouseman credence table served as an altar for outdoor services at Beckett House during lockdown.*

*The Mouseman stand carrying a lamp, the symbol of Toc H.*

stored at Amport House. It was transported to Beckett House earlier this year where it was designated as the centrepiece for the new chapel being created there. Ian and Simon Thompson Cartwright were invited to Beckett House to inspect the altar and advise on its restoration. The company was also commissioned to produce new items of furniture for the chapel to complement the altar. The finished pieces reflect the inter-denominational nature of this place of worship: they include a font; a lectern and credence table each bearing a carved saltire cross; a cabinet for communion silver; a prayer desk and cabinet carved with a depiction of a menorah; and a tall stand upon which rests a bronze lamp representing the symbol of Toc H, the international Christian movement formed



during the First World War to provide service to others in need.

In addition to the new furniture, the chapel also includes a pair of chairs which previously belonged to HMS Ark Royal. Records at Robert Thompson's show that the chairs – a Bishop's Chair and a Chaplain's Chair - were originally commissioned in 1954 for the chapel of the fourth ship to bear the Ark Royal name. Upon the decommissioning of this ship, the chairs were transferred to its successor, the fifth Ark Royal and remained there until it, in turn, was decommissioned in 2011. Ian Thompson Cartwright mentioned these pieces to Revd Andrew Totten, the Chaplain at Beckett House overseeing the new chapel project, who made enquiries of the Chaplain of the Fleet and the chairs were duly traced to a church in Leeds where they were on loan. They are now settled in the new chapel at Beckett House where, with the other Mouseman pieces, they can be enjoyed by all who visit this tranquil space.





## *Hello Dolly!*

In September, the people of North Shields welcomed back a much-loved figure to the town centre following her makeover in the Mouseman workshop in Kilburn. Dolly, an imposing wooden statue of a fishwife, had stood in Northumberland Square for more than 60 years but after being exposed to the elements for so long, her condition had started to deteriorate. In December 2019 the decision was made to commission repairs and it seemed only proper that this should be carried out in the place where she had been created in 1958. Dolly was duly transported back to Kilburn where the restoration work was carried out by Simon Thompson Cartwright, great-great-grandson of Robert Thompson.

The current statue is the fifth in a long tradition of wooden dollies - originally ships' figureheads - stretching back more than 200 years, which reflect the port's sea-faring history and are part of local folklore. It was no surprise then that Dolly's return to North Shields was warmly welcomed as people gathered in the square to watch a crane lower their old friend back into place. John Sparkes, Head of Regeneration at North Tyneside Council, explained, "The statue has a special place in the hearts of local people. When she was taken away for repairs in December, people were coming up to us concerned that she may never come back. Well I'm pleased to say that the amazing people at the Mouseman workshop have done a remarkable job of restoring her." Resident David Sherdown summed up the feelings of local folk, "If anything in North Shields is iconic, it's the dolly. When I walked



over, I went 'wow', she's back. I used to walk around these parks when I was a kid and she was the thing you noticed. It looks fantastic."

The people of North Shields can now look forward to the sight of Dolly in the square for many more years to come - and enjoy hunting for the two small carved mice hidden about her figure.

*Above: Dolly, back where she belongs in Northumberland Square, North Shields.*

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## *1950s furniture returns home to Bradford*

In our Winter 2014 newsletter we featured the Upper Chapel United Reformed Church in Idle, Bradford and its part in the Mouseman story. One of the last commissions received by Robert Thompson before his death in 1955 was for a large consignment of furniture for the church, which at the time was constructing a new building. Nearly 60 years later, in 2013, the chapel members decided that it was time to sell the 1950s building and construct a new, smaller chapel. But what to do with the large collection

of very fine Mouseman furniture? Fortunately, following discussions with Ian Thompson Cartwright, a number of solutions emerged. First, the Mouseman company agreed to purchase 26 pews, each 16 feet 6 inches in length, which were refashioned in the workshop in Kilburn into smaller monk's benches suitable for residential spaces. The benches, each signed with a carved mouse, have proved extremely popular and a small number remain for sale at Robert Thompson's. Other items of furniture from the 1950s commission – including the altar table, lectern, font and a chair - were retained by the chapel and these also travelled to Kilburn for refurbishment. The original choir stalls posed a conundrum. However, a flash of inspiration by chapel elder, Brian Devitt, led to Ian Thompson Cartwright being consulted to see if they could be refashioned into panelling for the new chapel interior. The answer was 'yes', and the reformed panelling now looks resplendent beneath an angled window in the new, light-filled, uplifting space.

Following the sale of the old church in 2013, the congregation continued to rent a room there for services until, in September this year, their new spiritual home was complete and the Mouseman furniture was reinstalled. Church Secretary Graham Carter said, "Just about everyone has now seen the refurbished furniture and the panelling and we are



all delighted with it. The whole chapel is transformed by the furniture and panelling from an interesting chapel to something very special. It has been worth all the time and effort."

*Above: The refashioned Mouseman panelling and refurbished furniture look completely at home in the contemporary space of the new chapel.*

*Below: One of the monk's benches fashioned from the church's original 1950s full-length pews. Similar examples are available for sale at Robert Thompson's.*



*If there's no carved mouse,  
is it still Mouseman?*

In Morphets of Harrogate's September auction, the sale of an adzed, English oak Mouseman cupboard attracted much attention. Despite, or rather because of, the lack of a carved mouse, the usual signifier of Robert Thompson's work, keen bidding ensued which pushed the final hammer price to £8,500. The lack of a mouse indicated that the piece was a particularly early example dating from c1926/1928; around this date, Robert Thompson's mouse signature started to appear on commissioned furniture pieces. The rarity of pre-mouse pieces means that they are highly sought-after by Mouseman collectors.

The presence and also the style of the carved mouse emblem can be a useful means of dating Mouseman furniture. So how did it come about? In a letter to Reverend John Fisher, Vicar of St Mary's Church, Berkeley, Gloucestershire, dated 1949, Robert Thompson wrote, 'The origin of the mouse as my mark was almost in the way of being an accident. I and another carver were carving a huge cornice for a screen and he happened to say something about being as poor as a church mouse. I said I'll carve a mouse here and did so, then it struck me what a lovely trade mark. This is about 30 years ago.' This dates the creation of the mouse to c1919, around the time of Thompson's seminal meeting with Father Paul Nevill of Ampleforth, Thompson's first major patron. However, it



is likely that the mouse motif was initially a personal whimsey of Robert Thompson which he whittled on items that were out of sight (his grandsons recalled their grandfather saying that the first mouse was carved on the beam of a church roof) or on pieces of furniture created for his own use such as the fireplace in his cottage which bears two scampering mice. Major pieces of work from 1919 to the middle of the 1920s - including the crucifix for Ampleforth village church

(1919), choir stalls for Workington Priory (1921) and the staircase at Upsall Castle (1924) - are all without a mouse signature.

From the mid 1920s onwards, as output from his workshop increased, Thompson started to sign his work with the carved mouse. A large collection of tables and chairs produced in 1926 for Stanbrook Abbey in Worcestershire, as well as numerous pieces for Ampleforth College from around the same

time, include the mouse motif. This desire to brand his work perhaps indicates his growing confidence in the business and a pride in the work produced from that small community of craftsmen in Kilburn, as well as a need to differentiate his furniture from that of imitators. Recognising the value of his work, in 1931 Thompson applied to the Patent Office to register the mouse design as a trademark.

On furniture from the 1920s and early '30s, the carved mouse generally appears with whiskers and front paws. However, the carved paws were a weak point and prone to damage. Shortly after the patent was granted, the mouse signature on domestic

furniture was generally carved without paws. The appearance of the mouse, with or without paws, can be a useful guide to dating mouse furniture. However, it is not an absolute rule as the style of the mouse could also be dictated by an individual client's wishes or the skills of the craftsman working on a particular piece: it may be carved proud of the surface in relief, recessed or even peering through a mousehole. The style of a piece of furniture, as well as other elements of its makeup, such as adzing, dowels, joints, leatherwork and ironwork, along with the presence and appearance of a carved mouse, all combine to indicate the approximate date within a timespan of ten years.

A forthcoming limited-edition book on Robert Thompson and his work, by Patricia Lennon, will examine the stylistic development of Robert Thompson's furniture. Drawing heavily on the work ledgers, photographs and drawings in the company's archives at Kilburn, the book will be a useful reference for collectors of Mouseman furniture.

*For more information on the forthcoming new book on Robert Thompson (publication 2021), and to register your interest in a special Collectors' Edition, visit [www.mousemanbook.co.uk](http://www.mousemanbook.co.uk)*

*Left: An early appearance of the mouse is seen on this monk's chair from c1926. The mouse here was carved with front paws.*

*Below: The monk's chairs shown here were part of a large commission in 1930 for the Horlicks factory in Slough. By this date the mouse was carved without paws and the chair had a 'cross' stretcher which replaced the previous square stretcher design.*



### *From the battle of Waterloo . . .*

Earlier this year, we were excited to receive an interesting commission from the Green Howards Museum in Richmond. The museum required a cabinet to display an extremely rare snuff box which had once belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte.

Made by a Parisian goldsmith in 1797 and bearing an image of the portrait of Napoleon by Jacques-Louis David, the exquisite snuff box was one of five made as gifts to be distributed by Napoleon. Only two of these are now known to exist.

The box was taken from the carriage of one of Napoleon's most trusted commanders, Marshall Ney, after the Battle of Waterloo by Colonel William Cameron of the Grenadier Guards. It was subsequently passed to Cameron's son, Abney, an officer in the 2nd Battalion of the Green Howards. Following his death in 1877, it was presented to the officers' mess where it was used to pass around snuff on special occasions.

Simon Thompson Cartwright, who was in charge of the cabinet's construction, said, "It was really quite thrilling to have the opportunity to handle something which had been on the battlefield of Waterloo and had probably been held by Napoleon himself. The cabinet has been designed to enable museum visitors to get a 360-degree, close-up view of this beautiful exhibit.

"The Green Howards Museum has an extensive collection of furniture crafted in the 1930s by my great-great-grandfather Robert Thompson for the regiment's officers' and sergeants' messes. I am proud to have had this opportunity to continue our association with the Green Howards presence in Richmond."