

ROBERT THOMPSON OF KILBURN **"The Mouseman"**

Talk by David Turner on 10.10.09

Robert Thompson was born in 1876 in Kilburn, a small village in the Hambleton Hills, north of York. He lived in the village of his birth for all but five unhappy years. His father was a joiner and young Robert attended the local village school. At the age of 15, his father arranged for him to be apprenticed to an engineering company in Cleckheaton in the West Riding of Yorkshire. The environment there was the polar opposite of his home village: full of noise, dirt, smoke and steam and Robert hated it. In later years he **described his time in Cleckheaton as "five years of penal servitude". Eventually, Robert** persuaded his father to let him return to Kilburn and work for the family joinery business.

The work was mundane, but he was back, living in the family cottage. Repairs to farm buildings and carts, occasionally some new construction, perhaps a bit of fencing. All done with care and to exacting standards - but not real craft work.

Robert had a dream, however. During his five dreary years in Cleckheaton, as he travelled back and forth, he had often stopped off in Ripon and visited the Cathedral. There he marvelled at the extraordinary woodcarvings by William Bromflet and these provided the inspiration that he needed to realise his dream. He felt that he wanted, **in his own words, to "bring back to life the spirit of medieval oak work, which has been dead for so many long years"**.

So he continued to work on the everyday jobs of the village joiner, but to prepare himself for his mission, he learned everything he could about the medieval craftsmen, about the materials they used and about how they worked. He set his face against labour-saving devices and mass production.

He began to buy up supplies of suitable English Oak and lay these down for seasoning. Since it took a minimum of five years for the wood to be ready to be worked, there was no way that Robert could stop being a country joiner one day and open up as a renowned craftsman in oak the next. It had to be a gradual process and there had to be overlap with his everyday work.

The outbreak of the First World War brought disruption to the joinery business in Kilburn and any thoughts he had of pursuing his dreams had to be shelved. But the dreams did not fade. The aftermath of the war, however, brought an unexpected opportunity. Robert was asked by Father Paul Nevill, of Ampleforth College, not very far from Kilburn Village if he could make a large crucifix in oak for the cemetery at the College. Now **Robert didn't know whether he could do it, he hadn't got a suitably large piece of oak and he didn't know where he was going to get one from. Three good enough reasons for any ambitious young man to say "Yes, of course I will do it!"**

That first commission from Ampleforth in 1919 set him on his way. His personal reputation spread rapidly and his small company began to flourish. It was in these earliest days of his success, too, that a small embellishment began to appear on his work. In 1949, Robert explained the emergence of the mouse in a letter:

"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 right here"

and I did so – then it struck me what a lovely trade mark. That was about 30 years ago.”

The mouse, created on a whim to amuse a couple of craftsmen working in the back of beyond, became a distinctive and lasting trademark that has travelled all over the world. But the little mouse has never dominated **Thompson’s** work. It is never obtrusive. It keeps itself to itself and is not always apparent in dimly-lit church interiors.

From that accidental birth, the mouse began to find a wide range of homes. As commissions started to increase, more craftsmen and apprentices were recruited by the tiny Kilburn workshop, **to reach a total of 35 at the time of Thompson’s death in 1955.** Although his mouse travelled far and wide, the man who created it had stayed rooted in his home village. Apart from the five-year Cleckheaton episode, Mousey Thompson lived, worked, married, prospered, died and was buried in Kilburn.

A simple stone marks his grave in the churchyard, but his real memorial is next door. It is the workshop which he founded and which lives on today, continuing the traditional skills of wood carving in oak which he revived. The methods which he established have stood the test of time. The workshop looks very similar to the way it did 75 years ago.

Each piece of Thompson furniture is taken from start to finish by one craftsman. The craftsmen range in age from under 20 to over 70 and they all joined the company from school and have been trained in-house. They serve a four or five year apprenticeship, working under several different carvers so that they experience a variety of approaches and styles. This ensures that each craftsman can express his own personal style within the overall guidelines of the Thompson Brand. **The skills of today’s Kilburn Craftsmen** represent a continuous and unbroken line of descent from Robert Thompson himself.

When a piece is started, whether it be from the current catalogue or a specially-commissioned bespoke piece, the designated craftsman will personally select the timber, looking at the grain and the colour and the seasoning to make sure it is just right for the job. Then the pieces are cut roughly to shape before being carved, finished and assembled at the workbench. Ordinary hand tools are used, but there is one extraordinary piece of equipment that gives all the Thompson furniture its unique look. The adze is the tool that produces that distinctive rippled surface.

After adzing, the oak is sanded by hand and then placed in a fuming chamber, which is filled with ammonia vapour. The alkali in the ammonia reacts with the acid in the oak to impart a soft honey colour to the surface of the oak. This method of colouring was used in the Middle Ages using urine instead of ammonia. Robert Thompson chose fuming to get the look he wanted. No Thompson furniture has ever been stained or painted.

We know our own Minster Mice well enough, but Thompson furnishings can also be found in the following churches in Nottinghamshire:

Babworth All Saints; Bingham St Mary and All Saints; Carlton on Trent St Mary; New Ollerton St Joseph (RC); Nottingham St Peter; Nottingham St Barnabus RC Cathedral; Windley Baptist Chapel; Worksop St Anne; Worksop Priory St Mary and St Cuthbert

The account above draws heavily upon the book *Mouseman (The Legacy of Robert Thompson of Kilburn)* by Patricia Lennon and David Joy (ISBN 978-1-905080-38-0), published in 2008. The Minster Shop stocks it and it is well worth mentioning this book to visitors, because they are always very interested in our mice.