

ASTLEY HALL MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

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Front facade (facing south) of Astley Hall.

Astley Hall is one of the most unusual and yet least known of the gentry houses of the North-West. Behind the rather grey facade it presents to the world today lies a seventeenth century brick facade, itself hiding a sixteenth century timber-framed house. The interior is full of surprises, notably some of the grandest plaster ceilings in the country; rare painted panelling and some fine English oak furniture, including a unique twenty foot plus shovel board table. The Museum's collections include a little known collection of eighteenth century glass and creamware and artwork by two of the twentieth century's most renowned artists. The first part of this article will examine the history of the Hall and its occupants before looking at Astley Hall as a publicly owned museum and art gallery; finally some of the more interesting parts of the collections will be examined in more detail.

The History of Astley Hall

The earliest parts of the building date from the late sixteenth century in the form of the timber-framed west and north wings. The house was probably built by Robert Charnock, reputedly after a fire at the family's former house in Charnock Richard. Although Robert married five times, his first wife was Isobel Norris, of the Norris family from Speke Hall, a fine timber-framed house that Robert would probably have

known. Large parts of Astley Hall as built by Robert survive, chiefly in the west and north wings. The west wing, with its timber-framing and large external brick chimneys, houses the kitchen block and today provides a marked contrast to the grey stucco of the main front facade. When built, however, the south wing, including this front facade, would have been of the same timber construction as the rest of the house.

The Charnock family were Catholic, and Robert's brother, John Charnock, was executed for his part in the Babington plot to replace Elizabeth I on the throne by Mary, Queen of Scots. There was almost certainly a chapel in Astley Hall, possibly in the room known as the 'stucco room', on the first floor of the west wing, or in a room on the first floor of the north wing, traditionally known as 'The Chapel'.

Robert Charnock died in 1616 and was succeeded by his son Thomas, who became M.P. for Newton-in-Makerfield in 1624. During the English Civil War Thomas's Catholic sympathies, along with many Catholic gentry in Lancashire, made him a natural supporter of the King - a portrait of Charles I and his family hangs to this day in the Great Hall. Thomas's son, Robert, became a Royalist captain in the Civil War, losing an eye during the siege of the Earl of Derby's house at Lathom, becoming known as 'Captain One-Eye'. When Thomas Charnock died in 1648, Robert — Captain



A view of the courtyard facing the west wing — the window above the doorway is inscribed with the date '1600'.

-One Eye' - inherited Astley Hall.

One of the more interesting, if ultimately unsubstantiated, stories about Astley Hall is that Oliver Cromwell spent a brief time at the Hall in 1648, following the defeat of Royalist forces at the battle of Preston. Cromwell is reputed to have slept in the 'Cromwell Bed', to be found in the 'Cromwell Room' and to have left his wet boots behind — these remain on display at the Hall to this day. It is unlikely that any of this story can ever be proved, but it is clear that Cromwell did spend the night of the 17th August at Preston before pursuing Royalist forces south to Standish and Wigan on the 18th, passing close to Astley.

Robert Charnock died in 1653 and his daughter, Margaret, inherited Astley Hall. Margaret married Richard Brooke of Mere in Cheshire in 1665 and Richard's father Sir Peter Brooke is reputed to have come to Astley with his son. Sir Peter was an established figure in county society, becoming High Sheriff of Lancashire in 1674; this, together with the joining of the Brooke family and the Charnock family is likely to have precipitated a major rebuilding of a rather old fashioned Astley Hall, in the mid-1660s.

The south wing of Astley Hall (the front facade) was rebuilt and re-worked in brick; it is a matter of conjecture how much of this 'new building' was indeed a new structure or merely a superficial reworking of an older structure, adding in effect, little more than a 'modern' screen set about three sides of the earlier structure. The style of the front facade, the large expanse of glass and the lack of symmetry, certainly suggests a reworking of an earlier structure rather than a new building.

While there is nothing overtly ostentatious about the exterior

of the house the same cannot be said about the interior and in particular the sumptuous plaster ceilings in the Great Hall and Drawing Room. These ceilings are made of wood, leather and plaster and fixed to the ceiling with wood and metal rivets. Little is known about who designed and produced them although they are reputed to be of either Italian or French influence, and "the whole is in the wildest baroque manner".¹ The ceilings contain much lavish decoration, including the coat of arms of both the Charnock and Brooke families. Certainly they were designed to impress and fitted well with the ostentation of much of Restoration England.

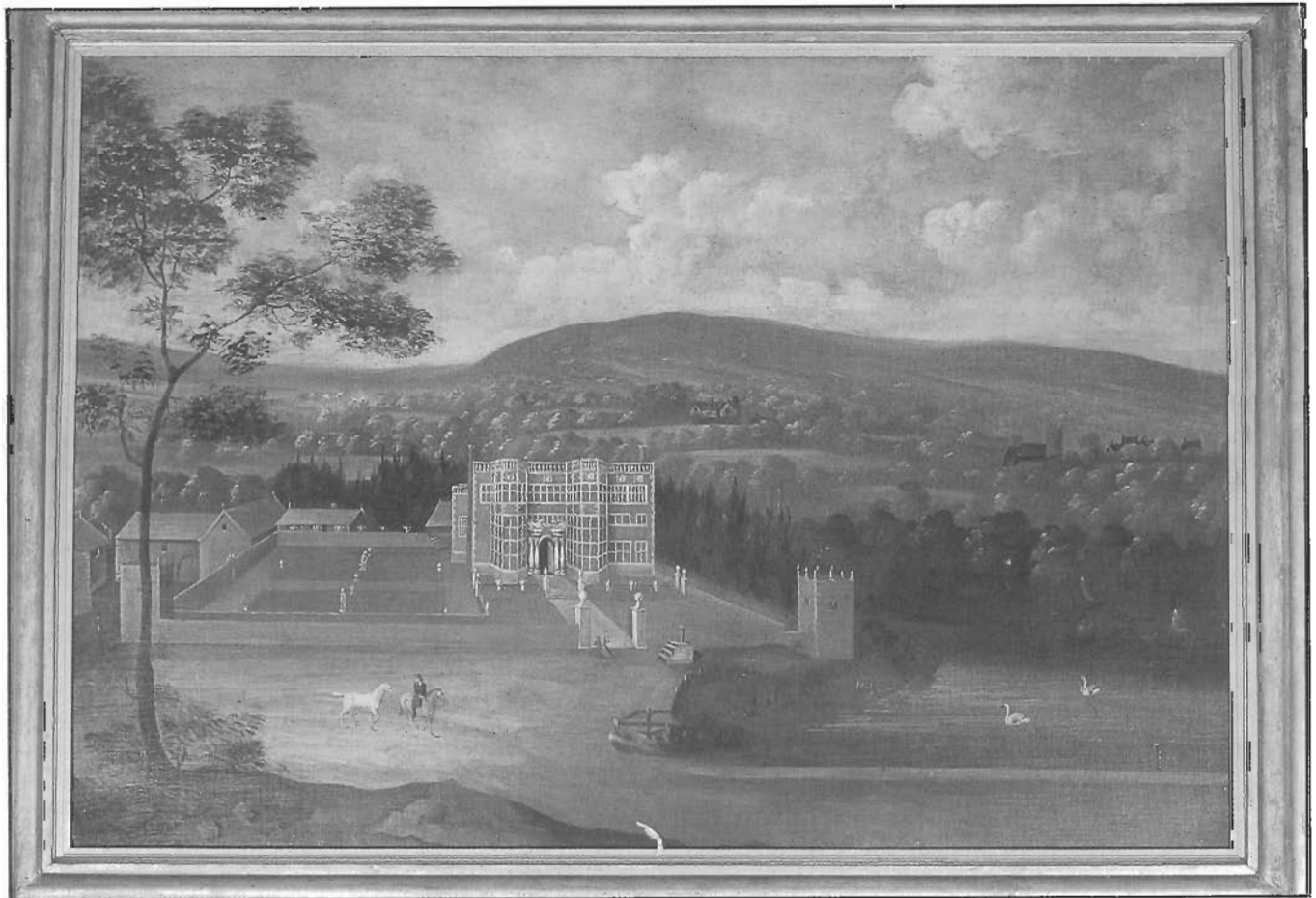
The Brooke family continued to live at Astley until the later part of the eighteenth century when the male line of the family died out. The heiress, Susannah Brooke, married Thomas Townley-Parker in 1787. It is again likely that the marriage precipitated some building work at the Hall, notably the application of stucco to the front facade to hide the, by late eighteenth century standards, rather old-fashioned brick facade. As was often the case at this time, considerable money was lavished on the coachhouse and stableblock complex.

Thomas Townley-Parker died in 1794 and his son, Robert, inherited the estate. Although he made Cuerden Hall his main home, it is likely that it was Robert who instigated the last major changes to Astley Hall by adding or rebuilding the east wing, overlooking the lake, early in the nineteenth century. The interiors of the main rooms in this wing, the Dining Room and Library, were both 'fitted out', however, to appear sixteenth century in style.

Robert's mother, Susannah Brooke, was the last family member to live at the Hall, which she continued to do until her death in 1852. Robert Townley-Parker's son, Thomas, died



The Great Hall ceilings



A painting of Astley Hall in about 1700



The Charnock bed in the Oak Bedroom - Cromwell is reputed to have slept in the bed.

without a male heir and the estates passed through his sister to the Tatton family. In 1906 Reginald Arthur Tatton inherited Astley Hall, although he did not make it his home, and donated it to the people of Chorley in 1922.

Astley Hall as a Museum

Following the First World War, Chorley Corporation cast around for a suitable site for the town's war memorial and were hoping to establish a public park, adjacent to Astley Park. In a letter to Chorley Corporation, Reginald Tatton offered to hand over Astley Hall as a free gift to the Corporation if they acquired the parkland adding that for the building to become a portion of the town's war memorial would be a fitting fate for the building. Tatton added that he felt it would be fitting to use the Hall as a museum, and to that end, he proposed to leave some of the furniture in the house, "sufficient in fact to keep up the character of the place as an example of a dwelling house of a century or more ago".² The Corporation's War Memorial Committee unanimously decided that Astley Park and Hall should form the town's war memorial and on February 24th 1922 Astley Hall was granted to Chorley Corporation. Public subscriptions were raised to pay for a cenotaph in the Park, which was duly erected as a replica of the town's market cross. In addition, a grand archway was purchased from a nearby Hall to act as the main entrance to the Park.

Astley Hall opened as a museum of 'period furniture' on May 31st 1924. In addition, three bedrooms on the first floor of the building were converted into an art gallery.³ In a concluding statement in the souvenir handbook of the opening of the museum the following 'mission statement' is laid out: "The ends in view in adding such a Museum as Astley Hall will provide in the educational equipment of the town are two-

fold. One is the development of incentive to a higher class in artizanship; the second is the general cultural development of community."⁴

Despite the good intentions of the museum founders, progress was actually painfully slow in developing the role of the museum, and it took seventy years to appoint the first professionally qualified curator. During the intervening years the building became the responsibility of the Library service in Chorley and the main priority seems to have been keeping the building in good repair. One development which did take place was the creation of the 'Room of Remembrance' in 1969; wooden panels recording the names of the Chorley men who died in the First World War, which once hung in the Town Hall, were removed to Astley Hall.

1974 saw a series of changes which had a major impact on the way Astley Hall was to be run. Local government re-organisation saw the Library service in Chorley become the responsibility of the County Council and the care of Astley Hall passed to the Amenities Department of the newly formed Chorley Borough Council. In the same year the Astley Hall Society, the unofficial 'friends' of the Hall, was founded. Under its long-time chairman, Mr. George Birtill, local councillor and one-time editor of the local Chorley Guardian weekly newspaper, the Society became unofficial guardian of the Hall, providing guided tours and costume evenings which are still popular today. This was at a time when there were no permanent members of staff at the Hall with the exception of cleaners and attendant staff during opening hours.

There were periodic calls for the Hall to have its own Curator, and a certain momentum built up in the late 1980s, partially at least because of the Museums and Galleries Commission new 'Registration' scheme whereby an institution which



The Shovel Board table in the Long Gallery

wanted to apply for government grants had to operate to certain minimum standards, one of which was access to professional curatorial advice. The argument was far from won, however, and as late as 1988 a prominent local councillor was quoted in the local newspaper as saying: "Astley Hall has done without a curator for the last 100 years, and can carry on without one...the sooner we [Chorley Council] get rid of Astley Hall the better".⁵ Luckily for the Hall, this view was not shared by all and during 1989 the post of Curator was advertised and applications actually received.

Despite these applications, however, the creation of a Curator's post would have to wait another five years as the new post was put on hold. Eventually, in May 1994 the first full-time, professionally qualified Curator was appointed to Astley Hall, almost exactly 70 years after Astley Hall opened as a Museum.

The first task of the Curator was to draw up an Acquisition and Disposal Policy for the museum, thereby fulfilling a condition of Registration with the Museums and Galleries Commission. The Policy was duly accepted by the Council and the Museum received its coveted Registered status in 1995. A Forward Plan followed in the same year giving the Museum a sense of direction for the first time, setting out key objectives until 1998.

Given the lack of curatorial supervision at the Museum, documentation of the collections was, to put it mildly, basic and improving these was seen as a priority. Storage conditions themselves, however, were quite good, mainly thanks to the Astley Hall Society's donation of a significant sum of money to establish a secure store, including racking for artwork. This has now been brought fully into use and documentation has been brought up to the minimum standards expected of a Registered Museum.

Significant changes have been made to the interpretation of the Hall over the last three years. The most significant development has been the opening of the north wing of the Hall to the public, for the first time. This area, as a service wing, gives a different perspective on the grandly furnished family rooms and enables the public to see a different side to a house such as Astley Hall. At the moment this area is largely unfurnished but it is hoped to introduce replica material at some later date. An interpretative room has been established on the Ground Floor of the north wing where some background information to the building of the house and the families and their lifestyles can be given; this is backed up with scale models showing the different stages of the development of the Hall. Other period rooms have been re-interpreted using replica materials such as tankards, plates and soft furnishings, to try and give an impression of Astley as a home, not simply a museum of 'period furniture'.

As well as being a fine historic house, Astley Hall is also the only museum and art gallery in Chorley and there is a need to encourage support amongst the local community. An essential part of this strategy was the scrapping of admission charges for local people; this has proved a very successful policy and a majority of visitors to the Hall are now from the local community. Temporary Exhibitions are a crucial element in encouraging repeat visits from the local community and to this end the Art Gallery is as much of an important resource today as it was when the museum opened. The exhibition policy tries to strike a balance between using the space to show the collections of Astley Hall, allowing local artistic groups a place to exhibit and bringing touring exhibitions into the museum which will hopefully attract local people on repeat visits. Exhibitions over the last couple of years have included modern art such as Picasso etchings and Pop Prints, to a moving toys exhibition and a hands-on archaeology exhibition. Hand in hand with the exhibitions are

special events from concerts to children's art workshops, craft fairs to archaeology days complete with historical re-enactments.

One of the biggest success stories of the last three years has been the growth of the Education Services at the Museum; education in its widest sense is an integral part of the museum's mission statement. A room has been converted into a classroom, an education pack produced and an ever expanding series of curriculum linked projects are on offer.

It has been important to show in 'real terms' that Astley Hall is moving forwards and virtually the only 'performance indicators' recognised by local councillors are increased visitor figures and increased income. Both are a reflection on the better interpretation and more focused exhibition and education policies, but with a mind to visitor expectations a shop and a coffee lounge have recently been opened. In the search for new sources of income Astley Hall now holds a license for civil wedding ceremonies and is an increasingly popular venue for corporate meetings and training events. A new marketing strategy has seen an overhaul of the publicity material for the Hall and the publication of newsletters and separate leaflets for corporate hospitality and weddings. Over the last three years visitor figures and income raised through retail sales have both risen by over 150%.

The Collections

The main collections at Astley Hall still mainly consist of the Hall and its furniture. Some of the oak furniture, in particular, is quite exceptional. The Charnock bed, on which Cromwell is reputed to have rested, must be one of the finest pieces of oak furniture in the county. The coat of arms on the front of the bed are those of the Charnock family.

The shovel board table is quite unique in its scale, at over twenty-three feet long with twenty turned columnar legs; these legs are joined by massive cross stretchers which are covered with an array of interesting carvings. One end of the top surface of the table, composed of parallelogram shaped wood blocks, is inlaid with scratch carved figures for scoring. An unusual piece of furniture is the 'Sirloin Chair'; this is the chair on which James I is alleged to have been seated while enjoying a rare roast loin of beef during a stay at Hoghton Tower. To show his pleasure the king knighted the joint, and 'Sir loin' beef passed into the language!

The panelling in the Great Hall is something of a mystery as, although probably of seventeenth century origin, it is unlikely that it was made for the hall but may have been added during later alterations. It depicts portraits of a varied collection of characters from European history of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, including well known figures such as Elizabeth I and Sir Francis Drake, but also more obscure characters as Scandenburg (an Albanian hero) and Bethlan Gabor (a prince of Transylvania).

The Drawing Room contains tapestries depicting the story of 'The Quest for the Fleece', as Jason outwits the dragon to gain the golden fleece. Little is known of the provenance of the tapestries except that they are seventeenth century in date and are commonly held to be Flemish. Although cleaned in the 1960s, restoration and a new method of hanging the tapestries is one of the museum's most pressing conservation priorities.

Astley Hall houses a notable decorative art collection which deserves to be better known, including eighteenth century glassware (in urgent need of more research) and a fine ceramic collection. This latter collection consists primarily of the bequest of Robert Grey Tatton, who left his collection to



The Great Hall panelling contains images of a curious mix of personalities.



A covered cup and saucer - a sample of the creamware in the collections of Astley Hall.

Astley Hall in 1934. As well as the usual dishes, vases and candlesticks the collection includes more unusual work such as a tall centre-piece in the form of three tiers of shells with dolphin brackets and rockwork base, surmounted by a figure of a woman as 'Plenty'. The collection also contains about another hundred coloured pieces, including tea-pots, tea-canisters and mugs. Some of these pieces contain the impressed mark of 'Hartley Greens and Co. Leeds Pottery'.

The Leeds earthenware factory was founded by two brothers named Green around 1770 before the firm became 'Hartley Greens and Co.' in 1781. For the next forty years the factory prospered, producing mainly cream-coloured earthenware competing with the potteries in Staffordshire. The Tatton bequest has often been called a collection of Leeds Pottery, but, as few of the pieces from the Leeds factory were ever marked, it would be incorrect to ascribe the whole collection to this one pottery firm. Nevertheless, the bequest is one of the more unexpected jewels to be found in the collections of Astley Hall.

From a Fine Art point of view the Hall has a curate's egg of a collection. Many of the seventeenth and eighteenth century portraits are on display and their value is their relationship to the families who lived in the house, rather than being of particular intrinsic or monetary value in their own right. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Art collection at Astley Hall is a collection of War Artists' work, dating from the Second World War period. The fourteen paintings include works by two renowned twentieth century artists, Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland.

The Paul Nash work is entitled 'Moonlight Voyage' and dates from 1940, depicting a Hampden bomber on a night mission; the painting was recently cleaned and restored and took part in a major Paul Nash exhibition 'Aerial Creatures' at the Imperial War Museum. The Graham Sutherland work, entitled 'Devastation', depicts the aftermath of a bombing raid on a Welsh farm in 1940; this work too was scheduled for restoration but when the conservator took it out of the frame she was in for a surprise. It appears that the work was produced on very thin paper, the sort butchers used for wrapping up meat, and it was fused to the backing board. Given



Paul Nash, Moonlight Voyage, part of the War Artist's Collection at Astley Hall.

the extreme fragility of the 'paper', restoration work could proceed no further and was returned to Astley Hall with only some basic cleaning work having been carried out.

Conclusion

Progress has been swift over the past few years in improving the interpretation of Astley Hall and its collections; the care of these collections has been brought up to modern standards and improved marketing is alerting more people to the varied attractions of the building. There are many improvements still to be made and it is a long term aim to convert the Hall's outbuildings and walled garden area into an integral part of a visit to the Hall, combining a 'Museum of Chorley' with retail and craft units.

Given that Astley Hall as a building, however, is beginning its fifth century, a modern curator, even if devoting a career of forty years to the building, is aware that one's 'tenure' is only transitory. The demands of modern economics and politics necessitates that new ways are found to increase visitor 'throughput', income is 'maximised', ever more imaginative marketing schemes devised, schemes for Lottery and other grant-aid are submitted. At the back of one's mind, however, is a feeling that one's main purpose is merely to hand on the building to its next custodian in one piece, waiting until the next person comes along with ideas about how to 'improve' the building, just as the members of the Brooke and Townley-Parker families once did. As for the building itself, you get the feeling that it is smiling to itself thinking 'here we go again...'.

Astley Hall is open:

April-October	Tuesday-Sunday 12 noon until 5pm (last admission 4.30) Plus Bank Holiday Mondays
November-March	Friday-Sunday 12 noon until 4pm (last admission 3.30)

NOTES

- 1 C.Hussey, 'Astley Hall, Lancashire -II', *Country Life*, 15 July 1922, pp.50-6.
- 2 Quoted in the souvenir handbook issued to mark the opening of Astley Hall and Park by Chorley Corporation, 31 May 1924, (no pagination).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *Chorley Guardian*, 7 Jan. 1988.