

The story of some valuable carvings.

When we bought The Manor House I heard anecdotally that there had once been an important wood carving there by carver Grinling Gibbons but it wasn't until I began to research into the history of the house for *Hidden in Full View* that I realised its full importance – and its full significance.

Grinling Gibbons was born in Rotterdam in 1648 and his father was English and his unusual first name was apparently formed from two family names. He became a sculptor and wood carver and moved to London where he received commissions from Charles II and thus became known as the 'Kings Carver'. He was commissioned by Sir Christopher Wren to create decorative carvings for St. Pauls Cathedral and Wren's extension to Hampton Court Palace. Knowing that the design of The Manor House is Wren-influenced we visited Hampton Court Palace as part of my research for the book and I saw first hand the exquisite nature of the over-mantel carvings by Grinling Gibbons. It was incredible to think that a similar carving had been included by the builder of The Manor House.

The visit to Hampton Court also revealed other influences such as the wood panelling that we have in The Manor House – some of it original, and the cooking range in what was once the original kitchens in the cellar which is similar to those that we saw in Hampton Court. If it was true that a Grinling Gibbons carving existed in The Manor House then it would be very significant indeed. However, confirming the existence beyond doubt was elusive and it was important to approach it with scepticism as myths develop easily over time. It wasn't until the book was in its very final stages that I discovered an important reference; *Victoria County History* - <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/durham/vol3/pp321-343> which references a carving attributed to Grinling Gibbons over the mantelpiece in the [council] boardroom. Recently I have also come across a letter by a Mrs. E. Dunn of Sedgefield WI in 1960 (writing for the booklet 'A Story of Our Village') who writes of The Manor House 'There was an unfortunate fire about the end of the last war which was confined to the handsome board-room and the well preserved and valuable Grinling Gibbons carvings were destroyed'. The sad fire occurred in November 1947 and there are still people in Sedgefield who remember it and its aftermath though interestingly (and frustratingly) there is no mention of the carvings (Mrs Dunn implies there was more than one) in the council minute books held at Durham County Record office though there are many entries – some evidently emotional - written about the fire and the loss of the fine council boardroom.

The presence of such important carvings was a clue to the importance and standing of the builder of The Manor House; he must have had fine tastes and the wealth to afford carvings from the Kings Carver and he must have been influenced by the architecture that was fashionable in London after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Grinling Gibbons became very successful in his lifetime and opened a workshop to meet the demand for his work and I think I can almost dismiss my healthy scepticism. The carvings would have been exceptionally rare examples of the work of Grinling Gibbons in this part of the world and a proud feature for Sedgefield if they continued to exist and I can't imagine that the name of Grinling Gibbons was so recognised that a myth could develop about the name of their creator. Therefore I accepted as fact that there were indeed important carvings above the mantels in The Manor House until 1947 however, though I have scoured books and catalogues about the work of Grinling Gibbons to try to discover a mention of the carvings being by the hand of the great man himself or whether they were produced in his workshop sadly it is unlikely we will ever find out.