

# Rebecca Hornblower's Chair



Rebecca Hornblower's Chair *image courtesy Birmingham Museums & Art gallery*

This story commences in 1979 when I arranged to meet a 4th cousin whilst on a trip to England. He was a direct descendant of the senior line of a LEE family who had been Birmingham lawyers since 1760. Our descent was from a second son, and the hope was that the senior line might have additional knowledge of the earlier generations.

Amongst other details, Peter told me about a tapestry chair worked by my 4x great grandmother in 1738 which was held by Birmingham Museums. Unfortunately I received this news on the second last day of my trip, making it impossible to fit in a viewing. It would be 12 years before I was able to return to Birmingham.

In the meantime I wrote to the Birmingham Museum, and the curator confirmed that they did indeed have this chair, but it was not at the museum. It was displayed at Aston Hall, a Jacobean mansion owned by the city and furnished with items from the museum. I was so glad that I had made enquiries, as I could easily have been thwarted by turning up at the wrong venue.



Aston Hall, Birmingham *image courtesy Wikipedia*

I discovered that a friend would be in based in Sheffield at the time of my planned trip, and we agreed to spend a day or two together. "I need to go to Aston Hall in Birmingham" I said, "So do I" she said. How amazing was that? She was following a family story that she was related to the Holte family that had built the Hall.

With the details firmed up, I wrote again to the curator, advising the date of my visit, and asking him to ensure that I would be able to see the chair. Janice and I were there at opening time, and I introduced myself, explaining that we had come to see Rebecca Hornblower's chair. The staff looked at me blankly - they were only security guards, any questions about exhibits should be referred to staff at the museum!

So there was nothing for it but to purchase the guide book and set about hunting room by room for any chair which might fit my brief. It was a very large house, containing innumerable chairs, but we worked through them methodically - can't be that one - it's one of a set; can't be that one - the cover isn't tapestry; can't be that one - it's too modern.... etc. We got through the whole of the ground floor without even finding a "possible" and, feeling somewhat despondent, started on the first floor. The third bedroom had a small ante-room with a chair which looked possible, and on referring to the guide book we found not only that it was photographed, but also that Rebecca Hornblower was mentioned! If only those guards had read the book!!

I wanted to get up close to examine the stitchery, but a rope restricted public access, so I rushed down to the door staff - "I found it, I found it, can I go under the rope to get a closer view?" A phone call to the boss produced the answer that this was out of the question as it would involve disarming alarms in the whole complex. So I must to do my best to get a picture in the rather dim lighting available.

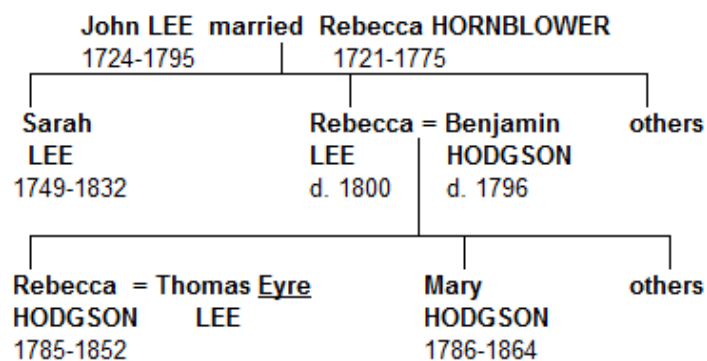
Whilst I had been probing the alarm system Janice had been doing some investigating of her own, and when I returned to the room she pointed out that under my Grannie's chair was a cross stitched mat featuring the Holte coat of arms. So it was just possible that my Grannie's chair was standing on her Grannie's carpet! More research is needed to prove her relationship.

When I got home to New Zealand a packet was waiting for me, containing an apology from the curator who had been away in Canada at the time of my visit. He enclosed the museum's photos of the chair which were much clearer than what I had been able to get. In thanking him I was able to provide family details which I hope will add to the value to their holding.



I had also obtained several family wills on that trip, and they enabled me to trace the movements of the chair throughout its life.

- 1738: Rebecca stitched her name into her tapestry. She was about 17 years of age
- 1748: Rebecca married John Lee, button manufacturer, of Snow Hill, Birmingham
- 1775: Rebecca died - her property belonged to her husband John so she had no will.
- 1795: John Lee willed the chair to their daughter Rebecca Hodgson nee Lee.
- 1800: Rebecca Hodgson died a widow, leaving the chair to her unmarried sister Sarah Lee for her lifetime, then to her daughter Mary Hodgson.
- 1832: Sarah Lee died and the chair passed to Sarah's niece Mary Hodgson
- 1864: Mary Hodgson died, and the chair passed to her married sister Rebecca Lee nee Hodgson. This Rebecca had married her second cousin, uniting two branches of the Lee family.



By the 1940s the chair, then 200 years old, had passed down through Rebecca [Hodgson] Lee's descendants to her great grandson whose wife Phyllis Hornblower Lee traced a descent from the same Hornblower family. Woodworm had invaded the chair's frame and it was in a dilapidated state when it was sold to the Birmingham Museum, and restored.

At the time of my visit in 1991 the tapestry appeared to be in excellent condition, but the calico under the seat had perished and was once more in need of restoration.





The chair as photographed in 1991

For further detail on this family go to  
<http://www.genealogy.ianskipworth.com/pdf/lees.pdf>

Mary Skipworth, 20 June 2012