

Arts And Antiques

Look through the Keyhole into the Geffrye Museum



By Abby Cronin

Step through the door of the Geffrye Museum and begin a journey which explores 400 years of English middle class domestic interiors – from 1600 to the present day. This small gem of a museum is set in the former almshouses built in 1714 by Sir Robert Geffrye. A wealthy merchant, Geffrye was made Master of the Ironmongers' Company in 1667, knighted in 1673 and Lord Mayor of the City of London in 1685. He was devoted to charitable works and bequeathed a substantial portion of his wealth 'to be used by the Ironmongers' Company to purchase ground, in or near the City of London, to build almshouses for the elderly poor'. In 1911 the London County Council bought the almshouses on Kingsland Road in the East End with a view to providing access to garden open space in an otherwise densely populated urban area. And in 1914 the buildings were converted into a museum of furniture which reflected the main local industry of furniture manufacture.

The popularity of the Geffrye grew throughout the 20th century. During the 1930s the museum's collections were organised



*Exterior Landscape of Geffrye.
Photo by Morley von Sternberg*

into authentically furnished urban middle class English living rooms, reflecting the taste of London's more prosperous residents. A generous Heritage Lottery Grant received in the 1990s enabled the museum to expand and extend the sequence of period rooms into the 20th century. Now the new extension offers additional exhibition space, a restaurant, shop and educational facilities for community outreach, themed workshops and a programme of visits for school children. Touch-screen terminals encourage visitors to find more detailed information.

Formerly known as a Museum of English Domestic Interiors, in recent years the Geffrye has adopted a wider brief and now sees itself as the *Museum of the Home*. In the light of this change, the Geffrye continues to develop an exhibition programme featuring homes which reflect diverse cultural tastes and traditions. For example, in 2005/06 'The West Indian Front Room' focused on memories and impressions of Black British Homes. And from 22nd March to 29th August this year, an exhibit entitled 'At Home in Japan – Beyond the Minimal House' peeks inside the private domestic lives in Japan today and questions the stereotype image of the minimal Japanese house. An annual selling fair, *Ceramics in the City*, will be held again in September 2011. You can browse or buy; it's a great opportunity to meet and talk with ceramicists.

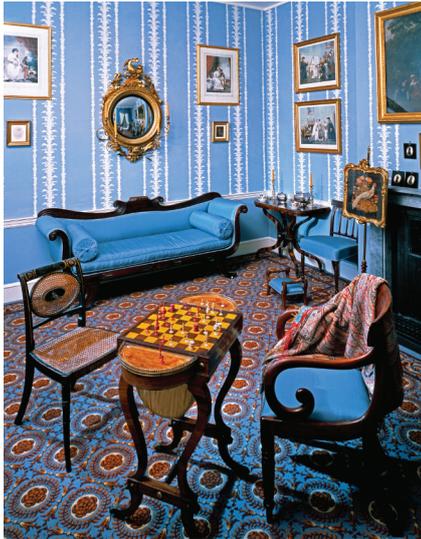
While the Geffrye continues to offer new exhibitions and events, the museum's main mission is to focus on interpreting the evolution of living rooms since 1600 in middle class English homes. *Parlours* or *living rooms* and *loft-style apartments* illustrate how family and social life was lived and changed as the British prospered and fashions in domestic interiors became a sign of status. Visitors can explore eleven period rooms which are bespoke architectural replicas made for the Geffrye and organised chronologically. The rooms contain mainly original furniture, textiles, wall and

floor coverings, pictures, decorative ornaments and accessories reflecting fashions of the day. Walls, ceilings, floors and windows are based on evidence taken from existing buildings in London. Excellent signage explains the contents and function of each room and there is a prominent 'Children's Trail' sign directing a child's attention to specific objects in the room. Along the corridor leading past the rooms are lobbies where you can hear 'voices from the past' and read facsimile newspapers. Walk on through the Chapel into a reading room where the library is full of reference books and magazines about the history of interiors, decoration and architecture. Just off the reading room is a comfortable Garden Room with graceful period windows and benches where you can rest and gaze out at the mature 'external garden rooms'. The Geffrye's gardens are based on four centuries of fashions in garden design. There is a walled herb garden leading to the main garden area which is open from April through September.

Here's a taste of what you will see and learn as you stroll along the corridor adjacent to period rooms. The 1630's Hall was the centre of the family's communal life and the setting for dining, entertaining, childcare and business. Note the elegant oak panelling based on a 19th century sketch of a 17th century room in London's East End. Among the furnishings are sturdy furniture, candles for lighting, papers, books and a fireplace. Though simple and functional, it was suitably impressive and represents an early 'middling' class standard of the time. By the late 18th century more goods were available and affordable due to increased economic prosperity. In 1790 a middle class family was able to furnish their parlour with attractive carpets, textiles, wallpaper, a mirror and paintings. The effect was warmer. There were more comforts but little attention was paid to the display of ornaments. The overall effect was simple and sparse unlike the more ostentatious



Hall in 1630. Photo by C. Ridley



1830s Drawing Room Photo by C. Ridley



1890s Drawing Room Photo by J. Lloyd

changes which occurred in the nineteenth century.

The Geffrye's 1830s *drawing room* features the flamboyant and elaborate Regency style of the early 19th century. Wallcoverings, carpets and textiles were conspicuously coordinated. Upholstered chairs and sofas were *de rigueur*. A wealthier clientele had developed an appetite for more ornamentation and this 1830s room is furnished with an array of pictures, mirrors and screens. Decorative objects suited Regency homes and these consumer goods were available in the marketplace. Towards the end of the 19th century, however, many artists and writers reacted against Victorian décor.



1935 Dining Lounge Photo by C. Ridley

Repelled by the excessive materialism of Victorian taste, they favoured a purity of style and sought 'artistic' furnishings for the home. The work and writings of Pre-Raphaelites such as Whistler, Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones were influential at this time. A key figure was English designer Christopher Dresser who had visited Japan and whose work was inspired by Japanese art and design. Collectively this group promoted a new 'artistic' style – 'A House Beautiful' in which rooms ought to be ensembles of exquisite objects. Known as the Aesthetic Movement, its advocates and consumers were mainly intellectuals, bohemians and some circles within the urban middle classes. See the 1890s period room where furnishings include unique fittings and fixtures with an exotic edge. Moorish and Islamic artistic styles can be seen in the carpets, ceramics, tiles, wallpapers, and furniture.

Twentieth century interiors more closely reflect our own experience of home decoration. The 1935s living room is based on newly-built flats. Smaller rooms suited the life style of well-off urban couples with no children. The *dining lounge* has modernist interiors, plain walls and is furnished with comfortable seating and practical dining areas with daylight filtering through wide metal-framed windows. Equipped with the latest conveniences including electricity, telephones, central heating, radio and phonographs and usually a fireplace, these flats became an alternative to



1998 loft conversion Photo by C. Ridley

the suburban house. The 1998 loft-style apartment is the last period room in the Geffrye. Recognising that living in the city had become both expensive and crowded, architects recognised the potential for converting many redundant commercial and industrial buildings into residential accommodation. Canary Wharf and Thames wharfs are two examples familiar to Londoners. They feature loft-style apartments which retain an industrial aesthetic and maximise limited space. Seen here, the bedroom is a mezzanine above a high tech compact kitchen which is divided from the living space by a 'breakfast bar'. Less suited for families, this accommodation works well for urban professionals wishing to live in or close to the centre of the city.



Herb Garden Photo by Sunniva Harte

Don't miss the period gardens at Geffrye. Spring welcomes them into bud and in summer they are glorious. This museum even has a Green Tourism badge earned for the conservation work completed when York stone replaced tarmac in the front garden and lighting was renewed to conserve energy. Restored Almshouse rooms can be seen by during normal visiting hours. Check out the website before visiting and scroll through the Kids' Zone and the contents on the Collections page. The London Overground opened a CultureLine in 2010. So now there is easy access to the East End's cultural connections. Get off at Hoxton Station and find yourself directly behind the Geffrye Museum. You can make your way into the museum – and begin looking through the keyhole!

<http://www.geffrye-museum.org.uk/>

Entry is FREE

www.cultureline.org.uk

All images courtesy of the Geffrye Museum

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