

Lot 735 A Sedan chair, with plain leather panels and roof, brass nailed, and partly glazed front and sides.

Reputedly Elizabeth Woolnough's sedan chair.

Current location unknown. Sold in 1947 for £30.

The Western Daily Press reported on the 7th of June 1947.

'Least utilitarian of the items, an ancient Sedan chair raised £32.'

Anton Bantock remarked:

'an enormous quantity of household junk, the contents of numerous outhouses and servants' quarters was jettisoned; some items of great sociological and family interest passed into obscurity, including Elizabeth Woolnough's sedan chair, which was sold for £30.'

The chair is mentioned in the 1901 Inventory where it is listed in Hunter's Hall. It is not specifically mentioned in the 1915 Inventory. In 1930 it was valued at £150 for insurance purposes.

When Vera Thomas visited Ashton Court in 1989 she recalled the North West wing. Her comments were:

"There was a beautiful Regency staircase here", said Vera, "with a sedan chair at the bottom".

What is a sedan chair?



The owner of a sedan chair would usually employ 2 men who carried the owner and the chair using leather straps across their shoulders. The straps were attached to the poles. The chairs were usually of a light-weight construction so as not to add weight to the sedan.

The sale of the sedan chair prompted comments in the Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette of the 3rd of June 1947.

'The fact that a sedan chair, which only fetched £32, was included in the recent sale at Ashton Court, Bristol, has prompted "T.G.," in the "Western Daily Press" to recall the origin of this form of transport. The sedan chair originated in Italy in the late 15th century, and was thought to have been brought to this country by Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham on their return from Spain about 1623. It probably got its name from Sedan in Eastern France where the first one was built. It was from the sedan chair that J.A. Hansom got his idea for the Hansom cab, which came later.'

Who was Elizabeth Woolnough?

Elizabeth Woolnough was the only child of Henry Woolnough and his wife Rebecca. Henry died young in 1746 and he left his wife, Rebecca, to manage his extensive wealth and property, including a share in the Spring Plantation in Jamaica which had been left to her by her uncle John Elbridge.

Joseph Bettey elaborates:

'In 1757 Elizabeth married John Hugh Smyth, son of Jarrit Smyth, the Bristol attorney who had acquired most of the Ashton Court estate through his wife, who was the sister of Sir John Smyth. Sir John had died without issue in 1741, heavily in debt to his lawyer, Jarrit Smith, who assumed the name of Smyth when he acquired the estate. The marriage of John Hugh Smyth and Elizabeth Woolnough brought her inheritance of £40,000 to secure the future of the Smyth dynasty at Ashton Court.'

John Hugh Smyth died suddenly in 1802 and Elizabeth moved to Clift House which was her home until she died in 1825 aged 87. John Hugh and Elizabeth were childless so the Ashton Court estate passed to John Hugh's nephew.

On the 23rd of April 1822 Dame Elizabeth Smyth presided over the inauguration ceremony for the opening of the newly built Coronation Road in Bedminster. She was accompanied by 'Capt. Smyth's Troop of Yeomanry' and she processed along the road in a coach and four from her home at Clift House. The new road ran alongside the New Cut from Ashton Gate toll house to Harford's Bridge. Legend has it that some of the workman who had constructed Coronation Road lined the route as the procession passed along. Clift House overlooked the western end of the New Cut and hence the new road passed by the end of the drive up to the house. The drive ran more or less along the route of the present day Frayne Road.