



Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson, Master Craftsman from Kilburn

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The best view in England is often said to be from Sutton Bank in North Yorkshire. Directly west from your viewpoint is Thirsk, then Wharfedale and the Pennines beyond. The escarpment below your feet has oak woods; to the south, about a mile away, is the village of Kilburn. Behind you, out of sight and to the southeast, is Ampleforth Abbey. On a clear day, you may be just able to make out York Minster.

If you stretch your imagination, Oxcodby, the fictional village in J. L. Carr's elegiac classic 'A Month in the Country', is also in your line of view. In the novel, the Oxcodby chapel-goers' Sunday summer outing takes them to the village of Kilburn. In the main street a joiner calls to someone he recognises, as the trippers' charabanc passes his front yard. If you suspend disbelief a little more, that joiner could be Robert Thompson. It is 1920. He's thinking about the new furniture he is making for Ampleforth Abbey. He is toying with the notion of adding a carved mouse ...

Towards the end of his life in 1949, Robert Thompson (1876-1955) wrote: *"The origin of the mouse as my mark was almost in the way of being an accident. I and another carver were carving a huge cornice for a screen and he happened to say something about being as poor as a church mouse. I said 'I'll carve a mouse here' and did so, then it struck*

me what a lovely trade-mark. This is about 30 years ago". That mouse has gone on to make Robert Thompson the most famous of many fine carvers of English oak. And churches proved to be enduring clients for his company, and remain so for his descendants today. The mouse works as a trade-mark, one of the earliest to survive into the modern day, but also helps authenticate the work of Robert Thompson's Craftsmen Ltd, and does service as a benchmark for quality. The mouse also serves perfectly for everyone wishing to seek out and spot examples of Mouseman furniture and carved works.

Carving a mouse in English oak is a demanding test of skill and patience. Oak combines hardness, weight, suppleness and toughness, but none of these to extremes, making it ideal for furniture and other uses requiring strength and durability, most notably medieval shipbuilding and construction. But a mature oak takes 120 years to grow, and is thus expensive. Oak is heavy and cumbersome, so ready availability of local supplies is important, especially when access is a challenge. Oak needs to dry out slowly, hence the large rectangular piles that may be seen in Thompson's Kilburn yard.

To hand-work oak, you need tools for paring and gouging, and specialist tools such as veiners, with a U-shaped

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edge. You need mallets and chisels and, famously, in the case of Robert Thompson, the adze, a smaller version of a mattock, with a sharp cutting edge that shaves the wood's surface, rather than slicing or cutting it. Evidence of flint adze work has been found at Starr Carr, near Scarborough, Britain's earliest known house, at 11,000 years old - so such techniques have been around a long time in Yorkshire. Use of the adze produces the characteristic hexagonal ripple effect in items such as refectory tables. Hand-working oak takes considerable time and effort, but the end result is unparalleled in domestic furniture such as sideboards and dressers, panelling, carvings, ecclesiastical fixtures and fittings such as pulpits, pews and prayer desks. There are

even Mouseman clocks and barometers, and smaller items such as ashtrays, fruit-bowls and book-ends.

Today, people wishing to go on a 'mouse-hunt' can do no better than starting at St Mary's, the charming village church of Kilburn, tucked away behind Thompson's yard. Other examples include the church of St Mary the Virgin in Norton-on-Tees, where the lych-gate and pews have 'mice'. Visitors may see some of the latter-day craftsmen at work at the Mouseman Visitor Centre in Kilburn, where there is also a splendid tea-room, complete with Mouseman dining chairs and bespoke café tables. The furniture range is displayed in Robert Thompson's original cottage, now serving as a showroom. But be warned: it's tempting!

(With thanks to Ian Thompson Cartwright for additional material.)



Find out more

Mouseman Visitor Centre, Kilburn YO61 4AH,
<http://www.robertthompsons.co.uk>

Motoring trails are detailed in 'Mouseman:
The Legacy of Robert Thompson of Kilburn', by Patricia Lennon and David Joy (2008)

The delightful 1948 silent film 'Craftsman of Kilburn' can be viewed at
<http://www.yorkshirefilmarchive.com/film/craftsman-kilburn>



Robert Thompson's trademark carved mouse



Robert Thompson in his workshop



Work-bench, Mouseman Museum, Kilburn



Oak stacked and seasoning, Kilburn