

## Through The Keyhole



In May we visited the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge to see *Madonnas & Miracles - The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy*. The exhibition was a fascinating glimpse through the keyhole at what lay people in fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy believed and how they practised their faith in private.

The first part of the exhibition was divided into the rooms of an Italian home and explored how religious imagery permeated the whole house. There was a wooden linen chest which when opened revealed images from the life of a female saint, an ivory comb engraved with an Annunciation scene, plates and dishes showing episodes from the life of Christ as well as many other ordinary objects decorated with religious symbols.

Poorer Italians used inexpensive rosaries, roughly made crucifixes and cheap prints and pamphlets. The better off had more leisure time to spend in private devotion and had both better made, and a richer variety, of objects including artworks. We learned that much art for the home was deliberately small in scale to encourage close looking and often used the landscape of contemporary Italy to remind viewers that they too could put aside worldly concerns and retreat from the world around them. Works of art, icons and objects like rosaries were meant to be used to help people show devotion to God by providing a focus for their thoughts and prayers. However, by the time of the Counter Reformation in the sixteenth century the church authorities were increasingly concerned that people may have been falling into the trap of worshipping the objects themselves and so they tried to restrict the kinds of items on sale.

Some of the most compelling items were annotated prayer books and Bibles, sometimes in several hands, where passages had been highlighted and notes jotted in the margins. These do something that the objects and artworks can't - they give a real insight into what their owners were thinking as they read and what struck them as important at that time in their lives.

By contrast, earlier in the year we had the extraordinary experience of visiting the recently reopened Mary Rose Museum. The *Mary Rose* was Henry VIII's flagship, she sank off Portsmouth in 1545 and was raised in 1982. The remains of the ship are displayed with the thousands of objects rescued from the seabed - all preserved by the silt. This too was a glimpse into a lost world. There were tools belonging to the carpenter and ointment canisters belonging to the surgeon. Animal bones and fruit stones showed what was being eaten; leather slip on shoes what was being worn; a backgammon set and musical instruments how time was passed. The *Mary Rose* was a warship so there were longbows and arrows, cannons and cast iron shot. There were also signs of faith - rosaries and leather prayer book covers; one of the archers had a wrist band with a prayer that began *Ave Maria*. In 1545 England had broken ties with Rome so these signs of ordinary people continuing with their old ways of expressing private faith are revealing.

Thinking back on both these exhibitions, which allowed us to take a peek into the very different closed worlds of Italian home and Tudor warship, I wonder what future historians and archaeologists, looking through our keyholes, would see and make of the way we practise our faith behind closed doors?