

BELTON HOUSE, GRANTHAM.

BELTON HOUSE, one of Lord Brownlow's noble and beautiful mansions, bears upon its face all the characteristics of the great architect who designed it, as his mind was expressed in his domestic creations. That architect was Sir Christopher Wren, and Belton House is chiefly noticeable, like Marlborough House and other examples from the same hand, for its dignified sobriety of character externally, and its stateliness and good arrangements within. There had been an earlier house at Belton, in which the ancestors of Sir John Brownlow, the builder of the existing mansion, had dwelt. The estate became the property of Richard Brownlow, Esq., Chief Prothonotary of the Common Pleas, who was born in 1553, and lived to be eighty-five. He had been a student of the Inner Temple, and treasurer of that society, and he received his profitable appointment on October 9th,

1591, and held it until his death. It is said to have brought him emoluments amounting to £6,000 a year, which substantial income enabled him to purchase from the trustees of the Pakenham and another family the Belton estate and other properties in Lincolnshire. The Prothonotary died in London, and his bowels were buried at Enfield, while his body was carried to Belton, where in the church is a figure of him in his official robes.

This notable lawyer had two sons, John and William, both of them baronets, and from the latter was descended Sir John Brownlow, who, in 1690, procured licence to enclose a park in Belton, Londonthorpe, and Telthorpe, about which he built a wall some five miles in circumference. He also built the house which still stands, although it has undergone some modifications. It was erected between 1685 and 1689,



THE WEST FORECOURT,

when Sir Christopher Wren was in the full tide of his work. It was the period in which St. Paul's was being built, and in which the churches of St. Andrew, Holborn, St. Mary, Lothbury, and St. Mary Abchurch were erected. We cannot withhold admiration from its dignified simplicity of aspect, and there is a great deal in the detail both externally and internally to admire.

Sir John Brownlow, who was visited at Belton by William III. during his northern progress after the death of Queen Mary, spared little in the beautifying of his mansion; but

who dwelt near by at Sayes Court, and who introduced him to Sir Christopher Wren. He was discovered reproducing in wood Tintoretto's great picture of the Crucifixion, at Venice, and Evelyn was so impressed with what he saw, that he invited his friends Wren and Pepys to examine the work. He procured permission for it to be shown to the King, and what, perhaps, was of more practical value, he procured from Wren a promise that the young artist should be employed. The promise was fulfilled, and in St. Paul's, and almost wherever Wren worked, Grinling Gibbons worked also. Thus it was



THE EAST END OF THE DRAWING-ROOM.

nothing, perhaps, that it contains is so interesting as the famous carvings by Grinling Gibbons. There are no finer examples of the work of the great wood-carver in England, and his masterpieces at Belton have had the advantage of being subjected to restoration by that eminent artist, who followed so much in his footsteps, the late W. G. Rogers. When Gibbons wished to devote himself to practising, uninterruptedly, the art he loved, he withdrew from La Belle Sauvage Yard, where he had lived, to a lonely house at Deptford, which had the unexpected advantage of bringing him into touch with John Evelyn,

that Belton House was adorned with truly marvellous illustrations of the extraordinary skill of the great wood-carver, whose work is spread so broadly throughout England.

The exquisite delicacy of the carvings at Belton enables us to give credence to the legend related of Gibbons that when he lived in the vicinity of Ludgate Hill, he placed above his door a bunch of corn so naturally carved in wood that it waved in the breeze and trembled when vehicles passed by. There is a lightness of touch and a truth to Nature that are not surpassed anywhere. The ears of wheat, the



MASTERPIECES OF GRINLING GIBBONS IN THE CHAPEL GALLERY.

snowdrops and other spring flowers, the grapes and various fruits, and the dead poultry and game, possess extraordinary fidelity to their originals. We can readily understand how John Evelyn, filled with the love of Nature, delighted in the carver's reproduction of natural things. There are two schools of thought upon the matter, and some will love the conventional despite all the naturalistic triumphs of Gibbons. But none can fail to appreciate his wonderful

and inimitable skill. What a picture it is, that of John Evelyn discovering him at his work in his little room in old Deptford, or bringing his friends to behold it. It was Evelyn's admiration, as we have shown, that founded the fame of Gibbons.

Grinling Gibbons had followers and imitators, but perhaps only one approached him in skill. There has been much dispute as to whether the famous carvings at Chatsworth were



THE ARCHES AND CARVINGS OF THE CHAPEL GALLERY,



FRUIT AND FLOWERS BY GIBBONS IN THE TAPESTRY-ROOM.

his work or that of the local artist, Samuel Watson. Allan Cunningham says, "The birds seem to live, the foliage to shoot, the flowers to expand beneath your eye," just as they do at Belton, and as they might be expected to do in the work of Grinling Gibbons. And yet all documentary evidence goes to show that Watson was busily employed, and makes no mention of Gibbons, though many refuse to believe that any other hand than his could have wrought the marvels. At Heanor, a few miles from Belper, is

a curious epitaph of Watson, seeming to imply that he had been neglected by Faine. It deserves to be quoted here :

"Watson has gone, whose skilful art displayed
To the very life, whatever Nature made.
View but his wondrous works in Chatsworth Hall,
Which are so gazed at and admired by all;
You'll say 'tis pity he should hidden be,
And nothing said to revive his memory.
'My mournful friends, forbear your tears,
For I shall rise when Christ appears!'"

Therefore, perhaps, the name of Watson

should be linked with that of Gibbons. Both worked in the same style, but, while the former was employed, presumably, mostly in his own district, the carvings of Gibbons are in many parts of the land, and nowhere in greater perfection than at Belton House.

From this digression upon the work of the great wood-carver, which is made appropriately, because he played so prominent a part in the adornment of old English mansions, we return to the history of Belton House. A later Sir

John Brownlow, who was created Viscount Tyrconnel in 1718, and who died in 1754, made many changes in the place. It was he who began the fine library, and laid out the beautiful formal gardens, which no longer remain. Perhaps to his time we may ascribe the noble hammered gates of the west forecourt and other external adornments. He built the triumphal arch near the eastern gate, which is known as the Belmont Tower, and commands a magnificent view from its crest. This Sir John



THE WEST END OF THE DINING-ROOM.



THE CEILING OF THE GREAT HALL.

Brownlow left no children, and his sister Anne, who was his heiress, conveyed Belton to her husband, Sir Richard Cust, second baronet. Their son was Sir John Cust, born in 1718, who represented Grantham in Parliament from 1743 until his death in 1770, and was Speaker of the House of Commons from 1761 to the same year. He assumed office in the first Parliament of George III., and held it at a stormy time in Parliamentary history, when Wilkes was thrice returned for Middlesex and was expelled and replaced. Wilkes and his friends made Sir John Cust an object of bitter invective, and Wraxall says the chair was never filled with less dignity or energy. Walpole, on the other hand, says that it was well filled, and certainly Sir John Cust earned Royal favour. He wore himself out in the toils of his office, and his son, Sir Brownlow Cust, was created, in 1776, Baron Brownlow of Belton, expressly in recognition of his father's Parliamentary services.

The first Lord Brownlow employed James Wyatt to alter and improve Belton House. A desire for change had passed over the country, and there was scarcely a county or a large town in England which did not exhibit some public or private building due to that active architect.

He built Heaton House, near Manchester, for Sir Thomas Egerton, Fonthill for Mr. Beckford, and added two wings to Chiswick House, the Duke of Devonshire's suburban place. At Belton House he removed the cupola, which has since been replaced, made the Drawing Room more lofty, and effected some other changes. The splendid character of the plaster-work will be noticed; and however much we may regret that Wren's structure should have been modified, we must recognise much that was good in the work of Wyatt. There is excellent character in the house generally, charming picturesqueness in its courtyard, and lavish beauty in its iron grilles and many of its details.

Numerous interesting portraits are at Belton, including examples of Lely, Reynolds, Romney, and Hoppner. But, as we have said, internally nothing is so interesting as the beautiful work of Gibbons, exemplified in the cedar paneling of the Chapel, the pendent groups, flowers, fruit, and game of the Drawing Room, and other examples, not excelled, if they are equalled, by anything from the same hand that can be shown at Blenheim, Cassiobury, Houghton, or other great houses.



DEAD GAME, FRUIT, FLOWERS, AND CORN BY GIBBONS.

There are, of course, at Belton great and noble surroundings, not the old formal gardens that were laid out there, but more modern parterres, set like jewels in their green framework of grass, reproducing the design of

the original garden so far as the configuration of the ground would permit, and with a rich background of evergreen and deciduous trees. Beauty reigns everywhere, and taste and judgment preside over its manifestations.



CARVINGS OVER THE HALL MANTEL.