

# DUNSTER CASTLE, SOMERSET.

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THE ancient and picturesque village of Dunster, in Somerset, and the venerable castle which has looked over it for ages from the hill, constitute together one of the most interesting scenes which we could find in all the West of England. Here one of the most powerful comrades of the Conqueror, William de Moion, established himself, and became one of the greatest landowners in the West. His castle is mentioned in the Exchequer Domesday, and he is recorded to have held sixty-eight manors in Somerset, Devon, Dorset, and Wilts. His son William was one of the great nobles who espoused the cause of Queen Matilda, and in the "Gesta Stephani," which came from a hostile pen, it is recorded that he placed knights and foot soldiers in his impregnable stronghold by the seashore, whence he issued to roam over the country, "sweeping

it as with a whirlwind." After him came many other great men of his house, some of whom played a large part in our baronial history.

The castle of Dunster is of high antiquity, but the oldest existing part, so far as can be known, appears to date from about the time of Reginald de Moion, who died in 1257. The great entrance gateway, the series of projecting, semi-circular towers, and the thick curtain wall which connects them, probably are the work of this Reginald. It is not easy to say, however, why the lower ward of the Norman castle required rebuilding so soon. Reginald was succeeded by his grandson John, after whom, in regular descent, followed other Johns. One was an active warrior under Edward I., and greatly distinguished himself in the wars in Flanders and Scotland, and sat in



THE UPPER GATE OF THE KEEP.

Parliament as a peer of the realm. Then another John inherited the estate, and was a valiant soldier against the Scots and in the wars of Edward III., standing high in that monarch's favour, and being one of the original Knights of the Garter in 1350. He married Joan, the daughter of Sir Bartholomew de Burghersh, a lady of great note in the fortunes of Dunster, since, at her death, it passed to other hands.



*A PORTION OF THE STAIRWAY.*

Her husband's will is rather brief, and ominously refers to creditors in London. Perhaps the fortunes of war and the too generous hands of his ancestors had shorn him of some of his prosperity; but he made dispositions, since he left no sons, to secure the estate for life to his widow.

The remainder was secured after her death to Lady Elizabeth Luttrell, a dame of high

degree, and the price paid was 500 marks, being equivalent to £3,333 6s. 8d. The original receipt which she gave for this money is now the most interesting document preserved by Mr. Luttrell at Dunster Castle. The family of Luttrell, which thus came into possession of Dunster, claims descent from one Geoffrey, who was concerned in the rebellion of John during his brother's reign, and was reinstated in his Lincolnshire estates when the truculent king came to the throne. The husband of the noble lady who bought Dunster was Sir Andrew Luttrell of East Quantockshead, nine miles from Dunster, and she was the daughter of that great peer, Hugh Earl of Devon, and the widow of Sir John de Vere.

Sir Andrew Luttrell's son was Sir Hugh, a man of great worth, honourably employed by three successive kings. He supported the House of Lancaster, was Lieutenant of Calais, and Ambassador to the Duke of Burgundy. He succeeded to Dunster on the death of Lady Joan de Mohun, but his possession was disputed by the Mohun heiresses, who held that the lady had no right to dispose of it. A great dispute followed, ending in a long law-suit, which resulted in favour of Sir Hugh. He went to France with Henry V., and was Governor of Harfleur. Afterwards appointed Seneschal of Normandy, he lived long abroad, while his son John directed affairs at Dunster.

Although he was often absent from Dunster, much work was done at the castle in his time. In 1417 masons were summoned from Bridgewater to advise about rebuilding the hall, and two years later

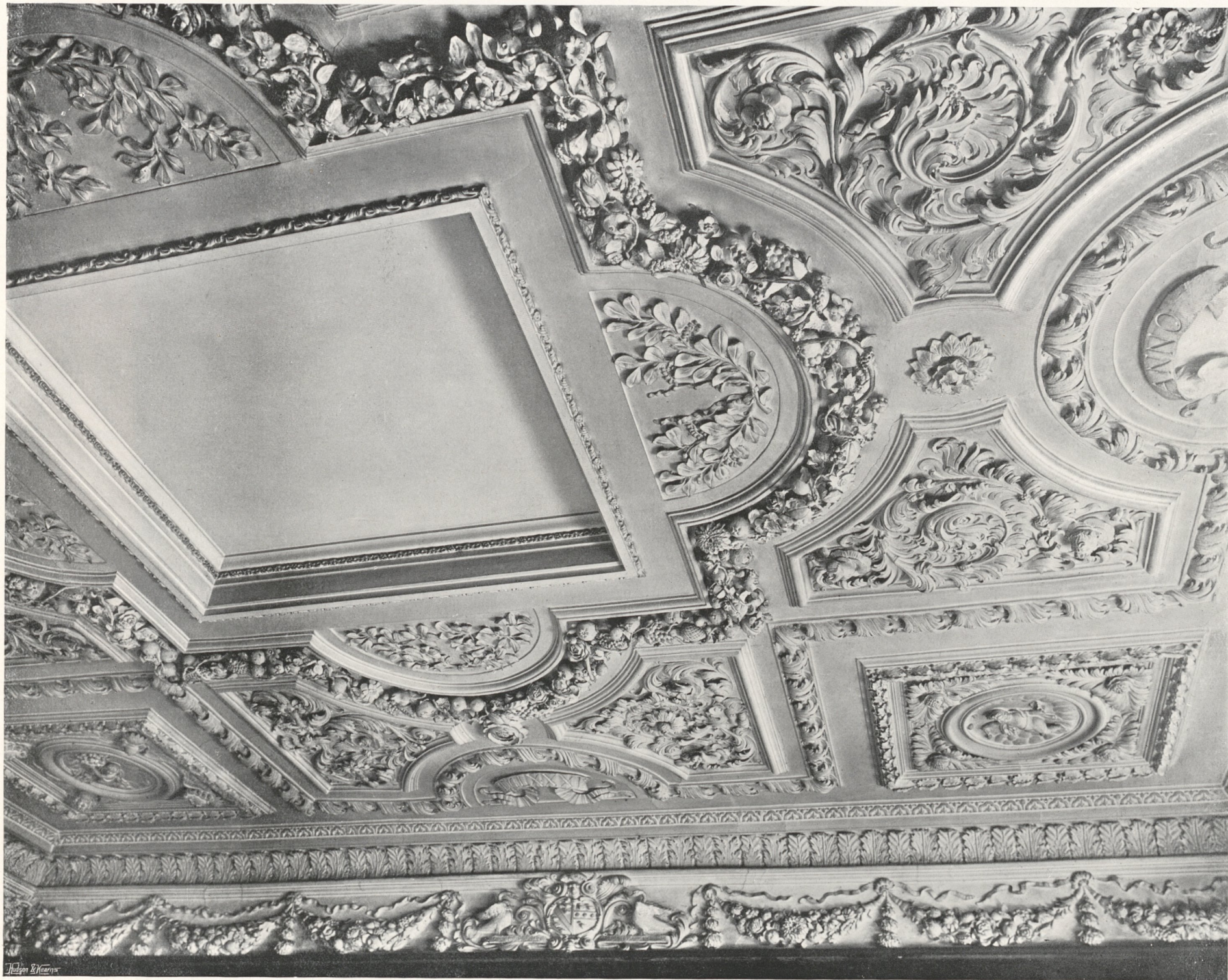
part of the walls of the hall and castle was pulled down, and a new building was begun near by. This work was no doubt the gate-house, now spanning the approach from the north-west, which some have assigned to the time of Richard II., and others, with as little warrant, to that of Henry VIII. Sir Hugh's accounts mention an upper and a lower castle. The former was generally known as "le Dongeon,"



THE STAIRWAY.

and had a chapel, a kitchen, and at least one tower, while in the lower ward near the gate-house stood the hall, the second chapel, Dame Hawys's tower, a tower over the entrance, with a portcullis and gatekeeper's room, the lord's room, the constable's room, storehouses, stables, etc. Sir Hugh was in 1428 succeeded by Sir John, who strengthened the gate-house by building the two buttresses on the north

side; and then came Sir James, who was knighted for his prowess on the Lancastrian side at the battle of Wakefield, and was mortally wounded in the second battle of St. Albans. Upon the success of the House of York misfortune shrouded the Luttrells, whose possessions were forfeited to the Crown, and were held by the Earls of Pembroke for a time. But the tide turned with the victory of Bosworth,



THE CEILING OF THE DINING-ROOM.

and the old possessors came into their own again.

It is possible that the keep had fallen into decay in the sixteenth century, and perhaps the buildings of the lower ward were not thought suitable for the residence of a gentleman of the time, for Andrew Luttrell, who succeeded in 1521, preferred to live at East Quantockshhead. His son John, a soldier of note, who fought in the battle of Pinkie, is represented, apparently allegorically, in a curious painting by Lucas de Heere, dated 1550, preserved at Dunster. He is depicted wading through the waves to the shore, while a war-ship in the offing, struck by lightning, is being abandoned by her crew, and a female figure receives him, holding in her hand a sprig of olive or bay.

We must now hasten on to the Civil Wars, when Mr. George Luttrell held his castle for the Parliament, but surrendered it on the failure of the Marquis of Hertford to establish himself in the neighbourhood. The castle was then garrisoned for the King, and Colonel Francis Wyndham was the governor. Prince Charles, afterwards Charles II., visited the place, and slept in the room bearing his name. When the tide turned in 1645, Dunster was the only place in Somerset held for the King, and it was not surrendered until after it had stood a close siege of 160 days, its fall ending the struggle in the county.

We shall not pursue the history of ancient Dunster further. Let us, however, note with great gratification that it has not since passed from the heirs of its old possessors. The west front was erected about 1589 by Mr. George Luttrell, on the level of the upper platform. The present owner has converted the upper storeys into one large room 46ft. long. The adaptation of the fortress to modern requirements was carried out at the beginning of the seventeenth century, to which time plaster ceilings, mantel-pieces, and various doors and windows are attributed. Mr. Francis Luttrell added the elaborate and most beautiful moulded

plaster ceilings of the staircase and dining-room. In the richness and fine effect of the decorative fruit, bird, and other adornments, this work is not surpassed in England. The glorious pierced carving of the staircase balustrade, with its floral vases, panels, and sculptured mouldings, is certainly the work of the best craftsmen of the time.

The castle continued as fitted by Mr. Francis Luttrell up to a recent date, but great changes and improvements have been effected by the present proprietor from designs by the late Mr. Salvin. The north tower of the principal front was replaced by a larger turret stair, the porch was rebuilt on a greater scale, and the edifice was raised in many parts. A lofty tower was erected on the south front, on the site of an incongruous chapel built in 1720. The hall was enlarged by throwing rooms into it, and the whole house was converted into a splendid and convenient residence. The ancient keep of the Moions having perished, the lofty Tor has now a bowling green upon its summit. The interior of the castle is very interesting throughout. The hall has a richly-embossed ceiling with pendants, and the elaborately-carved balustrade to the great staircase has been alluded to. Prince Charles's room has many old features, and a mantel dated 1620. The house is also rich in old portraits, some of them by eminent masters. The *corámi* of painted leather, probably Venetian, but perhaps Spanish, representing the history of Antony and Cleopatra, are extremely curious and interesting.

About the castle are spread radiant gardens and glorious woodlands, and it is a delight to ascend to the bowling green on the summit of the wooded Tor to look out over the lovely country around. There are enchanting walks through shady paths in the woods, with a glimpse sometimes of the stream, and the sound of a water-mill, and then, on the lawn, a bugle horn will awake a triple echo, as if to summon the dead Moions and the old Luttrells from their sleep.