

LITTLECOTE, WILTSHIRE.

THE famous house of Littlecote—the ancient home of the Darells and the Pophams—stands within the Wiltshire border, but at a distance of some three or four miles only from Hungerford in Berkshire. Leland, who saw it on his historic journeying, describes its grounds as “a right faire and large parke hangynge upon the clyffe of a highe hille welle woddyd over Kenet.” The description is true to-day, for the Kennet still flows through the park, and the woods there still are green. When the Antiquary visited it the house must have been new, but, though many changes have passed over it, the structure preserves unaltered the aspect of his times. About it have gathered traditions as tragic, strange, and romantic as linger around the time-worn walls of any house in England. The situation is low, and the land

by the house level, but higher to the south, so that as the visitor nears it, approaching by the old avenue, he sees the red-brick walls and gables and chimney-stacks rising above the hedges and garden adornments. Truly a house of marvellous charm is this, and many-featured in its antique character, since some forty gables are lifted against the sky in a grouping of old-world picturesqueness. It is a feast of colour also, rich and glowing when seen in the setting sun, with the dark green foreground and the sky behind, and countless panes in its mullioned windows to reflect the evening glow. There is a masterful grouping of wall-spaces, and the play of light and shade on the bold projections and sheltered recesses, upon buttress and oriel, and upon gable and chimney, which is not the least charm of the structure. The alterations made



THE HOUSE AND FORECOURT.

nearly a century ago by General Edward Leyborne-Popham, who had married the heiress of the Pophams of Littlecote and taken the name, do not in any way break the antique spell.

Before Littlecote came to the hands of the Pophams, it had long been the seat of the Darells, of whom William was Sub-Treasurer of England and Sheriff of Wilts, *temp.* Richard II. Here lived, in the sixteenth century, another William Darell, the last of the line of the builders of Littlecote, whose stormy career is still recounted by the neighbouring peasants, when they tell of "Wild Darell," whose mad course links him, we think, by strange association, with the "wild huntsman"

performed her duties to a lady, whom tradition avers to have been masked. Scarcely had the new-born infant been thus strangely ushered into the great world, when a man of ferocious aspect entered, and, without more ado, extinguished its new-budded life by brutally flinging it on the back of a great fire which roared on the hearth. Its body rolled on one side from the burning logs, but once again, amid the shrieks of the mother and the cries of the woman, he threw it upon the flames.

Then instantly the midwife, again blindfolded, was mounted on the pillion, and, hurriedly riding in the breaking day with her silent



THE CHAPEL.

of earlier tradition. The story of Darell's alleged crime has been told by many writers, including old Aubrey, Sir Walter Scott, and Macaulay. One dark and stormy night a hasty messenger, they say, arrived on horseback at the cottage of a Berkshire midwife, demanding her instant services for a lady. Plenteous was the reward offered, but the strange condition was attached that the old woman should be blindfolded, and be carried on the horseman's pillion to the scene of her duties. Her scruples were overcome, and the pair set forth through the night, until they reached a lonely mansion. There the midwife, still blindfolded, was conducted to an upper room, where she

companion, was put within her own doors. But the strangeness of the summons had aroused her curiosity, and, on reaching the house, she had counted the steps as she ascended, and, moreover, had cut a piece out of the lady's bed-curtain. Thus ultimately was the horrid deed brought home to its cruel author, and plain and palpable, say the country-folk, was the proof of his guilt. Yet Darell escaped the penalty. Old Aubrey—garrulous, gossiping Aubrey—averts that a dark transaction wrought his freedom. "The knight was brought to his tryall; and, to be short, this judge had his noble house, parke, and mannor, and (I thinke) more, for a bribe to save his life."

The judge in question was Sir John Popham, chief justice of the King's Bench, a sound lawyer, but a severe man, who presided at the trials of Sir Walter Raleigh and Guy Fawkes, and who had much to do with the colonisation of Virginia.

acquired, as many believe, by honest purchase. It would appear, in fact, that Darell sold the reversion to the judge in 1586, and that the latter entered into possession when Darell died in 1589. The manner of his death is stated



THE GREAT HALL.

The story, it must be confessed, seems incredible, and the cold light of records has no warrant for it. These tell, indeed, quite another story; but it is not denied that Darell lived, and that Popham possessed his estate—let us hope

by tradition to have been consonant with his desperate and passionate life. He had always been a wild horseman, and at length, they say, dashing in a frenzied career across the park, his steed fell in the headlong course, and was

killed with his rider at a spot still known as "Darell's Leap."

Such is the dramatic story that is told with bated breath at Littlecote, lending a strange romantic interest to the old Wiltshire house. The place, in all appropriateness, has its haunted room—strange if it had been without one! With the Pophams the house long remained, and happily is still in their possession. The judge's only son was Sir Francis Popham, a soldier and politician of litigious temperament, who died in 1644. His son John had died before him, and was buried with great pomp at Littlecote in 1638. Alexander, the second son, succeeded at Littlecote, and, after siding with Parliament in the Civil War, entertained Charles II. at his house in 1663. The third son of Sir Francis was Sir Edward Popham, a distinguished admiral and general, who was buried in Westminster Abbey in 1651.

It is unnecessary, however, to follow the successive generations of the Pophams of Littlecote. The present owner is descended in the female line from Alexander Popham, mentioned above. Macaulay records that William of Orange, on his progress from Salisbury to London, after his conference with the commissioners of James at Hungerford, December 8th, 1638, retired to Littlecote, where a great assemblage was invited to meet him, and the old Hall was then crowded with peers and generals. He occupied the rooms of which the windows look out along a lovely grass walk between splendid flower borders. Mr. Edward Popham was in possession in 1730, when a most interesting discovery was made in the park by his steward, who came upon a Roman tessellated pavement, which was laid bare, and proved to be one of the finest of the kind ever discovered in this country. Other Roman remains have been uncovered at Littlecote, thus showing that the venerable mansion had been preceded on the spot long before by the villa residences of Roman provincials.

The interior of the house, as befits a place invested with so much historic and legendary interest, is full of antique charm. The Great Hall, entered by a door from the lobby or passage in the customary way, is a lofty and noble apartment. There is a grand Renaissance screen, with two archways to the lobby, divided by fluted pilasters, and enriched with admirable elaborated panelling of the same splendid craftsmanship, which has invested the whole interior with singular beauty and old-world charm. Here hang breastplates and morions, buff leather jerkins, matchlocks, caltraps, and other equipments, worn or used by the stout foemen of the Civil Wars. These objects were present, and had their part in the making of history, and as evidences of history they remain at Littlecote, telling of Chalgrove fight and the battles waged on hard-fought Newbury field. Through those mullioned windows the sunlight floods many another quaint old interior in Littlecote Hall, and the Chapel, with its antique screen, gallery, and seating, is not the least interesting feature of the antique dwelling-place.

To examine these interesting survivals of Stuart days in such a place must be an exalted pleasure indeed. Littlecote belongs to a great class of our old manor houses, presenting, almost unchanged, the aspect of former days. When we stand in the Great Hall it is not difficult to fancy the return of the fighting Parliamentary soldiers, nor to picture to ourselves the brilliant company who made history here when they greeted William of Orange. When we pass outward into the gardens, and feel all the sweetness that belongs to emerald lawns and green woods, to shady recesses in the pleasaunce, and to walks where we may linger in the sun, we find sustained interest also. Finally, when we pass away by the avenue through the park, we feel that we are leaving one of those places which are landmarks in the life of the English people.