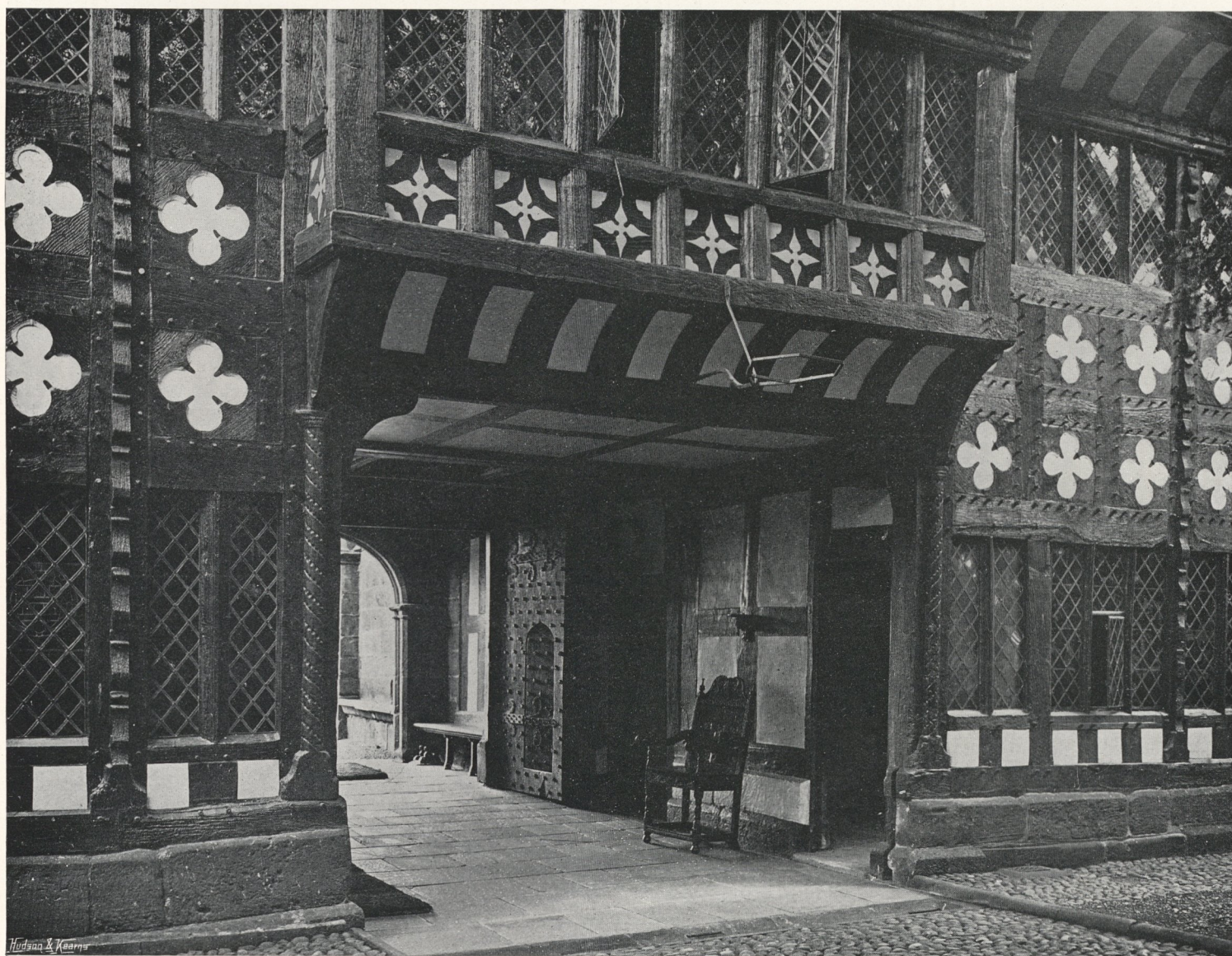


SPEKE HALL, LANCASHIRE.

SPEKE HALL in Lancashire, the famous mansion standing near the estuary of the Mersey, is one of the most interesting houses in England, representative of the timber edifices in which our ancestors lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though it really dates in part from the end of the century before. Begun in 1490, to replace the older house that had sheltered the Norris family for two and a-half centuries, it was not completed before 1605, and now after 300 years it is nearly as perfect as it was then, and, thanks to the family of the present owner, we may hope it will so remain for some centuries more. The wood used throughout was English oak, well jointed and pegged together, now scarred and seamed by the suns and storms of centuries. When John Leland, the antiquary of King Henry VIII., went to

various seats in Lancashire, and visited the house of Sir William Leyland, presumably his kinsman, at the Morleys, near Leigh, he described it as "builded, saving the foundation of stone squared that riseth within a great moat a six feet above the water, all of timber, after the common sort of building of houses of gentlemen for most of Lancashire." Such a house, retaining all its characteristics, is Speke Hall. Extraordinary quaintness is in the overhanging gables, enriched with splendid barge-boards and finials, and most picturesque is the treatment of the structural timber framework, diversified by the introduction of quatrefoils and other adornments. In this the house is like many others in Lancashire and Cheshire. The moat has long been drained, but the stone bridge remains, a marvel of picturesqueness, and all the details of



THE ENTRANCE GATE FROM WITHIN THE QUADRANGLE.

the stonework, as of the timber, are extremely good.

It was Sir William Norris who, in the year 1490, began the present timbered house at Speke. His son Henry fought under Sir Edward Stanley at Flodden in 1513, and was one of those who received autograph letters of thanks from Henry VIII. Then succeeded another Sir William Norris, who, in 1547, fought at Musselburgh. Three years previously he had joined Lord Hertford's expedition, which sacked the Palace of Holyrood and burned Edinburgh. From the Royal Palace he removed a number of books, notably a copy of Bartolus, and four folios of the Laws of Scotland inscribed in his own hand (May 11th, 1544), as heirlooms at Speke. They are now preserved in the Athenæum Library in Liverpool. Tradition has always maintained that the architecturally carved panelling at one end of the Great Hall at Speke was taken from Holyrood.

During the progress of the building, Sir William often resided at his seat near Chester,

where he was Sergeant of the Bridge Gate. His family remained Roman Catholic, and in building the Hall a chapel was not omitted. It was placed to the left of the principal entrance, and has long been used as a servants' hall, Speke now having a church of its own. After 1547, becoming too old for active service, he pushed forward the building of Speke, and about 1560 added the genealogical mantel-piece in the Great Drawing Room. Sir William himself was twice married, and had in all nineteen children, as is recorded in this curious carving. Edward Norris, his eldest surviving son, lived a quiet life, and completed the present Hall, retaining only the old stables of the previous buildings. In 1598 he added to the principal entrance a stone porch (unroofed) and parapets to the bridge over the moat.

Five generations later Mary Norris inherited the property, in 1726, and ten years afterwards married Lord Sydney Beauclerk. The fine gentlemen of this family were absentees, and not only shamefully neglected the house, but



THE DRAWING-ROOM.



SPEKE HALL.

THE GREAT HALL.

heavily mortgaged the property, which was sold by the grandson of Mary Norris in 1795 to Richard Watt, of Oak Hill, Liverpool, and of Bishop Burton, Yorkshire. Structurally the house was not harmed, and was again cared for, preserved, and beautified, and became a centre of antiquarian interest.

The entrance bridge is a fine feature, and there are pleasant seats in the recesses and in the quaint open porch leading through the archway to the massive entrance doors. Within the courtyard we are first impressed by the two noble yew trees which shade the whole of it, and by their character maintain the old-world spell. It is particularly worthy of note that the buildings surrounding the quadrangle are so

square panels, which again are sub-divided diagonally. A passage or lobby, as is usual, separates the Hall from the Kitchen offices, and the dais, or place for the high table, is at the further end, where a half-octagon bay looks into the courtyard. The length of the Hall at Speke is 41ft. 3in., but originally it was 10ft. longer. Probably in the seventeenth century the chimney-breast was brought forward, and curiously embattled and moulded work was carried up to the ceiling. At the same time the minstrels' gallery facing the high table was panelled off. The breadth is 34ft. 6in. without the bays, and Speke appears to be the widest of all the Lancashire halls. It will be seen how charming a place is the octagonal bay,



THE NORTH-EAST GALLERY.

arranged that all the rooms look out upon the open country, and that the corridors running round the courtyard and giving admission to these rooms are well lighted by numerous latticed windows on both floors. On the left are the old Chapel, Kitchen, and offices; on the right the Library and other rooms; and the noble bay window of the Great Hall is a prominent object opposite.

The position of the Great Hall facing the main entrance is quite characteristic of houses of the time. Constructed in the middle of the sixteenth century, it closely resembles the halls at Houghton Tower, Rufford, and some other places, and, like the first of these, has a flat ceiling, divided by deeply-moulded beams into

which was commonly used as a boudoir for the ladies. Here is old armorial glass, and a beautiful pattern of vine leaves divides the upper range of lights from the lower. From the central boss of the ceiling of each bay hangs the very unusual feature of a chandelier carved in oak, while a larger one formerly hung from the centre of the Hall. Another bay faces the one last described, and overlooks the garden. It has a separate fireplace, and doubtless could be screened off as a distinct apartment. Between the two bays and behind the position of the high table is the elaborate panelling some portion of which was probably brought from Holyrood, as has been mentioned. It is manifestly later than much of the other carving,



SPEKE HALL.

THE OLD PANELLING IN THE GREAT HALL.

and has panels with heads of the Cæsars and other subjects, separated in the lower range by pseudo-Corinthian columns. The inscription is old and curious: "Slepe not tell u hathe consederd how thow hathe spent y day past: if thow have well don thank God, if other ways repent ye."

fortunately escaped injury when the room was used as a "shippon" or barn), its oak wainscot, the upper panels being pierced with traceries of a late Gothic pattern, and its fine old carved mantel-piece. This is the portion of the house which was chiefly desecrated when the place was threatened with ruin. Now the spirit of



THE BAY IN THE HALL.

Over the door of the Great Drawing Room which we now enter is another moral inscription: "The stretest waye to heaven is God to love and serve above all thynges." This room, next to the Great Hall, is the finest in the house, with its exquisite Elizabethan ceiling in stucco, enriched with elaborate ornament (which

the eld is in the place, and in fine old panelling, decorative ceiling, and beams covered with a scroll of hops and vines, the room is very beautiful.

The staircase near gives access to long panelled corridors or galleries, which are a very characteristic feature of the house, and their

windows have a delightful outlook upon the courtyard. These corridors lead to the principal bed-chambers, which are mostly panelled, and contain some fine old carved bedsteads. Here, ancient tapestry still adorns the walls and conceals a secret cupboard; and a secret stair is hidden leading to the roof or "cockloft." It may be observed that though these chambers and galleries at Speke Hall are all lined with dark old oak, the character of the place is pleasant and lightsome, from the multiplication of windows, which, through their latticed panes, illuminate the quaint interiors. Whatever is here of internal plenishing is in style appropriate to the house, and the carved oaken furniture is not often surpassed. Many articles that formerly belonged to the old house have been recovered, and others added, all with a view to maintain the Tudor character.

The presence of antiquity dwells in the house, and the old armour calls up the memory of the dead-and-gone soldiers who had their home here. Coming back, they would scarcely mark

a change in their old abode. With accustomed footfall they might pace the corridors and enter the panelled chambers, which have suffered little alteration from their day to ours. At night mighty winds from the sea speak in the swaying boughs of the trees, just as they did of old. In the intervals the hooting of the owls is still heard from the gables, where they are encouraged to build, and are even provided with a doorway for exit and entrance. The old house is, indeed, a great survival, and a majestic monument of the past. It has been completely and most judiciously restored and preserved by successive owners of the family of Watt. Perfect taste has presided over the work, and nowhere is there any intrusion of the modern to break the spell of the old. For the last twenty years the work has been almost continuous, and is still in progress. To seek out every cause of weakness or decay, to remove, or at least counteract it, to renew what was past preservation with an exact facsimile of the old both in form and material—this is indeed conscientious restoration.



A SIX-LIGHT OAKEN CHANDELIER.