

SMITHILLS HALL, BOLTON, LANCASHIRE.

WITHIN some three miles of the busy Lancashire town of Bolton-le-Moors, noisy with the hum of the spindle and the rattle of the shuttle in the loom, stands ancient Smithills Hall, apart in its gardens, and preserving its old-time splendour undimmed. In these pages the interiors of several of the black and white—or “magpie,” as it is sometimes called—timber-work houses of Lancashire and Cheshire are depicted, and Smithills is one of the finest of them. What is especially gratifying in regard to this antique house is that, though it lies so near to a manufacturing town, it is maintained in something even greater than its pristine charm. Such additions as have been made to fit it for a modern habitation are in admirable taste, and the stone enlargements

are in excellent harmony with the old structure, while beautiful gardens and a good park are the setting of the place.

The site of the Hall presents many analogies with those of other Lancashire houses, and it is reasonable to think that it was selected because of the facilities it presented for defence. The old gate-house seems to have been at the south-west corner of the quadrangle, as is marked by an avenue of limes leading that way. The quadrangle is not enclosed, as in some houses of the class, but is open on the south side, and the more modern erections have been added in an extension westward.

In very ancient times the place belonged to the great house of Lacy, and it passed to the Stanleys of Lathom, and then to the Radcliffes,



THE LINEN-PATTERN PANELLING OF THE DINING-ROOM.

who were seated at Smithills in the reign of Edward III., and were a branch of the Radcliffes of Radcliffe Tower. Joanna, the daughter and heiress of Sir Ralph Radcliffe, conveyed Smithills to her husband, Ralph Barton of Home, at some date after 1450. The older portions of the present house, with their singular enrichments, and very fine internal carvings, were built by Sir Andrew Barton in the reign of Henry VII., and it is interesting to note that the rebus of his name—a bar and a ton—with the initials “A.B.,” still remain in the panelling of the Dining Room, as may be seen quite plainly in one of the pictures. The builder was a man of consequence in his shire, and appears to have taken a prominent part in public affairs. An inconclusive attempt has been made to identify him with another Sir Andrew Barton, a privateer captain, or pirate, who preyed upon shipping in the time of Henry VIII., as an old ballad in Percy’s “Reliques” recounts the metrical story. But, if the pirate knight was a Scot, he was not Sir Andrew Barton of Smithills Hall, and there is reason to believe that the Lancashire gentleman died in his bed, and not as Sir Andrew the pirate in the ballad, at the hands of the sons of the Earl of Surrey.

During the residence of the Bartons at Smithills a somewhat remarkable episode occurred there, in the bitter times when the hand of one man was often set upon the throat of another, and when the wrongs of one reign brought their retribution in that which followed. It is recorded that in 1555 a young curate, named George Marsh, was apprehended and brought before Justice Barton at Smithills, on the charge of holding heretical opinions obnoxious to the government of Queen Mary. Marsh’s friends, foreseeing the dangers, entreated him to conform, but he, stamping his foot on the ground, exclaimed: “If my cause be just, let the prayers of thine unworthy servant be heard.” Thereafter, so the story goes, the footprint remained, and was regarded with veneration; and even now, as if to confound the incredulous, it may be seen in the passage by the “gospel hall.” A panel in the floor is raised, and there something like the imprint of a foot is seen. It appears that, after being examined at Smithills, Marsh was taken before the Earl of Derby at Lathom and burnt outside the walls of Chester on April 24th, 1555.

Sir Thomas Barton of Smithills died in 1659, and the estate passed, with his daughter Grace as sole heiress, to Henry Belasyse, M.P., eldest son of Thomas, first Viscount Fauconberg, whose descendant, the third Earl, sold the manor in 1721. It afterwards passed to the Byroms of Manchester, and was sold for £21,000 to Mr. Richard Ainsworth of Halliwell, who died in 1833. It thus reached good hands, and, through the care of that gentleman and his present successor in the estate, has been brought to a new state of perfection.

Mr. Henry Taylor, who has written that very interesting book entitled “Old Halls in Lancashire and Cheshire,” says that the architectural history of Smithills is more beset with entanglements than that of almost any other old house he has dealt with, in consequence of its large size and the great number of alterations and rebuildings in mediæval and subsequent times. From the architectural point of view, the main interest is on the eastern side of the quadrangle, from which the domestic part has gone westward, where the more modern portions lie in an added wing. The courtyard, which, as we have said, is open on the south side, is about 60ft. square. On the north are the Great Hall, with the Pantry and Buttery, and across the western end of the large apartment are screens, with an ancient passage through the building from north to south. At the east end stood the high table, with a canopy over it, but at the close of the eighteenth century the Great Hall was converted into a brew-house, the side walls were raised, and a false roof of flatter pitch was added, and a new floor. The walls have been all more or less rebuilt, the first rebuilding being from wood to stone in Tudor times. There is now revealed an open timber roof of great beauty, from which the date of the earlier building may be taken. Mr. Taylor says that it is certainly not later than the beginning of the fourteenth century. The timber is extraordinarily massive, and must have been cut from large trees, probably grown in the vast forests of that region, which gave the Bartons their badge of the acorn, repeated many times in the old panelling. There is no trace of smoke on the beams, and no indication of there having been a fireplace, as was not uncommon in the Great Halls of English mansions. The arrangement of the Hall screen was similar to that at Baguley in Cheshire, Rufford, and Adlington Hall—that is, without a minstrels’ gallery—but at some subsequent date a gallery was inserted, and afterwards removed.

Entered by a door at the back of the high table was the smaller Hall, or Lord’s Chamber, now divided into rooms, and further east was a charming Withdrawing Room, or Banqueting Room. The domestic Chapel is on that side also, but unfortunately has suffered damage in past times by fire, and so is not so generally interesting. On the western side of the quadrangle are apartments with massive oak timber roofs. There a corridor was added in the Jacobean period to provide means for entering the upper rooms independently, and is supported by an arcade of oak columns, forming a veranda to the lower rooms, where is the splendid old oak carving, with the ancient linen pattern, the rebus of the bar and ton, the oak leaves and acorns, geometrical patterns, heads within circles, and quaint legends, most of the oak having been taken from the old Withdrawing Room on the other side of



A CORNER IN THE DINING-ROOM.

the quadrangle. It will be seen that the carving is of an exceedingly rich and elaborate character, full of the spirit and quaintness of the late Tudor style, and excellently preserved.

In the old-time framework of the house there is manifestly embodied a great deal of the domestic life of our English forefathers. We may note in the addition of the corridor for the convenience of the bed-chambers, and in the abandonment of the old Hall, the change of manners that ushered in the existing state of things. The times had gone in which the knight sat at the high table, with his retainers below the salt, and the day had come when private

apartments were built for the greater seclusion of the family. From this point of view, therefore, Colonel Ainsworth's house is very interesting. In its external aspect of black and white timbering, with much quatrefoil adornment, and the many gables and mullioned windows, there is a simple dignity that well bespeaks the character of old English houses. The successive additions all appeal to the eye as most successful features giving grace to the earlier structure. Architecturally they are admirable, and the house has gained by what has been done. Happily, it is carefully guarded and well maintained by the hands of those who value it.



THE HALL AND TERRACES.