PARK HALL,

SHROPSHIRE.

THE old houses of England have necessarily many domestic features in common, be they lofty or lowly, castle or cottage; but the more we see of them, the more clearly do we recognise that they owe their character almost as much to locality as to the age in which they were built. And this is true notwithstanding the prevalence of general types, as seen, for example, in the frowning fortress, with barbican, portcullis and machicolation, or in the spacious buildings of later times, looking trustfully out on to the world that surrounds them. There is the contrast between the Border mansion, with its strong tower or peel, and the house of its time pleasantly placed in a peaceful shire of the South; a contrast also between the individualities of the mellow red brick of East Anglia, the stone of the North and West, and the timber-work of Lancashire, Cheshire and Shropshire. Now, Park Hall, near Oswestry, with its picturesque frontage of fine timber construction, bears the character of its locality, and also of peaceful days, though it stands in the very borderland where many a fierce struggle had taken place between English barons and the men who followed the Red Dragon of Wales. And, as a contrast of time and circumstance, and also of locality, we find the house standing guarded, as it were, by two ancient strongholds of solid masonry—those of Oswestry and Whittington, which belonged to the outer line. At the time of the Domesday survey, only two strong fortresses



THE EAST WING.



THE ENTRANCE HALL.



THE OLD DINING-ROOM.

had risen upon the Welsh Border—Oswestry and Montgomery ; but castle-building began with the rebellion of Robert de Bellesme, the last Norman Earl of Shrewsbury, and was continued by the



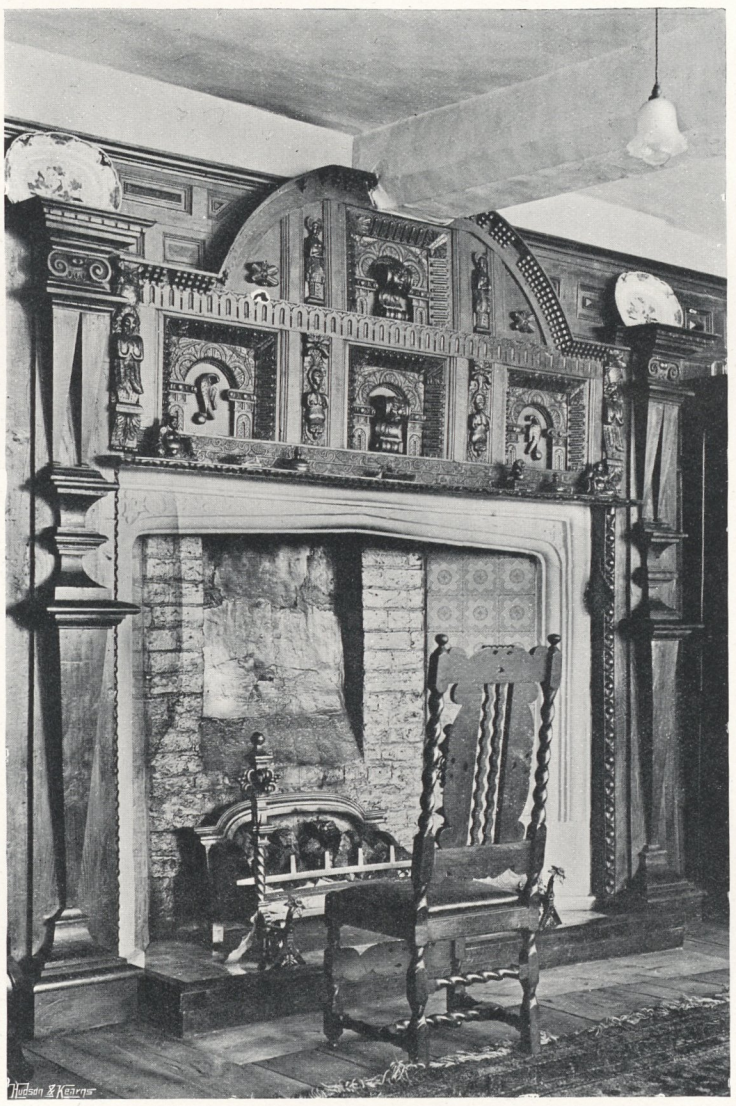
THE DINING-ROOM.

barons who guarded the western frontier of Shropshire against the inroads of the Welsh. The line of these ancient defences was double, the western chain including Overton, Chirk, Whittington, Oswestry, Kinnerley, Alberbury, Montgomery, Clun and several more ; and the inner, or eastern, chain the castles of Whitchurch, Ellesmere, Ruyton, Shrawardine, Stretton and Brampton Bryan. Park Hall, the beautiful sixteenth century house we depict, belongs to far different times. Yet its name takes us back to the great castle of Whittington, the



THE OAK STAIRWAY.

residence of the feudal family of Fitzwarren, one of whom was a baron of the Magna Charta, and whose members, by the name of Fulk, succeeded one another in possession for ages. The Park, as the name implies, was the parkland attached to the demesne of Whittington Castle, which in later times passed to the great Shropshire family of Fitzalan ; and in 1563 the Earl of Arundel, last of the Fitzalan surname, joined with his son-in-law, Lord Lumley, and Lady Lumley, his daughter, in selling Park to Thomas Powell of Whittington, Esq. This gentleman, who built Park Hall in the reign of Elizabeth, added to his estate by buying in 1571 other lands from one William Albany, citizen of London, who had speculated largely in the purchase of the Shropshire estates of the Fitzalans. It has been stated that the house was erected by Robert ap Howell, "of the town of Oswestre, draper," who died about 1541 ; but this is uncertain historically, and improbable architecturally. Blakeway gives the family a descent from the junior branch of the royal line of Powis. However this may have been, the Welsh patronymic of Ap Howell had been Anglicised when the builder of Park Hall came into possession of the property. For many generations his descendants lived in the beautiful mansion, and Robert Powell of Park adhered to the Parliament in the Civil War, and was sheriff of the county in 1647. He was succeeded by his son, Robert Powell, D.D., chancellor and canon of St. Asaph, rector of Whittington, and parson of Hodnett—an old pluralist who was also spoken of as "esquire," so that perhaps we may best describe him as a "squarson," in the cant phrase of two centuries ago. His son, Thomas Powell, recorder of Oswestry, who was removed from his office because he absented himself from his duties, was the last of the family to possess Park Hall. There is in existence a letter from Charles Knife, who had married his daughter, which portrays him in a very unfavourable light. It appears that he had overawed his children, and, at length, bringing a mysterious stranger with papers for them to sign, as he alleged in relation to the sale of estates in Derbyshire, he fraudulently procured their signatures to a document which betrayed them out of their inheritance. There seems to have been some truth in these statements, for though Sir Francis Charlton purchased the house and estates in 1717, for the sum of £10,500, he had to raise £3,000 in 1728 to pay off Powell's mortgages.



IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

The house he bought, with its "yards, orchards, outhouses, etc.," covering twelve acres, with much farm land, was a very excellent example of a country gentleman's house ; and before we deal with its later history or internal character, let us describe its exterior, which, with its variety of gables and gablets, pinnacles and chimneys, bay and oriel windows, plain and quatrefoil timbering, excellence of grouping and artistic character, is particularly admirable. It is not quadrangular, as were the great Cheshire timber houses of an earlier generation, like Adlington and Speke, which still clung to mediævalism. Park Hall has full Renaissance characteristics—the front lies open, a carefully designed and balanced E shape of almost continuous windowing, of the same model, if not of the same shape, as Burton Constable or Quenby. It is rich and varied in its panelling, but the Gothic quatrefoiling of Samlesbury is modified and sparsely used, newer and more varied designs being introduced. It belongs to the age of mottoes, devices and apt classic or moral apothegms, of which several may be seen in various parts of the structure. Thus, over the doorway of the porch may be read :

Quod tibi fieri non vis
Alteri ne feceris.

The very quaint and picturesque chapel at the south-west angle is a remarkable structure, and was consecrated by Archbishop Parker on the same day as that at Aston. Over the doorway on the exterior is the text, "Petra et Ostium Christus est." The chapel is panelled and ceiled with oak, and has a small gallery, which is entered from the house. When Sir Francis Charlton bought the place, it had a summer-house and a raised terrace, a pigeon-house and a gatehouse ;



PARTS OF THE SOUTH FRONT.

and there is an elaborate sundial, including not less than four dials, on the terrace, dated 1578, with the words, "Tempori Pare," "Tempus omnium parens," and "Tempus edax rerum." On the back was a remarkable set of twelve adonic verses, which were as follows, the beautiful rendering being by the late Mr. Stanley Leighton, M.P., who has written some notes on the families which lived at Park Hall :

Præterit Ætas.	The cycle is passing.
Nec remorante.	The ages no more.
Lapsa recedunt.	Return in their courses.
Sæcula cursu.	The same as before.
Ut fugit ætas.	As passes the cycle.
Utque citatus.	As sure and as fast.
Turbinis instar.	Is rolled by the year.
Volvitur annus.	As the breath of the blast.
Sic quoque nostra.	And so too my own life.
Præcipitanter.	Grows less unto me.
Vita recedit.	As the tide wave returns.
Ocyor undis.	To the depths of the sea.

Later on there came inevitable changes, and ultimately a sale, so that the terrace and sundial disappeared, and the pigeon-house and gatehouse as well. With this fine estate and beautiful house Sir Francis Charlton endowed his son Job Charlton, who died unmarried, and Park passed to collaterals, and 100 years later was sold to Mrs. Wynne Corrie. A very interesting inventory of the contents of Park Hall was taken at the death of Job Charlton in 1761, in which mention is made of 104 pictures and 79 portraits hanging in the staircase, the passages and even in the servants' hall. The ancient single plank long table, now in the hall, is also in the list, valued at the modest price of £2 2s. The chapel had been converted into a gunroom, and contained blunderbusses, pistols and other objects. The rooms mentioned are: Three parlours, library (without books), hall, gallery, chapel, five best bedrooms, men's garret with five beds, maids' garret, pantry, housekeeper's room, servants' hall, closets for linen and china, and wine, ale and beer cellars ; and there were brewhouses, a larder, a salting cellar, stables, a summer-house and a gatehouse. Curiously enough, no mention is made of the dining-room. Much work seems to have been done in or about the year 1640, and the splendid plaster ceiling of the dining-room, with Neptune riding the waves, belongs to about this time, and is a very remarkable example of the skill, probably, of some Italian craftsman. The carved mantelpiece, with double Ionic columns and adornments, harmonises well with the rich panelling and the splendid old furniture of the room. Much care has gone to the restoration and beautifying of the house, which has latterly received much enlargement ; but nothing has been allowed to interfere with the old-world charm of the ancient portions. The entrance hall is even more impressive than the dining-room. The low, beamed ceiling, the excellent panelling of the walls, and the grand old table, all are features of this beautiful interior. The table bears the date 1581, and its proportions are of its date, except for its unusual width. The top is formed of a single plank of oak, 19ft. 8½in. long, 3ft. 11¼in. wide and 1⅞in. thick, and there are the customary foot-rails. The character of this fine interior is admirably rendered in the picture. Through an archway at the further end is seen the staircase, which is also illustrated. It is an admirable piece of work, with a very heavy balustrade, and the simple, flat geometric carving of the newel-post is effective and dignified. Park Hall is rich in seventeenth century oakwork, and the mantelpiece in the drawing-room, which is seen in one of the pictures, is another illustration of its excellence of character. In the hands of the Charltons it was generally well cared for, but signs of decay afterwards fell upon it. Now in the hands of Mrs. Wynne Corrie it has gained a new lease of its existence. The very large additions in the style of the period, in brick and stone, have been limited to the garden elevation, and in no way interfere with or mar the old timber-work. Other necessary changes have been effected all in a reverent spirit, and the house has become commodious and comfortable, and within and without it is a mansion of very excellent and original character.