ASTON HALL,

WARWICKSHIRE.

THE famous house of Aston is the compeer of Holland House and Blickling, of Quenby and Temple Newsam, and, while showing points of difference and originality, has architectural affinities with nearly all the noble mansions which date from its time. Although history is silent as to the name of its architect, it possesses such nobility of character, such admirable grouping of parts and such charming freshness of detail that we recognise in its mellow brick walls the work of master hands. Misfortune has crowded upon, destruction hovered over it ; but—albeit in surroundings new and strange—it still stands in majestic form as a superlative exemplar of the Jacobean Age. Its condition is changed, and it is now a museum and a picture gallery, happily rescued from peril and made secure by the public spirit of the gentlemen of Birmingham and the municipal authorities of that city. Yet, if we close our eyes, we still seem to recall its princely state, to hear again the rustle of wimple and farthingale, the voice of the cavalier, and the clang of arms—to breathe, in a word, in these venerable chambers the atmosphere that filled them in their prime. Crowning a gently-rising eminence, with elms, Spanish chestnuts and beautiful gardens for its neighbours, it presents to the observer, on the main or east front, the same hollow square, with advancing wings and an array of mullioned windows, as do Quenby and Temple Newsam, while its gables resemble those of Holland House, and its cupolaed towers show kinship with those at Blickling.



NORTH-EAST GATEHOUSE.

Before, however, we proceed to any description of the house, let us say something of the builder and his ancestors, for the house is in a real sense the vesture of the man. Sir Thomas Holte, the Royalist founder, who welcomed King Charles at his "poor house of Aston," came from a stout Warwickshire stock. The word holt signifies a wood or grove, and so we see that the ancestors of the builder of Aston were

dwellers in the greenwood of Warwickshire, where they appear as men of position as early as the thirteenth century. John Holte, who was living in 1470, was a follower of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, the king-maker, and was given the office of Ranger of Sutton Chase. The altar tomb of his grandson William Holte may be seen in Aston Church, with his effigy clad in armour, with surcoat, the hands joined in prayer, the head resting on a helm, and a lion lying at his feet, while the inscription describes him as "sometime lord of this towne." His son Thomas was a "learned lawyer," and Justice of North Wales in the reign of Henry VIII. His effigy is also in the church, clad in a gown, with a parchment roll in his hand, and the figure of his wife is there also. The rhyming inscription upon the Justice is singular :

Thomas Holte here lyeth in grave ;
Ihu for thyn passyon
On him thou have compassyon,
And his soolle do save.

The learned lawyer's son was Edward Holte, Justice of the Peace for Warwickshire and High Sheriff in 1583. He also lies buried with his ancestors at Aston. He died "about Candellmas," 1592, says his inscription, which also describes him as lord of Duddeston ; and he is represented in effigy, with flowing hair and a peaked beard, with his wife, who was a daughter of John Ferrers of Tamworth Castle.

Their son, Sir Thomas Holte, who was born in 1571, and who enjoyed the possession of his property for the space of some sixty-two years, was the builder of Aston Hall, and it was he who raised his family to the highest pitch of prosperity. He was High Sheriff of the county in 1599, and, being a member of a deputation which welcomed King James on his coming to England, he was knighted in 1603 at Grimston, being advanced to the dignity of a baronetcy in November, 1612. The old manor house of Duddeston, in which the Holtes had lived, now became insufficient for the high state to which they had attained, and hence it was that Sir Thomas Holte turned his attention to the building of Aston Hall, which he began, as the tablet over the entrance records, in April, 1618. His great-grandson described him as "a gentleman well read in most parts of learning and versed in several languages," and as "highly esteemed in his county by men of all conditions, being of an even temper, truly great, charitable, and exemplary in his life and conversation." It may be, perhaps, that this amiable eulogy requires some qualification, as we shall see. Much wealth had come to the family through marriages with heiresses, and it was further enriched by the marriage of Sir Thomas with a daughter and co-heiress of William Bradburne of Hough in Derbyshire. He appears thereby to have been enabled to put in hand his magnificent mansion, the work upon which extended over a great many years, for although begun in 1618, it was not occupied, as the inscription testifies, until 1631, nor completed until 1635, the baronet being then of the age of sixty-four. He appears to have been of a somewhat irascible temperament, and it is fabled



BETWEEN THE WINGS.



EASTERN FACADE.

that in a fit of passion he slew his cook. He certainly prosecuted a man of Birmingham for saying he had done so, and secured damages to the extent of £30 at the trial at Warwick, though the verdict was subsequently reversed, as is believed, on a technicality. The allegation was that "Sir Thomas Holte tooke a cleever and hytt hys cooke with the same cleever uppon the heade, and clave his heade; that one syde fell uppone one of his shoulders, and the other syde on the other shoulder."

We may, perhaps, dismiss this story as mendacious. There is more authority for saying that Sir Thomas was violently opposed to the marriage of his son Edward with Elizabeth, daughter of Dr. King, Bishop of London. The



SOUTH-WEST LOGGIA.



A STAIRCASE OF ELABORATE STRAPWORK.

baronet seems to have thought the marriage unequal, and threatened to disinherit the young man; but King Charles, in whose favour Sir Thomas stood high, intervened, and induced some degree of harmony. The King thought blessing should follow union with the daughter of "a soe reverend and good a man," and concluded: "Wee doe, therefore, recommende it to you that you doe not only forbeare any act against your sonne in respect of his match, but that you restore him into your former favour and good opinion, wherein Wee doubt not that our mediation, upon grounds of much reason and indifference, will soe far prevaile with you, that



TOP GALLERY.



NORTH SIDE OF THE HALL.

Wee shall have cause to accept graciously your answer, which Wee expect you return unto Us with all conveniency."

Sir Thomas lived in high state at Aston, and in October, 1642, had the honour of receiving his Royal master in his splendid abode. Charles was marching to relieve Banbury Castle, and stayed at Aston on October 16th and 17th, and left behind him several memorials of his visit, which passed from the last baronet to the Bracebridge family. They formed part of the exhibition held at Aston, being lent by Mr. Bracebridge, when Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort opened the hall and park for the use of the people on June 15th, 1858, and were bequeathed to the town by Mr. Charles Holte Bracebridge in 1872. A few days after the visit of Charles to Aston the battle of Edgehill was fought, where Edward Holte was wounded, and though he recovered and was engaged in the defence of Oxford in August, 1643, he contracted a fever there which proved fatal in the same month. There is some reason to believe that Sir Thomas Holte, though he may have relented in some degree, remained finally implacable in regard to the marriage of his son. The storm of the Civil War reached his house in December, 1643, when Dugdale records that Colonel Leveson, governor of Dudley Castle, at his request, placed a guard of forty musketeers in the Hall. The men of Birmingham were growing dangerous, and on December 26th, to the number of 1,200, they began to attack the house, bringing up guns, which have left their mark on the south-west wing, while one ball, passing through the wall, knocked off an ornament from a baluster of the staircase and lodged in the panelling behind. The defence was continued for three days, but, when twelve Royalists had been killed, the defenders surrendered. Pillage followed, and much damage was presumably done, but the family papers had previously been removed to a place of safety. Sir Thomas suffered for his loyalty; his goods were confiscated, and he compounded for his estates by paying £4,401, which, in the money of our time, represents a far larger sum. He appears to have been a man of proud, obstinate and resolute character, and he stood very high in the Royal favour, being at one time selected by Charles, as a person of great learning and influence, to serve as Ambassador to Spain, but he was excused owing to his great age. His portrait by Van Somer was exhibited at South Kensington in the Loan Collection of National Portraits in 1886.

Something shall now be said of the great house which the sturdy old baronet built and adorned, though the fine pictures shall be left to complete the tale. The principal entrance is by the church gate, which has an arch spanned by a curious ogee crocketed arch, flanked by two posterns and picturesque lodges. From this point a road leads to the old avenue of chestnuts and elms, of which several weather-beaten veterans remain. As has been suggested, the grand entrance front testifies to the opulence and princely tastes of the founder. The wings project boldly to form the courtyard, and the cupola-crowned towers advance into the area, each having an entrance on the ground floor, consisting of a square-panelled door under a semi-circular arch ornamented with the shell ornament and flanked by flat fluted pilasters. All the details are exceedingly beautiful. In the central block the principal features are the enriched doorway and the splendid windows, lighting the entrance hall and the great oak staircase, with the massive central tower of three storeys. The doorway has a semi-circular arch with fluted columns on square bases, supporting an entablature, over which is the commemorative tablet which has been alluded to, with the words LAVS DEO, and the arms of Holte. On the south front of the house is a central projection containing the window of the chapel, and the large ones of the great drawing-room, while admirable colonnades extend on either side. Adjoining the great drawing-room, and over the eastern arcade, are the King's bedroom and dressing-room. Lady Holte's drawing-room is over the second colonnade, and suffered much in the siege. The west front of the mansion is also very attractive, and appears to have been designed with special reference to the long gallery, which is in the upper part of it.

Passing through the main entrance, we reach the great hall, a splendid apartment nearly 50ft. long by 25ft. wide, lighted by four noble windows. Yet it is an entrance merely and no longer the main room of the house, as had been usual up to this date. It is entered direct and from the centre, not from one end and through screens; it has no dais or oriel, and its chimney-piece is at one end. The plaster ceiling is most wonderfully sculptured, moulded and otherwise adorned, and a bold cornice, with grotesque animals, runs round the walls. Opposite to the entrance is a doorway communicating with the apartments on the west side of the house, and there are arched alcoves of unusual character. The fire-back has the Royal arms and the initials "C. R.," and over the mantel are moral verses:

If service be thy meane to thrive
Thov mvst therein remaine,
Both silent faithfvl jvst and trve
Content to take some paine;
If love of virtve may allvre
Or hope of worldly gaine;
If fear of God may thee procvre
To serve doe not disdaine.

The staircase is of carved oak, seamed with age, all quaint and beautiful, with much less of the Italian character than we found in houses of the date, such as Hatfield, Blickling and Temple Newsam. Here the ornament is of strapwork, shallow and unmodelled on the newel-posts, pierced and sculptured in the panelled filling below the handrail. This is the first type of this form of filling, of which there were soon to come further developments. On the

outer string of the staircase fine dolphins and sea-monsters are boldly and admirably carved. The cannon ball which carried away the cresting of one of the newels is still preserved, and the shattered newel appears on the extreme left

circular niches along the walls Roman and Elizabethan soldiers are executed in high relief. The ceiling is greatly enriched, and the chimney-piece, which is of white stone, alabaster and black marble, is most richly sculptured with



PART OF THE LONG GALLERY.

of our picture. The great drawing-room is entered at the second landing, and is a noble chamber lighted by two mullioned and transomed windows on the south. The carved stone frieze is in admirable style, and in semi-

grotesques, mouldings and armorial achievements. The King's chamber is entered from the drawing-room, and is small and unpretentious, with a geometrical ceiling and a frieze, and the walls are hung with curious cross-stitch tapestry

executed by Mary Holte and her sisters in and about the year 1744 in memory of King Charles. Lady Holte's drawing-room has a very pretty ceiling and a most excellent fireplace. The long gallery is one of the finest examples preserved to us of a style of room which no great house of the age of Elizabeth and James was complete without possessing. It is 136ft. long, 18ft. wide and 16ft. high, and the walls are wholly covered with splendid oak panelling, divided into compartments by Ionic pilasters, the panels themselves being arcaded. The ceiling is enriched with elaborate panelling in plaster of fine design, while on the walls hang interesting portraits bequeathed by the late Mr. Charles Bracebridge Holte. Here also is the fine walnut inlaid cabinet which King Charles is believed to have presented to Sir Thomas Holte. The chimney-piece of strap-work panels divided and supported by caryatides is a very ornate and elaborate sample of its period.

Sir Thomas Holte was succeeded in his title and possessions by his grandson Sir Robert, who was active in promoting the Restoration, and was sheriff and M.P. for the county. The widow of the sixth baronet, who died childless, left the property to her daughter, Mrs. Bracebridge, and thus the estates passed to the Bracebridge family. In 1817, by indenture, confirmed by Act of Parliament, the property, valued at £600,000, was vested in trustees, and in the same year the furniture was sold. The hall itself, with a large acreage of the property, was sold in April, 1818, and passing through various hands was in danger of being destroyed, when a limited company was formed in 1857 to acquire the mansion and forty-three acres for the use of the public at a cost of £35,000. The property was subsequently vested in the Corporation of Birmingham, and was converted into a public museum and picture gallery, and its grounds laid out and planted. Thus the venerable structure is happily to be preserved in perpetuity, and, though we may regret its conversion from domestic to public uses, we cannot but rejoice that the grand house remains in the hands of those who will value and maintain it.



NORTH-EAST WING.