RAGDALE OLD HALL,

LEICESTERSHIRE.

THE old hall of Ragdale, Rakedale, or Wreakdale—for so variously is, or has been, the orthography of the place—has fallen somewhat from its high estate, though it is nowise diminished in its picturesque architectural charm. Its venerable timber, brick and stone, mouldered and worn in their antiquity, its lofty gables and chimneys, and, more than all, its magnificent bays, seem to suggest a world of family history. Once a possession of the great baronial house of Basset, afterwards a seat of the much-ennobled family of Shirley, Ragdale has become a farmhouse, and a place of quaintness and of memories.

We must pass lightly over several genealogical links in order to reach the builder of Ragdale Old Hall as it now exists, with its quaint old Jacobean features and its timber portions of an earlier time. When Sir Ralph Shirley of Stanton Harold died, in 1517, it was numbered with his possessions, and it remained with his descendants, apparently being used as a dower-house or residence for married sons, for it is known that Mr. John Shirley, who had military command in Leicestershire in the reign of Elizabeth, and died in the lifetime of his father, lived there. His eldest son, George Shirley, who was a man of great note and a scholar in his time, was Sheriff of Northamptonshire in 1603, and was created a baronet in 1611 on the first institution of that dignity, his name being fourth in the order of creation. He chiefly lived at Astwell in Northamptonshire; but there remains a curious letter of his in which he complains of the nuisance of saltpetre-digging at Ragdale. He adhered to the old faith and



THE GREAT BAY.



EAST FRONT.

was a great benefactor, and his grievance against the saltpetre-men was that they did not spare the "rooms wherein the poore men did lie," nor "spare to digg upp myne owne dwelling howse there."

By natural decay of its timber, and by the unwarranted depredations of the saltpetre diggers, Ragdale Hall apparently fell into decay ; but it was restored, enlarged, and in great part rebuilt by Sir Henry Shirley, second baronet, who died in 1633. Sir Thomas Shirley, the antiquary, his only brother who survived, thus speaks of him : "By the noble education which his father gave him, Sir Henry Shirley acquired, by the sharpness of his wit, an exact knowledge of the liberal sciences, and from Oxford he was sent for the bettering of his understanding and the gaining of languages, with licence of the King, to travel



OLD RAGDALE CHURCH.

beyond the seas. Having adorned himself with all the qualities required in a complete gentleman, he returned to his country with the general applause of all, and addressed himself to the Court of Henry Prince of Wales, and was received with honour by that glorious rising sun, whose death struck his heart with so deep a sorrow that he retired himself into the country to live a solitary life, determining not to think of courtly pomp or glory." In the "Stemmata Shirleiana," by E. P. Shirley, some curious papers are printed relating to him and his quarrels with his Leicestershire neighbours anent the right of hawking, which ultimately caused him to be made a prisoner in the Fleet for "scandalising the Earl of Huntingdon." It was averred that he had said: "He cared never for a Lord in England, except the Lord of Hosts; and that it was a fine thing for my Lord to deny him hawking in his ground, and that he was glad my Lord had no more ground to hawk in; that he had a spirit as well as my Lord, and that my Lord should hear from him within three weeks, for no man would deny a gentleman, for I am a gentleman." Finally, however, the choleric baronet withdrew his imputations on the Earl's honour, and was "enlarged."

He occupied the last years of his life in rebuilding Ragdale Hall, which bears all the architectural marks of his time. It is rich in the many quarterings of his ancient family, and something of its heraldic interest is doubtless due to his brother, Sir Thomas Shirley, the antiquary. The house is built partly of brick made on the spot, with some stone, and portions of the more ancient timber and plaster work intermixed. Like many an old manor house, it abuts somewhat closely upon an unfrequented country road, as will be seen in the pictures, and is very near to the old church and its venerable and remarkable churchyard cross. The principal front of the house faces south, and overlooks the little village below. Over the round-headed entrance doorway are weather-worn shields, with fifty quarterings of the



THE PORCH.

much-dowered family, and above is the crest of the Saracen's head won in the Crusades. Over the great bay on the east is the coat of Shirley impaling Devereux, and over the the initials of Sir Henry Shirley and Dorothy his wife, daughter of Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, and there is the date 1631, with the motto "Æterna præpono caducis." This



THE HALL FROM THE CHURCHYARD.

corresponding one to the west is another shield, too much weather-worn to be intelligible.

Within the house over the parlour chimney-piece we again have a many-quartered shield, and interesting room has some splendid enriched panelling, and a carved doorway projecting into the room after the manner of an internal porch, such as we have already noticed at Maxstoke



THE OAK ROOM.

and at Cotehele. In charm of grouping, of structural features, details of adornment, and the rich yet sober hues of the old brick and stone, the place is really excellent.

There is special interest in the illustration of the porch, admirably revealing all its features. This picture was taken in 1890, to illustrate the "Renaissance Architecture in England" (Batsford), and no photograph can now be taken from the same standpoint in consequence of the growth of the foliage. Ivy partly covers the many quarterings of the Shirleys, an apple tree overhangs the gateway, and the yews completely block up the entrance shown here. The marriage of Sir Henry with Lady Dorothy Devereux eventually brought the barony of Ferrers to his descendant, the seventh baronet, in whose favour it was called out of abeyance in 1677 and converted into an earldom in 1711. Stanton Harold and Chartley (the latter has been recently sold) became the chief seats of the family, but Ragdale was occasionally used as a hunting-box until the seventh Earl left it to his daughter, the wife of the Duke of Sforza-Cesarini, and her descendant is the present lord of the manor.



IN SHARP PERSPECTIVE.