HILL HALL,

ESSEX.

THE great houses within twenty miles of London, which a house agent with the truth in him might describe as desirable mansions, grow fewer each year. But Hill Hall, sixteen miles from the City and hard by the forest of Epping, is one of them. It lies in the parish of Theydon Mount, and has the long history which may be discovered of most manors near London. An English Godric held it before the Conquest, and under Henry II. it was in the hands of that Henry of Essex who, from being the King's constable, a warrior and a rich lord of lands, fell by his cowardice and saved his life inside a monk's frock. Hampdens were lord of Hill Hall under the early Tudors, and Philippe Wilford of London, Sir John Hampden's widow, having married with Sir Thomas Smith, persuaded her second knight to buy the reversion of her jointure here. Thus Hill Hall came to a most famous Essex man, memorable among ten thousand Tom Smiths, and Hill Hall has never since left the family. His father was Sir John Smith of Saffron Walden, twice High Sheriff of Essex under Henry VIII., and at Walden Thomas was born in 1513. A legend tells that he introduced the herb saffron into Walden, but Walden was Saffron Walden long before his day. A little saffron is still grown there in neglected corners of old gardens, and the house in which Thomas Smith was born still stands in the market-place. His own manuscript in the British Museum enables us to reconstruct the life of the builder of Hill Hall. By his own hand we know that little Thomas Smith was born a lively, prattling child, the delight of his father, but after his third year a strange nightmare and a fever began for him a sickly season which lasted until manhood. The sixteenth century was a time in which the hardy lived on and the weakly were soon carried to churchyard mould. There must have been hardiness in Thomas, or he would not have passed the years of his youth. They were ill years.



FROM THE NORTH-EAST.



NORTH-EAST FRONT.



SOUTH-WEST CORNER IN THE QUADRANGLE.



EAST FRONT FROM SOUTH-EAST.



PART OF THE SOUTH FRONT.



LEAD URNS, SOUTH TERRACE.

His spirits were low, he laughed little and never played with other boys. Pimple-faced and sore-lipped, plagued with toothache and backache, other boys would have little of him. As he could not play he worked ; he read history, wrote, painted and even carved, and loved his book until no more could be taught him of tongues and letters. Before the end of his eleventh year this marvellous Essex boy was packed off to Cambridge, where he soon added a dropsical affection to his other ills. His diary tells us plaintively that he lay down at night on his bed with his feet swollen and aching, and woke in the morning to find the swelling in his face. A lean and bilious Bachelor of Arts and fellow of his college, he pushed his way. In his twentieth year he was a Master of Arts, teaching natural philosophy and Greek to his elders. There was a goal to make for. Those days of the new learning put a career before the scholar and the book-man who would climb. In his twenty-fifth



THE HALL GALLERY.



THE HALL.

year, Thomas Smith, the scholar, now rid of the sickness which had plagued his youth, became known to King Henry VIII., a dangerous companion for great lords, but a good patron to many a lesser man. After Jane Seymour's death, Smith and Cheke the Greek teacher declaimed before Henry on the question whether the King, seeking a new wife, should look for her at home or abroad.



THE DINING-ROOM.

When twenty-six years of age, Thomas Smith, with money in his pocket, went the great tour in France and Italy. The road sang to him; he was young and strong again after the sickly years, and at last he found life sweet. Two years later he came home again, crossing the Alps on a Christmas Eve, and Cambridge welcomed him back. With a salary of £40—a good one in the reckoning of that time—he was a young professor of law, and Vice-Chancellor at thirty. Such a man must often have looked this way and that at the priesthood, and at last he found it advisable to bow his head for the tonsure. A bishop of Ely made him priest, and with the bishop's chancellorship



SCREEN IN THE HALL.

and a Lincoln prebendal stall he records that he was supremely happy. Then the King, Henry VIII., that most dread Sovereign, as his contemporaries justly styled him, was gathered to his fathers. The new Court of the boy offered place and pension to Master Smith, and, casting away his priest's gown, he took the London road. For a patron he chose the plotting Duke of Somerset, a man who drew to himself many faithful servants. Smith was the Duke's Master of Requests, and, following the Protector in his Scottish expedition, came near death by a fever at York. At this time, the man about the Court would take lay or clerical preferment in the same mouthful. Smith was one of the King's Secretaries of State, and Provost of Eton and Dean of Carlisle, besides his post under the Protector, being ready to follow any employment that offered. In 1548 he had forgotten his tonsure and married. In 1549 he was a knight whose priesthood was an old story not to be recalled. Smith was a place-hunter, but he did not leave Somerset, "My master of whom I have had all," when Somerset's course was run; and Sir Thomas notes with a trace of complacency how with the Protector and other noble folk he was led to prison with the greatest pomp of the law.

In 1550, Smith, once more in Royal employment, was so happy as to be on an embassy in France when the terrible sweating sickness, the Stop-Gallant, as men playfully called it, was slaughtering and scaring in London. How he passed the greater danger of Mary's reign, he being a twice-married priest, lukewarm in all matters of faith, we know not; but to the coat of arms granted to his father he added the significant crest of the salamander which survives among flames, and which, if we may trust careful artists, has also the air of a slippery beast.

In 1557, the year of his old father's death, Sir Thomas, being the husband of the widowed Dame Hampden of Theydon Mount, began to rebuild the Hampdens' house of Hill Hall, deserting that house at Ankerwycke which he had made to be near his Eton provostship. In these years of retirement he gave himself to astrology, a study for which he had a passion. We have seen a volume filled with calculations for this all-but-forgotten art. He followed it first in his twentieth year, and he notes that in 1550 he was assailed with so strong a desire for learning it that he could scarce sleep at night. We have, it seems, to thank his astrological speculations for the accurate dates of his life's adventures which give us Sir Thomas Smith's history. Perhaps he never quite abandoned the study, although a pupil records that, in a moment of scepticism, he once called it "the most ingenious art of lying."

Under Elizabeth, Sir Thomas came back to his State employments, being too useful a servant to lie idle. Again he was an ambassador, being four years in France on the Queen's business. In 1571 he was once again admitted to the Privy Council, and the next year saw him again a Secretary of State. He had then laid aside his diary, his last notes being of the death of his only child, a natural son, killed in Ireland, where Sir Thomas had founded a colony on the coast of Ulster. But, beside the biographical notes, we have much material for the history of his public and private life, and more especially a long letter, in which he defended himself against many charges



THE QUEEN'S ROOM.

brought by those jealous of his advancement. Some of his phrases have the true Pepysian touch of intimacy. He protested that he was not high-stomached, but ready to do the State service in any capacity, as able "to serve in the bodie and thilles, as carters calle it, as weale as in the rome of a forehorse." His enemies had called him miserly, and pointed to the mean attire of Dame Smith. "My wife," he answered, "doth not go so gorgeously as some would have her. If that be a fault let her bear it. She hath all my money." Counting his expenses when a Secretary of State about 1549, his income being £120 yearly, he tells us that "I so ordered the matter that mine own board, my three servants, and three summer nags and three winter geldings, all this did not stand me in much above £30 yearly." Truly few Secretaries of State who have followed him have been such managers. In 1568 he began to build the north and west sides of his house of Hill Hall "stronger and more splendidly"; but he left much to be finished by his nephew when in 1577 he ended his days at the hall. His body lies in the church of Theydon Mount under a rich tomb, the epitaph calling him orator, mathematician and philosopher, a man skilled in the Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Italian tongues. "Serviceable to many, injurious to none, averse from revenge." English verses over the canopy have a true word of this man's restless and enquiring mind:

What yearth or sea or skies contayne
What creatures in them be
My minde did seeke to know
The heavens continually.

Dying childless, he was succeeded at Hill Hall by his nephew, the ancestor of all later Smiths of Hill Hall. His son received a baronetcy, and the twelfth baronet is now the head of this family, one of the oldest surviving Essex houses.

Hill Hall, even to-day, contains the substance and material of the old house which Sir Thomas Smith built; but the eighteenth century saw mere uncouthness in the red chimneys and gables and mullioned windows of Elizabeth's time, and Sir Edward Smyth, the third baronet, set about disguising his brave mansion. His shield of arms displayed over his work impales the shield of his first wife Anne Hedges, and as this lady died in 1719 we can date the new ornament within a few years. This east front is completely his work, and is an admirable example of its dignified yet comfortable type, the real English domestic architecture of Anne and the first George, as opposed to the highly Italianised and inconvenient palaces which Vanbrugh put up at Stowe, Blenheim and Castle Howard. On the other elevations of Hill Hall, old Sir Thomas's work occasionally peers out, and the inside of the quadrangle was deemed too unimportant to be much altered, and here the mullioned windows predominate. Inside, the hall keeps the Elizabethan spaciousness; and a square panel set high up in the wall has the arms of Queen Elizabeth, a lady who was taken for patron saint by all courtly house-builders of her time. The great original fireplace is retained, but its roomy hearth is filled in with a Georgian chimney-piece, admirable in design and workmanship, but a little ill at ease in its rather telescopic position. Along the gallery are ranged breast-plates and lobster-tail helmets of the seventeenth century, and the fine armchairs of the Restoration period will be remarked in our picture. Besides the portraits of his employers, Elizabeth and her terrible father, hangs a painting of the fresh face and red beard of the founder of the house. The Queen's Room is a room of embroidered chairs and bed-hangings. Here will be seen one of those towering state beds, upholstered with needlework, which were reared at the end of the seventeenth century. The large late panels of the dining-room are broken, on the one side, by the older windows. It is a pleasant, simple, white room with grave furniture of Queen Anne's time, its cabinets filled with china. Altogether Hill Hall, within and without, suffers nothing in beauty and interest from the blending of two styles. All the work is good, and all the effects are pleasant. It is a fine and stately home, yet a wholly liveable one.