DERBYSHIRE ARCHÆOLOGICAL
AND
NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY.

Denby Old Hall and its Owners.

I.

THE HALL.

By PERCY H. CURREY, *Hon. Secretary.*

THE stranger, travelling on the Ripley branch of the Midland Railway, will occasionally turn his head to glance at the quaint old house which, backed by the trees of Salterwood, forms such a picturesque object on the west side of the line, between Denby Station and Marehay; but beyond this, Denby Old Hall is little known to anyone outside its immediate neighbourhood; the house is scarcely visible from the road, and the district is not one to attract visitors, though there are many pretty bits and interesting old houses to be found by those who know where to look for them. Even at the present time, in spite of the smoke from the potteries and the throbbing of the winding engines, the visitor to the Old Hall will see sufficient of the former character of Denby Park to show what an attractive place it must have been before its beauty was given in exchange for the wealth which comes from underground.

Denby Old Hall is not mentioned, so far as the writer can ascertain, in any of the Derbyshire histories. Glover states that the Rossels had a park at Denby in the reign of Henry III. and that in the time of Henry VI. the Denby property vested, through an heiress, in Lawrence Lowe; this park most probably included the Hall which forms the subject of the present paper. Glover's subsequent statement that John Flamstead, the Astronomer Royal, was born at the Old Hall, refers most probably to a house, now pulled down, formerly known as Crowtrees.* The designation of "Hall" seems to be comparatively modern; even as late as 1714, in the will of Robert Robey, it is described as "Denby Parke," and in earlier documents it is spoken of as "the Lodge or Parke House." Its situation in the Middle Ages must have been very secluded; the village and church of Denby lie a mile away to the south-east; the Derby and Alfreton turnpike road, which now passes about a quarter of a mile to the east, is modern, having been made under an Act of Parliament passed about 1786, and the original approach would probably be from the Rykneld Street, the name of which is still preserved in the unprepossessing hamlet of Street Lane; Morley Park, in Duffield Forest, came close on the west side.

Some interesting information concerning the estate can be gathered from the depositions in an action in the Court of Chancery in the reign of Charles II., respecting the ownership of Salterwood and Pryor Leyes, in which there seem to have been witnesses on the one side ready to prove that Salterwood was always considered part of the park and within the pale, and on the other equally assertive that it was not part of the park, and was fenced off from it. Among the depositions we find the following statements: "The messuage house, that is undoubtedly within the parke and was the Keeper's Lodge formerly"; "Denby Parke enclosed with a pale 65/68 yeares before, disparked about 49 years before, and that Salterwood

* Vol. XIX., p. 109, of this *Journal*.

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DENBY OLD HALL, FROM THE EAST.

and Pryor Leyes were part of the parke, and within the pale Deere grazed and hunted therein." The park was estimated to contain a little over 200 acres.

Of the mediæval hall which must have stood here there are, so far as the writer can ascertain, no documentary records, nor are there any structural remains with the exception of the moat. The moat is, as might be expected in so hilly a country, rather an ususual feature in Derbyshire, but it gives us no clue as to the date of the house, as houses were occasionally moated even so late as the Elizabethan period.* The moat, long since disused, lies about 50 yards north of the present house; it is about 33 feet wide at the top and 6 feet deep, and encloses a rectangular platform measuring about 58 feet by 80 feet; on three sides it is excavated in the solid ground, but on the north it is confined by an artificial bank on the edge of a small ravine formed by a stream coming down from Marehay, from which it was probably fed. Except in very wet weather, it is now dry, but in the memory of the present tenant of the farm it was filled with water, and only a very slight diversion of the stream would be necessary to bring the water into it again.

What the original hall was like we have, of course, no knowledge; from the fact of its being moated, it would seem to have been a place of some importance, for a keeper's lodge in mediæval times was an official residence. It would probably be built of timber. Though the usual building material of the district was formerly stone and is now brick, timber was, in the middle ages, much the most usual material, even in stone districts, and there would no doubt be abundance of good building oak in the park or the neighbouring forest.

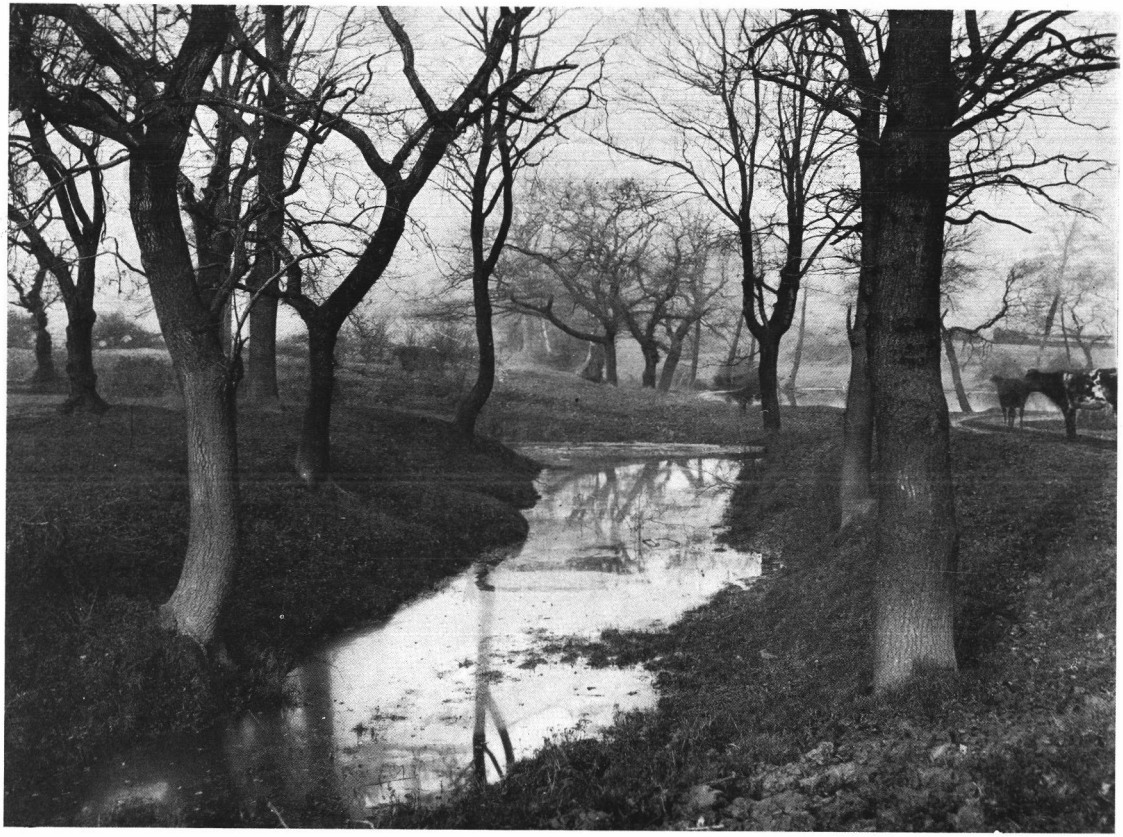
The present hall consists of two distinct buildings; the older portion is much the more perfect and is an interesting example of a small Elizabethan country house. It is difficult to definitely say who was its builder; from the depositions in the law-suit

* See Parker & Turner's *Domestic Architecture of the Middle Ages*, Vol. II., p. 15.

previously referred to, it appears that the estate was purchased in 1628 by Robert Wilmot from Vincent Lowe and his trustees, Thomas Hutchinson, Timothy Pusey, and Gilbert Ward, and was immediately afterwards demised by Robert Wilmot to Vincent Lowe for forty-one years at a rent of £100. From the style of the building one might, however, venture to speculate that the founder was Patrick Lowe, father of Vincent Lowe. From the external appearance alone it would be difficult to assign a date to the older hall,* its picturesque style, with deeply recessed mullioned windows and straight label mouldings, having prevailed in Derbyshire, and, in fact, in all stone districts, not only during the latter part of the sixteenth, but throughout nearly the whole of the seventeenth centuries. After the fifteenth century it becomes more difficult to date a building from its architecture alone than it is during the mediæval period, when the way in which the native Gothic styles developed contemporaneously over almost the whole of the country, at a time when communication was not very rapid, is often surprising, but with the Renaissance began that confusion of styles which has steadily increased up to the present day. In the rural districts the builders imitated, or tried to imitate, the details of the imported foreign styles long before they grasped the principles of their design, and even in the Stuart period, while Inigo Jones was designing for his wealthy patrons purely classic buildings, we find houses all over the country that possess much of the picturesque character of the Gothic work. At Denby Old Hall, however, we have other things besides the masons' work to assist us in coming to a conclusion as to its date. Judging by the plan and the joiners' work, the writer is inclined to the opinion that it was erected in the latter part of the sixteenth century.

The building is of stone, the outer walls being about 2 ft. 9 ins. thick; the dressings of the doors and windows are of hard millstone grit, in excellent preservation, but the walling is of a much poorer material, probably obtained close to the site, very picturesque in colouring, but badly weathered. The

* "Older" as opposed to the later Jacobean addition.



DENBY OLD HALL. THE MOAT.

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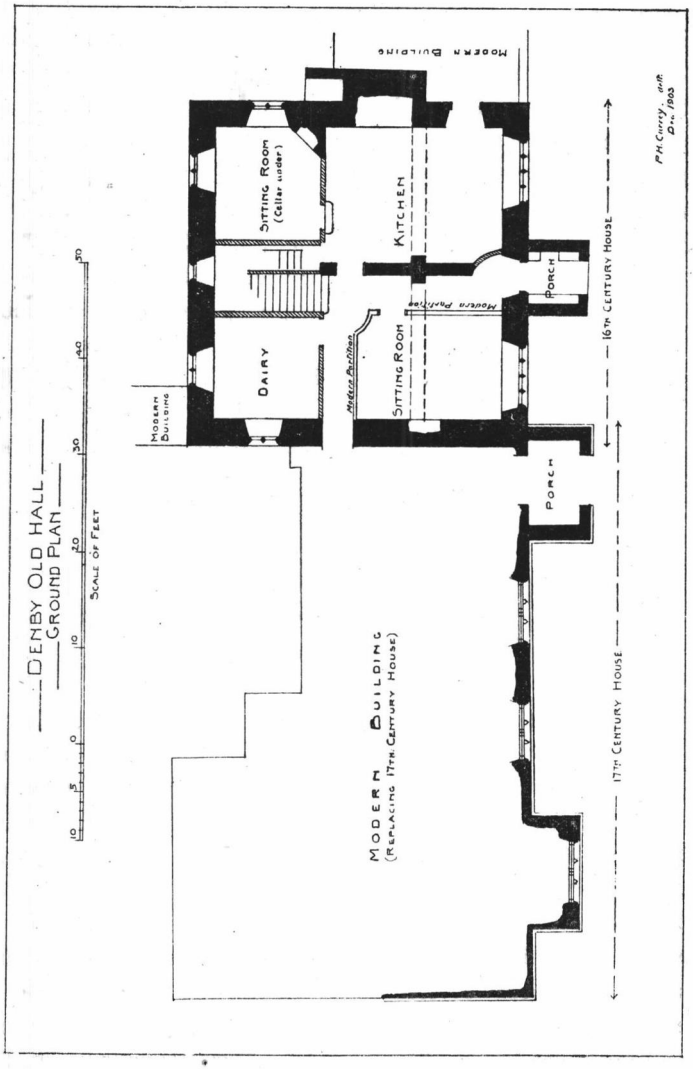
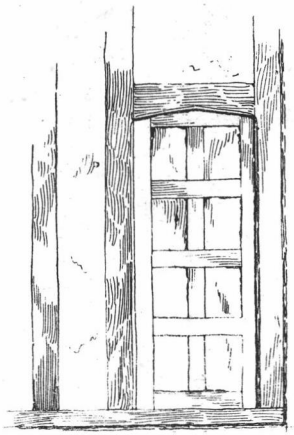
plan is interesting, showing the striving after a symmetrical design, which was then such a novel feature in domestic archi-



tecture, and the quaintly naïve way in which that symmetry was attained. It is practically square, measuring 36 ft. by

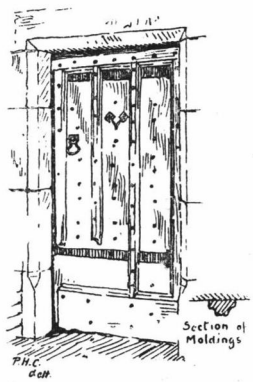
35 ft. 3 ins., and is roofed in two spans with a gutter between, showing two equal sized gables on both the east and west walls. To carry the roof, an internal stone wall is carried up from bottom to top, dividing the house into two equal parts. As it was necessary, in order to preserve the symmetry of the design, for the porch to be placed in the middle of the east wall, this internal wall would, if carried across, have come right in the middle of the door; so, to avoid this, it is stopped short a little distance from the outside wall. The ground floor (see plan) contains two large rooms, a hall or house place, and kitchen. The partitions, forming the passage and greatly reducing the size of the hall, are modern additions. At the back of the inner hall is a small room, now used as a dairy, and at the back of the kitchen another, used as a sitting room, with a cellar below; between these is a staircase, some of the steps of which are said by the tenant to be of solid blocks of oak, but they are now cased over. The upper floor, which is an exact repetition of the ground floor, comprises four bedrooms, with a small closet or wardrobe over the porch, which communicates with the bed-room above the kitchen. The internal partitions, with the exception of the stone cross wall mentioned before, are all of timber. Owing to the way in which everything, including in some cases the doors themselves, has been covered with wall-paper, it is difficult to examine much of the work, but the framing of some of these partitions has quite a Tudor appearance. The sills of the partitions in some cases run across the doorways, a system which, one would imagine, must often have proved a very



ONE OF THE INNER DOORS

literal stumbling-block to the junior members of the family. The roof appears to be the original structure; it is carried by two massive oak trusses, and is covered with stone slates (technically known as grey slates), though repaired in places with tiles. The stone walls appear to have stopped at the eaves level all round, and the gables to have been of timber framing and plaster; but this has, with the exception of the great rafters, been removed and replaced with brickwork, as is clearly shown in the view of the front of the hall.

Several of the rooms contain the original fireplaces, which are of very plain character, with boldly-moulded stone jambs and lintels. A good deal of plain oak panelling still remains in the house in a more or less mutilated condition, and in the bedroom over the hall there is some of good design and rather elaborate workmanship. This is obviously not in its original position, and appears to be of later date. It may, with some degree of probability, be inferred that it was removed from the newer portion of the hall, as will be presently suggested. The front door (see sketch), which is probably coeval with the house, is formed of two thicknesses of oak boards strongly nailed together, and with mouldings planted on the face.



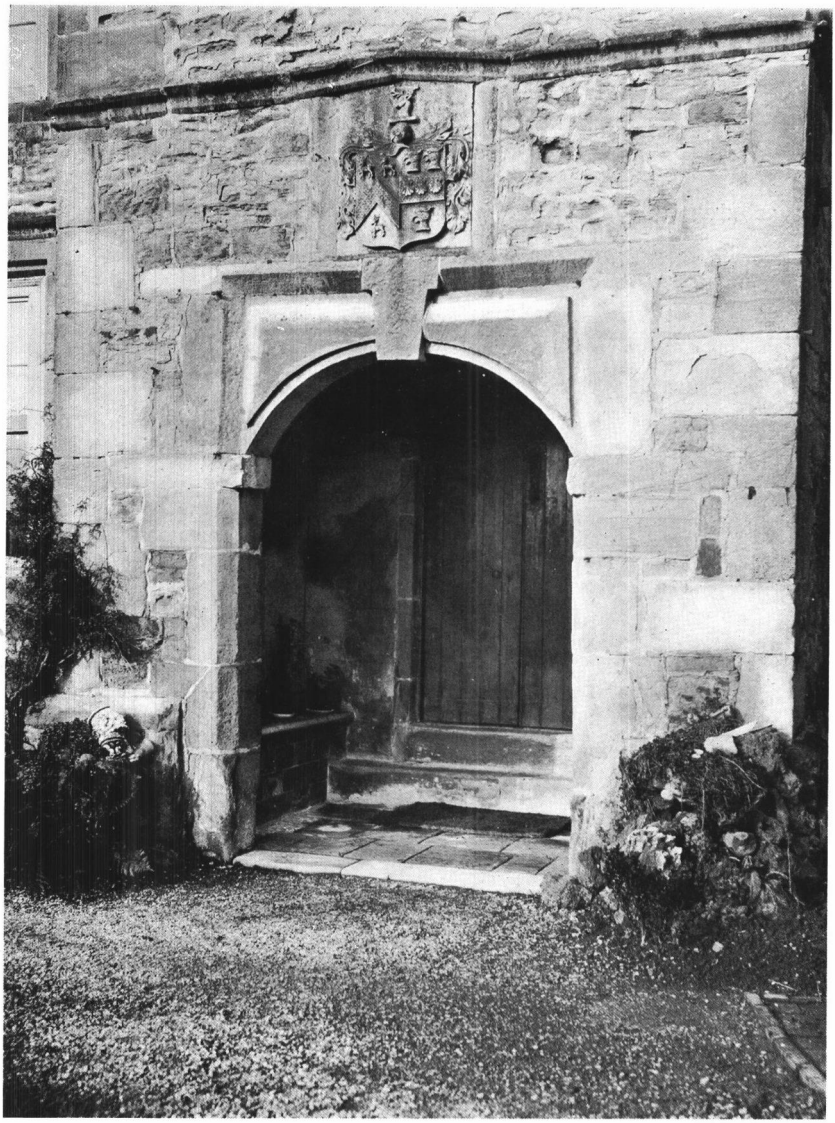
THE OUTER DOOR

Probably the last to occupy this house as keeper of the park was Nicholas Ottiwell, whose sons were called as witnesses in the action previously mentioned. The following item of evidence is so quaintly given as to be worth quoting: "The deponent's father was keeper of Denby Parke in Patrick Lowe's tyme. Patrick charged him to have a care what hee did in Salterwood for if hee did any hurt hee would not beare him out, for hee heard his father say it was not within his Charter."

About a century after the building of the Elizabethan

lodge, a wing of much more ambitious proportions was added. Thomas Robey, of Castle Donington (b. 1598, d. 1678), Sewer Extraordinary to Queen Henrietta Maria, Consort of King Charles I., married as his second wife Dorothy Wilmot, a grand-daughter of Robert Wilmot, the purchaser of Denby Park, and through her acquired the Denby estate. It is fairly safe to assume that he was the builder of this section of the hall; the architecture corresponds with his time, and over the door are the arms of Robey and Wilmot impaled. Unfortunately, with the exception of the east and part of the south walls, nothing of his work remains, and it is impossible even to guess at its plan, though the small fragment left is sufficient to show, in a tantalizing way, what a charming building it must have been. It appears to have been allowed to go to ruin, and to have been re-built, in the most uninteresting style imaginable, early in the nineteenth century; even in the old front wall the mullions and transoms have been removed to make way for sash windows. In the possession of Miss Gregory, the present owner, is a sketch of the old hall, evidently drawn with a fair degree of accuracy, signed on the back: "James Coxon, May 1st, 1823." This sketch shows the old portion much in its present condition, but the later wing is roofless and with grass growing on the top of the walls. The windows, however, with their mullions and transoms, were then perfect. On the back of the sketch is a note by Robert Strelley Parker, stating that "over the porch was a stone with the arms of Robey impaling those of Wilmot"; the stone now over the porch is modern, but this note shows it to be an authentic reproduction.

The front of the newer portion of the hall, as will be seen from the plan and the photograph, has a boldly-projecting square bay window and a porch, which are very effective in outline. It is built of similar materials to the lodge, and, except for the facts that the windows are larger and the mouldings a little bolder, and that the workmanship is generally more careful, it will be seen that little real change had taken



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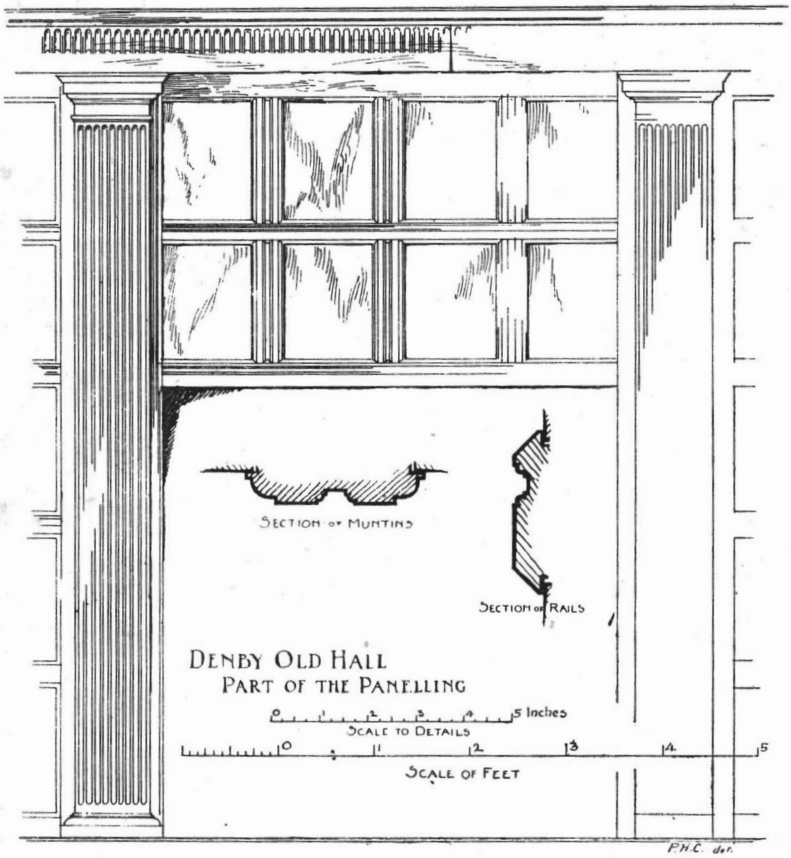
DENBY OLD HALL. PORCH.

place in the manner of building. The quaint archway to the porch, of which Mr. Haslam's photograph gives an excellent view, is very characteristic of the Stuart period. The oak panelling referred to above as existing in one of the bed-rooms of the old house, a small portion of which is shown in the



accompanying sketch, looks as if it must originally have adorned the dining room or one of the principal rooms of this wing; it reaches from floor to ceiling, and is now made up of fragments, the mouldings of which vary in different parts; even the cornice is of different sections on opposite sides of

the room; it is divided into bays by fluted pilasters of very slight projection, with delicately-moulded caps and bases; it shows no signs of ever having been coloured, and the oak in some of the panels is beautifully figured.

In the garden is a small brass sun-dial on a stone pillar, inscribed "Robert Robey, 1714."