

SWARKESTONE BRIDGE.
Showing Chapel House and Elms, 1867.

Swarkestone Bridge.

By GEORGE BAILEY.

Methinks I see the bard on yon green ridge,
Or 'midst the pleasant meads at Swarkestone Bridge,
Loving to hear the wind by Trent's soft edge
Whisper in reeds or sigh amongst the sedge.

J. J. Briggs.



HERE are but few of the ancient, or mediæval, bridges now left to us: the more reason, then, that those should be protected and preserved as ancient monuments. The actual bridge that crosses the Trent at Swarkestone is modern, not being older than the time of George III.; but the long viaduct over the flat stretch of meadow happily does retain much of its ancient fabric and pointed arches. As to its date nothing very certain can be stated, but a near approximation may perhaps be arrived at by comparing dates of others which are known. For instance, the first stone bridge built in England was Bow Bridge, built in 1118, and the now destroyed Burton Bridge was said to be built by Abbot Bernard in 1175; but this statement rests on one by Erdswick, who cites the following from an ancient document in support of it:

“One William-de-la-Warde, in the time of the above abbot, ‘dedit terram ponti de Burton, 6 denarios annuatim sibi et heredibus suis imperpetuam, etc.’” But, as has been well said, “if William-de-la-Warde gave land to the bridge as here mentioned, it is plain the bridge was then in being.” And,

moreover, there was a Robert de Brislingcote who gave land for the same purpose previously to that time.¹ This, however, does not dispose of the probability that it was built by the abbot, before whose time there must have been a bridge of wood. Those who, like the writer, remember it, will know that it was an early English structure, agreeing with the date named, and also that the resemblance of what remains of the old one at Swarkestone with it was identical. But this is not all, as will be seen from the following remarks made by the late J. J. Briggs, of King's Newton, written in 1859 :²

“A short time before the recent alterations were effected, we distinctly traced on one of the arches towards the centre of the bridge the figures 1192, and we infer, from various circumstances, that the date was probably correct. . . . Now, assuming the date 1192 upon Swarkestone bridge to be correct, there would not be twenty years' difference between the two: the bridge at Swarkestone would be built in 1192 and that at Burton in 1174.”

It is unfortunate that no drawing of Swarkestone bridge in its entirety was ever made.³

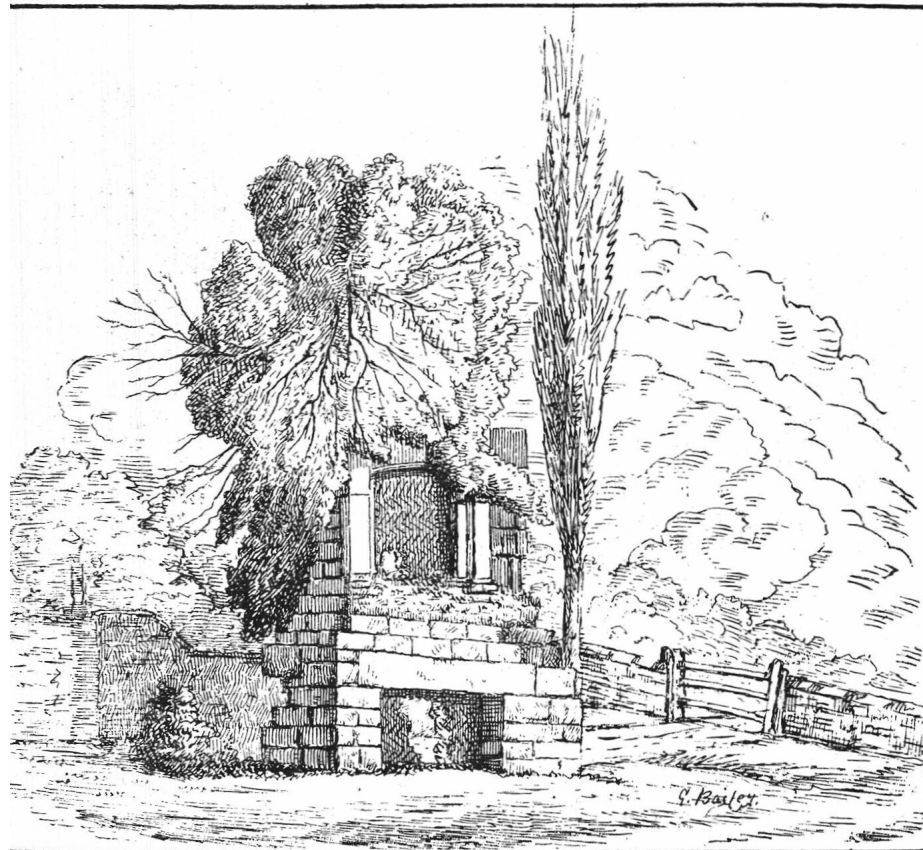
There was, as late as 1863, to be seen immediately on crossing the bridge, on the left-hand side, a house sheltered by tall elms, in which the rooks used to build, standing in the meadow close by the bridge; and Mr. Briggs says “some part of this house formed, in ancient times, a chapel in which was a priest to sing masses for the souls of those who passed over the bridge.” Neither house nor trees are there now. In an inquisition held at Newark 26th October, 19 Hen. VII., 1503, is the item below, which throws some light on this chapel:—

“Item quod unum parcellum prati jacen inter Pontem de *Swarckston* et *Ingleby* detur in Antiquo tempore Priori de *Repington* et Successoribus suis in perpetuum ad intentionem quod illi perpetue et continue provideant unum Presbyterum

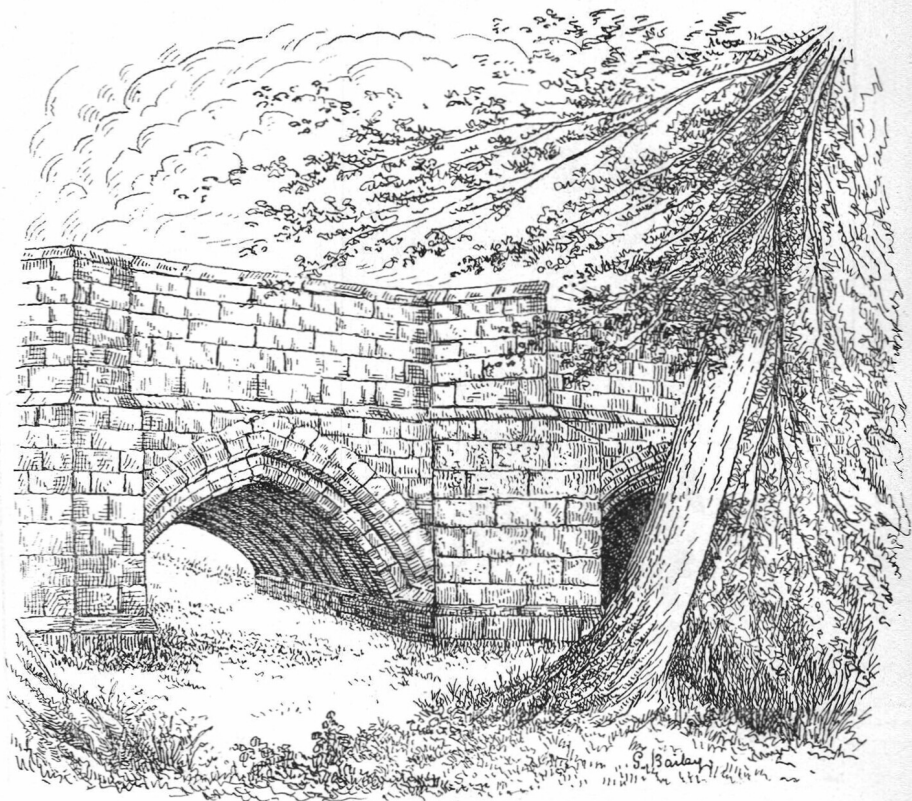
¹ *History of Burton*, Westley, p. 57.

² Notes, *To the Trent and other Poems*, p. 75.

³ The late A. O. Deacon made a fine pencil sketch of that formerly at Burton, but we cannot trace it.



RUINS OF MANOR HOUSE, STANTON-BY-BRIDGE.



ORIGINAL ARCH OF SWARKESTONE BRIDGE, 1908.

(*Anglice, a priest*), canutare super dictum pontem in capella que habent. Tenentes provident null . Presbyter . neque fecerunt per spatium viginti Amorum. Ac pratum predictum valet per annum sex Marcas."¹ "But there is no trace of this chantry in the minister's accounts of that priory after the Revolution, though the prior of Repingdon granted to *S. Petre (sic)* a lease of the manor of Calke with a *certain parcel of meadow* lying beside the Swarkeston Bridge in the parishes of Melbourne and Stanton. . . . The 'parcel of meadow' alluded to is now lost, and has in some way or other become merged in other property. At the dissolution of monasteries and chantries it was probably sold."²

It was sometimes the duty of the priests or hermits who lived at these chapels to collect the tolls for the repair and maintenance of the bridges. There are several of these bridge chapels still remaining. That at the foot of St. Mary's Bridge in Derby is an interesting example; but there are, or were, others much older than it. "At Droitwich there was one on the bridge through which the road passed, the reading desk and pulpit being on one side, the congregation on the other."³ All important bridges had a chapel, which was only a continuation of the practice of the Romans. "Plutarch derived the word 'Pontifex' from sacrifices made upon bridges, a ceremony of the highest antiquity. The priests are said to have been commissioned to keep the bridges in repair, as an indispensable part of their office, and the offerings were of course for repairs."⁴

These bridges were at first built of wood. The great one over the Thames was of wood until Peter of Colechurch built the first one of stone. He died in 1205, leaving it unfinished; but he was buried in the chapel of St. Thomas à Becket, a handsome structure with a crypt, built over the tenth or centre arch—a singular place of sepulture.⁵

¹ *Topographer*, v. ii., p. 271.

² J. J. Briggs, Notes, *To the Trent and other Poems*, p. 77.

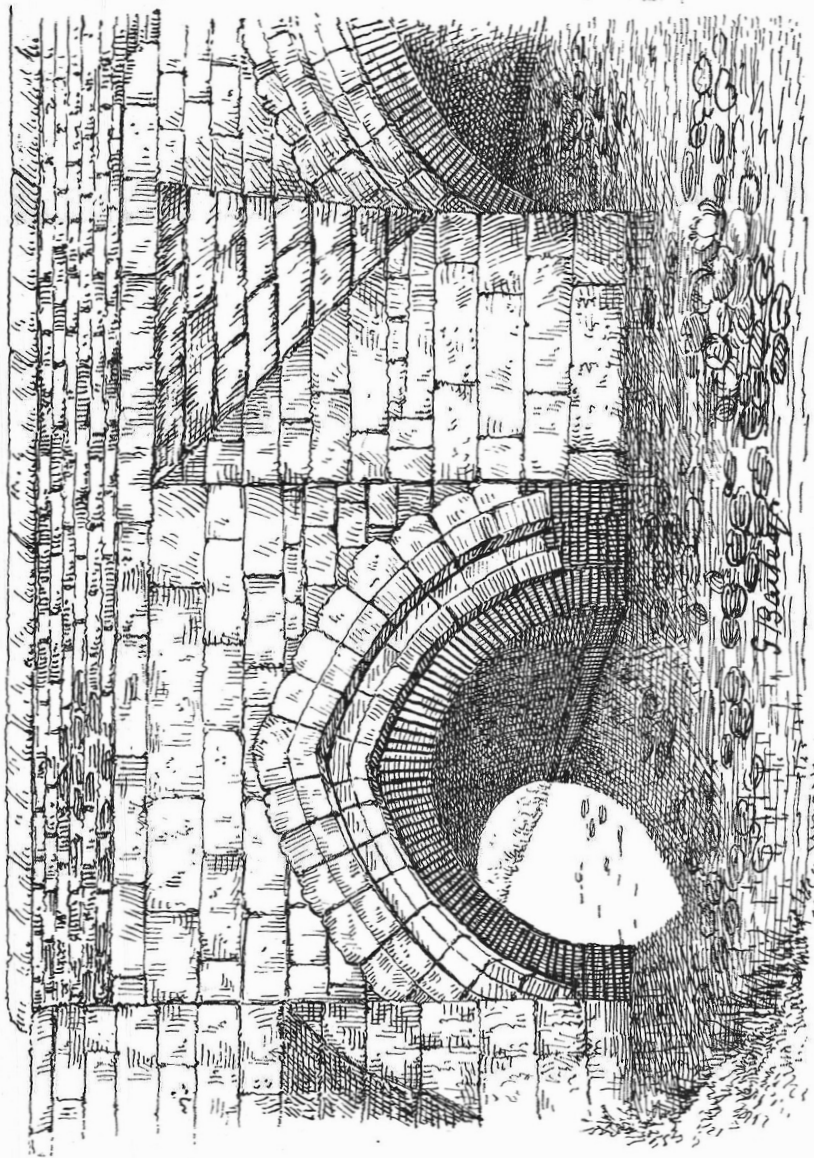
³ Nash's *Worcestershire*, i., 329.

⁴ Fosbroke, vol. i., p. 62.

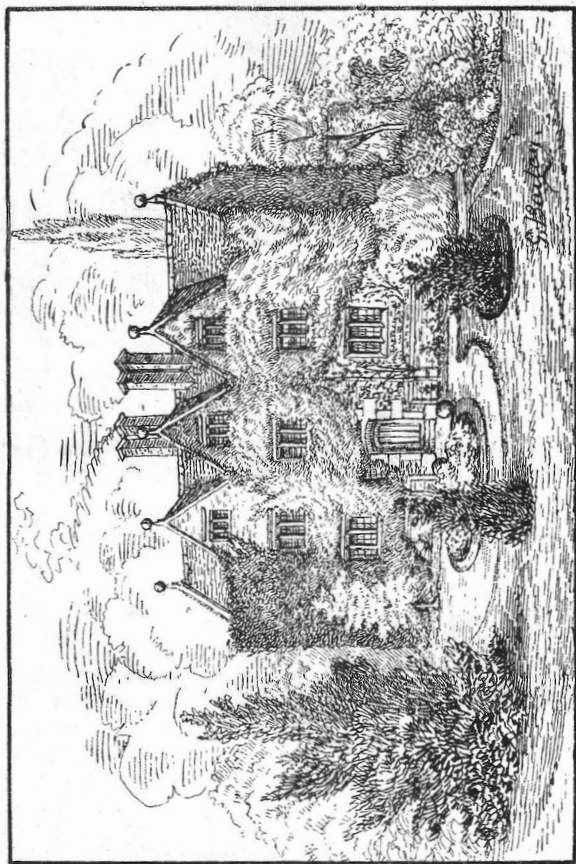
Knight's *Old England*, 310.

These timber bridges were constantly needing repairs, rendered necessary by the damage caused by floods, and there are numerous recorded occasions on which the bridge at Swarkestone needed them, and in such circumstances it was necessary to appoint a jury to inquire into the rights and privileges, and Mr. Briggs gives an instance occurring in the fourth year of Edward I., when they presented to the justices in Eyre "that the merchants of the soke of Melbourne passing the bridge at Swarkeston and elsewhere within the limits of the liberty, for the reception of passage and toll of the lord the king always had been accustomed to pay such toll and passage to the king and borough of Derby, to which it belonged, but for the last three years had unjustly withheld the same without warrant, to the *prejudice of the lord the king*, and had done the same at Dovebridge."

When it was found that the revenue was not sufficient to keep the bridges in repair, "Grants of Aid" or "Grants for Pontage" could be obtained by petitioning Parliament or the king. In the case of this bridge three such grants were made. They occurred in the eighteenth year of Edward II., the twelfth of Edward III., and again in the twentieth year of Edward III. Thus in the eighteenth year of Edward II. : "The king to the bailiffs and good men of the town of Swarkeston greeting. We have granted to you for three years from the day of making these presents, in aid of repairing the bridge over the Trent, by the hands of William Grove, of Swarkeston, Richard, of Swarkeston, and two others, or those whom they shall appoint for the purpose, and for whom they shall be answerable—and by the inspection of our well-beloved in Christ, the prior of Repingdon, or his deputy, for things passing over the bridge, the following tolls and customs: that is to say—For every horse load of corn; every cow, &c.; every horse laden with hides, &c.; every cart of fish; a horse laden with cloth; or a cask of wine, one halfpenny, and for a cart laden with lead one penny. For other merchandise not specified, worth five shillings, a farthing." The grant then concludes: "And therefore we command that



AN ARCH STRENGTHENED IN 1899. SKETCHED 1908.



SIR RICHARD HARPUR'S RESIDENCE, 1867. FORTIFIED BY
SIR JOHN HARPUR IN 1643.

ye take the customs for the aforesaid term of three years, and with the money arising therefrom make the repairs and amendments, &c., necessary for the said bridge &c. *Witness, ourselves at Melbourne, &c.*"¹

The present handsome bridge over the Trent was built about 1801. It has seven arches, the entire span being 139 yards. The long causeway has twenty-two arches, and the whole length is 1,304 yards, or about three-quarters of a mile. The original width of the road was 11 ft. or 12 ft., but for greater convenience of the increased traffic some parts have now been increased in width to 22 ft. In the narrow parts some of the triangular recesses still remain, and break the long length of wall, and so give an agreeable variety and picturesqueness to it. The pointed arches, with their buttresses, are well-proportioned, and the bases of the buttresses are well finished. Unfortunately some of the pointed arches had to be strengthened in 1899, and it was done with blue bricks. There are also some round arches of modern insertion. On crossing the causeway there may be seen on the rising ground to the right the scanty ivy-mantled bit of ruin of the house in which two ladies—the reputed builders of the causeway—are said to have lived. A beautiful legend, of which there are several versions, attaches to this. In substance it is as follows:—At the house, of which only this bit of ivy-mantled ruin remains, there once lived two ladies, and on one occasion they were much troubled as to the safety of a young man—brother or lover—who had to cross the long stretch of meadow before he could reach the manor house. From the window of a room which overlooked the great expanse of turbid waters, which had converted the meadow into a wide lake, as was always the case when the Trent was in flood, they at last saw him whom they so anxiously expected breasting the waters on his horse; but bravely as both horse and rider resisted the rising waters, they were overwhelmed, and never arrived alive at the goal of their desire. Then it is related that those two ladies resolved to do their utmost to prevent the recurrence

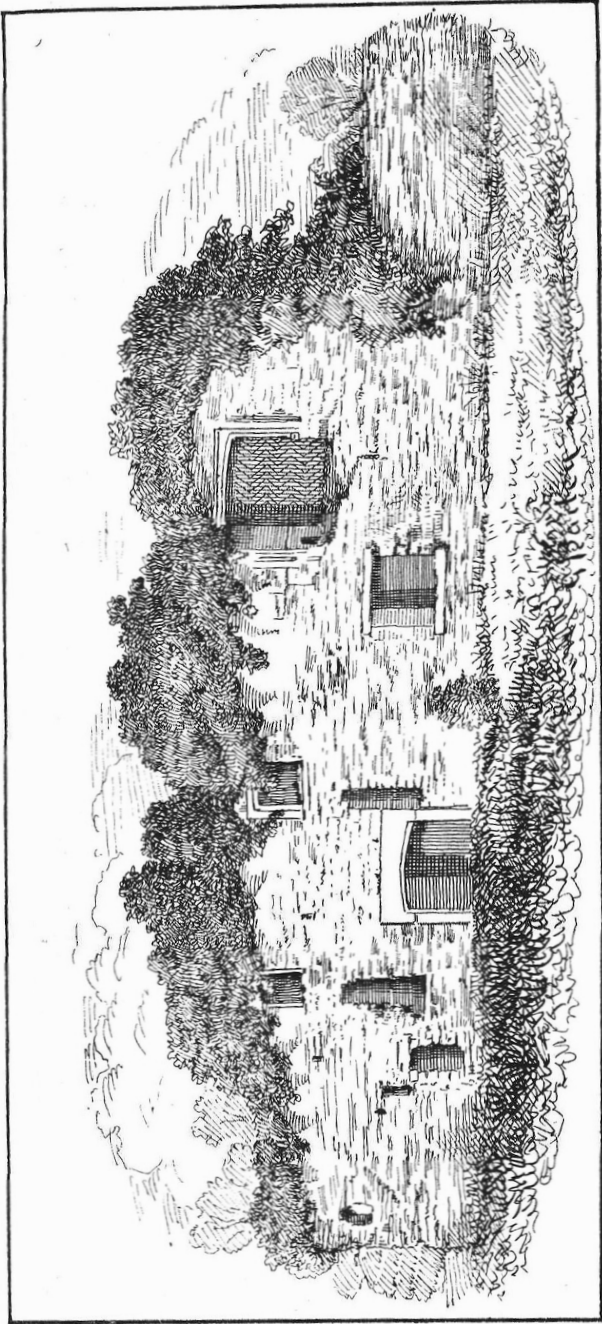
¹ These are quoted from the *Hundred and Patent Rolls*.

of such a catastrophe by spending their fortune in causing to be made the long viaduct, which, in part, still remains. Their fortune was very soon exhausted, and for the rest of their lives they sat and span to supply their own needs, and then died; but their work was accomplished. There are some guesses, but no actual record of who the ladies were.

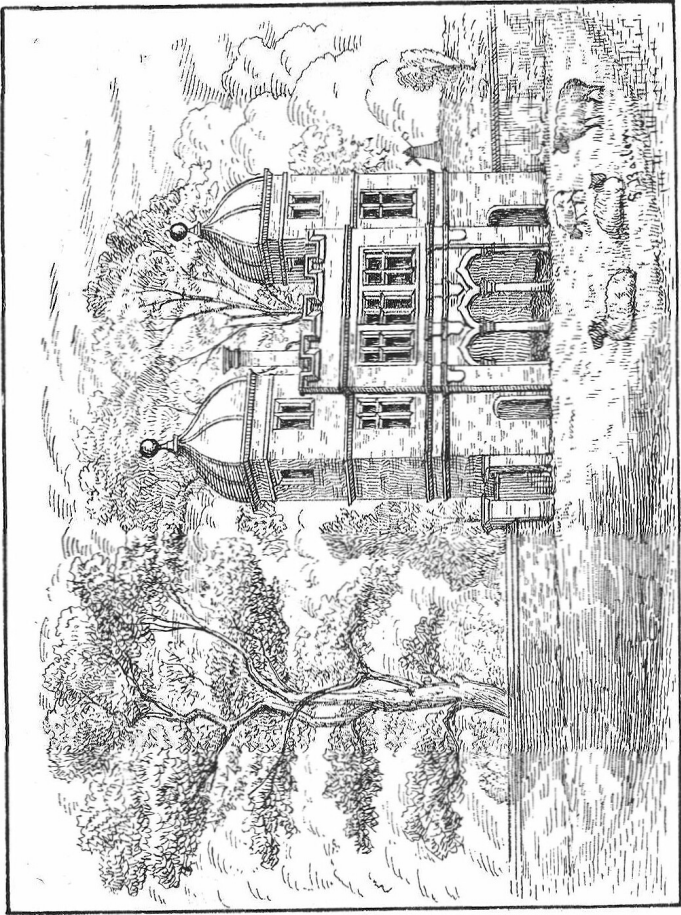
On crossing to the left from this point a good view of several of the thirteenth-century ribbed arches is obtained. To depict the character of the bridge and arches—both those which are still unaltered (Plate 3), as well as those which were in 1899 strengthened with blue bricks (Plate 4)—more adequately, two sketches are here given, made during a recent visit. They also show that the lower portion and the pointed or drop arches are older considerably than the upper part, which in many places has been rebuilt or patched with bricks. It may also be remarked that it is plainly seen how much of the parapet has at various times been altered or rebuilt as the irregular structure is traversed; and on retracing our steps and taking our stand on the bridge that spans the Trent, and looking down the broad and silvery stream, there may be seen the old grey walls and gables, embosomed in trees, of the house of Sir John Harpur, which was besieged by the Parliamentarians under Sir John Gell in 1643,¹ at which time this end of the bridge had been fortified by Sir John Harpur of Swarkestone and Colonel Hastings of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, but without avail; the position was taken, and the Royalists defeated. Again, in 1745, Charles Edward Stuart's advance guard took up their position on the same spot, but, being recalled, a hasty retreat was made, and the misfortunes of the "Young Pretender" were consummated at Culloden.

A few words on the adjacent ruins may be added in conclusion. There is good reason to believe the pretty gabled house, now a farmhouse in the occupation of Mr. Poyser, is

¹ Glover, *History of Derbyshire*, i., pp. 62-70, gives two records of the siege.



RUINS OF THE OLD RESIDENCE OF THE ROLLESTONS, 1867.



PAVILION IN THE TILTING GROUND, SWARKESTONE.

that built by Sir Richard Harpur after his union with Jane Findern about 1588,¹ and to which he removed from Littleover Hall.² It was probably built about 1560, and he died there on the 25th January, 1573. As was usual in those days, the old manor-house was more or less dismantled and allowed to fall into decay; so the considerable remains still to be seen are what is left of the house of the Finderns, Rollestons, Becks, and other ancient proprietors. Beyond these ruined walls, standing on one side of the walled paddock called "The Tilting Ground," there is a very pretty pavilion or pleasure-house, now roofless and floorless, but still in good preservation. In the centre is an open arcade of two arches, supported by pillars, and the storey above has mullioned windows, and a fireplace and chimney shaft remaining. On the spandrels of the pillars there are shields bearing the arms of the builders, viz., Sir John Harpur of Swarkestone and Breadsall, who married Elizabeth Howard, daughter and heir of Henry Howard, Esq., third son of Thomas, Earl of Suffolk, by Elizabeth, daughter and heir of Thomas Bassett of Blore. Sir John died in 1677—28 Charles II.—from which it may be inferred that the pavilion was built early in that reign, so that it may be assumed that it was never a tilting yard, but most likely a bowling-green or a place for bull or bear-baiting, or any games of the time. The large barn close by this green is an uncertain quantity, so far as its date and use are concerned. It has all the appearance of having been a tithe-barn, possibly belonging to Repton Priory or Calke Abbey; but in the absence of documentary evidence it is useless to conjecture. The church is close by, but it is almost entirely a new structure, except the tower and the chapel containing the monuments of the Harpurs of Swarkestone, which, judging from the style of architecture, was built for their reception. The more ancient tomb of John Rolleston—date 1482, Edward IV.—is on the north side of the chancel. It was

¹ *Churches of Derbyshire*, iii., p. 433.

² J. J. Briggs, Notes, *To the Trent and other Poems, &c.*, also *History of Hemington*, privately printed.

his eldest son, Henry, who married Alice, daughter of John Francis of Foremark.

It may also be noted that the Derbyshire Archæological and Natural History Society has its library and holds its meetings in a room of the Derby House of the Franceys.