

The Old Court-house at Alfreton.

BY WILLIAM STEVENSON.

ALL that was left of the Old Moot-Hall at Alfreton, occupying an island site in the market-place, has lately been pulled down. The ordinary passer-by would probably be ignorant that in the premises lately occupied by Mr. J. Redfern, the Draper, there lay hidden amid many seventeenth or eighteenth century additions the remains of the ancient Market-Hall or Court-House. Dr. Pegge says¹ "Alfreton was esteemed a barony or honour." And there may have been an earlier moot-hall than this, one which probably served the further purpose of a market-hall for the chartered-market granted by Henry III. in 1251, to Thomas de Chaworth of Marnhan, Notts. and Robert de Lathom the joint lords.

Thomas de Alfreton the last of that line died in 1241, and the manor then descended to his nephew Thomas de Chaworth, and to Robert de Latham (who had married one of Thomas's sisters and coheireses) who sold his moiety to Chaworth.

The building lately demolished was partly of brick and partly of stone. Its demolition has given the opportunity for a more accurate knowledge of its construction. The Hall proper, divested of the seventeenth and eighteenth century additions—the object of which was to convert the premises to business or residential purposes—proved to have been the northern or High Street portion,

¹ Glover's *History of Derbyshire*, vol. ii., p. 10.

consisting of a frontage of 48 ft. 6 ins., with a depth extending south of 24 ft. It was a building of three bays in length, two of which, the west ones, were excavated possibly as a prison ; in this underground apartment was a built-up stone column 3 ft. wide and 2 ft. thick, finished with a heavy cap-stone. The basement walls, 3 ft. in thickness, were of quarry-faced stone capped by a chamfered plinth a few inches above the ground level ; a south entrance had been in use to the end, but a blocked north one was plain near the centre—on the market side—the latter possibly the original. The basement was floored over with oak beams 14 ins. by 14 ins. and oak joists about 8 ins. by 5 ins., in section, some of the joists had been replaced by oak studs from half-timber walls—or walls of post and panel—two sheets of which, one being the remains of an outer south-wall, survived at higher levels. The panels were formed of strong oak-riven laths tightly fitted into the grooved edges of the posts and thickly plastered on either side. The first chamber floor was of the same sized joists and timbers, three of the latter forming a centre line the full length of the building, into which the heavy joists were tenoned ; three such beams called for four supports, of which the end walls of the building formed two—a third, or inner one towards the west, was an oak wrought and carved octagonal column, 1 ft. 3 ins. in diameter, long hidden by being “ box-cased,” to prepare for which the column was reduced to a square, and so mutilated that a model, one-eighth full size has been necessary to show the original details, and its position standing on the ground—floor beams and supporting those of the first-floor.

This model, together with the mutilated original, is here shown by photographic illustrations, which it is hoped may lead to an authoritative date being assigned to the great timbers of this building, enquiries already made, tend to prove that the details of this column are unique,

and exclusively Derbyshire, but based architecturally on one of the Gothic periods. The second discovery was that the first-floor longitudinal beams, some distance before gaining the end walls, threw off secondary beams on either hand at an angle of 45 degrees, their trend being the four corners of the oblong building ; these could only imply that the chamber story was originally an overhanging wooden one, and that the office of these angular beams was to carry the upper corner posts—the whole suggesting a ground and an upper one of half timber work, replaced by a later one of double brick. An original two story half-timber building was thus adumbrated with chambers in the roof, the floors, except in the basement, being of plaster run upon reeds.

It was hoped to find evidence of a second worked column, provision for such, after the manner of a respond, was patent in the eastern stone wall of the basement, but it was found that the brick period, following that of the wood, had destroyed all evidence, the beam ends here being supported by a 14 in. wall.

The position of this brick wall marking the western boundary of the eastern bay, itself standing upon a basement wall of stone, suggested an original ground story apartment at the eastern end, leaving the two western bays as one apartment with the above oak column in the centre ; the whole more or less open to the market itself, serving as a covered-market, or a women's-market. Here was a portion of a great hearth or fire-place, brought to light in this eastern apartment, and one that dated far before the late one in the eastern brick wall. This had been a well wrought stone stack carefully quoined at the corners, the fire-place opening 4 ft. high, having a broad plain chamfer with a Gothic stopping (date yet undefined) about one foot above the floor level, this chimney-stack was found perfect on the first-floor or chamber-story, and to terminate under the plaster-floor

of the roof chambers. Here the fire-place opening was 4 ft. by 4 ft., clear inside, and 2 ft. 9 ins. in from back to front, the same broad chamfer occurred but the stoppings were plainer or less elaborate—the mantle-stone, a ponderous thing, was entire, 6 ft. 3 ins. in length; 1 ft. 2 ins. in depth; and over 1 ft. in thickness, all of which stones are preserved with the hope that something will be made of them to preserve the memory of the old building—now a thing of the past.

The Moot-Hall or Court-room, would of course be on the first floor, where the older stone fire-place in the back or south wall suggested a consulting or private room separate from the larger (court-room) two-bay apartment. The fire-place was here discovered bricked up, the rubbish behind yielding fragments, many bored, of stone slates, or "slab-tiles," the original form of covering, one bedded in moss, which still lingers in the town.

Nothing could be clearly proved regarding the mode of access to this Court-house or Moot-Hall chamber. An entrance in the main front of the basement suggested descending outer steps from the market place pavement—this, in a like building at Yarmouth, and one—the Moot-Hall, alais "Guild-Hall," late at Nottingham, may have been by an outer ascending stairway.

The great timbers of this building were thought to be of value, and it was hinted that they might be used for repairs at the roof of Westminster Hall; they were officially inspected for this purpose, but on disturbance it was found that time or the worm had cut too deep into their flesh, for such an honour to be granted, nevertheless, this heart of oak will survive in one or more chairs, reproduced from a typical Derbyshire original (sixteenth or seventeenth century) specimen, kindly lent for the purpose, by Mr. L. S. Stroyan, of the Old Bank, Alfreton, from his old-family collection.