

WELL HOUSE FARM, BANSTEAD.

BY

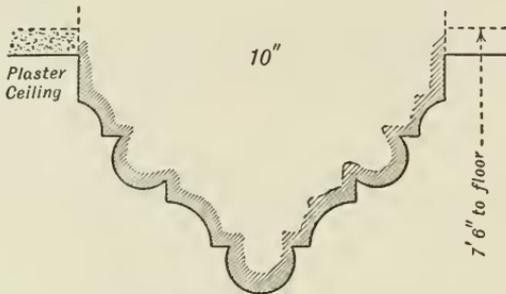
PHILIP MAINWARING JOHNSTON, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A.

WELL HOUSE FARM is a very good illustration of the type of smaller country houses that remain, practically unknown even to the limited antiquarian public, in our Surrey villages. My attention was drawn to it by our Member, Sir Henry Lambert, whose family have been settled in Banstead since early in the 16th century, and who himself lives in the parish. Sir Henry, indeed, conjectures with every probability that Well House Farm was built, or at any rate inhabited, by his ancestor, John Lambert, who died in 1533. The object of these notes being architectural rather than genealogical, I will leave the latter branch of the subject in hands much better qualified to deal with it, and will confine myself to a description of the building.

The house presents a long, low front of early-18th-century brickwork to the road, a branch off the main village street. Nearly opposite, at the corner of the two roads, is the much larger and more important house known as Well House, with a history and interest all its own. Both houses are named from the ancient covered well which stands at the junction of the roads—a typical old village well sunk into the chalk.

Originally the house called Well House Farm appears to have been built in the last quarter of the 15th century,

and to have been of timber-framing on the ground and first floors, rising from a footing of flints and bricks. It has been much altered and enlarged at successive periods, insomuch that it is difficult to recover the



Ceiling Beam, Well-House Farm

original plan and disposition of the house; but the front, though masked by a Georgian brick wall, crowned by a parapet, represents the original road frontage; and the low-

pitched parlour, looking towards the road, with a cased ceiling-beam (which is exposed in the adjoining hall-passage), is evidently part of the ground story as first constructed.

In the rear of this room are the remains of an original newel staircase in wood, with the stump of a mast-newel, such as may still be seen in other old timber houses in Surrey, *e.g.*, Burningfold, illustrated in S. A. C., Vol. XXIII, p. 77. The existing staircase, constructed on the site of the original, has preserved this stump, which may be seen under the "winders," by opening a small cupboard door.

The centre of the house, with the double-storeyed porch wing projecting from the back (Plate I (a)), is the oldest part and has rooms of very low pitch—7 ft. 6 in. from floor to ceiling. The brick wing on the left is of Elizabethan date and has rooms on both floors of ordinary height still retaining their original oak panelling. The present end wall, of the same narrow bricks, appears to have been built in advance of the original wall, perhaps to the extent of the chimney projection, or for the better protection of a timber-framed end which had suffered from the weather.

The oldest and most interesting features are to be found in the porch wing (Plate I (a)), with its overhanging



G. C. Druce, F.S.A., photo.

(a) Half-Timber Wing and Chimney in Rear.



G. C. Druce, F.S.A., photo.

(b) Mediæval Fireplace.

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gabled upper storey, carried upon the projecting floor-joists, and with curved brackets to the angle-posts. There are traces of the 15th-century doorway, long since blocked up, on the left of the quaint wooden lattice-work window of the present larder, shown in the photograph. The walls here are of black flint rubble and lumps of firestone. The timber framing of the gabled upper storey is concealed by tile-hanging, and a comparatively modern sash window has replaced the old one. Traces of a moulded verge-rafter are still to be seen, but the verge-board, if there were one, has gone. The right hand return wall of this upper storey is plastered over the old timber work, and on this side is a well-designed chimney of flints and narrow bricks, partly coated with plaster, which has two stalks set upon a brick weathered capping. There is a plinth to the chimney, crowned with moulded bricks, and above the first floor the breast gathers in with weathered courses. The stalks have a projecting brick necking course towards the base, but the original cappings have disappeared and have been replaced by plain modern caps.

A good deal in the history of the house hangs upon the date of this chimney. It will be noticed that there are two flues. If there were originally a fireplace on the ground floor, it has been altered or so gutted that evidence of date is lacking. It would serve no purpose in the larder, which has evidently occupied its present position for at least two centuries.

This uncertainty as to date confronts us when we stand within the first-floor room and look at the most interesting feature of the house, the beautiful stone fireplace, shown in Plate I (*b*). It is of firestone, and can hardly be later in date than *c.* 1480. The chimney stack itself *may* be coeval, but more probably is of the 16th century—*c.* 1540–80.

Such a fireplace seems both too large and too fine for the small room in which it stands. A subsidence in the right jamb, which probably took place at about the time of its erection here, has caused a fracture in the

right-hand half of the head, which has dropped about an inch, making a very unpleasing distortion.

The head is of very graceful four-centred form, the curve of the arch being most delicate. It is enclosed within reversed ogee mouldings, which return with the jambs forming a rectangle. The arch mouldings, which are also continued down the jambs, are a fillet, a hollow, and a bead, and these mouldings fall upon a plain spayed plinth. The spandrels between the arch and the rectangular head are carved with a trail of strawberry foliage and fruit—or is the blackberry intended?—and in the angle the stem is formed into a circle, within which, left and right, are the well-known contractions for Jesus and Christ in black-letter, **Ihc** and **Xpc** (Plate II (*a*) and (*b*)).

The stones out of which the arch is cut, one to each half of the arch, rise somewhat steeply on the back or upper edge, towards the joint in the centre.

It seems clear that the fireplace was not made for the position it occupies in this comparatively small room—a room which can hardly have been other than a bedchamber.

Now, Sir Henry Lambert has shown that the Priory of St. Mary Overie, Southwark, had lands and a house in Banstead. The house, called “Canons,” would be of some importance, with a chapel; and although, I believe, no remains of the mediæval buildings have come down to our day, its position is known.

Taking into account the date and character of this fireplace, the abbreviations of the Sacred Names in the spandrels, and the clumsy re-setting of the stonework, which has resulted in the dislocation of the head, it seems more than likely that the fireplace came from “Canons,” which was totally dismantled, at some date subsequent to the dissolution of St. Mary Overie’s Priory. Thus, supposing that the chapel and other parts of the grange at “Canons” were demolished in about the middle of the 16th century, the Lambert then in possession of Well House Farm may very probably have acquired this stone fireplace and re-erected it in



G. C. Druce, F.S.A., photo.
(a) Left-Hand Spandrel of Fireplace.



G. C. Druce, F.S.A., photo.
(b) Right-Hand Spandrel of Fireplace.

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its present position in his house.¹ The character of the bricks in the back is Tudor rather than late-15th century.

The opening measures about 4 ft. in the clear, with a height of 3 ft. 8 in.

One cannot help wishing that the right-hand half of the head could be taken out and carefully reset. With this slight adjustment the beauty of this old fireplace—quite one of the most interesting left to us in Surrey—would be still more evident.

I am indebted for the photographs illustrating these notes to the kindness of my friend Mr. George C. Druce, F.S.A., our honorary photographer, and to the present occupier of the house, Mr. Baker, for permission to make a thorough examination of the building. To Sir Henry Lambert, to whom and to whose family the antiquities of Banstead owe so much, my thanks are also due.

¹ A parallel instance is the removal from Blechingley, and re-erection in Reigate Priory, of the fine Henry VIIIth fireplace.