

LECKHAMPSTEAD.

1. Cup. It has no marks, but is evidently Elizabethan. A scroll runs round the rim. Height $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches, diameter $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches. It appears to be weighted with lead or sodder.
2. Salver paten. Date letter 1723-4. On the foot is a half obliterated maker's mark. It is inscribed :—

The GIFT OF
M^{RS}. ELIZ. HATT
TO LACKHAMSTEAD^d
CHAPPLE
A.D. 1737.

The engraving is rather badly done.

Diameter $8\frac{1}{4}$ inches, height $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches, weight $12\frac{3}{4}$ ozs.

3. Small Flagon. Date letter 1866. Maker's mark R.H., inscribed in a double curve. The sacred monogram is inscribed beneath the spout. It has a down-shaped lid. Inscribed round the base :

D.D. JOANNES E ROBINSON
VICARIUS 1866.

It has a "whistle" handle, small thumb piece, shaped as fleur de lys.

Weight $12\frac{1}{4}$ ozs.

Old Southcote Manor.

By Ernest W. Dormer.

GRIM and gaunt, stately and venerable, with its exterior softened and beautified by the hand of time, a relic of the good old days, stands old Southcote Manor, the ancestral home of the Blagraves. Rank weedy vegetation thrives rampant on the terraces where once the stately lord, with rapier slung and powdered peruke, accompanied by his farthingaled and bejewelled lady, were wont to walk in the cool of the eventide. To emerge from dream-land, we will take a ramble through, and inspect this, one of the oldest houses still existing near Reading. It is a baronial mansion of the fifteenth century, moated, and composed of red brick, with stone

dressings. It lies in the valley of the Kennet, about half-a-mile from the Bath-road between Reading and the small village of Calcot. The first view of the structure is singularly impressive. A clock tower, of modern construction, to the right stands out prominently above a group of trees, which presents a striking and harmonious contrast to the beautiful building itself. We enter an old iron gate—very old, by its appearance—and walk up the carriage drive. At the right of the entrance is the old tithe barn, in which the time-honoured tithe dinner was held every year when the tithes were collected. Passing well-trained vines, with every appearance of a good crop of luscious fruit, one notices an orchard, well-stocked with hundreds of fruit trees.

To reach the main entrance of the house, an archway has to be passed through, which divides the stables into two parts. Part of this is inhabited by the caretaker, but the other has evidently gradually fallen into decay, leaving about two-thirds of the original place in a **very tottering condition. In its best days, this building alone** was capable of housing 150 horse and foot—the soldiers above and the horses below. It is built of overlapping lath oak, the archway also of oak, and roofed with old handmade tiles. Many are the jests and songs, the scenes of joy and sorrow, of which these old walls could tell had they but tongues—of the Royalists and Roundheads who used to stable here in the olden days, either in the service or in the chase of Charles I. But this is a digression.

We emerge from the gateway and get a fine view of the front exterior of the house, with its mullioned windows, with little glass, entrance hall, flagged terraces, and two towers. Dilapidated, yet firm, shunned yet eagerly sought, silent and forlorn, solemn and imposing, it stands, a connecting link with the glories of a vanished age. We pass through a rusty though splendid specimen gateway of wrought iron-work, evidently of the Elizabethan age, and cross a shaky structure erected to take the place of the old weather-beaten and rotted drawbridge, which was once a chief feature of the place, and the substitution of which hardly tends to heighten its historical interest and value. When the drawbridge was pulled up the only way of escape from the building was by swimming or wading the moat, 30 feet wide, and stone-walled with a mud bottom, while invaders had only one way to subdue the occupants, and that was by laying seige to the house, and cutting off the supply of water from the sluice gates in the Holy or (Hallowed) Brook, which feeds the moat and completely surrounds the building. It may be mentioned

that the historic stream called Holy Brook was cut out by the monks of Reading Abbey to supply water for their mills.

At the north-east corner of the house, quite detached, is the old watch tower, the date of which is said to be 1450. It is supposed that there were originally four of these towers, one at each corner of the house, built for the purpose of a watch being kept on the surrounding country, and also for a strengthened defence. It has port-holes facing the moat, and contains two rooms, one above, which was originally reached by a flight of brick steps, but is now demolished, and one below, entrance to which is gained through an ancient door, the upper part of which is curiously netted. Within the lower room is a deep cellar-like cavity, from which a secret passage is said to run beneath the moat to somewhere outside the house. This allowed the occupants of the house communication with the outside—a great consideration in time of war. The passage, has, however, been built in by a modern resident. Traces of bricked-up apertures appear in many of the rooms, the evidence which leads one to suppose that this was not the only secret passage.

From the tower we retrace our steps to the house and come to the entrance hall, a very choice specimen of early stone work, but which, through want of attention, has broken and badly flaked. The hall is beautifully panelled in old oak, which seems to have stood the test of time remarkably well. The fine carving is worth a visit in itself. The ceilings of this and one or two other rooms are beautifully coloured in red, black, and gold, the centre of each division being shaped octagonally and set in squares. We saunter through the rooms, of which there are a great number, the outside appearance being very deceptive in this respect. They are handsome and lofty, and admit of good light and ventilation. The carving in most of the rooms is very fine, as is also the dadoed staircase leading to the upper storey. The staircase is dark and gloomy, but it is not the "ghostly hour," and sighs and rustlings and shadows are in the land of the unseen.

From the upper rooms we get a magnificent view of the surrounding country—towards Coley, or Cowley, to give it its ancient name. Undulating pasture land, gardens, the brook, all form a pleasant scene. The kine browsing in the meadows, the cawing of the rooks, the bleating of the lambs, all tend to change the everyday scenes of bustle and excitement into a haven of pure natural delight. On again we pass, through the numerous passages and rooms with endless turnings, peering here, peering there, tapping here, tapping there

—the secret panel mystery is strong upon us. Hollow sounds come forth, but the solid oaken panels prevent intrusion, even if one were desirous of desecrating this home of antiquity. One of the rooms had apparently been a ball-room in the olden time. It is not without feelings of wonderment that we gaze into this dust-covered relic of the past, with its heavy oaken rafters and walls, and think of the years that have flitted by since the "Roger" and the "Minuet" were gracefully danced by courtiers and the ladies, the merry laughter that ascended to the ceilings, the wit and gallantry that these remnants of a bygone age have witnessed, the Christmas festival with tapers aglow, the long banqueting tables bespread with viands, the coming of age of a son, the ball-room lit with a thousand glittering lights, the health of the bride, the mistletoe and kisses—and without, the glistening snow and ice-bound moat, and the church-bells ringing the glad tidings to men.

While emerging from an old doorway, attention is drawn to a slab of slate upon which is the following inscription:—

ROBERTVS ROBINSON,
Ob. 29 Mar., 1770.
E. II.

No doubt this is a tomb-stone of someone who was buried here.

The old open fire-places still exist, and are of a capacity well approaching some of the modern-built kitchens in small cottages. After a thorough search of the regions above we descend to the depths below. Ash-pits, cellars, woodhouse, all in the more modern part, each have a share of scrutiny, also a dungeon with arched roof of very gloomy appearance. There is a long room running the whole length of one end of the building, with the sides studded with portholes facing the moat for fire-arms. This is immediately under one of the kitchens, which has splendid cupboard accommodation in good oak. Close to the kitchen is a ruined chapel, built, according to tradition, in the time of Elizabeth, but this cannot be regarded as authentic.

Take away the railway immediately contiguous, imagine the four watch towers complete at each corner, the newly-added portion and modern dressings missing, replace the Solar Tower now demolished, clear the moat of the rushes and weeds which now almost fill it, replace the drawbridge, and we have one of the finest specimens of moated manors extant in the South of England—of formidable proportions and calculated to stand seige against an army of invaders for some months in the olden time, although of little avail against a 4.7 wire gun of a more destructive age.

The history of the house, as recorded authentically, commences with its purchase by John Blagrove, of Bulmershe Park, Earley, or Erle as it was then called, who came to reside there in the year 1588.* Daniel Blagrove, son of Alexander, was nephew to John the Mathematician, the author of the Mathematical Jewel. He also wrote "*Margarita Mathematica*," and "*The Art of Dialling*, London, 1600." Now Daniel was an attorney in Staple Inn, and resided at Southcote during the time of the civil wars. He was Recorder of Reading in 1645, and also Member of Parliament for the Borough in 1640. During the trial of Charles I. he constantly attended the mock High Court of Justice in the Painted Chamber at Westminster Hall, and signed the Warrant for putting the King to death. As a reward for his services he received the office of Exigenter of the Court of Common Pleas, worth at that time an annual stipend of £500, and was also made a Master in Chancery. At the time of the Restoration, finding the danger which threatened him if he remained any longer in the country, he fled to Achen, in Germany, where it is said he died in an obscure condition. Alexander, his father, bore the reputation of being the best chess player in all England.

The will of John the Mathematician was so complicated and exact that a considerable time was spent in deciphering it to the complete satisfaction of the legatees. In the south aisle of the Church of St. Laurence, Reading, on the wall, is a curiously painted monument with a demi-effigy in cloak and ruff, holding a skull in one hand and a quadrant in the other, with the following inscription and verse :—

IOHANNES BLAGRAVVS
TOTVS MATHEMATICVS
CVM MATRE SEPVLTVS.

Here lies his corpse which living had a spirit
Wherein much worthy knowledge did inherit,
By which with zeale our God he did adore
Left for maidservants and to feed the poore :
His virtuous mother came of worthie race
A HUNGERFORD and buried neare this place.
When God sent death their lives away to call,
They lived beloved and died bewailed of all.

Deceased 9th August,
Anno d'mi. 1611.

* Bulmershe Court remained in possession of the Blagrove family until the death of George Blagrove in 1789, when it was sold to Viscount Sidmouth, who sold it to Mr. James Wheble in 1801.

The erection called the Solar Tower was, until quite recently, standing, but as it had become a source of danger by dilapidation, it was decided to demolish it. It was within the interior of this tower that John Blagrave pursued the study of the heavens, and it is recorded that his works on this subject are of real worth, and not commingled with quackery and charlatanism, as were those of other pretended mathematicians of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, for instance, Dee and Kelly.

The house has played an important part in the history of the country. It was here, in 1643, that the Earl of Essex held his Council of War, on the termination of which he marched and raised the siege of Reading. The Council Room is still extant, complete as then, but with the addition of a beautifully carved mantelpiece, *temp.* Queen Anne, which was fitted by a descendant. One may imagine in this oak-begirted room, the figures of Cromwell, John Hampden, Essex, and Blake, all stern visaged and immobile, sitting at a documented table, their faces clouded with care and anxiety, while standing about the tables are officers with strange and worried look.

As a place of any marked antiquity would be very incomplete without a ghost, we must find one for Southcote. It is a lady on a white horse, which crosses the drawbridge every night at 12 o'clock. "Perfectly true, I can assure you," says one. "Oh, yes," says another, "I know someone who has seen it." A controversy very seldom satisfied on either side usually arises on topics like these, so we drop the subject.

We walk around the moat, and find an erection of quite a modern series. It is supposed to be a ball-room, and built about 1892 at the entire expense of Mr. Wastel Briscoe, who rented the house from the owners, and spent considerable sums in renovating parts which were dilapidated, chiefly the exterior. The completion of the work was suddenly stopped on the death of the eccentric and hermit-like inhabitant, about whom there are many curious tales. He was buried, so it is said, in four coffins, at a church near Hastings. He is said to have been a firm believer in the spectre that was supposed to haunt Southcote house.

The house has undergone so many changes since its earlier days that there are very few parts of the original building of 1450 remaining, and the numerous tenants to whom it has been leased have added portions quite at variance with its original architecture and bearing little or no correlation to its anterior additions. But we have

the moat and parts of the interior quite intact, and the fact of the newly-added portions being very apparent does not tend to lessen the interest of a visit. The existence of secret caves and tunnels beneath or about the house has been proved, and the authority of a learned gentleman in the neighbourhood of Reading has been expressed that a secret passage runs from Old Southcote Manor to Reading Abbey.

Some years ago a burglary was committed within the house, and a large proportion of the plate was stolen. Suspicion fell upon the butler. He strenuously denied the theft, but was convicted and sentenced to a long term of penal servitude. The stolen plate was never recovered.

Within the precincts of the entrance stable formerly stood a pigsty. One day, while the caretaker was busying himself about the garden, a cab was driven up to the entrance, and two gentlemen wearing silk hats alighted, each with a brown leather bag. They inquired the name of the present owner or tenant of the place, and then desired to know if the caretaker could fetch the gentleman in question in half-an-hour. He informed them that he could not do so under an hour, upon which one of them gave him half a sovereign, and asked him to find the tenant and bring him in a cab as quickly as possible. The caretaker departed and fulfilled his mission, but when the two arrived the strangers had disappeared. After a search they both arrived at the conclusion that a hoax had been played upon them, so the caretaker was advised to keep the change from the half sovereign and say no more about it.

A morning or two after, the caretaker called the attention of the tenant to the fact that the pigsty had been blown down. Upon examination it was found that it had been *taken* down, the brick bottom pulled up, and a large hole dug. The tenant then began thinking of the disappearance of the two "gentlemen" a few days before, and by recalling the whole facts of the case he came to the conclusion that one of these was the butler, who had returned after serving his sentence (with an accomplice), and that while the caretaker had been despatched on a fruitless errand, the two had set to work, dug up the missing plate which had been concealed beneath the sty, and decamped with it before the return of the cab and its occupants.

And so we take our leave of this old-time place, satisfied with our visit, and looking forward to return at an early date