



The Royal Oak Inn, Chester.

By FRANK SIMPSON, F.S.A.

(Read February 7th, 1922).



HIS old inn, situated on the south side of Foregate Street, was, in 1919, one of the six oldest houses still remaining in Chester, the date on the gable being 1601. The whole of the overhanging front had at some time been plastered over, thus destroying much of its ancient beauty as a timbered building, probably at the time the modern windows were inserted. When the oak panelling was removed from the interior of the front wall of the first story, the old window frame, with its oak mullions, was brought to light, showing how the original window frame, which appeared to extend along the whole of the front, had been made use of when inserting the three modern windows, the spaces between being filled in with lath and plaster. This must have been done prior to 1810, as pictures of this building show the three windows in position at that time.

The names of old tenants, or owners of property in Chester are always interesting to the antiquary, and help one to trace the various families, and the place in which they resided. In regard to the building in question, the writer finds that it had, at various times, been owned or tenanted by the following :—

16—.—Hugh Moulson	1774.—George Biggins
1670.—Richard Briscoe	1782.—Mrs. Faulkner
1700.—Charles Griffiths	1798.—Mr. Dawson
1703.—Richard Parratt	1809.—John Porter
—George Buxton	—Robert Denson

1840.—John Ward	1904.—J. T. Robinson
1850.—Thomas Sudlow	1908.—R. Bardsley
1864.—Thomas Holland	1909.—R. A. Pickering
1876.—Margaret Holland	1910.—W. Tidswell
1892.—John Western	1913.—P. Lawson
1901.—H. E. Cross	1919.—J. T. Miln

This was one of the fourteen licensed houses in Chester which issued its own copper token. On the obverse was:—

“ RICHARD BRISCOE ”—with a Royal Oak crowned;
and on the reverse

“ IN CHESTER. 1670. HIS PENNY.”

In 1882, the carrier for Kelsall and Tarvin, David Jones, was timed to leave this inn at 4 p.m., on each day of the week, except Sunday. And on Wednesdays and Saturdays Tarporley was included in the journey. In a deed dated 15 December, 1759, reference is made to a house on the west side, near the Royal Oak, in possession of John Wilkinson, coachmaker, as being lately erected by Griffith Biggin. Griffith Biggin was related to Charles Griffith, who owned and occupied the adjoining inn.

In the next premises, east, now owned, and occupied, by Messrs. Guest and Wardle, is a cement panel over a fire-place on which are the letters I. B. with a heart in the centre, and below 1673 with a round stud between the 16 and the 73. It has been said that they are the initials of John Button, son, or grandson, of Edward Button, who was one of the City Sheriffs in 1600, and Mayor in 1616; but I am of the opinion that they are the initials of John Biggin, whose family owned property about this site for a great number of years.

The five premises here adjoining one another, were at one time all licensed public houses. They were known as:—The Nag's Head, The Leopard, The Royal Oak, The Red Cow, and the Union Vaults. The Nag's Head (now a cocoa house), and the Royal Oak still remain.

The Royal Oak was purchased by Mr. John Douglas, architect, in 1885, from Mrs. Holland, who, from the time of her husband's death, had owned and occupied the inn. It again changed hands in March, 1889, when a Mr. John

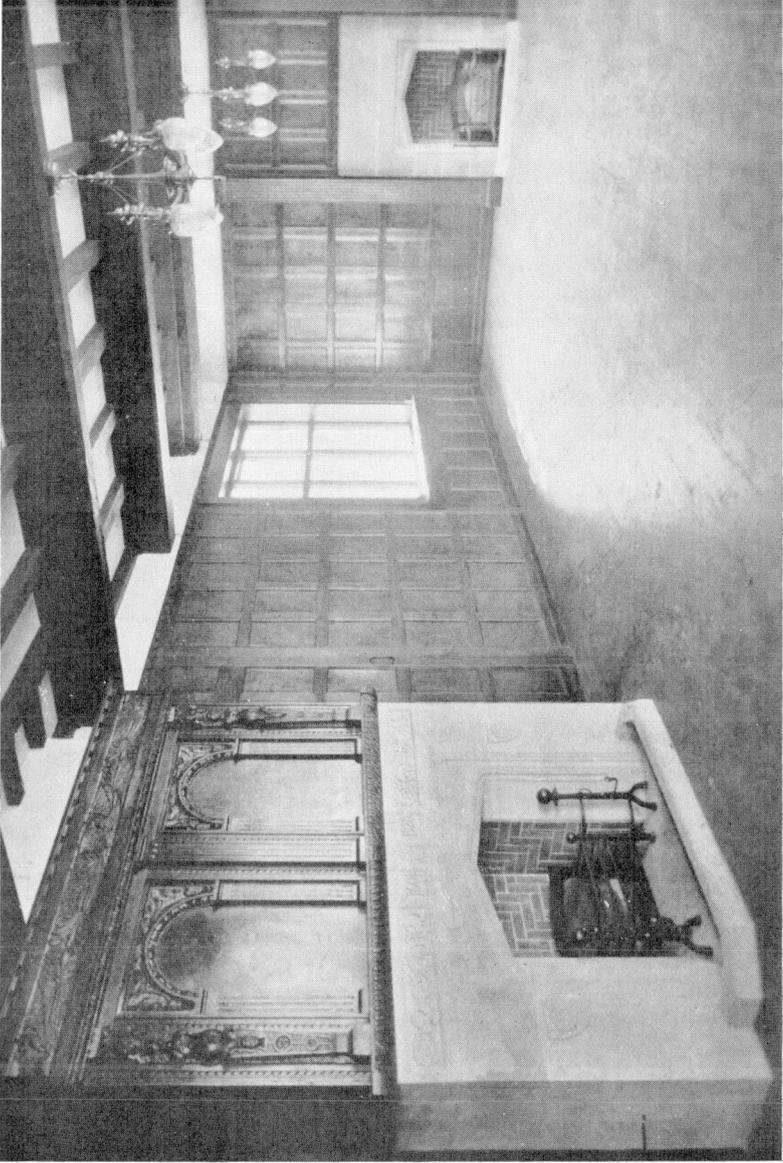
Western became the purchaser. In 1919, it was sold by public auction, and Mr. Miln, Bridge Inn, Tarvin Road, Chester, became the purchaser.

Mr. Miln, after consultation with Mr. Fred Davies, of the firm of John Davies and Sons, architects, Chester, who have had considerable experience in this class of property, and are responsible for most of the timber fronted licensed houses in the city, decided to rebuild the premises. It is much to be regretted that these old houses continue to disappear, but in the case of this Inn, its demolition was unavoidable, owing to its dilapidated and insanitary condition. Many of the oak beams were eaten away, and crumbled like dust, and the place was over-run with rats. One cannot help but wonder how some of these old timbered buildings continue to hold together, but still they do, and in many cases prove to be more lasting than much of the jerry property put up within the last twenty years.

In February, 1920, the workmen began to demolish the old building, and Mr. Fred Davies was commissioned to design the new timbered building to be erected on the site.

On taking down the building all the oak timbers on the east side were found to be about fifteen inches out of the perpendicular, and the brace joints were all broken, thus causing the upper portion of the building to lean over to that extent towards the street. The oak framework on the west side was in a somewhat similar condition, but not so pronounced. The oak framework on either side of the building was filled in by mud and wattle work of a very decayed nature, and a great quantity of what appeared to be chaff, which had most probably been carried there by rats, as was found to be the case under the floors.

The oak panelling surrounding the front room was carefully taken down by Messrs. John Garnett and Sons, cabinet makers, Lower Bridge Street, Chester, and behind the panelling three skeletons of what appeared to be pigeons were found. When the writer visited this room, about 1900, the oak panelling was painted a pale green colour, and the oak floor was very uneven, sloping considerably towards the



Oak Panelled Room, "The Royal Oak" Inn, Chester.

Photo.—F. Simpson, F.S.A.

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street. At a more recent date a pine floor was laid above the oak floor and in levelling this, part of the oak panelling on one side was covered up to a depth of twelve inches, and the oak framework cut so that the new flooring might fit close up to the panels. On removing the pine floor, 1920, the green paint previously seen by the writer of this article was still to be seen on the panelling below the floor surface, but above it the whole of the panelling was covered with several coats of thick brown paint. The panelling was removed to Messrs. Garnett and Sons' cabinet works so that the paint might be cleaned off and the woodwork repaired prior to its re-erection in the new building. The architect kindly invited the writer to visit Mr. Garnett's works to examine the panelling, which he did 18 February, 1920, and the writer's thanks are due to Mr. Garnett for giving him every facility for so doing. On taking the woodwork down it was quite evident that it had not originally been made for this room, as in various parts it had been supplemented with pine, and behind the top of some of it the men found an oak frieze decorated with the billet ornamentation frequently seen in Jacobean woodwork. That it belonged to the building there can be little doubt, as an oak door, or two, was found in the upper rooms, which corresponded in detail, of rather unusual type, to the framework and panelling in this room. The unusual feature is that the framework of the panelling has a plain chamfered edge at the top of the panels, and a worked mould at the bottom and sides. It may be that the panelling, when fixed in this room, was placed upside down. The panels, with the exception of two lengths taken from the west side of the south wall (right of fire place) were all of a size, measuring 16in. by 10½in. The backs of the panels distinctly show that they had all been split, and not cut with a saw. On either side of the fireplace was an oak fluted pilaster with carved capitals, and above the fireplace some decorated oak of Jacobean design. On either side was a pilaster, the upper portion bearing the figure of a male, and below, one of a female, each wearing a plumed head-dress, that of the female being much smaller, and containing less

decoration than that of the male. The decoration of the male figures differs slightly in character. These figures are somewhat similar to those seen on the carved pilasters on either side of Leche House, Watergate Street. This house did not bear a date on it until 1916, when the tenant, Mr. Wedgwood, had painted on the gable the date 1570, although the actual date must have been subsequent to 1610.

There had evidently been a third pilaster in the centre of the mantelpiece, which, at some period, had been replaced by a plain strip of pine. Between the pilasters are two panels, 34in. by 22in., with rounded ornamented heads supported by flat fluted pilasters. On cleaning the various coats of paint off each panel they were found to be inlaid with pear and cherry wood, forming a floral design containing a conventional poppy, with other flowers and leaves. Above the panels was an oak frieze 74in. long and 10in. deep, with three carved brackets, one at either end, and the other in the centre. The space between these brackets was filled in by two grotesque winged animals. The base, or plinth, was 8½in. deep. In the centre was a shield bearing the letters

R. H.
E.

The second letter no doubt represents "H," evidently the initials of the owners, man and wife, of the premises, and at either end half a shield, that on the left side bearing the numerals 16, and on the right 07, *i.e.*, the date of the erection of the building, two nondescript animals filling the spaces. A somewhat similar style of nondescript animal may be indistinctly seen at either end of the beam bearing the inscription on God's Providence House, Watergate Street, which bears the date 1652.

It will be noticed that the date carved on the mantelpiece and that on the gable of the old building differ. The explanation is this:—when the wood work was *in situ* the date on the mantelpiece appeared to be 1601. This, evidently, was

taken as the authority for the date painted on the gable. When the several coats of paint were cleared off the mantel-piece, it was found that the top of the 7 had been broken off, and the paint having thickly coated over the jagged edge of the figure, made it appear as a "1." It is quite certain, however, that, the figure was a 7. This view is borne out by the first numeral of the date, which is quite different in design, but even this was hardly noticeable until the wood-work was thoroughly cleaned of paint.

Along the front of the rooms, above the windows, were the remains of a plaster frieze, twelve inches deep, on a foundation of rushes. This was decorated with a lion passant and fleur-de-lis alternately, about a foot apart. Several of the fleur-de-lis remained, but only one lion, the others having been broken off.

The oak beams had been carried under the fire-place, and the lintel above was of oak. It is surprising that more of these old buildings, where such conditions prevail, especially where the old hob grates are replaced by modern low grates, are not destroyed by fire. The floors were composed of oak rafters 5in. by 4in., filled in between by rushes coated over with cement, and above this the oak flooring boards. Most of the oak beams, rafters and framework show signs of having done duty prior to being used in this building, and were probably old ship timbers. On taking down old buildings in Chester, this is generally found to be the case.

Considerable discussion has recently taken place as to why this inn was called "The Royal Oak." The writer was informed that it was owing to a huge oak tree which grew in front of the building, and a well known builder supports that view, saying that when his firm were laying, or repairing, a sewer in front of the building, they came across the roots, etc., of an old oak tree, which they removed. If an old oak tree stood there, it must have taken a century or two to mature, and the inn might have been named "The Oak," but why the "Royal" Oak? A student of local history could hardly imagine such a tree standing there at any rate, during the siege of Chester, 1634—1646, as history

informs us that nearly all the buildings outside the Eastgate were razed to the ground so that the enemy (Parliamentarians) would be unable to gain cover when besieging the city. As a matter of fact, the inn was not known by that name until the latter part of the 17th century, prior to which time it was known as the "Sign of the Crow," which the following copy of a deed verifies :—

" This Indenture made the seaventh day of ffebruary in the second year of the Reign of our Sovereigne Lady Anne by the grace of God of England Scotland ffrance and Ireland Queen Defender of the ffaith, &c. Annoq' Dni 1708 Between Charles Griffith of the citty of Chester Inholder of the one part and Richard Parratt of the same citty Draper of the other part Wittneseth that the said Charles Griffith for and in Consideracion of the sum of ffive shillings of lawfull money of England to him in hand att and before the Sealing and delivery of these p^rsents by the said Richard Parratt well and truly paid the Receipt whereof he the said Charles Griffith doth hereby acknowledge Hath granted bargained and sold and by these p^rsents Doth grant bargain and sell unto the said Richard Parratt his Executors Administrators and Assignes All that Messuage Tenement or Inne with the Appurtenancies heretofore called or known by the name of the Sign of the Crow and now the Royal Oak situate lying and being on the South side of the fforegate Street in the said Citty of Chester heretofore in the Tenure or occupacon of Hugh Moulson Tanner or of his Assignes and now or late in the possession of the said Charles Griffith his admints or assignes and all houses outhouses edifices buildings barns stables yards orchards gardens backsides sellars sollars shops Rows Rooms Lights Curtilages Ways waters Watercourses passages libertys easements profitts commodityes and hereditam^{ts} whatsoever to the said Messuage Tenement or Inne belonging or in any wise appertaining or to or with the same now or at any tyme heretofore usually held sett Lett occupied or enjoyed or accepted reputed or taken as part parcell or member thereof or as belonging thereunto To have and to hold the said Messuage Tenement or Inne and all and

singular other the p^rmisses herein before granted or meant menconed or intended to be herein and hereby granted and conveyed with their and every of their Appurtenancies unto the said Richard Parratt his Executors Admintns and Assignes from the day of the date hereof for and dureing and unto the full end and terme of one whole year from thence next ensuing and fully to be complete and ended yeilding and paying therefore the rent of One pepper Corne on the ffeast day of St. Michael the Archangell onely if the same be demanded to the intent and purpose that by virtue of these p^rsents and of the statute made for Transferring of uses into possession he the said Richard Parratt may be in the actual possession of the said P^rmisses and be thereby enabled to accept a Grant and release of the Reversion and Inheritance thereof to him and his heires. In Wittness whereof the partys Aforesaid to these p^rsents Interchangerbly have putt their hands and seales the day and year first above written.

“[Signed] CHARLES GRIFFITH.”

The Rows alluded to in this deed were not similar in construction to those seen in Northgate Street, Bridge Street, Watergate Street, and Eastgate Street, where there is a passage or footway for pedestrians between the lower and upper stories, but there was a passage or footway for pedestrians below the first story, similar to what may be seen lower down the street, in the two premises occupied by Messrs. Haswell, confectioners, and Mr. Jones, Surveyor and Engineer (now—1924—removed). On this side of the street, at one time, were a number of these timbered buildings, the fronts supported on strong wooden pillars; a number of them were taken down during the last century.

Another interesting deed in connection with this property is :—

“ An Indenture dated 1774 between George Biggins, of the City of Chester Upholsterer of the one part and Joseph Fluitt of the City of Chester Gentleman of the other part for and in consideration of the sum of ffive shillings well and truly paid by the said Joseph Fluitt before the delivery of these presents.”

It is therefore only reasonable to assume that this, like many other public houses bearing the name of the Royal Oak, derived its title from the miraculous escape of Prince Charles after the battle of Worcester, Wednesday, 3 September, 1651, who, after wandering about during the night was next morning led to Boscobel, the house of a Royalist, William Penderell, where he found a Royalist Officer, Major Careless. The next morning, Friday, the 5th, they left the house and hid throughout the day in a great oak tree, unseen by the Parliamentary soldiers who were passing to and fro in search of Royalist fugitives. This tree became known as the Royal Oak, and soon after the Restoration was the glory of sign painters. In Chester and suburbs there are at least four inns known by this name.

THE NEW BUILDING.

The ground floor of the new building has been put back from the front line of the old building, and forms a recess 2ft. 4in. deep. This has probably been done so as to get the overhanging storey above, which in former days projected considerably over the footpath, leaving barely sufficient head-room for a person of moderate height to walk under. Below the window line the front has been cased with Aberdeen granite four inches in thickness. This, no doubt, adds to cleanliness as, having a hard polished surface, it can, when necessary, be washed and polished. The writer would have preferred a red sandstone of a hard nature, such as that obtainable at the Woolton quarries, which, when laid on its natural bed obtains with age a harder surface, and as time goes on is more compatible with the mediæval style of buildings, whereas the hard polished granites retain their new appearance indefinitely, and tell us, approximately, the period in which it was erected.

The first storey overhangs the ground floor to the extent of the recess (2ft. 4in.), and is thus brought into line with the buildings on either side of it. It is supported by six oak brackets, and forms two bays of three lights with a light on either side, each bay resting on two oak brackets. The

windows are filled in with ornamental clear lead lights, known as the "Elizabethan rope pattern" and the iron casements, one on either side of the centre light of the bay, are pivoted in the centre, top and bottom. The front of this storey is filled in by straight oak struts and cement.

The second storey, which overhangs the one below by about eighteen inches, rests on three oak brackets. This contains two bay windows, smaller in size than those below, having one centre and two side lights, each bay resting on a single oak bracket. The windows are filled in with square plain lead lights, the centre one being pivoted similar to those in the storey below. Between the two bays, just below the gable beam, and on either side of the centre bracket are two Tudor roses, in plaster, in high relief, and on the outer side of each of the bay windows, two fleur-de-lis. The remainder of the front is filled in with oak straight and circular struts and cement.

The oak gable-beam above overhangs the storey immediately below by about twelve inches, and bears two carved inscriptions:—"Built 1601 A.D." and "Rebuilt, 1920 A.D." Between the inscriptions, and on either side of them, the space is filled with carvings of the acorn and oak leaves.

The gable above is richly decorated with straight and ornamental oak struts filled in with cement, and finished by oak barge-boards elaborately carved throughout with oak-leaves terminating at either end with acorns. The apex of the gable is completed by a carved oak finial, pendentive.

The new building extends over the gateway, above which a rough red cement panel bears in high relief the sign of the inn, an oak tree, and its designation on either side of the tree:—

" YE OLDE ROYAL
 OAK HOTEL."

The windows above, slightly projecting, are filled with similar glass to those of each similar storey already described. The front is decorated with straight and semi-circular oak struts and cement, the whole being surmounted by projecting eaves.

The front part of the roof is covered with small Westmorland slates and to the rear with Bangor slates. The brick is hand-made, and the chimney-stacks are of the Elizabethan style of architecture.

A considerable amount of thought has been given to the details when designing the perspective for this building, and so far as the writer is aware, it is unique not only in Chester, but throughout the county. It is the only building, new or old, in the city bearing this decoration of the acorn and oak-leaf, which forms a pleasing change from the running vine with which we are so familiar. A more suitable design for the timber decoration of this inn could not have been adopted. The whole front forms a happy contrast to the other timbered buildings now standing in the city, and does credit to architect and builders alike.

Timber construction specially lends itself to two-storied buildings; the more overhanging or broken up it is, and varied in design, the more pleasing the final effect.

THE INTERIOR.

The interior of the building has been planned and fitted up with due regard to the requirements of a modern middle class hotel, where light refreshments and luncheons for individuals, or parties, are made a prominent feature.

The only part of the interior we, from an antiquarian point of view, need describe is the luncheon room, which now extends over the gateway and occupies the entire front of the first storey. The 537 square feet of oak panelling removed from the old room was carefully cleaned, and repaired where necessary, and an addition of 145 square feet cut out of the old oak beams, formerly in the old building, made to correspond. This extra panelling was necessary owing to the extension over the gateway.

The framing of the panelling consists of horizontal rails four inches wide, having a chamfer, or bevel, on both edges, a face mould, hollow and round, being on the lower edge of the face. The vertical framing, or muntins, are $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide, heavily moulded on either side, scribed and morticed into the horizontal rails, the tenons being secured by two pegs.

A new plaster frieze, a faithful reproduction of the old plaster frieze containing the lion passant, and fleur-de-lis, remains of which were found in the old room, has been placed above the panelling surrounding the room.

The architect has shown ingenuity in retaining the old beams, as they are now again doing duty in their old position by covering the steel girders enclosed within them. The oak flooring boards of the old room were carefully removed, planed level, and where necessary, made out with boards cut out of the surplus oak beams of the old building and relaid on top of the new pine floor. Two new fire-places, of light brown York stone, of Elizabethan design, have been fixed in the room. The principal one, on the south side, having a shield on each jamb on which is carved a Tudor Rose, and on the head the dates 1601—1920, and on either side carvings of nondescript animals, etc., somewhat similar to the decoration on the old oak. The fire-place on the west side is similar in design, but much smaller, the decoration consisting of three Tudor Roses carved on the head. Both fire-places are lined with red 2in. tiles, set in herring-bone pattern, and contain hammered iron dog grates.

The room is now one of the most perfect specimens of the period it represents in the county. Messrs. Garnett and Son, and their employees who were responsible for carrying out the restoration of the interior woodwork of this room, are to be congratulated on the splendid manner in which the work has been carried out. The writer was kindly allowed to visit the works at all times and see the work during its progress, and he was pleasantly surprised to see the interest taken in the work by the men employed on it.

The owner of the premises is to be congratulated on possessing such a fine building, and the thanks of all antiquaries are due to him for his public spirit in putting up such a worthy successor to the old building he had taken down, and preserving its ancient character, at enormous cost. Such buildings are an asset to the city, and it is satisfactory to know that the City Authorities appreciate and encourage the adoption of this Cheshire style of architecture whenever possible.

It is pleasing to note that the whole of the work was carried out by local firms. Messrs. John Mayers, Son & Co., Canal-side, were responsible for the erection of the building; Messrs. John Garnett & Son restored and re-fitted the oak in the luncheon room; Messrs. Clegg & Sons made the stone fire-places, which were specially designed by the architect, as were also the dog-grates, made by Messrs. James Swindley and Sons. The lead lights were made by Messrs. Williams and Gamon, who were also responsible for the electric light installation.

There is still a great opening for the young designer who will devote his energy to bringing out suitable designs for electrical fittings for use in old buildings. At the present time the electrician who has to light a room such as this, is sadly handicapped by lack of such fittings.

