

OPENING ADDRESS OF THE ANTIQUARIAN SECTION  
AT THE SHREWSBURY MEETING.<sup>1</sup>

By STANLEY LEIGHTON, M.P., F.S.A.

The history of a county, of a borough, of a parish, is in miniature the history of the nation. No one can thoroughly understand the course of national events who is not conversant with the local and personal currents which give volume to the stream. In England the county and the parish have retained through centuries their identity and their homogeneity ; so if anyone has mastered the history of a locality he has the key to the history of his country. An acquaintance with *Eyton's Antiquities of Shropshire* cannot be acquired without at the same time realising the great reconstruction which the Normans introduced into England. *Baxter's Autobiography* and *Gough's History of Middle* represent, in the most graphic form, the local and personal forces which led to the rebellion, the commonwealth, the restoration, and the revolution. A faithful study of what remains to us of the past helps us to appreciate the continuity of change, both in the outward appearance of the country and the personality of its inhabitants. Six centuries ago there were twelve stately religious houses in Shropshire, a hospital of the Knights Templars, and a certain number of friaries. They are all gone. There were at the same time over forty castles in Shropshire. They are all gone as residences of importance. I can only recall three or four which have a vestige of roof left upon their walls. Stokesay is a beautiful but dismantled shell. Shrewsbury Castle, of which Leland says "it hath been a stronge thinge, but is now much in ruin," suffered still further disfigurement in the beginning of this century at the hands of Laura, Countess of Bath, and Telford, the famous road engineer. Wattlesborough is used as a farm house, and its square Norman tower is covered with a

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Music Hall, July 15th, 1894.

modern roof. Apley is used as a stable, and little but the foundation is left. And six centuries ago there were four conspicuous walled towns in Shropshire—Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth, Ludlow, and Oswestry. Hardly a vestige of their gates or walls can now be traced. The destruction which has befallen the castles has also swept away their owners. Compare the feudal baronage of Shropshire with its modern peerage:—Fitzalan, Audeley, Boteler, Burnel, Charlton de Powys, Corbet of Caus, Fitz-Herbert, Fitz-Warin, Lacy, Mortimer, Pantulf, Say, Stafford, Strange, and Montgomery. All these once-famous names are unfamiliar now. When Noel Hill, the eldest son of Thomas Harwood, was created Lord Berwick of Attingham in 1784 he was the only resident peer in the county. There were, indeed, two Irish peers, Kilmorey and Clive; but, as far as I know, no resident English peer, unless Earl Gower of Lilleshall be counted. Ruins and dismantled houses each have their own story to tell, which will generally repay the trouble of discovery. Stokesay points to the rise of commerce, one of the powerful factors in England's greatness. Its builder was Laurence, a clothier, of Ludlow, who adopted the name of his town, and erected this charming castellated mansion in 1290. "It was not," says Eyton, "till the reign of Edward I that mercantile wealth could thus readily be exchanged for territorial importance." After passing by heirship to the Vernons, Stokesay again fell into mercantile hands, and was purchased in the reign of Elizabeth or James I by the aldermanic family of Craven, by whom it was sold again for money, made in business to the family of its present owners. In feudal as well as in modern times wealth generally came through heiresses, and there are few families with large possessions which do not owe much to female inheritance—a fact which, I suppose, inspired the old punning legal rhyme—

" Fee simple, simple Fee,  
 And all the Fees in tail,  
 Are nothing when compared with thee,  
 Thou best of Fees, Fe(e)male."

Whether the duties and the dangers of feudal rank brought their possessors more quickly to extinction than

the conditions of modern pre-eminence is a problem worthy of consideration. Special superiority, either social, political, pecuniary, or literary, seems seldom to remain long in the same family. Eyton concludes a notice of the early Fitzalans with these words :—" Having now given some account of eight successive representatives of Alan Fitz Flaad, this retrospective observation suggests itself, viz., that not one of these eight Fitzalans attained the age of sixty years ; only two passed the age of fifty ; three died between forty and fifty ; one between thirty and forty ; and two others died under thirty." The fate of the Staffords who inherited Caus Castle from the Corbets, and having intermarried with the Plantagenets stepped into the highest grade of nobility is equally instructive. Edmund, the fifth earl, having succeeded a brother who was murdered, and two other brothers, who died childless, was himself killed at the Battle of Shrewsbury in 1403. His son, who was made Duke of Buckingham, was slain at Northampton in 1460. His son was slain at St. Albans. His son was beheaded at Salisbury in 1483, and his son was beheaded on Tower Hill in 1521. The Royal House of England for the last eight centuries has been represented by seven families, but never during all that time by an English dynasty in the male line. The Conqueror William was a Norman ; Stephen, a Frenchman ; Henry II., an Angevin or Plantagenet ; Henry VII, a Welshman or Owen ; James I, a Scotchman or Stuart ; William III, a Dutchman of the House of Orange ; George I, a Guelph or Hanoverian ; and the family next in succession is the House of Saxe-Coburg. The feudal scheme of society, the outgrowth of surrounding circumstances rather than of settled policy, linked enormous duties with corresponding position. Recognised and customary obligations, which could not easily or safely be avoided, appertained to wealth. There is danger to any State when property and leisure are dissociated from public responsibilities. In old England the castle represented military service. The abbey represented religious, educational, and civil duties. The towns, with their exclusive guilds and chartered privileges, represented the labours of municipal government and the superintendence of trade. The custom of primogeniture,

aristocratic in its primary idea, was democratic in its direct consequences. While the eldest son of a baronial house was endowed with the land, almost to the exclusion of his brethren, he was at the same time laden with specific military and civil responsibilities. The cadets of the house, equally noble in blood, but in the eye of the law merely commoners, were taught to seek a livelihood for themselves in trades and professions. There was no caste, and as the ranks of the barons or knights were ever and anon recruited from the legal and mercantile classes, so the trades and professions were as often recruited from the younger branches of the nobility. The bishops, abbots, and priors were as numerous and as influential as the earl and barons, and sat in the House of Lords by a similar baronial tenure. The lesser landowners were represented by two knights of the shire in the House of Commons, but the towns of Shropshire were represented by ten burgesses. So the archæologist will find in the chartularies of the abbeys, and in parochial and diocesan archives, and in the records of the corporations, materials for history as plentiful as in the Public Record Office, and in the muniments of the territorial houses. By way of still further illustrating the changed and ever-changing conditions of the country, as shown in the local history of a county, Mr. Leighton gave quotations from Leland, who lived in the reign of Henry VIII, at the close of the feudal period. He said: By the 28th Statute of Henry VIII the shire system was introduced into what are now the counties of Brecknock, Radnor, Montgomery, Denbigh, and Flint, and the boundary between England and Wales was defined. I must express the pleasure which it gives me to know that the castle of Clun has lately been purchased by the present Duke of Norfolk, and thus the holder of the ancient barony of Clun and Oswaldstree, is again a Shropshire landowner. Speaking of Leland's list of some of the landowners in Shropshire in his time, Mr. Leighton said: Comparing Leland's list with the modern Domesday Book of 1873, I can find only six of the same names. Christopher Saxton marked twenty-four parks in Shropshire in the time of Elizabeth. There are now, I think, ten deer parks, but only one, viz., Oteley, is

identical with Saxton's list. Eight, however, of his parks are still represented by manorial residences. Speaking of the period of the Civil War, he said the rebellion was a struggle not of class against class, but of the supporters of one theory of government and religion against the supporters of another. And this important fact, sometimes overlooked, is proved by the names of those who favoured the Parliamentary side. Amongst them in this part of England are to be found the Earl of Bridgewater (president of the Court of Marches), who was a patron of Baxter; the Earl of Denbigh, the old Lord Herbert of Chirbury, Mytton of Halston, and his brother-in-law, Myddleton of Chirk, and the following families were more or less conspicuous in the contest against the King:—Corbet, of Adderley; Corbet, of Stanwardine; Matthew Herbert, of Oakley Park; Mackworth, of Betton; Clive, of Styche; Lloyd, of Aston; Powell, of Park; Baker, of Sweeney; Evans, of Treflach; More, of Linley; Charlton, of Apley; Mitton, of Shipton; Edwardes; Cotton, of Bellaport; Forester; Harcourt Leighton, of Plash; Fowler; Norton; Pierpoint, of Tong; Kinnersley, of Badger; Leighton Owen, of Braggenton; Waring; Wingfield; Betton; Young, of Cainton; Botterell. Others, such as the Owens, of Condover, were waverers.

I have pointed out how entirely the castles have disappeared as residences. It is difficult to put one's hand on an inhabited house of the fourteenth century, and not easy to find one of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The most ancient residence in Shropshire still used I believe to be the Prior's house at Wenlock, and it is certainly one of the most interesting. Since the dissolution it has passed through many hands, and it is now, happily, in the possession of one who well knows how to preserve its character. I will mention a few other old houses: Plash, near Cardington, can show some remains of Tudor Gothic, intermixed with Elizabethan work, and it has not been much touched during the last two centuries and a half, until it was lately carefully restored. Condover is the best example of the later Elizabethan style in the county. The Whitehall, however, in Shrewsbury, is perhaps as a whole more characteristic, because its surroundings, its gate-house, its dovecot, its

walled gardens and its stables are still pretty much as they were. There is a good example of an early seventeenth century dovecot and barn at Hodnet. Whitton Court, near Ludlow, Lydston, in Claverly, Madeley Court, Lutwyche, Belswardyne, Shipton, Upton Cressett, and Plowden are among the sixteenth and seventeenth century houses which are still maintained as residences. But, generally, we must seek for old specimens of domestic architecture in farm houses, and in many of those cases the old character is well preserved. Black and white timbered houses are to be found all over Shropshire, especially in the towns, and, above all other towns, in Shrewsbury. Pitchford ranks as the best specimen of a country house in this style as a whole, but the frontage of Park Hall, near Oswestry, will bear comparison with any façade of this class in England. Marsh or March, in the parish of Westbury, is a small black and white house, and has been excellently restored quite recently, and the same may be said of the Black Birches. Molverley Church, Halston Chapel, and Park Hall Chapel, are examples of the use of this style in ecclesiastical buildings. The stately but ruinous shell of Moreton Corbet is a fine Jacobean design of first-rate order. The house was burnt down before it was inhabited, and has never been rebuilt. I draw near to my conclusion, and return to the point from whence I began, that acquaintance with the local evidences of history makes us admit that there are fewer old things of man's contrivance in the world than some people think. Go into any house, and how little can you lay your hands upon which has been in that house for a hundred years. You may see, in any well-appointed house, books and furniture, and swords and armour, and lace and jewellery, and silver and pewter, linen and tapestry, and pictures, but how little, even though it be old, has been in the house for long; how little has been seen by those who lived there centuries ago. There were few books, few pictures, few ornaments in a country house even in the seventeenth century. The old inventories testify to the simplicity, not to say ruggedness, of the lives of our ancestors. So when people bring treasures of art, and especially when they bring portraits to an old house, they should not be ashamed of labelling them, in order



that old things which have been purchased may not be mistaken for old things which were brought into the house when they were new, and have grown old in the same place. A house may be built in a year—a home cannot be made in a year or in a generation. When people build new houses, by way of making what they call a good job of it, instead of carefully repairing the old ones they destroy a homeliness which they themselves will never see again. More harm has been done by too lavish reconstructions than by neglect. Shropshire has largely benefited in every generation from new comers, and every generation of men has added to its pleasant residences, and none more than the present.

“The fair new homes of England,  
Homes of the strong and free,  
Of a race that still for ever will  
The new world’s masters be.”

I think that here the ancient and the modern fairly combine together and every day grow into closer harmony. Certainly people are not so set upon pulling down in order that they may rebuild now as they were in the last century. There is greater reverence for the past, and a better reading of its story. In this county something yet remains here and there which is not new; a genuine sentiment pervades homes which have witnessed the exits and the entrances of many generations. I hope it will never fade away.

“The old world-homes of England,  
What tales their walls can tell  
Of hopes and fears in by-gone years  
To those that read them well.”