

THE ABBOT'S PARLOUR, THAME PARK

By WALTER H. GODFREY, *Secretary*

The Institute visited Thame in 1910, when the Summer Meeting was held at Oxford, but the members did not, as far as I am aware, go to Thame Park to see the remains of the Abbey.

I had occasion to go there some time back in the interests of the very beautiful early sixteenth-century panelling in the Abbot's Lodging, which was in a rather perilous condition, and my friend Mr. Edward Yates was good enough to take a series of photographs of the designs for record purposes. The present paper was prepared to give these views a permanent place, and to elucidate the heraldic panels which are among the most interesting features illustrated.

The Cistercian monks of Otteley moved to Thame about 1132, Alexander Bishop of Lincoln giving to them his manor and park of Thame.

In 1527 Bishop John Longland wrote to Wolsey suggesting as the successor of John Warren, then abbot, Robert King, abbot of Bruerne, who came of a Thame family. Warren was living magnificently at the expense of the impoverished abbey. Longland had already made King one of his suffragan bishops with the title of Bishop of Rheon in the province of Constantinople. King's brother, William King of Thame, married a sister of John Williams, one of Henry VIII's commissioners for the dissolution of the monasteries and the later owner of Thame Abbey. King afterwards held the office of Abbot of Osney as well as Thame and surrendered the latter on 16 November, 1539. In 1542 he was created Bishop of Thame and Osney, and in 1545 Bishop of Oxford. A well-known portrait of King and a view of Osney abbey appear in stained glass in Oxford Cathedral.

Thame abbey was completely destroyed with the exception of the Abbot's lodging, and a thirteenth-century

range to the north, which perhaps connected the dorter with the rere dorter. The main part of the present house probably represents the dorter,—it is a fine eighteenth-century building incorporating walls which are at least as early as the sixteenth century. The Abbot's Lodging may have been begun by Warren, but it is mainly the work of King, who furnished the interior.

The plans (Fig. 1), the dimensions of which are approximately correct, show the arrangement of the Abbot's lodging, which seems to have been built at three separate times. *First*, a small upper and lower hall with bay windows at the east end. *Second*, an extension embodying a larger hall, on the ground floor, of five bays, with an upper hall and a second room beyond, and *third*, a tower of three storeys in height covering the original external south door. The second building has a large southern bay or oriel and a projecting stair. Most of the ancient features (excepting on the south front) have disappeared on the ground floor, and the north wall has been altogether altered, the openings being modern. The stone entrance door is well preserved, with a four centred arch within a square frame. Two beautiful pendants carved with amorini remain at two intersections of the ceiling beams to the ground floor of the second building.

The western upper apartment has a late sixteenth-century stone fireplace, but the moulded beams are of early sixteenth century date. This is perhaps Warren's work but there are remains of an oak frieze carved with Robert King's name. The hall to the east, on the first floor, has been spoiled of everything, and the room beyond (perhaps used as a kitchen) has its stone fireplace only. The south room in the tower is however largely in its ancient state and its fittings are those illustrated here. This room is full of incident. In addition to a four-light south window it has an oriel thrown out to the west. It has three doors, one into the hall on the north, a door into a cupboard (perhaps originally a garderobe) on the east, and one to the passage and stair in the north-east corner, which is perhaps the earliest example in English architecture of an *internal porch* (Pl. i). The original stone fireplace remains.

The whole room is panelled with linen fold panels, four



[Photo. E. Yates

ABBOT'S PARLOUR : INTERNAL PORCH



A. ABBOT'S LODGING, THAME



B. ABBOT'S PARLOUR : SOUTH-WEST ANGLE

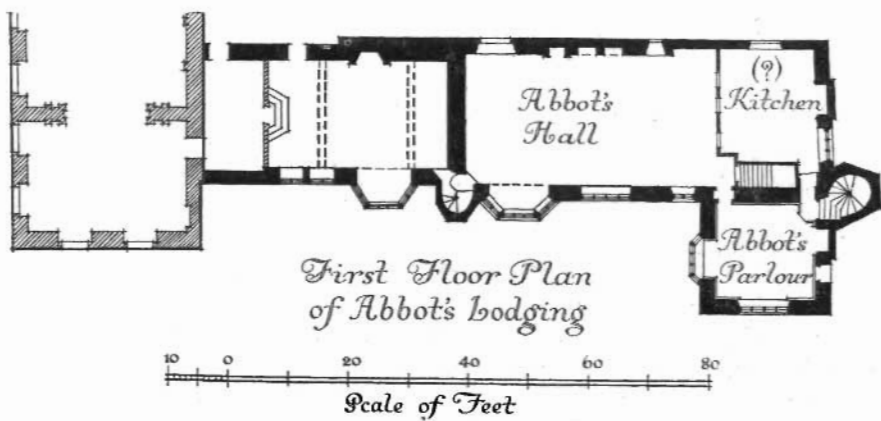
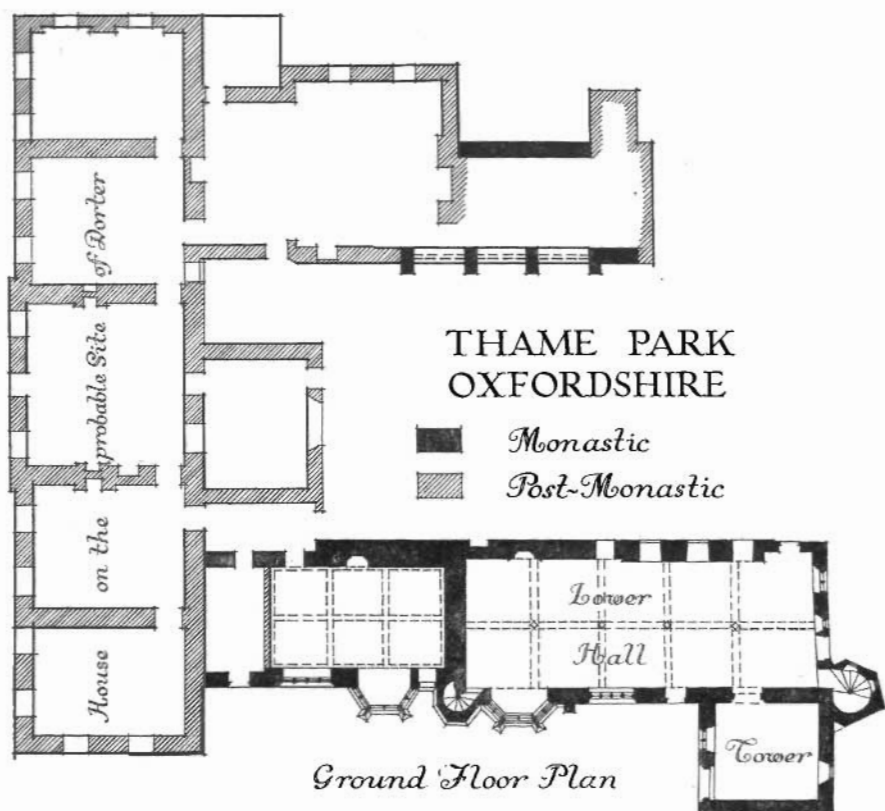


FIG. I.

panels high. The space above this to the ceiling is filled with a continuous range of carved panels and a frieze similarly enriched. The material is entirely of oak, the carving being extraordinarily delicate. Each panel (except those with shields of arms) has a roundel with heads, varied at times with a mitre in high relief. The frieze is a beautiful band of arabesque, its design centred on roundels, similar to those on the panels. The heads, being modelled in too high a relief to be cut entirely from the ground, have been applied, and in most cases this portion has disappeared. It is difficult to determine whether this has been due to deliberate mutilation or to failure of the adhesive material. Some of the work in lower relief was also applied, but most of it is cut from the solid.

The whole work was originally coloured, the linen fold panelling and the ground of the carved work being blue, and the decoration itself apparently gilt. The greenish-blue ground remains in the upper part, but the lower work has been cleaned, though not so successfully as to get rid of all the colour. The carved designs are now white, having been picked out in distemper, but beneath them are remains of a yellowish ground and traces of gilding.

The porch is somewhat awkwardly introduced, but it is no doubt contemporary with the rest of the work. Of its two front panels one is lost and the other has the arms of Thame Abbey:—

Argent on a chief *sable* the heads of two pastoral staves *argent*.

Here the pastoral staves are complete, there being no chief.

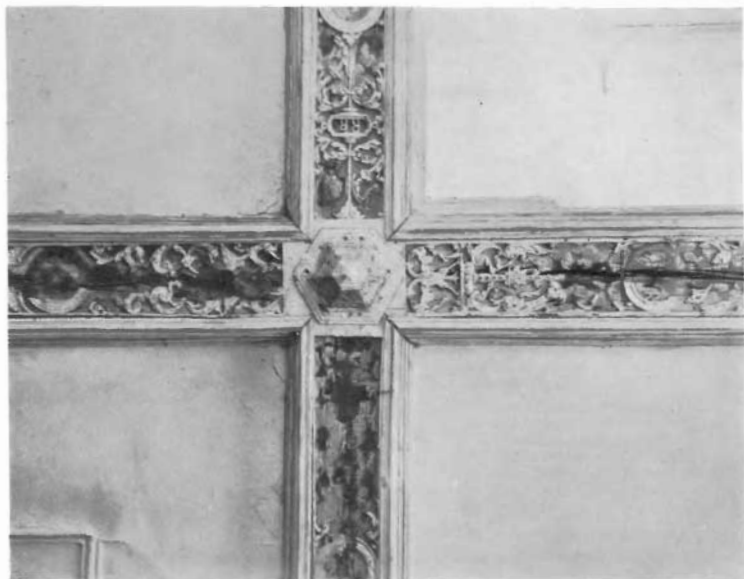
The view on Pl. ii, B shows the work in the south-west angle, and part of the oriel. The mitre can be seen in the frieze and a shield with R.K. The K looks somewhat like an R and has led Lee (in his book on Thame) and other writers to suggest Ricardus Rheonensis, a very doubtful rendering of King's title.

The frieze on the south side (Pl. iii) shows the K better. The missing panel here and the one in the porch are the only serious losses the room has sustained. A roundel with an uninjured head in profile is to be seen to the right of the shield bearing the abbot's cypher.

The ceiling (Pl. iv, A) is carried by two beams which



ABBOT'S PARLOUR : SOUTH SIDE



A. ABBOT'S PARLOUR : CEILING-BEAMS



B. ABBOT'S PARLOUR : WEST WALL

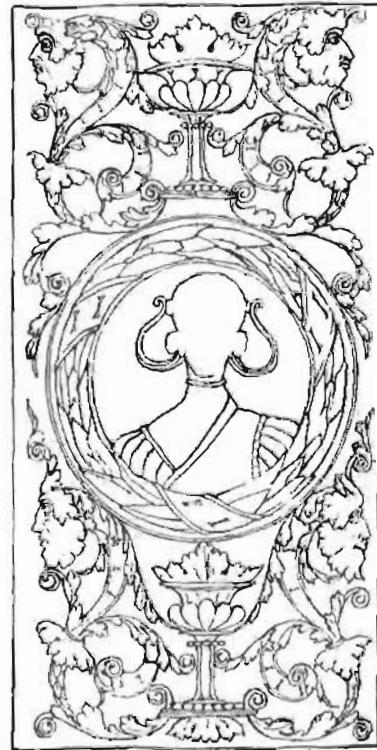


FIG. 2. PANELS ON NORTH WALL

cross one another. The same construction is used in the ground floor hall, and the room above the parlour. In them all the beams are cased with contemporary oak casing, and in the hall (as already noted) the intersections have fine pendants. Here the beam is enclosed in casing enriched like the frieze, the sides being covered with a moulding mitred at the angles. The pendant, which is hexagonal in plan, is very simple. The design is exceedingly delicate, and being largely applied has fallen away in places. The letters R.K. appear in small panels on the beam.

The run of panels on the north wall (Pl. v and Fig. 2) shows a remarkable variety of treatment, and it will be noticed that the frieze is constantly varied, no two parts being alike.

One other feature must be mentioned before we consider the heraldry, and that is the door at the top of the east staircase. It has been lifted from its place to photograph it better (Pl. vi, A). It retains its fine original lock.

The heraldry (Pl. vii) displayed on the east wall is very interesting and as far as I know it has not so far been fully interpreted. Lee in his book on Thame has little to say about it and mistakes some of the arms. I have had the privilege of the help of General Fane Lambarde, who has assisted me to solve a rather intricate puzzle.

It must be remembered that after the surrender of the abbey by Robert King the property was granted to John afterwards Lord Williams of Thame, whose sister Anne was the wife of the abbot's brother William King. Lord Williams had two daughters, co-heiresses, Isabel who married Sir Richard Wenman and brought him Thame Park, and Margery who married Sir Henry Norreys.

These shields are all contemporary with Robert King and have nothing to do with the marriage of the Williams daughters. They are however very eloquent of the complaisant abbot's friendships among those who were prominent in the king's service, when the monasteries were being dissolved.

The first panel from the porch has a roundel with a mitre above it. On the circular band is inscribed ROBERTUS CYNG. The initial of the second name looks like a C. The second letter is a Y. The word is certainly not Ruen,



ABBOT'S PARLOUR :

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PLATE V.

NORTH WALL



[Photo. E. Yates]

B. ABBOT'S PARLOUR: NORTH-WEST ANGLE



[Photo. E. Yates]

A. DOOR AT HEAD OF STAIR

a contraction for Ruensis as suggested by Lee. The shield of arms, if it were here, is missing. King's arms were :

Sable a lion crowned between three crosslets *or*.

The second panel has the arms of Lee :—

argent a fess (here *nebuly*) between three leopard's heads *sable*.

They are apparently the arms of Robert Lee of Thame, who received, with John Williams, lands of Notley Abbey. Sir John Clarke, whose arms come later, married Jane Lee, who died in 1516 and was buried at Quarrendon, Bucks, in the chapel that now lies in ruin. (See *Hist. Mons. Comm. Bucks*, vol. I, pp. 189-273).

The third has had three eagles. These are the arms of William Barentyne, High Sheriff of Oxfordshire in 1511, of Little Haseley (Churchill) and Thame. He was one of the royal commissioners for enquiry into the monasteries in 1534-5. His arms—*Sable* three eagles displayed *argent* armed *or*—were formerly in Thame Church.

The fourth shield is that of John Longland, bishop of Lincoln, Abbot King's patron. This shield is surmounted by a mitre. The arms are :—

Argent on a cheveron *gules* between three pellets a cock *argent* ; above a fillet *vert* and in chief a rose *gules* seeded *or* enclosed by two leopard's faces *azure* langued *gules*.

The fifth shield bears the royal arms of Henry VIII. It stands out in greater relief than the others and is still surmounted by the remains of a bold crown. There are two roses in the upper corners, and below was a panel with apparently the royal initials and perhaps a date, or it may be the remains of a portcullis. The royal arms appear on the exterior of the eastern oriel of the Abbot's Lodging, and on the western oriel of the tower (Pl. ii, A).

Next to the royal arms is a panel having a wreathed roundel surmounted also by a crown and the remains of two roses in the upper corners, similar to the last. The centre of the roundel seems to have held a badge or emblem that has now disappeared.

The next two panels are shown in greater detail in Pl. viii, and in it can be seen the singular beauty of the frieze with its rope band against the ceiling. The arms to the left are those of Sir John Clarke of North Weston (see also Fig. 3), who was granted an augmentation after

the Battle of the Spurs in 1513, where he made prisoner Louis of Orleans. Sir John was one of Henry VIII's commissioners for Oxfordshire and married Jane Lee.

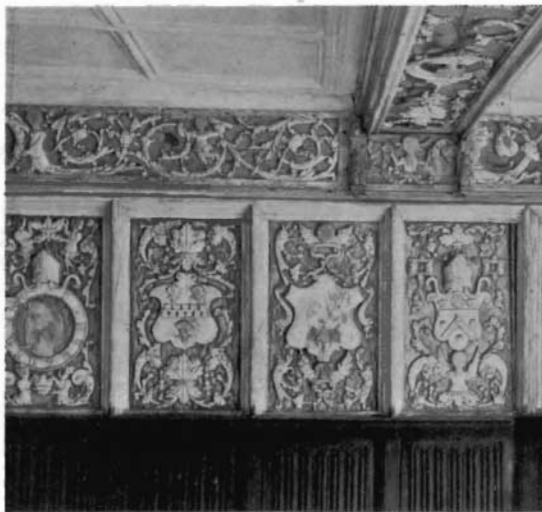
The arms are *argent* on a bend *gules* between three pellets three swans *or*; on a sinister quarter, *azure* two fleurs de lys in chief *or* and a demi-ram saliant *argent* in



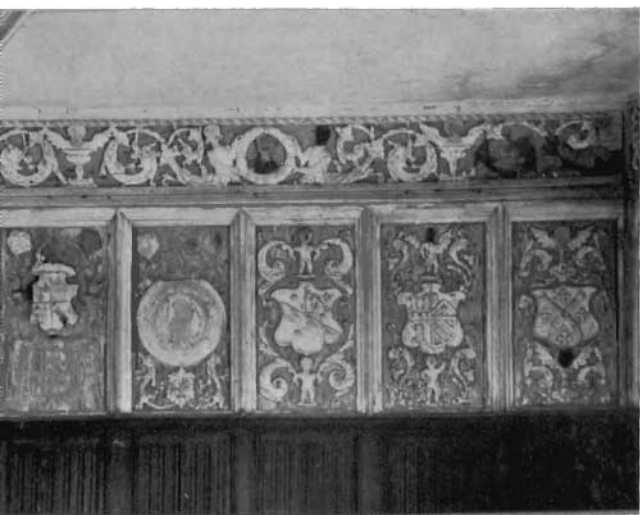
FIG. 3. ARMS OF SIR JOHN CLARKE

base, over all a bend *argent*. This augmentation is a composition from the armorial bearings of Louis of Orleans, Duke of Lougueville, Sir John Clarke's prisoner.

The next shield has hitherto been thought to bear an incorrect rendering of the arms of Wenman on the dexter side. The Wenman arms are: *Sable* on a fess *argent* between three anchors *or* three lion's heads rased *gules*



ABBOT'S PARLOUR :



[Photo. E. Yates

HERALDIC PANELS ON EAST WALL



PANELS WITH THE ARMS OF CLARKE AND FERMOR

langued *azure*. But the anchors are here on the fess, and the lion's heads on the field. These arms are really those of Fermor, *argent* on a fess *sable*, between three lion's heads *gules* three anchors *or*. The arms of Wenman and Fermor bear the same charges, which are of the same tinctures, but the tinctures are transposed on the field and the fess, and the position of the charges are also necessarily changed.

There seems to have been a very close relationship (if not some confusion) between the Wenman and Fermor families. Richard Wenman (whose grandson Sir Richard married the Williams heiress and owned Thame Park) bequeathed 10 marks in 1533 to Elizabeth, wife of his brother William *Fermor*. The shield before us commemorates I think the marriage of this William and Elizabeth. The grandmother of both Richard and William had married first a Wenman and secondly a Fermor, and the names were used indiscriminately.

The impalement of this interesting shield has also presented difficulties. It is half the quartered coat of Norreys for Elizabeth Norreys the wife of William Fermor. She was a half sister of Edward Norreys, whose grandson Sir Henry married the second of the Williams co-heiresses. Each half of this shield, then, by a curious coincidence commemorates a connexion of the families into which the Williams heiresses were to marry, in the third generation later. The arms are thus identified:—A Norreys had married a Ravenscroft and had adopted his wife's arms *argent* a cheveron *sable* between three raven's heads rased *sable*, and they are so shown in the roof of the Norreys chapel at Bray. The son of this marriage married Alice Merbrooke, whose arms (within a border *gules* bendy *or* and *azure*) are those shown in the lower quarter.

It only remains to be said that this William Fermor was one of the most active of the commissioners of Henry VIII, and so no doubt a friend of Williams and of Abbot King.

The remaining coat is that of John afterwards Lord Williams, the leading spirit among the royal commissioners and the future master of Thame Park. His arms are:—*azure* two organ pipes in saltire between four crosses paty *argent*.

There are many examples of panelling such as this at Thame, with which its detail might be compared with

profit, but space will not allow. A word or two may, however, be said of some work in a neighbouring house. In the hall of Weston Manor there is some panelling from Notley Abbey that seems almost certainly to be by the same hand as the carving we have been considering.

Weston Manor, which belonged to the Abbey of Oseney, came, like Thame, to John Lord Williams, but went to his daughter Margery, who married Sir Henry Norreys. This panelling, however, was removed to Weston, after the house had been acquired by the Berties, Earls of Lindsey.

Part of the frieze has the inscription 'Time Deum et recede a malo / Richard Ridge / Principium Sapientiae est timor D'ni.' A writer in *Country Life* (25 Aug., 1928) suggested that this Richard Ridge was the carpenter to Henry VIII, who worked at Hampton Court, but Mr. G. Eland pointed out in a later issue that he was, without doubt, Richard Ridge the last abbot of Notley, who was appointed 1532 and surrendered the abbey December 9, 1539, retiring with a pension of £100 a year.