

SHIRE HALL, WILMINGTON, KENT

By EDWARD YATES

Until about 18 years ago, there stood near the village of Wilmington in Kent an old house called Shire Hall, concerning which the writer has been unable as yet to secure any historical information. Evidently a house of some importance when built, it had been sadly neglected for years and was in a very dilapidated condition, a few farm labourers using it as a doss house. Internal evidence proved that it had been erected at the end of the sixteenth century; a finely carved chimney-beam to the ground-floor fireplace was dated 1591, whilst the ceiling-beams bore carving of the period.

Viewed from the exterior, three chimney-pots on the gable-end chimney stack indicated a fireplace other than those seen in the inhabited rooms and suggested a roof-space, or attics, to which there was no apparent means of access. A second investigation inside resulted in an interesting find. Many years since, a lath-and-plaster partition had been placed across the foot of an upper flight of stairs, completely cutting off this flight and the attics to which it gave access. The reason for cutting off this upper floor was noticed later.

In 1912, the writer was able to break through the partition, and on carefully mounting the stairs (each tread of which was covered with nearly an inch of dust) he saw by the light of a motor head-lamp a windowless attic-room of great interest, entered by a heavy Tudor doorway. The floor of the room was at roof-plate level, upon the beams forming the ceiling of the room underneath. The roof collars made the horizontal portion of the ceiling, ashlarling about 4 ft. high formed the vertical sides, the splay of the rafters being used between the collar and the ashlarling and the whole lathed and plastered except where the dormers originally existed. These dormers having decayed and fallen inward, the dormer-space had been filled in with two or three rafters from ridge to plate and sealed in with tiles. The room being then without light was no doubt

cut off from the other part of the house by the partition mentioned before. This must have occurred over a hundred years ago, as an old lady well over 80 years of age who, more than 60 years before, went to live in the house after her father-in-law had spent his long life there, said that none of them had any idea there were rooms in the roof.

At the further end of this roof-room, the lamp revealed a fine stone Tudor chimney-piece, with all its Tudor colouring almost as fresh as when put on. This colouring is apparent in the Pl. i, A. Above the flat arch simulating the four-centred late Tudor arch, was a frieze of fine floreated panels, the centre panel containing a rose. The two outside panels had the sunflower, whilst the intermediates of lozenge shape had flowers of four petals. The flat spandrils between the arch mould and frieze each bore a shield and a fern frond. A massive oak curb about 3 in. by 3 in. chamfered on the top edges was dowelled to the oak floor.

Cupboards were contrived on either side of the fireplace. The wood work of the cupboards, the great beam above the fireplace and the plaster surrounding it, and the whole of the plaster forming the ceiling and sides of the room, were all covered with fine decoration, black line on the white ground, Italianate in style. Below the ornament, forming a cornice at the junction of collar and rafter, a series of arabesques was depicted figuring cupids and other human forms, birds and foliage in bewildering profusion. The whole conception exhibited a wonderfully free line and true perspective, having regard to the angle of the surface on the splay of the rafters, and was no doubt the work of one of the Italian artists who, at the end of the sixteenth century, were much encouraged and welcomed here (see Pl. i, B).

It is to be regretted that the house was destroyed by fire a short time after the writer's visit, thus putting an end to his contemplated task of making further records of the interesting and little known place. As a small portion of the plaster decoration has been given to the Victoria and Albert Museum and is exhibited in Room 52, it may not be amiss to put these slight connecting notes on record.

The photographs were taken by the writer in 1912 by light from a motor head-lamp kept moving over the field for a matter of 20 minutes.



A. FIREPLACE OF *c.* 1591, FORMERLY AT WILMINGTON,
KENT



B. DECORATED PLASTER ON UNDERSIDE OF RAFTERS, *c.* 1591,
FORMERLY AT WILMINGTON