

Prebendal Houses at Little Chester.

BY GEORGE BAILEY.

BESIDES the Stone House prebend, of which we gave a short account in the last volume of this journal, mention is made in the same deed of Queen Mary, of other houses called "the two small Prebends in Little Chester." But there were originally seven of these prebendal farms there, which joined the stipend or maintenance of the prebendaries of the Collegiate Church of All Saints', in consideration of their taking duty at stated times in the Church and its Chapels. The College was dissolved by Edward VI., and its estates sold to Thomas Smith and Henry Newsum for £346 13s. 4d. The names of the prebendaries and the value of their stipends were, "Magister Ramsey, Clerk, 13s. 4d., those of Magister Elien and William Taylor at a like sum respectively, Richard Weste 40s. 8d., John Wilkes 40s., Thomas Smythe 60s., and the Sub-dean or Stone-prebend 66s. 8d."* We think that only three of these farms can now be identified.

If reference is made to the last volume of this journal, there will be found two illustrations of the stone prebend house. In the second illustration, at the left-hand side, there is in the distance a sketch of a second of the three, and the illustrations which accompany this notice are of the third. We will take this latter first. It is known by the name of the Manor Farm, and

* Chron. All Saints', p. 12.

has passed out of the possession of the Corporation and now belongs to Mr. Dicken. We judge that the present house is partly of Queen Elizabeth's reign; some portions being of an earlier date and others later. The drawings show this plainly, especially the addition to the right in the front view, where the



MANOR FARM, LITTLE CHESTER—FRONT VIEW.

joining on of a newer part is shown, the older part leaning slightly forward, so that a projection runs up from the side of the door to the top. The stone base is most likely part of an older house. This stone base is to be seen only on the other side, or back view, of the house. There has been a stone doorway at the back, corresponding to that in the front. The place has evidently, during some part of its history, fallen into decay, and has been repeatedly patched, as seen in the marks of the newer brickwork joined on to the older part. The windows in the wing, which is an addition, and not so old as the front of the house, have formerly had stone work, like those in the front; a new piece has been put in, together with the present window frames of wood. Both the rooms in the wing are good, the lower one being wainscoted round, while the upper room has some nice old Dutch tiles round

the fireplace in good preservation, mostly fancy subjects in a pink colour, with one or two blue ones representing Scripture incidents. At the top of all is a curious room in the roof open to the rafters. There is an improbable legend that this was used as a place of confinement by the monks ; but it is not old enough. In a small bedroom, the beam which supports the floor above is a rough tree trunk of the rudest workmanship, while in other rooms the beams are very nicely moulded and correspond exactly with others in the



MANOR FARM—BACK VIEW.

house, shown in the distance in the drawing in Vol. XI., so that the date of portions of both these houses are the same. Each of them has a good panelled room, but the oak has been painted, and, unlike the stone prebend, neither have any carving, the nearest approach to anything of the kind is in the Manor Farm house, where there is a nicely moulded oak door to a cupboard in the wall of a passage, of which we show here a portion (Fig. 1) with a curious old iron hinge.

In the roof of the other part of this house, where the chimney-stack rises through the roof, there are remains of stone coffering which appear to have at some time or other been part of a flat

roof, so that probably this house had once a balustrade round the top, before the present tiled roof was raised. There is still to be seen at the angle of a wall in the yard the base stone of an old corner pinnacle—with the pinnacle itself broken off. The unfinished state of the back angle shows it was for a corner, not for a gable. We suppose the roof had become leaky, and that this was the only means of remedying it. The roof was covered with a floor of plaster formed into coffers or divisions by moulded stones, if these

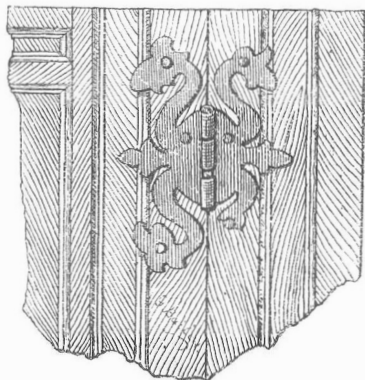


FIG. 1.

remain in their original positions. We can judge of the length of time that this flat roof has existed by the great accumulation of sand and hay which have been blown through the tiling for centuries past. There cannot be much less than a cartload of this rubbish, which has thus slowly accumulated by the persistent draughts always blowing through the old tiled roof.

We will now descend into the cellar, which is the most curious feature in this old prebendal house. It speaks to us of times long before prebends ever existed, when Christianity had made very little progress in this part of our island, for there seems little reason to doubt that in this cellar we look upon the remains of some old Roman building. The cellar is about 12 ft. 6 in. by 14 ft.; the walls, of old work, are about 4 ft. high, upon which the modern brick foundations are laid. This construction of the

Roman part is of the work called *opus incertum* or *antiquum*, and consists of a kind of rubble or concrete (Fig. 2) made up of almost anything in the shape of stone, laid together with little or no order at all, broken stones, boulders, pebbles and gravel,

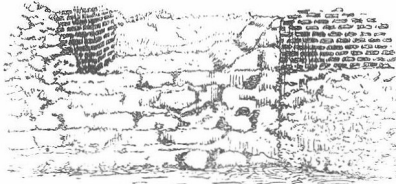


FIG. 2.

flooded with mortar. These two small sketches will explain this better than any description. It will be noticed that there are besides some very large stones (Fig. 3) measuring from 3 ft. 5 in. by 1 ft. 1½ in. up to 4 ft. 10 in. by 1 ft. 6 in.; some of them are shown in one of these sketches near the modern steps by which access is gained to the cellar. This walling, we take it, is another kind of building, in which the stones are laid entirely lengthwise, to which the French have attached the term

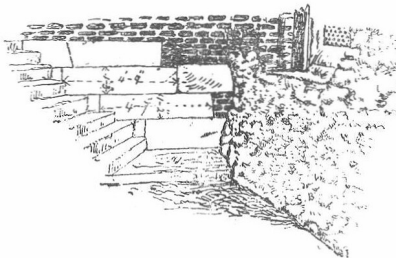


FIG. 3.

grand appareil. Whether this large work is in its original position we are unable to say, as there are stones quite as large in the other corner of the apartment, placed on and partially surrounded by the concrete work. We do not feel ourselves competent to speak with any authority on Roman buildings, but having com-

pared the drawings with others to which we have access, we think there is no doubt about the Roman origin of the walls, and we are confirmed in this opinion by Dr. Cox, who has recently examined them. Whether this can be one of the "vaults" mentioned by Dr. Stukeley, we are unable to assert; but it appears to be the same house of which he states that "Mr. Ford's cellar is built on a side of the wall, which is three yards thick." The east wall of this house, now Mr. Dickens', does rest on the part shown in Fig. 2. It will be seen, however, that all the walls of the cellar are partly of concrete, so that it must have been a room of some kind. Dr. Stukeley says the station, as traced by him in 1721, was square, and that he saw some vaults along the side of the wall.* That a Roman residence of importance stood on this site is certain, from the fragments of very choice pottery discovered in 1888 during the excavation of the ground necessary in building a grains tank, and which were in possession of Mr. J. Keys.† A great number of coins have been found at different times, ranging in date between the years A.D. 14 to 318, and when the Great Northern Railway, or one of the roads in Strutt's Park was made, we saw several brass coins in possession of a man, and on questioning him, were told that a man had found a lot in a pot which also contained a parchment on which was writing. "But yer know, sir, it wer that kind er riting nobory on earth cud read so hey chucked it i't fire an' burnt it!" The coins he had were filed quite bright, so that nothing could be made out. Doubtless a good many things of value to the antiquary have in like manner been "chucked," but there is much yet that would reward intelligent search.‡ If the Manor Farm stands on the site or near to a temple, as Dr. Stukeley conjectured, that may

* Pilkington, Vol. II., pp. 199 and 200.

† See Vols. X. and XI., pp. 159 and 81, of this Journal, in which notices appear of pottery, &c., found by Messrs. S. Haslam and Keys. Some of these fragments are of the finest quality and design.

‡ See Volume VII., pp. 76-7, for an interesting account of Finds by the late Rev. S. B. Brasher, in the vicarage garden; one of the walls must have been nearly parallel with it, but some distance further north according to Stukeley's plan.

account for finding the choice bits of pottery in the dust hole, and besides, here is (Fig. 4) a sketch of a stone now in the yard, which looks like part of a Roman altar. Two iron loops have been fastened into it, and it has been used by a wheelwright for turning his wheels, or some such purpose.

Since the above was written Messrs. C. Roach Smith and J.

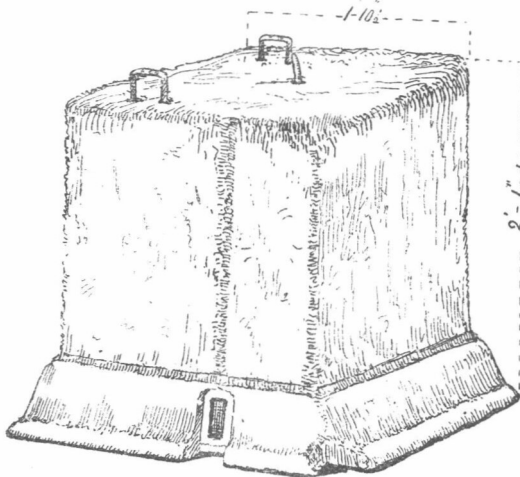
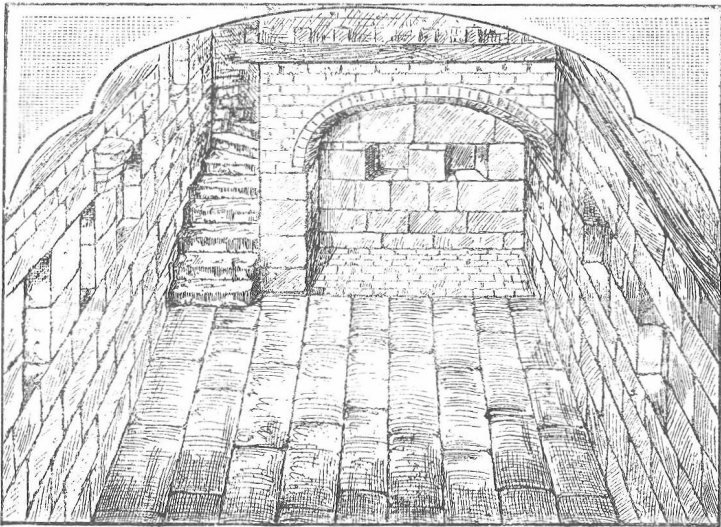


FIG. 4.

Collingwood Bruce have been communicated with as to the probable Roman origin of this stone, and they, though not thinking it a Roman altar, still think it may be Roman. Others who have seen the drawing believe it to be certainly Roman. It has, then, probably been one of the large stones placed at the angle of the wall. There seems, however, to be no doubt among these authorities that the stones by the steps (Fig. 3) are undoubtedly Roman, and that they are a part of the city walls. This is borne out by Stukeley's plan, which indicates that there would be a gate just there, and this would account for the large stone mentioned above (Fig. 4).

We will now leave the Manor Farm for the other house. It stands near the river, just opposite the Stone House prebend, of which mention has been made at the commencement of

these remarks. The date of it is the same as some parts of the house we have left, and has on the ground floor a good panelled room; the beams are also of good workmanship, otherwise there is nothing to call for notice until we enter the cellar, which is entirely of stone. It will be observed that the house is mainly of brick, and is of the same date as the Manor Farm. There are, however, a few old stones in a wall of the kitchen or bakehouse, on the garden side towards the river, and a few in the foundation; but there are no remains of any stone house, such as are in the chimneys of the Stone prebend, across the way. This being so,



CELLAR IN FARM HOUSE, LITTLE CHESTER.

we at once ask, how is it there should be a cellar like this of well-cut stones and well paved with stone, all the other part of the house being of brick? It was plainly there before the present house, and has been adapted to it. Probably the cellar had been filled up with rubbish, and was only discovered when the present house was about to be built. It may be the cellar of the old prebendal house, which we think once stood here.

We must now refer to the sketch of the cellar. The stone

walls, in which are a number of recesses, are the old part; the bricks are much more recent. Those seen on the left have been put there to support the present wooden floor, a row of stone being gone from this inner side. But on going outside, the other course of stone rises above the pavement and shows that the walls are of two courses in thickness. The side of the cellar not seen, and which would be at the back of the spectator, is all of brick, except the stones round the window lights. They are of old work, and appear once to have been in some part of a house; they do not belong to the present cellar. The light at the right hand corner is blocked up, and the wall inside shows nothing of it. Crossing the corner obliquely are seen the under sides of two stone steps and an old oak beam, formerly the threshold of a door, which some time or other must have entered a room above the cellar; but not the slightest evidence is found in the present walls above of any such doorway, so that it must have formed a part of some previous house. Attention also may be drawn to an old corbel seen between the recesses on the left. Whether that is its original position is doubtful, as there is no other on the opposite wall to correspond with it, and the piece of stone placed upon it has made it come in as a support for the floor beam of the present floor. It is, however, the recesses, of which there are eight, of varying size, which excite the most curiosity; what are they for? To hold bottles of wine has been suggested, but if so, why should they vary in width so much; beginning from the left hand, the nearest is 1 ft. by 1 ft. $3\frac{1}{2}$ in., next 9 in. same height, the next 1 ft. 6 in., the remainder are all 1 ft. 6 in. wide, the height varying from 1 ft. 4 in. to 1 ft. 6 in., in depth these are 8 in., the others differing from 4 in. to 1 ft. in depth. Now as an ordinary wine bottle is about 1 ft. high by 3 in. broad, the recesses would hold on an average 12 bottles, but if this was their use, it seems odd they should not be of an uniform size and depth. We do not suppose the occupants of these old prebendal farms were abstainers, still their incomes would scarcely admit of many luxuries; but they might of course supplement their income by the manufacture of a liqueur, *i.e.*, stomachic. We think, how-

ever, this conjecture must be abandoned as being too hazardous. Then what can the place have been made for? Is there any known instance of such a constructed mediæval wine cellar? It must be of that age judging from the diagonal chiselling of some of the stones; though some of the large stones about the alcove appear much older and may be of Roman origin, and the thought suggests itself, could this have been the burial place of the chief man of the city? and are these niches in the walls *columbaria*, in which were deposited the cinerary urns? In Adams' "Roman Antiquities"* there is an engraving of a *columbarium* discovered in Pompeii, known as the tomb of Noevoleia. It is a square, vaulted chamber, above ground; it has a solid bench round it, on which urns were placed, and also arched recesses in it for the same purpose, and above, all round the walls, are similar niches to those in the cellar under notice, also containing urns. There are no benches in this cellar, but there are indications of another row of niches having had a place above those now seen, part of one remaining just in the corner coming down the steps. The stone walls have been higher than they are now, several courses of stone being gone; so that if this cellar has ever been a complete and separate building, the roof would be some feet above the ground, and it may have been vaulted, according to Stukeley's plan of Roman Little Chester, of which an enlarged copy has been lent us by Mr. Keys. This building was within the walls at the side of the road now called Old Chester Road, which runs through the centre of the city down to the edge of the river Derwent, so that it would be quite close to the west wall.

The burning and burying of the dead was prohibited in Roman cities, and so far no interments that can fairly be called Roman have been found in Little Chester. Probably in such a case as this they would not make any objection to a receptacle for urns, especially since, though burials were forbidden in cities, no objection was made to a street of tombs coming up quite close to the walls. This was so with the Via Latina and the Via Appia,

* Adams' "Roman Antiquities," p. 420.

streets lined with tombs close up to Rome.* We have not, however, sufficient data to warrant us in affirming that this cellar is of Roman origin. There seems, at any rate, no reason to doubt that it is one of the vaults spoken of by Dr. Stukeley, but its purpose remains a mystery.

We may mention here that the best living Roman authorities have been consulted, and they conclude, judging only from the sketch, that the cellar is a post Roman work. Here we are content to leave it, in the hope that it may be eventually examined by some more competent judges, and a definite conclusion arrived at. Our intention has been to recover some small fragments of the remains of these prebendal houses, and these traces of Roman occupation have come in our way in the course of the necessary investigations, and we shall only be too glad if they preserve some, until now, forgotten fragments of local history.

We have tried to verify some of the houses now remaining at Little Chester with Dr. Stukeley's plan. We find those of which we have written here, but they have been a good deal altered since his plan was made—mostly by additions to them—showing that the prebendal houses consisted of the oldest existing parts, and that the newer parts are of the latter end of George I.'s reign, or about 160 years ago. Stukeley's plan of Chester is of the highest interest now, showing, as it does, how much has been obliterated that was traceable in his time. In fact it is now the only existing record of what has now entirely passed away, except the small portions we have been able to trace in the cellars of these two old houses, and doubtless these in a few more years will be cleared out to make room for somebody to make some "almighty" money. Nobody cares now-a-days for aught else. "Will it fetch any money?" said a man to us, respecting one of these old stones; he could see nothing in it any further. That is the rule; he was no exception to it. Stukeley says the *castrum* was 500 ft. by 600 ft., or about seven acres. Who could say that now? But

* "Hand-book of Archaeology," by H. M. Westropp, p. 114.

for him, all that we know through his instrumentality, would long have passed into the limbo of the utterly forgotten. In concluding this our last paper on prebendal houses, we cannot do less than express our feeling of thankfulness to those who have rendered us assistance in bringing together these scattered fragments of their history, and especially to those occupants of these farm-houses who have shown the utmost courtesy and permitted us to rummage them from cellar to cockloft without ever in any way expressing annoyance, though we have often felt ourselves a thorough nuisance and sometimes a hindrance to them in their household duties. So we make this acknowledgment with the greatest pleasure.