

## THE AYRES' CEILING, PETWORTH.

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Among the objects of the Sussex Archæological Society not the least interesting is the preservation of memorials of such ancient structures in the County as, in the course of modern improvements, are from time to time, of necessity, swept away. With these is now numbered at Petworth the building known in the middle of the seventeenth century as the "Old Crown Inn."

The curious, and, from circumstances presently to be stated, probably unique, stuccoed ceiling of the principal room in this house, often attracted attention, but has received only cursory notice hitherto.

Its elaborate ornamentation had been so disfigured by whitewash that of its pristine splendour, when adorned with gilding and colours, few traces remained; and, from the room having been converted into two, much of the effect had been lost. The grotesque designs were, however, remarkable, as became more evident when the fabric was denuded, previously to its demolition.

In effecting improvements to one of the entrances to Petworth House in the summer of 1871, a house was taken down adjacent to the churchyard, and to increase the width of the street it became needful to remove also this opposite building, which was for that purpose purchased by Lord Leconfield of the Trustees of Ayres' Charity. An entry in the Petworth

Register Book shews its bequest two centuries ago—"Mr. Richard Aire gave to the use of the poore of the Parish of Petworth one house which was *anciently* called ye Crown Inn, near ye church gate, ye corner house on the left hand coming up from ye market, containing six tenements," &c. The date of this benefaction was June 8th, 1673. From the Register, also, we find that Richard Aire or Ayre was baptised at Petworth December 9th, 1632, the names of his parents being William and Benedicta. Near the centre of the ceiling appeared the initials  $\text{w.}^{\text{A.}}\text{B.}$  There can, therefore, be no doubt that its ornamentation was executed in the lifetime of his father and mother, and in all probability during the reign of Charles I.<sup>1</sup> The building itself was evidently in use as a hostelry long before.<sup>2</sup>

"The Crown" must have occupied a considerable area. Its front and projecting wings faced the churchyard, and a magnificent view of Petworth Park, with the hills in the distance, was, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, to be had from its large upper room; and supposing a solitary traveller then seated in it, and deferring his journey on a wet and dreary day, he could also from a back window look down on the inn-yard behind. The waggoners jolting into it from town might for awhile occupy his attention, but the comfortable hearth would soon attract him, and his curiosity being aroused he would examine the arms above it, and then proceed to survey the quaint figures of human beings and animals which in succession met his eye.

The chimney-piece shewed two columns. On their upper portions were the fruit and foliage of the vine, and at the base lozenges, which contained figures, in various colours under glass, affixed by wax. Between them was a coat of arms, probably fictitious. These were decipherable as—two battle axes, between three talbot's heads 2. 1. In chief a boar's head, between two garbs. *Crest.* A griffin rampant. *Supporters.*

<sup>1</sup> It will be observed that Richard Ayre lived at a most eventful period. He saw the beginning and end of the Great Civil War, and of "the Commonwealth," with all the changes of the Restoration. In 1662 "the Crown" had passed from his father to him, as appears from an old Court Book.

<sup>2</sup> Probably as early as the days of Queen Elizabeth, who, in one of her progresses, stayed at Rochester at the Crown Inn. Whether she visited Petworth, according to her intention, or not, is still uncertain.

Two griffins rampant. *Motto.* *Oīa, subjecisti sub pedibus, oves et boves.*<sup>3</sup>

From this motto the artist evidently formed his design, his leading idea being to represent the different departments of the animal and vegetable kingdoms, as then understood, in subjection to man. In the centre of the ceiling was a circular compartment, enclosing a flower, apparently a rose. This was flanked by two semicircles, containing elaborate groups composed of various tropical fruits and flowers. On the one side was a spirited representation of a dog, faced on the other by a fox with brush erect. Upon the cornice, commencing from the right, appeared, in the centre, the head of a bull, flanked by two ludicrous climbing apes, while on the opposite side, in the centre, was a boar's head with large tusks, flanked by two cornucopiæ: these were thus separated, and had their extremities far apart; but from the mouth of one horn depended a man's shoulders and head, and from the other the legs and feet of the same quasi-individual, the former encased in the padded breeches of the period. This quaint imaginary design had on either side of it sheep or lambs, in the attitude well known as that of the suspended golden fleece. At the corners appeared huge mastiffs seemingly sleeping. Two rats climbing on the stalks of plants were well delineated. Birds were represented by "the mousing owl;" mollusks by "the creeping snail with house upon his back;"<sup>4</sup> and insects by bees, or what seemed to some to more resemble moths from their feathered antennæ.

By far the most interesting feature in the ornamentation of this ceiling, however, was the peculiar series of representations, on its bordering, of the various stages of human life from infancy to second childhood. In this, there can scarcely be doubt, an allusion to the "Seven Ages" of Shakespeare was intended. Occurring, too, at a period so soon after that of the great dramatist, it is especially deserving of notice as an early attempt to thus illustrate one of his masterpieces.

The following engraving, from a photograph, shews a not inappropriate introductory design, which appeared on the

<sup>3</sup>The whitewash being scraped away from the motto, its words were plainly revealed, and at once afforded the key

which opened what had long been a puzzle. See Psalm viii., 6-7.

<sup>4</sup>There were no fewer than four snails, each with protruded horns.

left hand side of the fireplace—a woman kneeling by the side of a babe, in a wickerwork cradle on rockers.



The figures commencing on the right were these—

“The infant  
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.”

Then “the whining schoolboy,” not, indeed, “creeping like snail unwillingly to school;” but so appearing as to afford a sufficient reason why this was his usual mode of proceeding thither. He held an open book, and with doleful visage was sprawling on the ground; while on his back, in an opposite direction from his head, was seated his schoolmaster,<sup>5</sup> with uplifted hand about to be applied.

Some of the succeeding figures were so mutilated that they can only be imperfectly described.<sup>6</sup>

A helmeted warrior, who bestrode a tiger or panther, could next be discerned, and then a robed figure, wearing the ruff of the period, with

“Eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,”

who, doubtless, was intended for “the Justice.” He was bareheaded, and held in his hands a baton, and apparently a pair of scales.

An attenuated human being followed, in a sufficiently good state of preservation to be recognised as

“The lean and slippered pantaloon.”

<sup>5</sup> He wore upon his shoulders a hood, and from his girdle depended a rosary.

<sup>6</sup> Those of the infant suckled by the

nurse and of the aged man are given in the plate as being the least injured of the series.



NURSE AND CHILD.



PANTALON ON SNAIL.

And, in conclusion, there was an apt, but much impaired illustration of the

"Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange, eventful history,  
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion ;  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

The whole of these designs were boldly conceived and spiritedly executed.

It has been conjectured that the artist may have been brought to Petworth by one of the Earls of Northumberland, and the dates before-mentioned synchronize with the time when Henry, the 9th Earl resided there.<sup>7</sup> He, as is well known, made considerable additions to Petworth House ; was fond of art and architecture, and "designed an entirely new and magnificent mansion"<sup>8</sup> at Petworth, of which the ground plan is still in existence. It is not unlikely, therefore, that under his patronage the person who executed this work came thither.

Owing to the kindness of Lord Leconfield, such portions of this quaint relic of the Stuart period as could be preserved were given to the writer, and exhibited to the members and others at the late Chichester meeting, in the Lecture Room of the Literary Society and Mechanics' Institute of the city.

It must be added that although, from the nature of the material, its removal<sup>9</sup> was attended with difficulty, yet cordial assistance was in every way rendered, so as to enable those who inspected it to form an approximate idea of what the original appearance of this curious ceiling had been.

<sup>7</sup> After his release from the Tower, from 1620 to 1632.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold's "History and Antiquities of Petworth," p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks are due to H. G. Brydone, Esq., and to Mr. Downing, both for their suggestions and aid in this matter.

