

ACCOUNT OF THE  
 GUILDHALL AT DISS;  
 TOGETHER WITH  
 A FEW CURSORY REMARKS ON THE TOWN.  
 COMMUNICATED BY  
 MR. SAMUEL WILTON RIX.

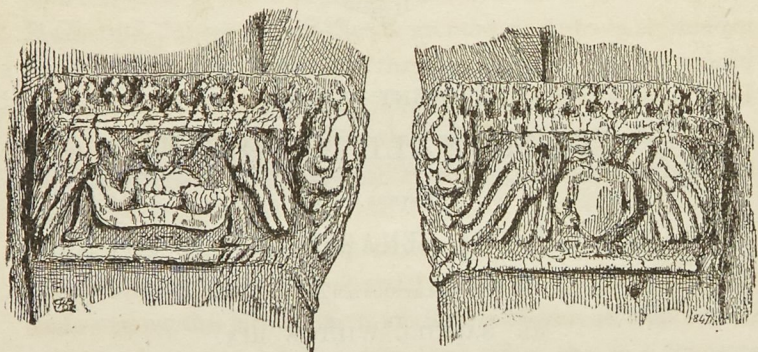
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Blomefield has placed Diss at the commencement of his Norfolk History. That town, situated within a few miles from the secluded rectory of Fersfield, his residence, possessed for him a special charm: it was the scene of his early youth. In the pedigree he gives of his family, it is stated that he "was educated first at Diss." Most probably he attended the Grammar-School, carried on in the house known as the Guildhall. This building he identifies as having been used in common by the two gilds of St. Nicholas and Corpus Christi, and subsequently "granted to the inhabitants."\* It has now been totally swept away. A slight notice of its history and successive occupants may be thought worthy of preservation.

The opulence to which the gilds at Diss had advanced, affords some countenance to the opinion that the Guildhall might be as old as the reign of Henry VII. Unfortunately,

\* Blomefield's *Norfolk*, 8vo. edition, Vol. I., p. 33.

at the time when alone the writer had the opportunity of knowing it, successive repairs had been allowed to obliterate almost every trace of its ancient appearance. The only proof of its antiquity, a massive oak post, remained at the south-west corner, having on its upper part the rude carving of which an etching is subjoined.



Through the kindness of Mr. Dawson Turner an extract has been obtained, from Sir Francis Palgrave, showing that the letters patent of 18th June, 27 Eliz. (1584), quoted by Blomefield as a grant of St. Nicholas Chapel to William Croft and John Hallyet, also included the Guildhall, by the following description :

“And also all that, the house in Dysse aforesaid (called in English a Gwyldde-hall), with the appurtenances now or late in the tenure of Thomas Burton, and late parcel of the possessions of a certain fraternity or society of divers persons in Dysse aforesaid.”

Croft and Hallyet probably obtained the grant as trustees for the various persons to whom the property embraced therein was intended to be conveyed. This was a common practice to save expense. It would seem, however, that the Guildhall had already come into the possession of the inhabitants ; for Blomefield notices that, “in 1575, here were kept the standard scales and weights for the market ;” and he

gives a list of utensils which “*then* were left to the use of the town in this house.”†

The earliest existing deed relating to the Guildhall, according to the Charity Commissioners’ Report, bears date 10th September, 1596, whereby the property was enfeoffed by Robert Cooper and others to Richard Leacke and others. This deed refers to a conveyance, dated 7th September then instant, made to the feoffors by Richard Fisher and others. No trusts were declared. But in the next feoffment, dated 18th April, 1623, and on subsequent similar occasions, the premises were conveyed to the use and benefit of the inhabitants of Diss.

Speed ‡ mentions “one Cleber, a schoolmaster, some tyme at Dys in Norfolke,” who, in 1556, read publicly a traitorous proclamation, and persuaded the people to take arms against Queen Mary; and who was executed at the following assizes at Bury. Whether he had swayed the ferule in the Guildhall is uncertain; though the dissolving statute of 1 Edward VI., cap. 14, under which the building was seized, expressly contemplates the “erecting of grammar-schools to the education of youth in virtue and godliness.” The earliest evidence the writer has met with of its being applied to such a purpose, occurs in 1692, when a charge is made in the “Disse Towne Booke,” § of 10s. for “glazing the Schoolhouse.”

In a list of “rents yearly growing due to the towne,” made in 1693, are the following:

	£.	s.	d.
“Rob <sup>t</sup> Towell for pte of y <sup>e</sup> Guildhall . . .	03	10	00
M <sup>r</sup> Edw. Easterby, ten <sup>t</sup> to the Guildhall Chamber, at . . . . .	01	10	00”

At Easter, 1705, these disbursements occur:

† Vol. I., p. 33.

‡ Page 854 (104.)

§ I am indebted to the courtesy of the Churchwarden, Mr. Farrow, for an inspection of this record.

	£.	s.	d.
“Sweeping the Schoole . . . . .	00	00	09
Paid George Tyrrold for glazeing the Schoole- house . . . . .	01	02	06
For a chaire for the Schoole house . . . . .	00	02	06”

The payment by the parish of a salary of £10. a year,\* is first recorded in the churchwarden's account at Easter, 1706.

“Paid to *Mr. Lloyd* for halfe a yeare's salary . 05 00 00”

Another entry calls him “the Schoolmaster;” and in 1707 the disbursement is :

“Paid M<sup>r</sup> Lloyd for his sallary and a bill for  
burying poor people 11s. 6d. . . . . 10 11 06”

which shows that Mr. Lloyd was in holy orders.

In 1710, *The Rev. John Bryars, M.A.*, Rector of Billingford, undertook the mastership. Accordingly, at the following Easter the parish officers take credit for

“Pd M<sup>r</sup> Bryers a year's sallary for y<sup>e</sup> scool . . 10 00 00”

This gentleman was active in promoting the success of a charity-school established in the adjacent village of Palgrave, and preached and published a sermon at the first meeting of its patrons. The dedication of this sermon is dated “Billingford, May 15, 1711.” And it would seem that he did not remove to Diss before 1713, when he was presented to the living of that parish. A second dedication prefixed to the same sermon is addressed, among others, to “Rob<sup>t</sup> Burroughs, Gent., Francis Guybon, M.D., William Coggeshall, Gent., Samuel Manning, Gent., and John Moulton, Gent., [all] of Diss.” Two years after its establishment, the Palgrave Charity-School was transferred to the Guildhall at Diss. There it was still carried on when Blomefield wrote (1736); the master having his dwelling in one part of the Guildhall, and keeping school in another part.†

\* See Blomefield, Vol. I., p. 37.

† Vol. I., p. 37.

The entries in the parish accounts, after 1713, do not show how long Mr. Bryars retained the Grammar School; but under him, there can scarcely be a doubt, the Norfolk Historian received the rudiments of his education.

In 1721, appears,

	£. s. d.
“Received of Andrew Webster for the Guild- hall Chamber . . . . .	01 10 00”

The death of Mr. Bryars occurred in 1728; and the educational zeal of his parishioners appears then to have somewhat abated. The churchwarden's accounts for 1730 contain these items:

“March 27. To <i>Mr. Randall</i> for two yeares’ sallery for schoole keeping, due at a Lady last past . . . . .	10 00 00
April 12, 1729. Received . . . . . by bills, one pound for four yeares’ rente of parte of the Guildhall Chamber due att a Lady day last past.”	

Another name appears in 1732, when we find,

“Decemb. 19. Paid <i>Mr. Blyth</i> for keeping the gramar schoole as $\Psi$ agreement . . . . .	10 00 00”
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From Blomefield † we learn that, while the Charity-School occupied a part of the ground-floor, the Grammar-School, in his time, was “kept above, in the same house,” where also the master had lodgings. This earlier institution had, no doubt, appropriated the principal apartment, which, as usual in half-timbered houses, was in the more spacious upper story. The succession of masters is not always ascertainable from the “*Towne Booke* ;” the payments being often entered merely as made to “the Grammar-schoole master.” But the individual to whom Blomefield refers, was *Mr. Chappelow*. It was he who received the parochial salary of £10. for the

† Vol. I., p. 37.

years ending Michaelmas 1733 and 1735; and in April 1737, there are several items of expenses "for worke in Mr Chapolow's school."

By a memorandum made about 1751; it appears that the "Guildhall or School-house" was then "occupied by *Mr. John Barnard*, on a lease for twenty years, bearing date 1738. Also the chambers that were lately used for a Latin School, at a yearly rent of thirty shillings." So that the Grammar-School had now taken the place of its humbler companion on the ground floor; and there it was always kept afterward. Mr. Barnard resided in the house nearly forty years, and died there, at an advanced age, in the year 1777. He is said to have been a person of respectability, and of some taste, especially as a florist.

The next occupier was *Mr. George Gilbert*, whom the oldest inhabitants still remember, as a man of excellent talents, social disposition, and superior penmanship. Extensive repairs were done at this period; and the building assumed the appearance shown in the annexed sketch.

Mr. Gilbert having removed to Hackney, about 1787 the school fell into the hands of *Mr. James White*, by whom it was soon relinquished in favour of the *Rev. Simon Westby*. The latter gentleman was a native of Holt, where he was educated at the school founded by Sir Thomas Gresham. In the year 1775 he became an assistant in the boarding-school established at Palgrave, in the house formerly occupied by Tom Martin the antiquary; and where Lord Denman, Gell, Dr. Frank Sayers, and his biographer, William Taylor, were among the juvenile charge; men whose subsequent eminence has contributed to shed great lustre around the name of Barbauld. In 1781, Mr. Westby entered at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, as a "ten year man;" and he accordingly took the degree of B.D. His position in society as a clergyman, added to his talents, acquirements, and energy, together with the adoption of certain books and

plans of teaching which had been used at Palgrave, ensured him success as an instructor of youth. The course of study pursued under his care was elementary rather than extensive or ornamental; including, however, such an acquaintance with classical learning as might throw light upon the structure and etymology of the mother-tongue, and might lay the foundation for higher attainments at college, or for the not less valuable process of self-improvement.

In 1812, Mr. Westby tested the powers of his pupils by inviting them to attempt some English and Latin compositions in verse. The result was a *brochure*, of which a limited number of copies were privately printed, under the title of "Prize Distichs on a Dead Nightingale, in Latin and English, and other Pieces, written by the Pupils of Diss School." Skelton, the laureated Rector of Diss, had written what Coleridge styles "an exquisite and original poem,"\* on the death of a sparrow killed by a cat; and, alluding to the sneer of a rival poet, had lightly said,

"But what of that?—hard 'tis to please all men,—  
Who list amende it, let hym set to his penne." †

At length, after the lapse of three centuries, the challenge was accepted—by "unfledged poets," but certainly with the advantages of a more promising theme and in more polished times. The comparison is curious between the quaint style, ludicrous extravagance, and coarse imprecations of the laureate, and the flowing, plaintive, and not inappropriate lines of the Guildhall boys.

Mr. Westby carried on the school with vigour until his death, which occurred on the 4th May, 1820. He was interred in the church at Kenninghall, of which parish he had

\* Coleridge's *Remains*, Vol. II., p. 163; Skelton's *Poetical Works*, by Dyce, Vol. I., p. xlix.

† Skelton's *Poetical Works*, by Dyce, Vol. I., pp. xxxv., 412.

been Vicar thirteen years. With him terminated the Grammar-School in the Guildhall.

The room, in which it had been long conducted, was afterwards occupied as a Charity-School for Girls. At length the site of the old house was required for the purpose of enlarging the churchyard. On the 9th September, 1846, the buildings were sold by auction, "to be taken down and removed on or before the 10th October,"—a sentence which has been carried into complete effect.

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SOME

FURTHER ILLUSTRATIONS RELATING TO DISS.

It is at the suggestion of Mr. Dawson Turner that I venture to add, to the foregoing account of the Guildhall at Diss, three or four unconnected etchings (very humble amateur performances) relating to the same parish. This is a needful, and will be considered a sufficient, apology.

The town is somewhat removed from the beaten track of intercourse between the chief towns of East Anglia, and was formerly so little frequented by travellers, that it became a proverb at Cambridge, to express indifference respecting trivial matters, "He knows nothing about Diss." According to Blomefield\* there were in 1736, "near 240 families and near 2000 souls." His own interleaved copy of the portion of the Norfolk History relating to the Hundred of Diss, which afterwards belonged to Honest Tom Martin and was presented by Mr. Wilkin to the Norwich Literary Institution, contains the following memorandum, probably in the handwriting of an intermediate owner.

"Number of inhabitants in the parish of Diss, taken June 5th and 6th, 1770:—

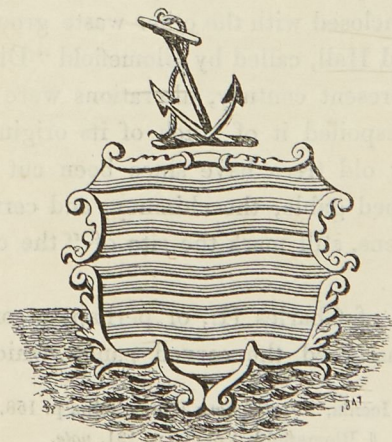
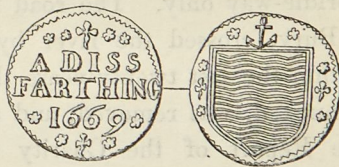
\* Vol. I., p. 38.



Presbyterians . . . . .	33	The number above 16	
Jews . . . . .	4	years . . . . .	1221
Quakers . . . . .	30	Under 16 years . . . . .	782
Catholics . . . . .	6		
Anabaptists . . . . .	2	Souls . . . . .	2003
Methodists . . . . .	4		
Church . . . . .	1924	Houses . . . . .	296
Total . . . . .	2003	Families . . . . .	393 "

In 1841, the population had increased to 3205; and a railway, diverting the traffic from the noble inn built at Scole in 1655, promises to add still further to the importance of the town.

The characteristic feature of its topography is the Mere, to which the town probably owes its existence as well as its name. Hence the shield wavy adopted as a device upon the Diss Farthing,† coined, in defiance of laws and proclamations, during the scarcity of money, and especially of small change, in the reign of Charles II. A similar shield, somewhat modified, is still used as the local symbol.



† Blomefield, Vol. I., p. 38.

Towards the south, at no great distance, the boundary line of the parish and of the county is drawn by the river Waveney, here only five miles from its source. "Hic limen Norfolciæ," writes Sir Henry Spelman, "tuetur Lopham, e cujus latere, velut ab eodem alvo, enascentes discordes fratres, Isis minor et Waveney fluvii, contrariis alveis, hic per Dille," [Disse] "in oriente Garienem petit, ille per Thetforde, in occidente Lennvm Regis; suo ambitu totum Norfolciæ australe hemisphærium complectentes."‡ It appears that, in the thirteenth century, it was one of the services of the lord and tenants of the Manor of Dickleburgh Rectory, to carry part of the abbot's wine from Norwich or Yarmouth to Palgrave Bridge.¶ This was a foot-bridge, or, at most, one adapted to a bridle-way only. The road from Diss, through Palgrave to Bury, crossed the river by a ford, seldom impassable. Within the last twenty years the bridge, a sketch of which is annexed, was removed, and an arch for carriages erected. The Report of the Charity Commissioners has recorded several sums contributed by the parish of Diss to this improvement.

At the northern extremity of the parish, near the termination of the "Heywood," formerly a chase-way or strip of common, but inclosed with the other waste grounds in 1814, stands Heywood Hall, called by Blomefield "Diss Hall."§

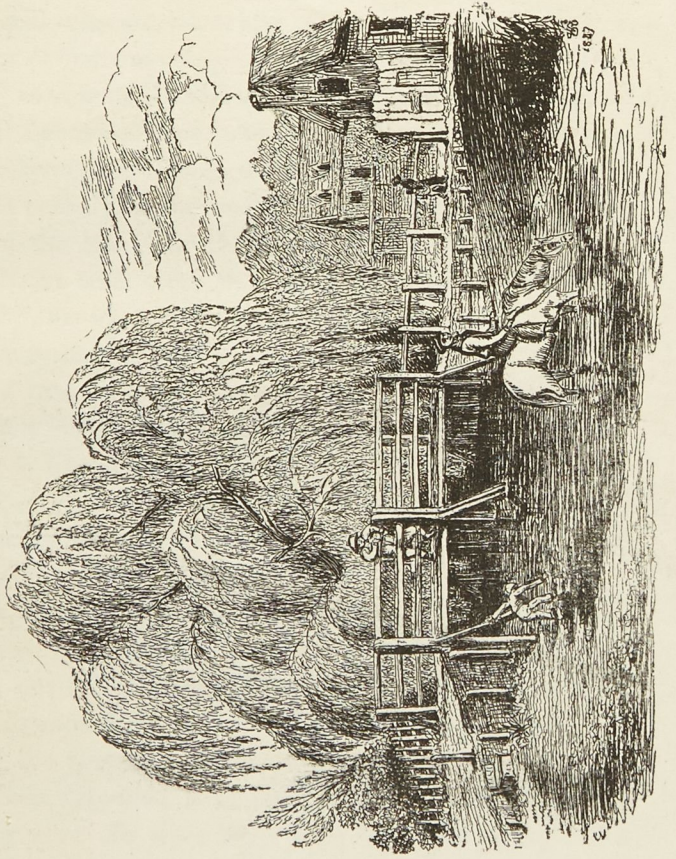
Before the present century, alterations were made in the house which despoiled it of much of its original character; and many very old trees have since been cut down. But the corbie-stepped gable, the chimney, and certain traces of moats and gardens, still mark the site of "the capital Manor House."

To the reign of Charles II., or perhaps a somewhat later date, may be assigned the carved panels which remain in

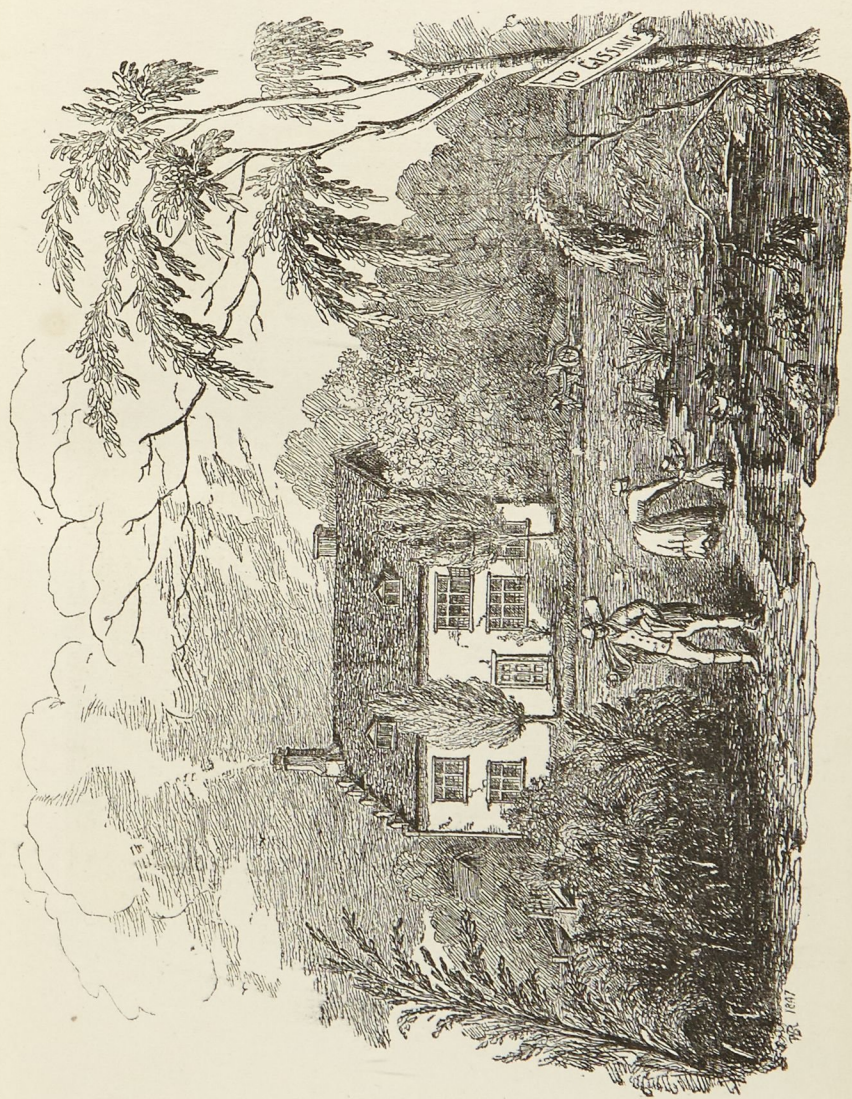
‡ "Icenia," *Posthumous Works*, folio, p. 158.

¶ Blomefield, Vol. I., p. 191, *note*.

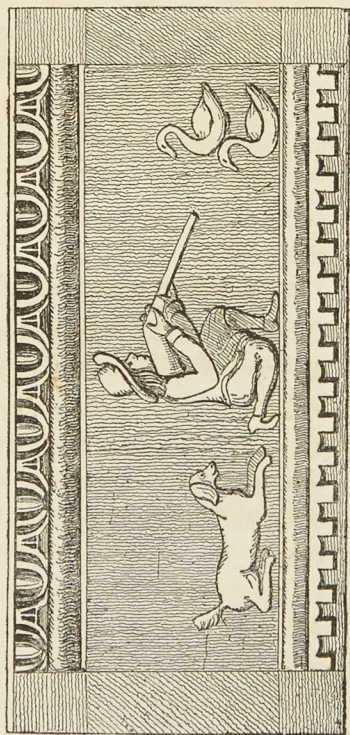
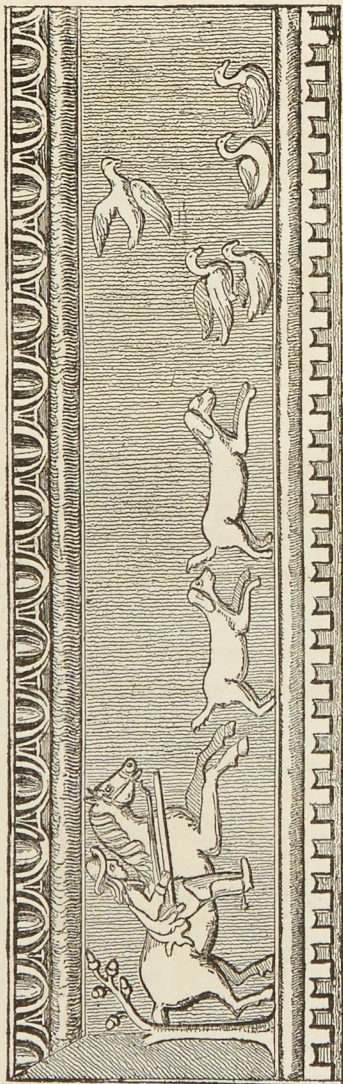
§ Vol. I., p. 15.



Cock-street Bridge, Diss. (Page 20.)



Heywood Hall, Diss. (Page 20.)



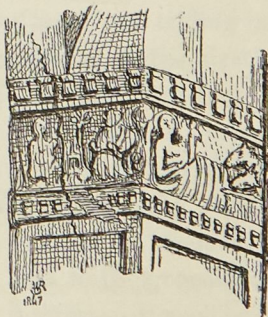
one of the upper rooms, having, no doubt, been removed from their original situation. Their subject is a duck-hunt—a pastime which Strutt\* justly describes as “barbarous,” and which is now happily obsolete.

Blomefield mentions an almshouse of brick, built on the east side of the churchyard at Diss, by Mr. Robert Burroughs,† who was Lord of the Manor of Roydon Hall with Tufts, and Patron of the Advowson of Roydon.‡ He wrote his name

*Ro: Burroughs:*

This almshouse was pulled down some years ago, and the site laid into the churchyard. In the Charity Commissioners' Report, it appears to be confounded with the house built in 1610, pursuant to the will of Richard Fisher, but which last, Blomefield says, was down in 1736. ||

Besides that upon the angle-post of the Guildhall, some other similar carvings have been suffered to reach the present times. One of these will be found on the house in the occupation of Mr. Charles Alger, near the ancient site of St. Nicholas Chapel. This capital is in nearly perfect preservation. It is more deeply and boldly carved than the annexed etching would indicate. The subject on the north side is the Birth of Christ; that on the



\* *Sports and Pastimes*, Hone's edition, p. 284.

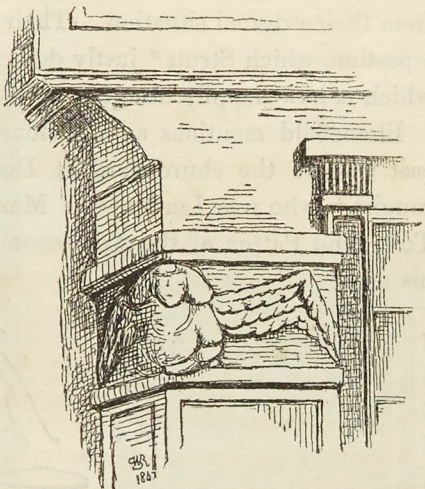
† Vol. I., p. 37.

‡ Vol. I., pp. 40, 46.

|| Vol. I., p. 36.

east, I suppose to be the Purification of the Virgin.

Another instance occurs on the north-west corner of a house in the Market Place, occupied by Mr. E. E. Abbott.




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These desultory notices are offered to the Society with diffidence, and are closed with the hope that other individuals, far more competent than the writer, may be found to collect and preserve, in the spirit and with the industry of Blomefield, the archæological remains of *Blomefield's own district*.

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