

ESHER PLACE.

By RALPH NEVILL, F.S.A., GODALMING.

IN this paper I do not intend to go into the general history of the manor, to which, as told in the County Histories, I have no new facts to add, but to confine myself to the architecture of what is left of the mansion, and such part of the history of one very great man, Cardinal Wolsey, as is connected therewith.

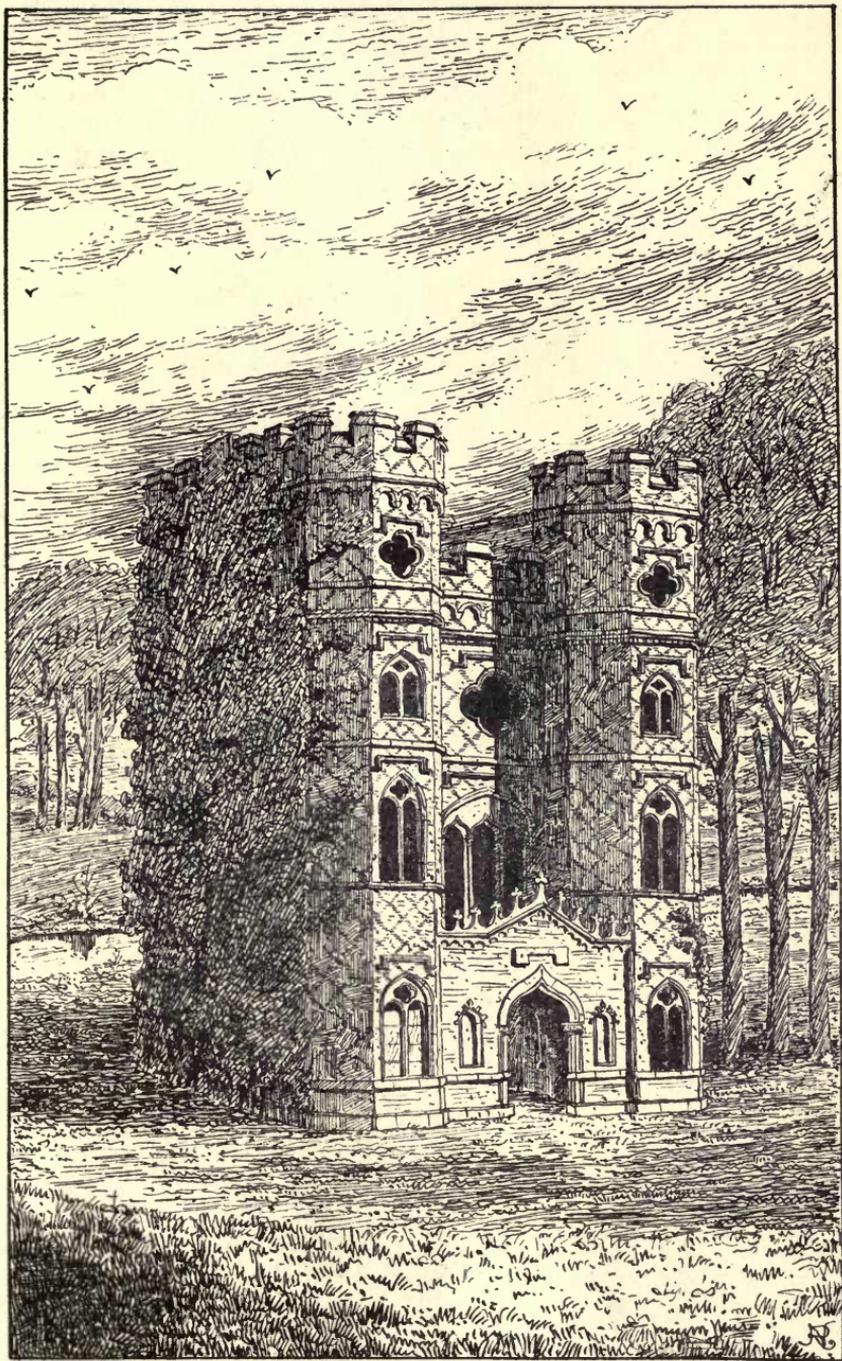
The story of that great man, interesting to us all as a matter of our history, has by the splendid genius of Shakspeare become so household a treasure that I do not think anybody will repent a visit to this the scene of his penance, that part perhaps of his life by which he will be ever remembered, when the recollection of his pomp and glory has passed away.

Full particulars of his residence here may be found in the "History of Cardinal Wolsey," by Cavendish, his gentleman of the chamber, from Holmes' edition of which book the sketch here given is principally taken.

The manor of Esher having passed into the possession of the bishopric of Winchester, William Waynflete, the founder of Maudlin College, Oxford, built here, between the years 1450 and 1480, what is called "a stately mansion of brick."

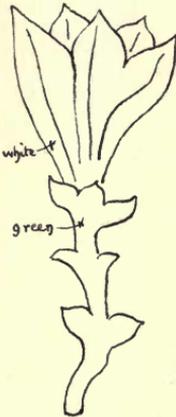
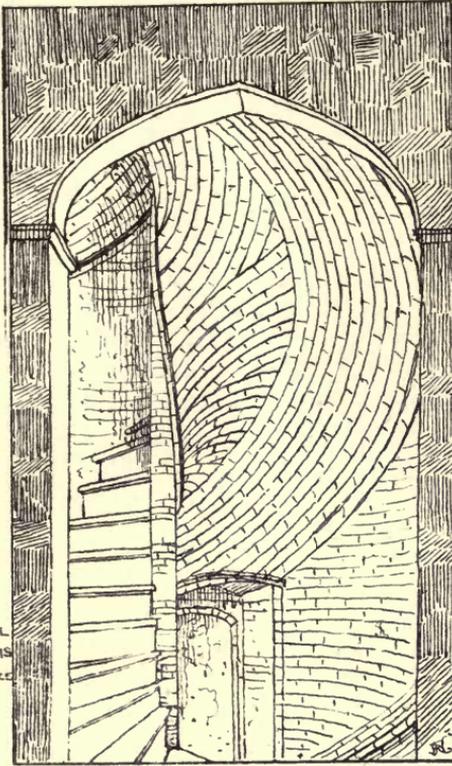
What you see is all that remains of the original building; how much of it is of Waynflete's date I will presently explain.

When Wolsey obtained the bishopric, he commenced adding to the building; but his occupancy was so short as to preclude his doing much. Brayley thinks that he would be too busied with the divorce to attend to building matters; but we know from the Records how keenly

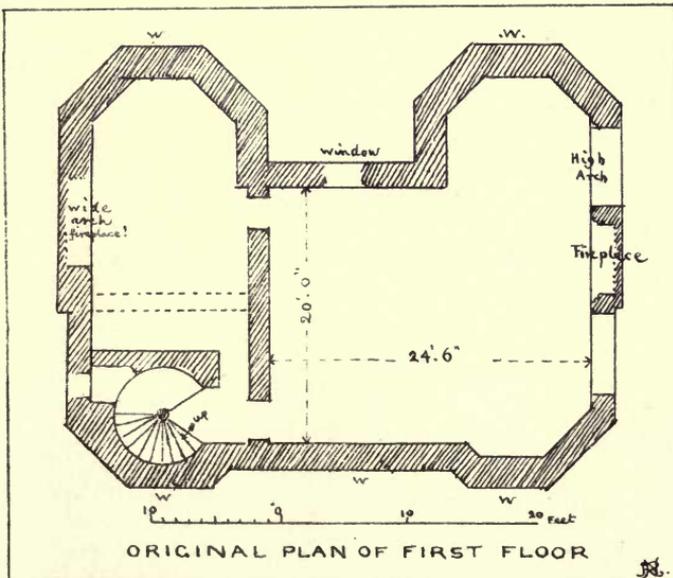


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GATE TOWER OF ESHER PLACE



SKETCH of STAIRS



GATE TOWER of ESHER PLACE

all the time of that suit he was looking after his great works at Oxford and Ipswich; and we know also from Cavendish that he built a fine gallery here.

From Wolsey the estate passed to the King, and thence through the Drake family, kinsmen of the great seaman Sir Francis; through the Lattons (a family of some importance in the time of William III.) to the statesman Henry Pelham, who retired here, as commemorated by some lines in Thomson's Seasons. At this time the place was possibly considerably out of repair, as it does not seem to have been the chief mansion of the Lattons; at any rate, the house was remodelled by Kent, the architect of Burlington House, the Horse Guards, and other buildings, and more honourably known as one of the principal advocates of the modern school of naturalistic landscape gardening.

The estate eventually passed into the hands of the Spicers, who pulled down what are said to have been Pelham's additions, and built the present mansion.

For convenience sake I will trace the architecture backwards, first premising that the whole of the brick fabric as it is, is undoubtedly Waynflete's original work.

The entrance-porch is altogether Kent's. The difference of the bricks from those of the old house will be seen at once. It is an attempt at an imitation of Gothic, done by an architect and workmen ignorant of its principles both of construction and design.

In a book published by Kent, containing designs of his own and of Inigo Jones, are drawings of a screen in Gloster Cathedral, of a front for the Court of King's Bench, and of a pulpit for York Cathedral, showing a form of crocketing similar to that you see here.

I may mention that in the same book is the drawing of a classic mantelpiece for Esher Place.

He also constructed a new staircase, of which the trace is seen to the right on entering. There are here also remains of elaborate plaster-work in the florid style of the period.

Of much better, indeed of very graceful design, is the arcading and vaulting of the entrance, the shafts of

which are of stone, the remainder being of wood and plaster.

The original brick arches of Waynflete's work are to be seen here where the plaster has broken away.

With regard to the windows throughout the building, I confess to having been at first sight much puzzled by them.

There is externally little or no apparent sign of their having been inserted, and though they are obviously not of the date of the original building, there is yet a delicacy of design about them, a true feeling of Italian, especially Venetian work, that made me think they must have been done at an earlier date and by workmen working in a style to which they were accustomed.

I have had the opportunity of making a most careful examination of the building with my friend Mr. Charles Cooke, the architect, for whose help and opinion I am exceedingly indebted, and we have succeeded in detecting clear evidence in several places, especially internally, of the insertion of the windows: perhaps this is most clear in the case of the quatrefoil over the porch, where the arch of the original window may still be seen on the inside. The manner in which the corner octagons on the left-hand side have been cut away internally to admit of an embrasure to a window larger than was originally built there, will also be noticed.

We have come to the conclusion that these windows were put in by Kent to suit the altered requirements of the house. Of the same date are the stone plinth and string.

I will direct your attention to the flooring upstairs, which is of very solid concrete, about two inches thick, supported solely on a single layer of ordinary thatch rushes laid across the beams. As there is no apparent sign of nails on the top of these beams, we at first thought that part at least might be original; but on breaking a small piece for a specimen, we solved the question by finding imbedded in it one of the small bowls of an old-fashioned clay tobacco-pipe, at once bringing the date at least below King James I.

This mode of constructing a practically fireproof floor is at any rate worth notice. I am told that it was practised in the south of Yorkshire within the memory of my informant, and may be so still there and elsewhere. The plaster in that case was made of a native gypsum rock.

It is melancholy to see the state the building has fallen into. A few more years and the brick vaulting on the south side must open and fall in, as several of the arches have already done. Ivy, that inveterate enemy of archæology, is slowly and surely splitting the building in two, while it conceals beneath its picturesqueness the mischief it is doing. I would that the Society for Preserving Ancient Monuments would turn some of their energy against this worst of destroyers.

The present possessor takes great interest in the building, and we may hope that the mischief that has been so stealthily creeping on may now be arrested. Unless this be done, and that shortly, we shall, I fear, lose what I think is one of the most interesting monuments in the county.

Of the date of Waynflete is the winding brick staircase, a piece of construction in brick of most ingenious design and sound workmanship. The clever way in which the jointing of the vault is arranged should be observed, newel wall-strings and original steps being all of brick. The large beams over the modern staircase are original, and the colour, red, can still be seen on the edges of the chamfers, and on the under side a stencilled pattern of lilies, which Mr. Crace, who first observed them, thinks to be "Maudlin lilies," the badge of Waynflete.

On the left-hand side at entry was the porter's lodge, vaulted in brick. Since the meeting of the Society we have opened two narrow slit windows ending in circles, one on each side, such as commonly placed in that position to allow of inspection of strangers.

The Hall or Great Chamber was, as is proved by a passage in Cavendish, on the first floor.

It is difficult to speak with certainty of the arrange-

ment of the various rooms, but I judge that the great chamber occupied the centre of the present building; the doors on each side communicating with the private apartments. It is possible, however, that this formed an antechamber, and that the principal room was in one of the side wings destroyed.

Several of the old fireplaces may be traced, though now bricked up; one on the south side has its jamb formed of the same moulded bricks as the arches below.

The various coats of arms, the glass, and the hammer-beam roof described by Aubrey, have long disappeared; they were probably destroyed by Kent.

In Wolsey's and Waynflete's time the whole place must have been very like a small piece of Hampton Court, where similar gatehouses are to be seen, as, indeed, in most work of the period. The original windows were also, doubtless, like to those at Hampton Court, where also, curiously enough, there is some imitation Gothic by Kent, the jointing of which resembles that of these windows.

It is clear from old prints and other evidence that the house extended with wings on each side, probably originally with return ends from these forming a quadrangle.

What Kent did was probably to remodel these wings, and to build offices beyond them.

On the N. side of the house was a flower-garden of the usual formal character, and a large orchard, shown in one of the prints, and mentioned in the inventory of Henry VIII.'s belongings.

The entrance was on the side away from the river, and it was by this that Cardinal Wolsey, after his disgrace, arrived, having taken boat from York House to Putney, and ridden thence with a large company.

It was to this gatehouse also that Sir John Russell, founder of the Bedford family, came from Hampton Court on Allhallow night, in the midst of a terrific storm, bearing from the King to Wolsey a message of cheering import, and up those stairs that he was led to

an audience with Wolsey, then to a supper, and a brief repose on a bed, while his clothes were being dried previous to his riding back to Hampton before day, "not willing for anything it were known he had been with my lord that night."

When Wolsey first arrived, he and his household were in a most pitiable state, and so continued for three or four weeks, there not being plate, beds, hangings, cooking utensils, nor furniture of any sort in the house; indeed, he was forced to borrow a few necessaries from Mr. Arundel and the Bishop of Carlisle; only, says Cavendish, "there was good provision of all kinds of victualls, and bere, and wine."

I should, perhaps, mention that it was usual in those days to carry the furniture and all household effects about from house to house.

After Allhallow day, however, the King caused to be sent to him all such necessaries, including furniture for the chapel, which, however, was not delivered of so rich a character as ordered.

Here, also, Wolsey was visited by the Duke of Norfolk, one who had a chief hand in his overthrow, but who on this occasion behaved to him with chivalrous courtesy.

The Duke on this occasion is said to have addressed the yeomen, telling them in what great esteem their loyal adherence to their master was held by all men.

I must not omit to mention the scene narrated by Cavendish, when, on Cromwell's suggestion, Wolsey, having assembled all his chaplains, yeomen, gentlemen, &c., in the great chamber, enters to them clad in the purple rochet of a bishop, and seeing them there all so faithful to him in his misfortunes, overcome by his emotion, turns away awhile to where the great window is, and, after mastering himself, addresses them in pathetic speech, recommending them for the most part at that time to betake themselves for their annual holiday to their families, or where they would, promising to find them afterwards places with the King or others; as indeed was done.

By his own dependents Wolsey seems to have been held in the greatest affection, justifying the eulogium passed on him in Shakspeare :

“ To those that sought him sweet as summer.”

Wolsey being told that his yeomen, for lack of wages, will not be able to travel to their own homes, winds up his speech with an appeal for help to his chaplains and others who have had rich preferments from him ; whereon Cromwell sets an example with five pounds, and others follow, some with five, some with ten, till a goodly sum is gathered.

In spite of the King's occasional favours, however, every effort is made to annoy the poor Cardinal ; among other things is one particularly shabby,—the King takes down a gallery that Wolsey had lately erected, in order to rebuild it at Westminster. This gallery, if it be as surmised, the one shown in a drawing among the Cotton MSS., consisted of an open arcade of Italian work on marble shafts, with an upper story lighted with projecting windows of alternating shape, with a profusion of metal vanes, coats of arms, &c.

At last the poor Cardinal, wearied out, falls seriously ill, and petitions the Court to allow him to remove elsewhere, as the “ moist and corrupt air ” of the house makes it impossible for him to live there. Henry, alarmed, sends Dr. Butts and two other surgeons specially to cure him, and a token of favour from Mistress Ann Boleyn, and soon after allows him to move to Richmond, after which Esher knows him no more.

It is here, however, that Sir William Shelley comes to propose to him to cede to the King York Place, the property of his archbishopric, which Wolsey, after ineffectual efforts, tells him to take, since so it must be, but bids him remind the King that “ there is both a heaven and a hell.”

Hence Cromwell is dispatched on his famous mission “ to make or marr,” and to strive his utmost, backed by Wolsey's urgent letters, to get the King to leave untouched his two great Colleges at Oxford and at Ipswich,

the latter of which, alas! with all its rich endowments, is swallowed in the avaricious maw of Henry and his courtiers.

Here, but for the dramatic necessity, rather than at York Place, should be the scene of that grand speech to Cromwell, ending with that heart-broken outburst that will vibrate through all time :

“ Oh, Cromwell ! Cromwell !
Had I but served my God with half the zeal
I served my King, he would not in mine age
Have left me naked to mine enemies.”

NOTE.—Since the above was written, Mr. Cooke has pointed out to me that Sauvageot's work on the French châteaux contains an illustration of a brick staircase at the Château of Blois, built by Francis I., in every respect similar to that at Esher.

At first sight it would appear as if Wolsey might have brought skilled artificers from France to construct this piece of work, but when we remember the short and late period of his career during which he held the Bishopric of Winchester, we must, I think, conclude that this method of construction was usual at the time. Other examples of the period that I have had an opportunity of inspecting have unfortunately been plastered so that one could see nothing of the joints.
