

OAKHAM CASTLE. (THE HALL FROM S.W.)

Oakham Castle.

BY J. HOLLAND WALKER.

ON Saturday, July 5th, 1924, the members of the Thoroton Society visited Oakham, where they inspected and studied the Castle and the Church.

Although Oakham is in a neighbouring county, and is therefore strictly speaking outside the purview of the Thoroton Society, yet it has some slight connection with Nottingham in its dim past, and it seems advisable that some notes as to the antiquities discussed by the members during their visit should be included in the Transactions of the Society.

The present remains of Oakham Castle consist of a roughly square enclosure of some two acres, surrounded by an earthen bank of varying height which reaches its maximum in the south west corner, where it assumes something of the shape of a mound, and is nearly 30ft. high. Within this enclosure in addition to modern buildings, stand the ancient hall, an ancient well now fitted with a pump, and countless mounds which represent vanished buildings. Some of these mounds have been levelled to form a tennis court, and between this tennis court and the eastern end of the hall, traces may be made out of what looks like the foundations of a large square building, which at some time past appears to have been attached to the hall. This is rather obscure and difficult to locate, and does not seem to have been scientifically investigated, but its presence is of considerable importance in elucidating the history and use of the hall.

The earthen ramparts surrounding the enclosure are crowned in places by remains of a mediæval stone wall, and about the middle of the western run of this wall is what remains of a small bastion, which may have carried a turret. This is best seen from the pathway leading down the east side of the churchyard, and it is observable that there is some sort of window in its projecting face. The wall, though almost vanished on the crown of the bank, will be seen to go right down to the original ground level in several places when inspected from the outside, shewing it to have been a revetting wall for the older embankment.

The whole area is enclosed by the remains of a moat, which is still easily traceable, although towards the south it is completely occupied by modern houses. On the eastern side the road to Burley and some gardens occupy its site, shewing it to have widened out very much; probably it was doubled, and the raised footpath on the east side of the Burley road represents the counterscarp.

To the north the moat becomes very wide, while towards the west it is easily traceable.

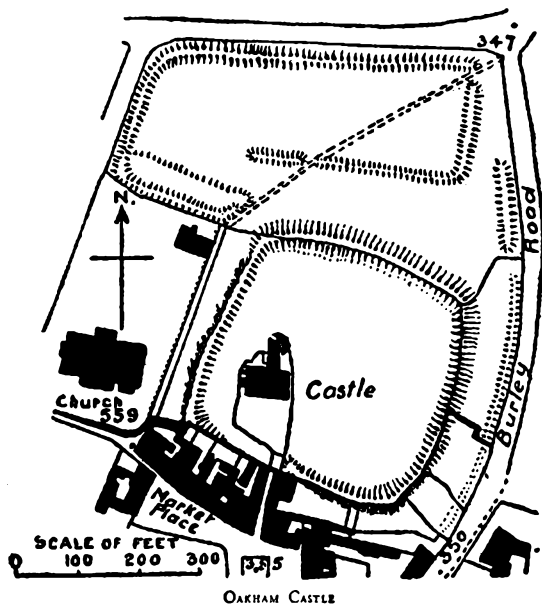
Across the wide northern moat is an oblong enclosure, now used as a public recreation ground, surrounded by a continuous bank, but the south east portion of this bank thickens to a platform overlooking the church-yard and the Caroline buildings of Archdeacon Johnson's school.

The modern footpath crossing the recreation ground diagonally, and its connection with the footpath by the church-yard, obscure here the defences at this corner, but it rather looks as if this platform were erected to overawe the town at some time or other.

Now, it is manifest that we have here an extremely unusual type of castle; there is no evidence

of a Keep, and the two rectangular enclosures do not seem to support each other in any way. Beyond the very formidable moat, which only surrounds one enclosure and the scanty ruins of wall and one bastion, there appears little preparation for defence, and yet the hall is of the very highest architectural merit, and speaks of great wealth and importance at the time of its erection. It is almost impossible to understand Oakham Castle without some knowledge of the history of Oakham and Rutland, which knowledge will provide a key not available by any minute survey of the remains themselves.

The first query arises is why is Rutland called "Rutland" and not "Oakhamshire." The neigh-



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bouring counties are all named from their County towns—Leicester, Nottingham, Lincoln, Northampton, etc.,

and our difficulties in this respect are intensified when we find that the area of Rutland, small as it is nowadays, was materially less at the time of the Domesday survey in 1086, part of the modern county being in those days allotted to Northamptonshire, while the remaining portion might almost be looked upon as an appanage of Nottinghamshire, so close is the connection in the survey.

This query has never been very satisfactorily answered ; but the hypothesis advanced by the writers of the Victoria County History of Rutland, seems to be worthy of consideration. According to Gamer, Rutland, with Rockingham and Winchester, was given in 1002 to Emma of Normandy, upon her marriage with Ethelred the Unready, and no doubt she retained it after her second marriage with Cnut. We know that she quarrelled with her son Edward the Confessor and that he sent Godwin and other Earls to Winchester " to take the lady unawares and deprive her of her countless treasures—." But as the account of the transaction continues " they let her live at Winchester, though without her hoard," there is nothing to shew that she was deprived of her rights over Rutland, or that it ceased to be a Royal dower. Anyway, Edward the Confessor granted Rutland as a dower to his queen Edith, with the proviso that upon her death the fruits of the church should go to the Convent of St. Peter at Westminster. William the Conqueror seems to have respected this gift, and the dower remained in her hands till her death in 1075, when it reverted to the crown deprived of the fruits of the church with its four chapels of Egleton, Langham, Barleythorpe and Brook. It was granted from time to time to various folk, reverting to the crown upon the extinction of the family of the grantee or through other causes. Thus, in the reign of Stephen, about 1165, it

was granted to Robert, Earl of Ferrers, about whose son Walkelyn we shall have something to say when we consider the Hall, and it remained in the hands of the Ferrers family till about 1221. At last, in the fifth year of the reign of King John (1204), Rutland is first mentioned as a county, when it is given, again as a dowry, to John's queen Isabella d'Angoulême "Comitatus Roteland et ville de Rockingham." The hypothesis advanced is that the district being a compact and fertile one that could be used as a royal dower, it not only maintained its individuality, as do several other similar districts in England, as, for example the "Parts" of Lincolnshire or the "Ridings" of Yorkshire, but was raised to the dignity of a County as a compliment to its royal holder.

In this account of the early history of Rutland, a point arises which will help us to understand the earthworks that we surveyed in the earlier part of this paper, namely that from 1002 to 1075, the lordship seems to have been continuously in the hands of the Queen of England—either regnant or dowager—and most important of all that during the terrible time of the Norman Conquest, the Lordship was held by Edith, Queen to Edward the Confessor.

Leaving now Rutland, and turning to Oakham, we find that the Domesday record reads

In Ocheham with five berewicks church sokeland Queen Edith had four carucates of land to geld, land for sixteen ploughs. There the King has two ploughs belonging to the Hall (ad aulam) and nevertheless there can be four other ploughs——in King Edward's time it was worth £40 ——There is sufficient land to occupy sixteen ploughs.— In King Edward the Confessor's time it was worth £40 and is worth the same now.

From this record several points emerge ; first, that before the conquest and, as we know, up to her death in 1075, Queen Edith was the main landholder of Oakham, as well as of Rutland ; secondly, that in the year of the survey 1086, the hall and a considerable tract of land was in the King's hands ; thirdly, the hall is definitely referred to as a " hall " ; and fourthly, the value of Oakham had suffered no diminution since the days of King Edward the Confessor.

Bearing these facts in mind we may now renew our consideration of Oakham Castle, confining ourselves at first to the first enclosure. We know that in pre-conquest England, the residence of the lord of a manor consisted of a great hall or club-room, to which many folk had right of access, and that appended to this hall were various subsidiary buildings, kitchens, store rooms and so forth, and that all this agglomeration of edifices was surrounded by a fence, either of wood or earth. What defence this compound could offer was almost communal in its character, and its ideal would be as a place of refuge for the local inhabitants during times of stress. Now, the Normans found it necessary to introduce defence, not for the community against outside aggression, but for themselves, against the community. They were a conquering people, holding down a much more numerous subject people by terrorism and force of arms, and their edifices which paralleled the pre-Conquest Halls, were the well-known Motte and Bailey castles, of which we have so many remains. Had Oakham been given to a Norman, we should have expected to have seen some trace of a motte, but we know that Edith, the widow of Edward the Confessor, who was William the Conqueror's friend, was allowed to remain in possession of her old holding, and consequently no

drastic alteration was necessary to the buildings of the *caput manerii*, so that the earthworks surrounding the first enclosure may be taken as representing, if not actually being, the rampart which surrounded the lord's hall in Saxon days. Indirect confirmation of this comparatively happy state of affairs comes from the fact disclosed by Domesday, that the value of Oakham was not diminished during the process of Conquest, which is an indication that Queen Edith was *persona grata* to the Conqueror, and that she was allowed to continue her rule pretty much as in the old regime.

The Hall referred to in Domesday must have stood within the present enclosure, but not on the site occupied by the present Hall. That building, as we shall see, is a hundred years younger than Domesday, and while it was being erected a hall was an essential of the life of the manor, not only for what we have called club-room purposes, but for the administration of the justice of the lordship, and other public purposes, so that it is probable that the Hall of Queen Edith and William the Conqueror was left in use while the later building was put up, and was pulled down or put to other uses when its successor was ready for occupation.

During the terrible days of King Stephen, the whole country was desolated by civil war between Stephen and the Empress Matilda, daughter to Henry I. Partisans of both sides, disregarding the wholesome doctrine that castles and other fortified places were only allowed to exist at the king's pleasure and under his licence, built themselves unlicensed or adulterine castles throughout the land wherein they lived safely, and preyed upon the countryside. No more ghastly picture of a nation's misery could be imagined than that portrayed in the English Chronicle, and the upshot was that for hundreds

of miles the country became desolate, and the people died of starvation or worse. But Oakham was more fortunate than its neighbours, for there is a treaty between Ranulph, Earl of Chester, and Robert, Earl of Leicester, who mutually agree not to fortify certain districts bounded by a line passing through Oakham, so that we may infer that Oakham was spared the worst horrors of this awful period.

In 1227, Henry III. granted Oakham to his brother Richard, Earl of Cornwall, who afterwards became the king of the Romans, and gave him permission to stockade the enclosure, taking brushwood for that purpose from Stokewood.

Now Richard got mixed up in the Barons wars ; he was a really capable and good man, and had seen a good deal of service both in France and Palestine, in the company of Simon de Montfort, but owing to circumstances which do not concern the story of Oakham, he was on the King's side at the battle of Lewis, and was captured somewhat ignominiously hiding in a windmill after that fray, so that his feelings towards the leaders of de Montfort's party must have been pretty bitter. After Simon's death at Evesham in 1265, parliament disinherited his followers ; and these desperate men, knowing that they could expect no mercy, decided to fight the matter out, and immediately fortified themselves in various parts of the country, and commenced a reign of terror in their neighbourhoods. Amongst these disinherited was the Earl of Derby, who ravaged and plundered in the Midlands during the years 1265-1267, and no doubt he would pay particular attention to the property of his enemy, the Earl of Cornwall, at Oakham, particularly as it was only defended by a brushwood stockade. Here, then, we have an indication of the date

of the fragmentary walls to which our attention was drawn upon our first consideration of the castle. It seems not unlikely that the ancient enclosure surrounding the Hall was put into a thorough state of defence to meet the attacks of the Earl of Derby after the battle of Evesham, in 1265. As a confirmation of this, Dr. Hamilton Thompson, working from an architectural standpoint, has expressed his opinion in a paper contributed to the Rutland Archæological Journal, that the remains of the wall are of the middle of the 13th century.

In 1300 we have an *Inquisitio post mortem*, following the death of Edmund, Earl of Cornwall, first cousin of Edward I., which reads

At Oakham is a certain castle well walled, and in the castle are a hall, four rooms, a chapel, a kitchen, a stable, a barn for hay, a house for prisoners, a room for a porter, a drawbridge with iron chains and a well. The castle contains within the wall two acres of ground. Outside the castle is a garden, worth with fruit and herbage 8/- and a fishpond and moat worth 3/4.

It will thus be seen that in 1300 not only were the main features of Oakham Castle exactly as we now see them, but that the old designation of Hall had vanished and the stronghold is definitely referred to as a Castle.

Before going in detail through the *Inquisition*, a word or two may be said of the somewhat obscure later history of the castle. No great event seems to have occurred in its vicinity and it passed through many hands before it came into the possession of its present owners, the Finch family. Its history has been well worked out by Dr. Thompson and by Miss Pearl Finch, and amongst the notable owners may be mentioned Piers Gaveston, William de Bohun, Thomas Lord Cromwell, and the first and second Dukes of Buckingham.

Turning once more to the 1300 inquisition, we find that we have mentioned the castle with walls whose date we have attempted to fix at 1265, and that in the castle is a hall, consideration of which we will defer for the moment, four rooms, a chapel, a kitchen, a stable, a barn for hay, a house for prisoners, a room for porter, a drawbridge with iron chains and a well. It is very difficult to locate these items, but the kitchen is probably represented by the rectangular enclosure of half obscured banks adjoining the east end of the hall. Certain indications inside the hall, which will be pointed out later, seem to point to the chapel being also either in or over this area. The "four rooms" would no doubt be private retiring rooms for the lord and his family, and would normally be at the dais end of the hall—in this case the western end—but all traces of them, together with the stable and barn for hay, have vanished. The "house for prisoners" is pointed out by doubtful tradition as being the bastion projecting from the western wall. This prison was somewhat notorious in its day, and there are several letters patent of Edward III., and Richard II. referring to it. In the reign of the latter monarch, several prisoners were allowed to escape, and at last, in 1380, a Commissioner was appointed to enquire into the state of the gaol, with the ultimate result that Richard Raille, one of the keepers, was replaced by a more efficient gaoler. The room for the porter and the drawbridge would doubtless occupy the site of the modern entrance, which is itself an interesting restoration of an erection of the first Duke of Buckingham, early in the 17th century, while the well with its modern pump is still in use.

The "garden, worth with fruit and herbage 8/-" is undoubtedly the oblong enclosure now used as a

recreation ground. It would be used as a kitchen garden not as a pleasure garden ; a few flowers might be grown for the benefit of the honey bee, but in the main such crops as cabbage, beetroot, peas, beans, garlic, would be the products of this enclosure.

The " fishpond " was undoubtedly the wide part of the moat, towards the north of the castle, and between it and the garden and in the quiet waters of this fish pond and the moat would be cultivated the carp, and other coarse fish, that formed so valuable a part of mediæval diet. It is disappointing that no light is thrown upon the great earthen platform overlooking the churchyard, but in our present state of knowledge we must be content to leave both its date and its use as an open question.

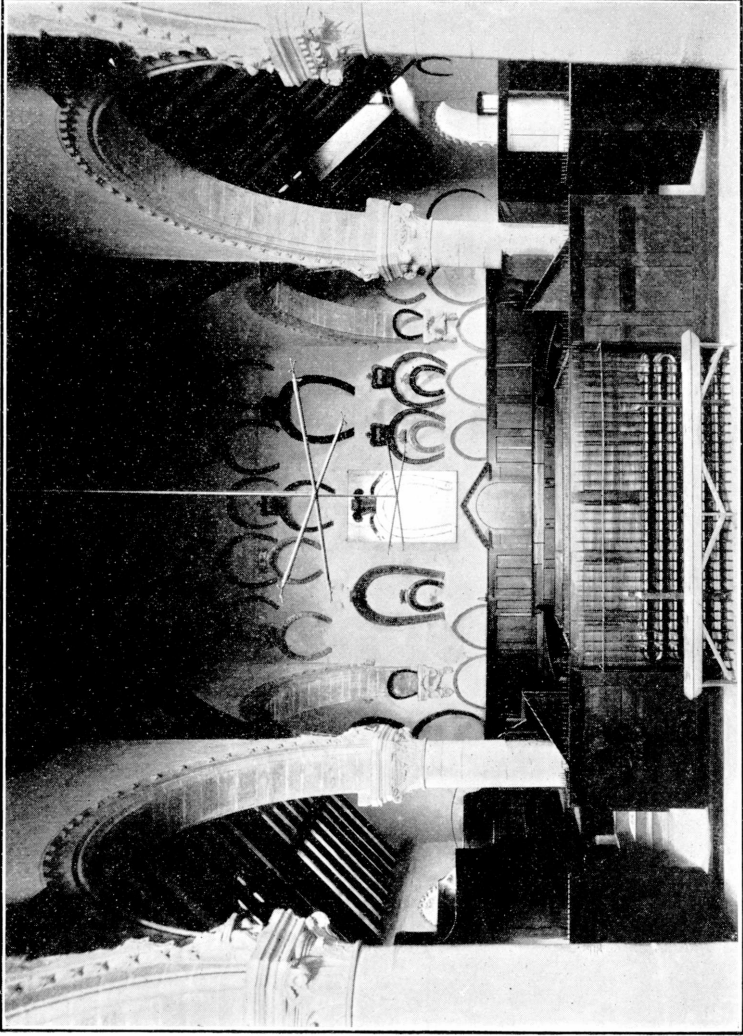
We now turn to the Hall, the most spectacular, if not the most interesting feature of the Castle, and before examining it in detail, a word or two as to the use of halls in general may not be out of place. The hall was the common meeting place, the refectory, the club room, for the whole of the family, whether master or man, whether man, woman or child. There was little desire for privacy in mediæval times, and the whole non-working life of the family was lived within its walls. Its rush strewn floor served as a sleeping place for the common herd, and down its centre ran, in early days, a great fire trench, replaced in later times by brasiers. At one end, raised a few inches from the ground was the dais, with its high table for the lord of the manor and his friends, and from this dais he administered justice, and transacted the business of the manor, ate his food and held his revels. In the wall at the opposite end to the dais, are usually to be found two doors leading to the kitchen and buttery, and the hall itself is entered by a

door in the side wall at the end remote from the dais. To prevent draughts, a screen was set up against this door, which screen was gradually extended right across the hall, with an opening to provide access to the kitchen and buttery doors, and as time went on the space between the screen and the outside wall was covered in by a ceiling, and the space above it was used as a musicians' gallery, or in more refined days for the ladies of the household to watch the proceedings on the floor of the hall.

Such a hall we have before us at Oakham, and it was erected about 1180 by Walkelyn de Ferrers. Walkelyn was a son of Robert de Ferrers, to whom the manor had been granted in 1131, and was a descendent of Walkelyn de Ferrière St. Hilaire in Normandy, who was master of horse or "Farrier" to William the Conqueror, and whose name appears on the roll of Battle Abbey.

The hall is a stone built structure standing east and west, and having a nave and north and south aisles. It is almost basilican, though the clerestory windows are omitted, and in this it probably reflects its descent from the Anglo-Saxon Shippon type of hall which consisted of a huge wooden nave, used for human habitation, while the aisles were occupied by cattle, above which were lofts used as sleeping places for the men on one side, and the women on the other.

Approaching from the south side, we notice that the gables of the roof are terminated by two grotesques, a sagittary to the west, and a St. George to the east, the spring stones of these gables also carry curious grotesques. The southern elevation presents in the aisle wall four windows and a door. The door, however, has been moved. Pictures dated 1720 shew that the door occupied the position now occupied by the most eastern



OAKHAM CASTLE. (INTERIOR OF HALL.)

window, which would be its normal position, and there are mason marks on almost every stone to tell of its removal. Each window consists of a double lancet richly decorated, each pair differing from the others. Internally, each double lancet is contained by a single segmental arch, decorated with dogtooth. The upper space over each light is built solid, so that the windows are square. Two grotesques occur, one on each side of the doorway. These do not appear to be *in situ* although shewn in a drawing of 1720. That to the east is a toad. The hall is lighted above by gables and dormer windows, but only the most westerly pair of these gables is ancient, the remainder, together with the louvres, are quite modern. In addition to the door in the southern wall, there were two, if not three doors in the eastern wall, and also one in the north and the western facades, but the north and west have been so much altered that it is difficult to say what happened there. In the eastern gable is a window with modern tracery and a blocked up window of very much later date than the hall. The ashlar are much larger than one would look for in Norman work, while at the north east angle is a curious ground course and drip stone, which seems quite incapable of explanation.

Upon entering the hall, the first thing that strikes one is that the builders have departed from the usual custom of building a hall upon an undercroft, as at the Jew's House, Lincoln, or at the Hall at Bishop Auckland, and have provided a ground floor Hall. The Hall is divided into nave and north and south aisles by colonnades of three columns, carrying segmental arches enriched with dogtooth. The east and west arches spring from corbels, not responds as is more usual. The reason for this is that the responds by projecting, would in-

terfere with service, while corbels would allow tables or benches to be set flush against the wall.

The dais was at the west end, and the hall would be entered through its door in its original position at its south-east corner. This door would lead into a passage, the right hand side of which would be formed by the east wall of the hall, interrupted by the doors leading to the kitchen and the buttery, which have abandoned the segmental arch. On the left hand of this passage would be the wooden screen carried right across the hall, which would stop the draughts to a certain extent, and which would contain an opening into the main hall. This passage would probably be ceiled, and above this ceiling would occur the minstrel gallery. Probably the nave would be used for tables, and the aisles for service and so forth. The windows are extremely curious, the slender walls below them which give them the appearance of window boxes being unique. The bases of the columns have foot mouldings, and their capitals are enriched with magnificent carving, so like the work at Canterbury, where at this time William the Englishman was busily engaged in repairing the damage caused by the fire of 1174, that it is difficult to dissociate the two works. The capitals are round in the neck, and crowned by a square abacus having the corners chamfered. The scheme of enrichment is based upon the Corinthian capital, having well marked caulicoli, but the place of the rosette is taken by an ornament that might almost be called an embryo stiff stalk leaf, while the free introduction of dogtooth shews the influence of the Early English school. On the whole, these capitals may be studied with the utmost care, not only for their beauty, but because, in them we may trace the development from classic ornament as represented by the Corinthian capital, to the

Gothic work of the 13th century, as represented in the stiff stalk and dog tooth enrichment.

The spandrels of these arches contain decapitated images of musicians, whose instruments are unfamiliar and difficult to recognise, while the corbels carry grotesque beasts such as a cat-a-mountain, and portrait masks, that on the south east being Henry II. and his Queen, Eleanor of Castile, and it is quite possible that the masks on the north east may represent Walkelyn de Ferrers and his wife.

The roof is modern with the exception of the red oak king-post truss, put in by Charles Villiers, first Duke of Buckingham, and contemporary with the old work of the modern gateway through which we entered the enclosure.

Turning now to the eastern wall, we shall see at its northern angle two round headed openings blocked up, the one above the other, and further that the end of the northern wall is thickened out in an extraordinary manner, so as to present a footing for an upper floor at the level of the upper of these two openings. At first sight the explanation of this arrangement is that the wall thickening is to provide a support for the minstrel gallery and that the two openings were in connection with a stairway leading to this gallery, but reflection shews that if a stone footing were necessary to the north, it would be equally necessary to the south, for the support of the gallery. Tradition points to the lower of these doors as being the entrance to the chapel, while the upper one led to the priests room. But it was not the mediæval custom to have any room over the Altar, and although this is sometimes departed from, as at Elkstone Church near Cirencester, it was very unusual to break the rule. It is possible that the upper door may have

led to the women's apartments which in that case would have been situated in the not unusual position over the kitchen ; but the upper and lower door are so manifestly associated, that it is difficult to see to what use, in this case, the lower door could have been put. In any case, this particular section of the hall, particularly when the treatment of the outside wall is born in mind, presents problems of considerable difficulty to the student.

A word must be said about the famous horse shoes which adorn the walls of the hall, and which are a particularly interesting study in themselves. They hang where they do in consequence of a custom which allows a claim to levy a toll of a horse shoe upon any peer of the realm passing through Oakham for the first time. The picturesque and generally accepted version of the origin of this right is that it was granted to Walkelyn de Ferriere, Master of Horse at the Battle of Hastings, who carried as his cognizance *semée* of horse shoes. But as the Ferrers family only held Oakham for a comparatively short period out of its long history, it is difficult to believe that even so picturesque a custom should imprint itself so deeply in so short a time. The more probable explanation appears to be that it is a survival of an ancient fine or custom not unlike similar and obsolete customs at Dover and Lancaster, and that the accident of the Ferrers arms has added interest to the custom. Commencing as a tax, it has now come to be a privilege to hang an ornamental horse-shoe on the walls of Oakham Castle Hall, where are stored horse-shoes presented by the bearers of many of the great names in British history.

Although Oakham Castle cannot claim to rank in interest with the great fighting castles such as Bamborough, Norham, or Conway, nor yet with the court

castles such as Windsor or Nottingham, it has a deep interest of its own. Although it has seen no sanguinary deeds nor witnessed any stirring historical scene, it has managed to preserve for us something of even greater importance, in that it has brought down to our days almost the very form of an Anglo-Saxon hall and manor house. Because of its peaceful passage through the Conquest, it escaped the necessity of a Mound and Bailey Castle, because of the wisdom of the Earl of Chester and the Earl of Leicester, it escaped the worst horrors of the adulterine wars under Stephen. Its earthworks were merely emphasised in stone by Cornwall in 1265, and its consequent unimportance has brought its main lines down for our inspection and instruction. It is perhaps going too far, but it is very nearly true, that if Queen Emma, wife of Ethelred the Unready, and of Cnut, could walk into the enclosure of Oakham Castle to-day, she would not find herself amidst very strange surroundings.

