CLAYDON HOUSE.

By Lady Verney.

The house at Claydon is spoken of as having been rebuilt in the reign of Henry VII., but there had been an "ancient seat" on the spot in the days of the De la Zouches and Cantelupes, from whose descendants Sir Ralph Verney, Lord Mayor of London in 1465, and M.P. for London in 1472, acquired the property. He was a strong Yorkist, and was knighted by Edward IV. for his loyalty to the White Rose—the "party of progress," says Mr. Bruce. He received large grants of forfeited lands from the King, "considering the good and gratuitous service he had rendered him."

A pencil sketch exists, of uncertain date, representing at least one phase of the old building, with gables in "corbel steps." Its lines were framed on the initial letter of the King's name, as was common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. H during the reign of the Henry's; E during that of Edward, and Elizabeth; while the fashion seems to have lasted into the reign of James I. Although added to, altered, and almost transmogrified, the form of the ancient Manor House may still be traced at the core of the present building.

The central narrow part, which joins the two blocks, I=I, consisted, until five-and-thirty years ago, of two rows of rooms, back to back, so that the ends of the house could only be reached by passing through a whole suite; passages were unknown at that period of architecture, none of the walls were at right angles, the floors rose and fell again in the same room three or four inches in level—it was like walking over a ridge in a ploughed field, and a ceiling varied in height as much as six inches in a length of thirty feet.

In the centre of the house a great chimney with open corners belonged to the hall kitchen, in which, when the house was repaired, a small chamber of concealment was found, in which ten men could stand, a "priest's hole,"

as it is sometimes called, or a "conveyance,"* the secret of which had been so kept as to be altogether forgotten. Such hiding places often existed known only to the owner of a house and his eldest son, and handed down with solemn secrecy to the next generation. In this case it was ingeniously masked by a blind passage in the middle story, and must have been entered by a trap door in the muniment room above at the top of the house, where, too, was a concealed door into a small private stair, long ago destroyed, though some of the stone heads of the steps could still be traced, which communicated directly with the cellars, so that if pursued, a man might retire *up* the public stairs, and then escape down the secret stair, finding his way out by a door less likely to be guarded than the other issues. It was a curious illustration of the probable origin of half the ghost stories, *de rigueur* in old houses, that this room, where all prying investigations must have been discouraged to the utmost, was the haunted chamber of the place. The particular apparition most likely varied with the period, but Sir Edmund Verney, the Knight Marshall, as the most marked man of the family, was the one whose appearance had survived up to the present day; he was supposed to be always looking for his hand, which had been severed from his body at the battle of Edgehill, where, according to the tradition, it had been found, with a ring containing Charles I.'s picture upon it, still holding the King's standard, though the body itself was lost.

The estate of Claydon comprised the chief part of the manors of the four Claydons (with their three churches)—Middel, Est, with Botal (a Saxon word meaning wood), and Stepul. There is a curious little deed dated 1468 in the muniment room, concerning a piece of ground 50 feet by 18, at Steeple Claydon, granted by the Abbot of a convent (Ozeney), which possessed property there, "to the yconomos and parishioners of the vill," to "build a common house for the church and parishioners aforesaid," at a yearly rent of 4d. To the north of the thrashing floor of the rectory of the convent was evidently a sort of little town hall, where public affairs could be dis-

* Two of the Jesuits concerned in the Gunpowder Plot were hid in a similar "conveyance" at a house near Droitwich. They were not found for nine days, when they were starved out.

cussed. Mother Church was wise in her generation, and seems to have felt that as meetings all over Parliamentary England were sure to take place, it was well in every sense that they should be held where her legitimate influence for order and peace could be exercised.

The church at Middle Claydon is "good fourteenth work," as Sir Gilbert Scott reported. The house had been let for one hundred years to the Giffards, of whom one, Sir Roger, and Mary Verney, his wife, rebuilt the chancel in 1517. There is a fine brass of them both, with thirteen little sons on one side, at his feet, and eight little daughters at hers. Dignity was expressed by size, as in the frieze of ancient Egyptian temples. In 1535 both house and church seem to have been still in bad repair, and Sir George Giffard, who then held the lease, undertook to rebuild both, if seventy years should be renewed for one hundred. Sir Ralph, the then owner, refused to "do this for nothing," when Giffard offered him a "hunting horse of the value of £30," equal to £300 at least at this time. It was probably a remarkable horse. Sir Ralph, a young man of twenty-three, was tempted by the bait, and agreed to the bargain; the church was repaired and the house rebuilt; "but the Verneys paid dear for the hunter," as Lord Fermanagh writes significantly in the following century. The next heir, Sir Edmund, was elected M.P. for the county of Bucks, and his brother, Sir Francis, for the town, in 1553. The Borough had only begun to return members eight years before, having refused the honour till then, in order to avoid being saddled with the cost of elections, which then were paid for chiefly by the constituencies, an excellent provision of the old time against bribery. Sir Francis was the third member, and a Verney thus represented the Borough in its earliest Parliaments, as another Verney was doing in 1885, 333 years after.

The two young Verneys were engaged in a plot of the Protestant party (called Dudley's Conspiracy), by which Mary Tudor was to have been deposed, and the Princess Elizabeth placed on the throne. It was proved that Francis and one of his cousins "had plighted their troth by breaking a demi-sovereign in two parts, with the consent of the said Edmund, and so the death and final destruction of their Supreme Lady the Queen imagined and

compassed." The inversion of the sentences is curious, the verbs coming at the end, as in German. Several of the conspirators, among them other members of Parliament, were imprisoned and tortured. Edmund was not put on his trial, and received his pardon under the Great Seal of Philip and Mary, now in the muniment room at Claydon, dated 1556. Francis was found guilty, but his punishment was afterwards remitted.

We have only time for a glimpse of the family life in each century. In 1620, Sir Edmund, Knight Marshall, bought back the lease of Claydon, which had still fifteen years to run, for £4,000. The King had promised to help him with the money, but was always in too great straits himself to pay more than £1,000, which he gave at the outset, and Sir Edmund was hampered with the debt to the end of his life. He had been for several years in the household of Prince Henry, the eldest son of James I., whose picture, probably by Miriveldet, hangs at the end of the saloon. At his death, aged nineteen, which took place in 1612, to the great distress of the kingdom, a household was formed for Prince Charles, with whom Sir Edmund remained as Gentleman of the Privy Chamber, and Charles after his rather cold fashion seems to have respected and liked the chivalrous, warm-hearted gentleman, "a man (says Clarendon) of great courage, of a very cheerful and generous nature, and confessedly valiant, who served his King faithfully, and having eaten his bread for thirty years," as he said, "would not do so base a thing as to forsake him, but who looked ahead and saw the dangers of the course which his ill-fated master was pursuing." "I do heartily wish the King would yield and consent to what they desire, and choose rather to lose my life, which I am sure I shall do, to preserve and defend those things which are against my conscience to preserve and defend." "He was as good as his word, and was killed in the battle of Edghill within two months after this discourse," as recorded by Lord Clarendon, with whom he had "great familiarity." Sir Edmund's picture, painted by Van Dyck, with the Knight Marshall staff under it, "was given him by the King at the same time that he gave him his own picture, also by Van Dyck," says an old list. One now hangs over the mantelpiece in the saloon and the other oppo-

site. Sir Edmund and his son Sir Ralph both sat in the Short and again in the Long Parliament together, though on different sides, for Sir Ralph was an earnest Parliamentarian. Though differing on so many points, they were tenderly attached to each other, and were at heart united in all their deepest opinions and feelings, particularly in religious matters. The prominent interest in religious over political questions, even the most absorbing, is extremely remarkable, both in Sir Edmund and Sir Ralph. It was not only that the liberties of England at this time were believed by them to hang as much on one as on the other, but that being men of the world, leading the ordinary life at Court, in Parliament, in business, in war, and sharing in the pleasures and occupations of other men, in town and country, they were among those (and there were many of their class) who truly cared to carry out their ideal of a higher life above all things, though without the smallest pretence of sanctity above their neighbours. "The nobility and gentry of England," says Carlyle, "were then a very strange body of men. The English squire of the seventeenth century clearly appears to have believed in God, not as a figure of speech, but as a very fact, very awful to the heart of the English squire. He wore his Bible doctrine round him as a man wears his shot-belt, and went abroad in it, nothing doubting;" and their wives were as high-minded and pure-hearted as themselves, as may be seen in the letters and papers relating to Margaret wife of Sir Edmund, and Mary the wife of Sir Ralph. "It was a period," Mr. Hallam remarks, "more eminent for steady and scrupulous conscientiousness in private life than any, perhaps, that had gone before or has followed after." Now Edmund, too, as was said of Colonel Hutchinson, had a loving and great courtesy to the poorest, which was already felt to be part of the demeanour of an English gentleman.

After his father's death Sir Ralph had a hard time of it. He was left with the charge of six out of nine brothers and sisters, from twenty-three to nine years of age, dependent upon him. The times were out of joint; hardly any rents were paid, and the debts on the estate were very large. Charles, on the advice of Strafford, had borrowed money, in 1641, from his household and friends, for the expenses

of the war, and Sir Edmund was mulcted of £1,000, which was never returned to him or his heirs. Sir Ralph refused to take the covenant, and in spite of his zeal for the Parliament, was voted out of the House in September, 1646, which, with his keen love of politics, seems to have half-broken his heart; and his estates, and those of his wife, in Bucks, Berks, and Oxford-shires, were sequestered. "Since December I have not had above £90 out of all my estate." He took refuge in France, where he continued eight years, and where his beloved Mary died. An inventory, taken in 1645, of Claydon and its contents, shows that the house must have been a large one, for fifty-three rooms are mentioned, more than there are at present. Probably, however, a great number of them were very small, as almost every one has a chamber or closet within it, without any other issue. The gallery and the inner chamber to it, my lady's chamber and her closet, the little and the great frippery where the clothes were kept. The disorganization of the country is shown by the description of how, since the war, the goods have been removed, to be safely laid up, while the pictures were, many of them, rolled and sent to be warehoused in Holland. There is a fine Vandyck of Lady Carnarvon, a great friend of Sir Edmund's, and one called a Velasquez, of his brother, Sir Francis Verney, which were probably thus treated. Pictures of his brother, Edmund Verney, who had been fighting for the King in Ireland under Lord Ormond, and was killed in cold blood, after the taking of Drogheda, of Sir Harry Lee, his father's friend, commemorated in "Woodstock," a fine head by Cornelius Jansen, hang in the pink parlour and breakfast-room.

At Sir Ralph's return to Claydon, in 1652, all things were set in order by that most methodical of men, and almost the first money he could dispose of was spent in erecting a great monument to his father and his mother, his wife, and himself, with four excellent busts, which he had ordered in Rome during his travels. There is a curious account of the way in which the work was delayed by a Cardinal, who refused to allow the sculptor to go on with the work.

There is another description of the house, at the end of the century, when Sir Ralph, full of years, "loved and

honoured by all who knew him," as his niece writes in 1696, came down to Claydon to die. He drove down from London with four horses, a necessity, for the roads of that time were mere tracks; and he writes once how he was dragged out of a slough of mud by horses from a farm near Aylesbury; he slept at Amersham, and reached home next day for dinner, with his niece, "to whom sweete Claidon and your care are the best cordiall she could take." "He dally gros so very weak, and he has no stomach to his meat," but the kind old man forgets no one. Lady Hobart, wife of Sir Nathaniel, an ancestor of the Earls of Buckinghamshire, thanks him for "delicket venison, the haunch was lofley." His sister, Lady Gardiner, acknowledges the receipt of "a hair and four fine chickings," and next "a fat pigg" (spelling was a rare accomplishment with ladies in the seventeenth century). "I have only been in my fir walk twice or thrice since I came down, but he goes out in ye coch to take the aire all fair days." His son comes down to him with his boy, aged nine, "Little Master," as his grandfather calls him —"the sight of you and your child did much revive him" —"but Sir John is going to be married, and his father begs him not to hurry his return till your occasions, which I know are great, be over." Sir Richard Temple visits him, and says his sons are coming from Stowe to dine, but the old man was too ill to receive them. Lady Rachel Russell tells his sister "shee daily prays for his recovery." "The rector gives them the sacrament," "all his servants are as diligent and careful of him as possible; two have watcht every night all the week." Then comes the end—"at 12 this night he left this miserable world for endless joy." "His Son, Sir John, orders the hall and the best court all round, and the Court porch, to be hung all round with black baize, also the brick parlour, the chairs, and four big tables, the entry to the spicery," etc. "The rooms looked very handsomely, though the Heavens wept, with all his relation, at his funeral." We are told his picture by Sir Peter Lely, and that of his wife, in blue and white satin, by Vandyck, whose loss he never ceased to lament during the fifty-one years that had elapsed since her death, hang in the saloon side by side.

There is only time for one more glimpse into the

next century. The house had been inhabited by two successive Lord Fermanaghs, the second of whom was created Earl Verney. There is a "conversation piece" of my Lord and my Lady, their two sons, and their two daughters, all sitting in the garden, bolt upright, drinking chocolate, their cups and saucers poised on the tips of their fingers, in a way which it must have required a special education to accomplish, and a black servant in the brown and crimson livery of the family, bringing in a tray. He is mentioned as "Perigrine Siam, a Moor of Guinea, brought over when six years of age by Mr. John Verney," who had been out with a merchant, Aleppo. Ralph, the second son, who, after his elder brother's death, in 1752, who left a posthumous child, afterwards Lady Fermanagh, was the last male heir in the direct line. He was a man of magnificent instincts, a great deal of taste and knowledge and boundless extravagance; he fought the county in the Whig interests, put in Burke for Wendover, with whom there is a not very satisfactory correspondence, bought up land, rebuilt the house, collected books, rare editions, splendid furniture, (one bedroom was furnished all with silver), sent for a mantelpiece from Italy, with a lovely wreath of ten babies, the size of life; the carvings in his new rooms were beautiful in design and execution, the mouldings in each different, the ceilings in wood, and inlaid work, wonderful in their variety and excellence. He employed Adams, the best architect of the period, under whom the decorations were executed by Italian workmen. He seems to have had a passion for perfection in his works. The central hall has a staircase, each step inlaid like a marquiterre table, and he tried three or four styles of pierced work for the balustrades in different woods, which we all found used in the pig-sty and in the ox-house. At last he fixed upon a lovely pattern in bronze, of scrolls, with wreaths of wheat, etc., "which rustle as you pass," according to an old guide book. "He was lavish and fond of show," says Browne Willis, "using the splendour of a gorgeous equipage with musicians constantly attendant on him, not only on state occasions, but on his journeys and visits. A brace of tall negroes, with silver French horns, behind his coach and six, perpetually making a noise, like Sir Henry Sidney's Trompeters in

the days of Elizabeth, "blowing very joyfully to behold and see." He contested the county three times with the House of Grenville, and voted against the American War in 1780, when Ministers were defeated. The Court influence after this was against him, and he was beaten in 1784, by very few votes, and petitioned, but gave up the struggle, finding that he had no chance of success. He was again elected in 1790 for Bucks, and died in the following year, ruined by Parliamentary contests, and by the expense of building his unfinished home.

He was succeeded by his niece Mary, aged 57, who inherited the entailed part of the estate. She pulled down the great central hall and the ball-room, 100 feet long, still leaving a very large house. She died unmarried, last of the direct line. Her kindly but shrewd face, in a mob cap, with a great blue bow, looks benignantly down from a good picture in the breakfast room, by Abbott. She left Claydon to her half-sister, the difference between the character of the two being expressed by the popular account—"My Lady used to ride upon a pillion behind her coachman (it was still preserved until lately), but Mrs. Verney always rode upon the single horse."

The Verneys were a very Parliamentary family, and represented the county and five of its boroughs eighteen times, always on what would now be called the Liberal side, so that the history of England of the period in a small way may be said to be found in the letters and papers of the twelve successive generations still in the muniment room at Claydon, and are above thirty thousand in number.