Remains of Pargetting in Oxford.

By Herbert Hurst.

IF we regard pargetting as ornament pressed in a concave mould and then transferred to a plastered surface when still moist, we have but one small square of this kind remaining in Oxford, the one on a house, No. 41, Castle Street, a little below White Hall, which is probably the oldest house in Oxford. This same White Hall in former days had its small square of pressed work, as can be seen in a tracing which I have made of it. But two good examples have been lately destroyed, and the fact of their destruction seemed to urge one to hand down in some safe manner the memory of them. The first of these was the small police office near the police station, at the south end of Carter's passage, dated 1611. The cells alone remained until recent years, and were taken down on 19th February, 1897; this we will call the police cells. The second perished about six years since—Falkner's House, a picturesque building, which fell a victim to the Carfax improvement. There was, indeed, a third house, Stanton Hall, later the Three Tuns, just to the west of the Shelley Memorial—the fungus, as some spitefully term it—which perished before our days, about 1840. At present Barry's new block of University College stands on the site. The flower work on the beautiful ceiling at No. 3, Brewer Street, c. 1530, the police cells, 1611, and on others, not forgetting the lobster salad one at St. John's College, must from their nature be also pressed work. The exterior of Bishop King's House, near Walter Hall, and all examples where straight lines and circular ones only came into play, it is better to class under a separate head as ornamental plaster work. To decorate these no pressing frame or special apparatus was required. In both cases the effect is obtained either by the contrast of rough-cast and smooth plaster, or by relief work, as in an impression of a seal. It is as well to be careful in defining the work; for pargetting, in the modern

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acceptance of the term, scarcely extends beyond the lining of chimney flues with a yellowish preparation, supposed to be a tough species of plaster, suited for soot. There does not seem to be any book describing the art, but much that now looks like crumbs of research may be, perhaps, all found hidden in some treatise of which I am as yet ignorant. In a very fine ceiling in the room over the old entrance of St. Alban's Hall, c. 1600, which some of my readers may remember, the unusually broad sides, and some parts of the faces of the beams are hacked over, as if in imitation of the rough cast work; the effect is good. Pargetted work and plaster work are features of timber-framed houses, and it may be of interest to go back a century or so to the time when it was fashionable, and to refer to one or two features perhaps not yet in print. When the framing of this kind of house was complete, the rectangular spaces bounded by styles and transoms were often filled with "wattle and daub," the timbers being, in early work, left uncovered and coloured black or brown. The wattle jacket outside and the lathe and plaster inside made a house much more warm and snug than would be expected, owing probably to the air space between the two jacketings. There is generally a groove of some depth made near the front face of the styles and transoms, to hinder the plaster from breaking away at the edge; this fact has now and then settled whether a partition wall or an outside one was being demolished. In examples, apparently before 1480, some holes, four or five to a panel are made in the upper and lower sides of the transoms, with the intention of forcing in, or "springing" in as the phrase is, stakes like those used for hurdles. These being in place, in and out among them, hazel or other twigs were woven, the surface was then trimmed moderately even, and the plaster applied; this was a well-worked substance of loam, clay, and gravel, with sedge grass or barley straw as the toughening material. The stakes and wattling soon gave way to square timbers, laths and plaster, the laths carried beyond the square spaces and over the timber framing. When this last was hidden imitative timber lines and imitative coins came into fashion. Of imitative timber work I can only furnish you with one example, on a small scale, too, I am sorry to say; it is part of the Wheatsheaf Inn, destroyed 1896, erected 1694. Two or three drawings of portions of the same building will shew their character: a type of window occurring in it, and also in Nixon's school lately demolished, seems at one time to have been rather common in Oxford; an example of it may be seen in stone figures in the front of Black Hall,

St. Giles's. Of imitative coin work two examples are worth quoting, the Danish Dairy Company's house, No. 120, High Street, once Mallam's, and No. 23, Pembroke Street. The first of these has in addition the sole remnant, as I believe, of original, ornamental barge boarding in Oxford; and the old lines of the coin ornament, behind the upper member of the front window, show how the early seventeenth century window design was altered in the next century. The coin work here is very ornamental, and should be compared with one or two specimens drawn by Loggan (Hertford College, Jesus, and another) in 1675. The modern parts of the window can be distinguished by the dentelles, or small projections. The house itself may be dated early in the fifteenth century, judging by the character of the mouldings of the old front, now hidden by the ceiling, and being no less than 6ft. 4in. distant from the present frontage. The house No. 23, Pembroke Street, recalling the portion of Wright's or Prideaux's house, west of Exeter chapel, is still more worthy of notice, not because its coin work is elaborate, but because we have in its topmost story the solitary open example of "winged" windows. In the house just west of the Music Room in Holywell, the wings to the window have been plastered over, but the casements of bottle-green quarries are still there. In one part of Exeter main quadrangle, similar windows drawn in Loggan have been either demolished or are cased up in masonry of the Tudor style. There are several good points in windows of that peculiar form, and probably when other Jacobean manias have fructified and become rotten these may be revived; their picturesque appearance will go far to make them appreciated. Of exterior pressed work there is only one bit remaining, and its locality has been already mentioned. One day a ladder stood there, and I cleaned out some of the tassel-like endings, but could not decide what they were intended to represent. It is a sad duty to say that both lathing and plaster there are rather rotten; if so, the end of early pressed work ornament in Oxford is within a measurable distance. Of Falkner's house, now the Birmingham Bank, near Carfax, four panels are fastened to a wall on the east side of the Museum. Now their surface is decaying, and the bright orange tone of the distemper has become apparent. The pressed work there was bold in execution, and so characteristic that the panels ought to be housed indoors; they cannot be expected to endure long in their present position, and Oxford cannot afford to lose such characteristic

examples. On looking at the patterns it will be seen that they halve at an unusual height, and it is not clear whether they were originally planned to be of the length we see them. It has been suggested that the raising of the roadway about nine or ten feet caused an alteration in the lower stories of this house; the floors of the entire house seem at some time to have been shaken into different levels in a most perplexing manner. In making a drawing of the building, I have taken the liberty of obliterating some of the worst of the more modern additions, and tried to work out what the house looked like before huge shop windows were introduced. I have several odd bits of drawings made to illustrate what a beautiful interior it may once have been. The "Three Tuns" was not so ornamented as Falkner's, but must still have been very picturesque. The diaper pattern on its upper part was clearly much choked up with whitewash when Turner drew the beautiful sketch still in the possession of University College. Here again one would naturally attempt a probable restoration of the front of the ground floor. Above that we are on much safer ground, for William Turner's drawing is just as complete as that of Delamotte is defective. After some consideration it can be safely asserted that the third story not only had wood work similar to Bishop King's House, but the pattern was identical. Nearly a century later than these last there was erected at Folly Bridge the "Ferry Inn" of older days, now Salter's house ; it is the latest example worth notice, and has in it an attempt at colouring. It seems to be simple plaster work. Our grandest example, though one of weak design, is Bishop King's House, and it is also a peculiar one, the upper half being probably Tudor, the lower half a poor flat copy of the same done in 1628. The *modus operandi* of this design was something as follows. The entire face was first of all rough plastered, strips of wood were then lightly nailed up at set distances, on these strips the centres of the different circles were marked off, a moulding guage having a radius arm of the correct length was then worked round upon these centres, plaster being supplied where required. The arcs being complete, they were connected by lines, but the moulded guage was then made to slide along guiding slips, just as in the making of cornices in our time. Before I speak of the three sibyls, duplicates of which are now over the two doorways of Christ Church Library, three over each, it may be as well to say that their source is rather interesting. At the extreme east of Oseney Lane, where the Hamel joins it, there stood an insignificant cottage, but as it was

older and better than its much poorer neighbours, it acquired a little respect, and has been called Christ Church House and Church House. I hope it will turn out to have been the house of the Oseney clerk near to the Hamel-cross. As a cornice to the living room on the ground floor were about a dozen of these sibyls, repeated by threes probably. The house was demolished when the model lodgings were erected near it, to make the corner a little more open. The mason who took it down still lives near the spot, and he gave me these particulars. From another source I learn that Christ Church had them preserved, and, much to their credit, caused them to be cleaned and mounted where I have said. These then will in all probability escape the ruin so common. But they are odd productions, defective in ears—one where there should be four, and the legends all running the wrong way. Now a word or two about these renowned ladies, by way of digression. It occurred to some ardent but not very scrupulous divine of the third century that it would be a good thing to fight the heathen with their own weapons, to show them that their own prophetesses had foretold the coming of the Messiah. It was easy to wrest the real or traditional utterances of one or two sibyls, as they were called, but the gallantry of the writers, we will suppose, led them to disregard the plain assertion by the fathers that all oracles were of diabolical origin. Gradually the number of such utterances, real or pretended, increased, and new ladies were invented to be their mothers, till at last the number twelve was reached, a counterpart to the twelve prophets of the Old Testament. Centuries rolled by; these prophecies of theirs were constantly quoted, never verified, never tested, and finally this family party of young and old ladies, about the time of the much-lauded Renaissance, were esteemed as highly as the Prophets inspired of old. The climax was reached when their goddess-like figures graced the walls of the chapel of the Sixtine Chapel, painted there by Michael Angelo. I have here a scarce and early book upon this subject; its exterior is a tough old sheet of vellum, torn from some service-book, and bears on its surface the denial by St. Peter. But his untruths were a mere trifle compared with the misstatements within the book; altogether it is one of the choicest collections of silly beliefs and manufactured lies ever published, excepting perhaps some more modern reprints of books on palmistry and the occult arts. It may be as well perhaps to quote a sample or two of their feigned utterances. The Persian Sibyl, who, we learn, wore a light blue dress and had a white veil,

said thus regarding Christ, "He shall satisfy five thousand men in the wilderness with five loaves and two fishes, and taking up twelve baskets of the remains, has filled the baskets in hope of more." The Libyan Sibyl was not very young, in rich robes and with a garland on her head; she said "The day shall come, and the Lord shall enlighten the thick depth of the shadows; and (omitting a few sentences) a virgin, the mistress of the nations, shall hold Him in her womb." The Delphic Sibyl, dress not described, said but little to the purpose, "Know the true Lord, who truly is the Son of God." The Samian has a naked sword at her feet, her bust is charming, and there is a thin veil on her head; her prophecy is, "A rich man shall come and shall be born of a poor woman, and the beasts of the earth shall adore him and say, 'Praise Him in the courts of Heaven.'" The Cuman, whom Virgil quotes—"A virgin comes back, the realms of Saturn return; now a new offspring is sent down from the lofty sky." These are but samples, and they suggest a comparison with the trivialities in the Apocryphal Gospels. From history, a little more trustworthy, we gather that false Sibylline books abounded, that Augustus the Emperor had 2,000 publicly burned and the others revised; the early Church was positively inundated with them, and from 1540—1610 voluminous treatises were published about them. Strange as the whole matter is, it has a counterpart in the mediæval treatment of Virgil, who was forgotten as a poet, but figured as a magician, a prophet, and a necromancer, the Faust legend being founded on his legendary history. It is strange, too, that a house of no great pretences in a humble suburb of Oxford should have had the heads exhibited, put around the walls.

By way of conclusion please excuse a word or two as to the material, on which the very essence of the duration of these examples depended. The laths were rather narrow, as can be seen at the rear of the piece exhibited. It seems that the massive lathing of the Tudor and earlier times had passed by. A narrow lath checks that expansion by damp and subsequent contraction by drying which imperil the "keying," or that part of the plaster which is forced through the gaps of the laths. The amount of cow and other hair incorporated is very excessive, to the present day it looks as fresh as when it was first used. It is practically everlasting, and the plaster has in some cases stood for 400 years without a crack, much more without falling. The Merton example is about 1450, that from the police cells was put up in 1611. As a contrast we will think

of ordinary ceilings in our days. The unwisdom or the trickery of modern builders (I do not wish to give offence) reduces the hair to a minimum, so that what now serves for an entire ceiling would in those days have scarcely sufficed for a single square foot. In consequence modern ceilings as ordinarily contracted for, endure for about four years, then develop cracks, and down they fall. In North Oxford as I walk along, about once a month I easily note the debris of some fallen ceiling or other being wheeled out, but it requires almost a magnifying glass to discover the hair in it. It is, all must concede, time that this was put a stop to. The leaf of pressed or pargetted ornamentation is nearly turned over, and, strange to say, a fresh one in which the plainest, most vulgar, and most ineffective kind, threatens to be the next laid open for us. I refer to the poverty-stricken rough cast in Logic Lane and near Holywell Church. It was cruel to inflict upon us the Jacobean style if it is one; some look upon it as a compound of the dregs of Classic and Gothic; to go one stage more into the mire of architecture is almost unbearable. Every house erected cuts off a view of God's hills or God's clouds; repay us then in some way, but not by walls of rough cast. It has been to me a matter of much interest to note how earnestly the men of the seventeenth century set themselves to embellish that which we are content to leave perfectly blank or stiffly lined out to imitate the ashlar work.