

HALL PLACE, BEXLEY

By P. J. TESTER

HALL PLACE is situated in the north-east part of Bexley, close to the River Cray and less than half a mile south of the Dover Road. The house has been the subject of considerable popular interest for many years, though a good deal of misapprehension has been current regarding its age and historical associations. Canon Scott Robertson gave a factual account of some of its past owners in *Arch. Cant.*, XVIII (1889), 370-2, but the few published descriptions of the building itself which have so far appeared are mostly inadequate or misleading. In an attempt to remedy this, the present writer has lately made a close study of the fabric, particularly the older portions, and the results of this investigation are set out herewith.

As it stands now, the house consists of a sixteenth-century block constructed of rubble masonry, with a red brick seventeenth-century extension adjoining its south side. It is generally held that an earlier house stood on or near the site, occupied successively by the "At-hall" and Shelley families, the property passing to Sir John Champeneis<sup>1</sup> in 1537. Of the medieval house there is no trace left. I can discover nothing in the present structure necessarily earlier than the reign of Henry VIII, and it is almost certain that the nucleus of the sixteenth-century block is the work of Sir John Champeneis, dating from about 1537-1540. There is support for this opinion in the fact that the walls which can be shown on constructional grounds to be the oldest are composed of rubble incorporating an astonishing amount of re-used medieval carved stone which was very probably taken from a monastery demolished at the time of the Suppression. During recent structural renovations I have seen Gothic moulded voussoirs, broken shafts, bases and capitals, all set haphazardly in the body of the walls, the carved side usually turned inward and often retaining traces of the coloured decoration which it bore in its original setting.

Such use of stone from a demolished religious house was quite common in the middle of the sixteenth century. For example, stone from St. Radegund's Abbey, Horton Priory and Christ Church Priory, Canterbury, was used in the construction of Sandgate Castle in 1539-40, as recorded in *Arch. Cant.*, XX, 235. Holy Trinity Priory, Aldgate,

<sup>1</sup> This spelling of the family name occurs on Sir John's monument in Bexley Church.



Hall Place, Bexley.  
General view from the south-west.



The North Front of the Tudor building.

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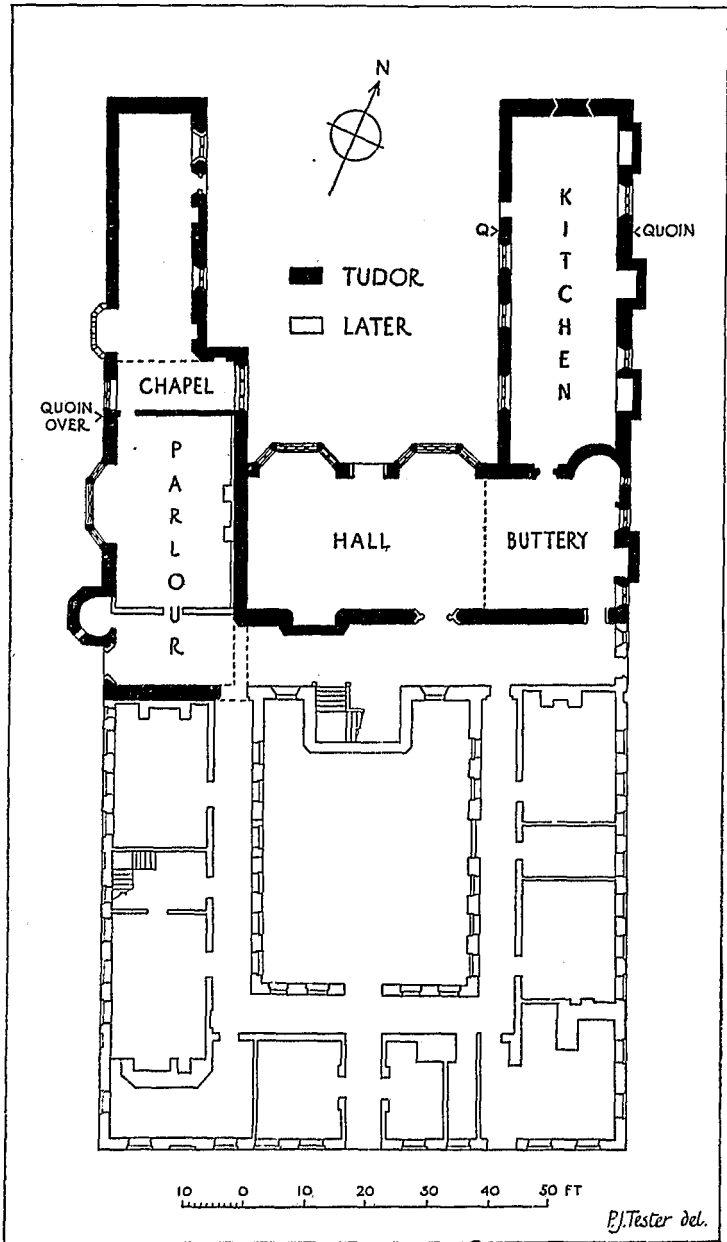


FIG. 1. Ground plan of Hall Place.

which held the advowson of Bexley Church until 1531, was pulled down after its suppression and sold for building material by Sir Thomas Audley. Sir John Champeneis might indeed have obtained his stone from London, where he was a prominent citizen and had been Lord Mayor in 1534. A number of monasteries were no doubt being demolished there about the time he came to Bexley, and stone could have been brought down the Thames in barges to within short carting distance of Hall Place. Alternatively the material may have been obtained from a nearer source, such as Lesnes Abbey or Dartford Priory.<sup>1</sup>

At several points on the outer face of the walls pieces of re-used carving can be clearly identified *in situ*. Mouldings appear in the east wall of the kitchen and the south wall of the hall, while at the north end of the west front can be seen the circular ends of a number of small shafts, bedded into the wall at right-angles to its length.

#### THE TUDOR HOUSE

Sir John's house followed the usual medieval plan which remained popular well into the sixteenth century. A lofty hall was crossed at its west end by a two-storey structure containing the parlour on the ground floor with the bedroom over. Access to the upper room was gained by a newel stair in a turret projecting from the west wall. Attached to the north end of the parlour was an oratory or small chapel. The hall had a single large bay window in the north wall to light the high table at its west end, while at the opposite end the height of the room was divided by a floor, the lower compartment so formed being the buttery. From this the kitchen projected northward, the room above probably being servants' quarters.

Very shortly after the house was completed it was enlarged and the internal arrangements of the hall altered. The details of this second phase of building are described below, but in general it may be stated that the interval separating the two periods was so slight that no difference in the form of the windows or the external treatment is detectable, and the same monastic spoil was used throughout. Internally the Period I walls are lined with chalk blocks, while red bricks were used for this purpose in Period II. Sir John died in 1556 and possibly the alterations were made by his son and heir, Justinian, who lived here until his death in 1596. One of the aims in this later work seems to have been to create a more balanced appearance of the exterior when viewed from the road to the north, the projecting wings on that side being brought to a uniform height and length, and the bay

<sup>1</sup> The latter was pulled down in 1541. In the same year there is a record of stone having been brought from the demolished church of Barking Abbey for the erection of Henry VIII's manor house at Dartford. See *Arch. Jour.*, XXXIII, 69-70.

window in the hall matched by a companion on its east side. This desire for external symmetry is typical of the general tendency in domestic architecture during the latter half of the sixteenth century.

*The Hall.* Most of the north wall of this room is taken up by two large bay windows, the western of which is slightly older than the other.<sup>1</sup> Evidence for this is contained in several features which indicate that the floor over the buttery—which now forms a wide, open gallery—originally extended farther west than at present. It could not possibly have done so while the eastern bay was in existence, as it would have cut across the height of the window, and so the latter must belong to a later phase of construction. The narrowing of the gallery to allow the construction of the eastern bay is attested by the irregular intervals between the beams supporting it across the width of the buttery, those to the west being very much closer together than those at the east. Moreover, in the south wall there are two openings on a level with the gallery but well in front of it, and these obviously at one time gave access from the gallery into the upper compartment of some vanished structure which in Tudor times flanked the south side of the hall. This was most probably a two-storey porch covering the south entrance of the house now represented by a wide opening communicating with the seventeenth-century corridor. The significance of there being *two* upper openings would seem to be that the western is the original and that the other was made when the front of the gallery was carried back in the manner just described. However, as the new front of the gallery was apparently farther east than the internal limits of the room over the porch, direct access between the two was no longer possible. Consequently, the new opening was made as close to the north-east corner of the room as possible and cut obliquely through the wall to come out on its north face just in front of the gallery, the intervening space presumably being bridged by a short timber structure:

A porch of the type suggested and an entrance in the side of the hall was a very usual arrangement in late medieval and early Tudor houses. According to custom the entrance would originally have opened into a passage running across the hall, the west side being a screen through the openings in which admittance was gained to the hall itself. On the other side of the passage was a partition forming the west side of the buttery. All trace of these arrangements has now gone, but in the north wall below the edge of the gallery can be seen the eastern jamb of a window destroyed by the construction of the adjoining bay in Period II.

Between the two bay windows is a modern imitation-Tudor doorway. A mid-nineteenth-century drawing shows a classical-style

<sup>1</sup> The older one is entirely of stone while the tracery of the other is of timber.

opening in this position, with a broken pediment, and this was very likely of seventeenth-century origin.

A fireplace in the south wall was served by an external chimney.

*The Buttery.* Probably this room provided not only a store for drink and a serving place but also a servants' hall, as suggested by the fireplace on the east side. On the south side is a flight of steps, now covered by the floorboards, leading down to a cellar which extends under the buttery and the kitchen. It is doubtful if the square-headed opening at the east end of the south wall existed in Tudor times. Another similar opening, now blocked, can be seen at the other end of this wall, just west of the hall chimney, and both may be due to post-sixteenth-century alterations.

In the north-east corner is a semicircular alcove which formerly contained one side of a wooden newel stair leading to the gallery and thence to the rooms over the porch and the kitchen. The stair was lighted at both levels by the two remaining single-light windows in the east wall. From the fact that the lower part of the alcove is of chalk it would seem to be of Period I origin, but the brickwork of the upper portion suggests repair or rebuilding in Period II.

It is doubtful whether the modern fireplace in the east wall of the gallery above indicates the presence of such a feature in this position in Tudor times. This remark applies also to the fireplaces at present in the rooms over the kitchen.

*The Kitchen.* Evidence of the lengthening of this room is very obvious at its north end where the chalk lining of the original work is seen in the east and west walls butting onto the brickwork characteristic of the second period. On the outside of both these walls the junction is clearly marked by vertical lines of squared stones indicating the position of the quoins forming the corners of the kitchen in Period I.

On the inside of the north wall are indications of a blocked sixteenth-century window.

Two segmental arches turned in brick show the positions of the Tudor fireplaces in the east wall. These are now blocked, but their large chimneys still project on the outer wall. A stone fireplace now occurring between the two blocked ones is a modern insertion. Its flue has been contrived in one side of a projecting turret which has a superficial resemblance to the adjoining chimneys but was in reality meant to house a garderobe which can still be entered by a door on the upper floor. The small privy is lighted by two narrow rectangular slits.

An inspection of the exterior of this east side shows that the windows adjoining the buttery chimney and that next to it are cramped against the chimneys in such an awkward manner that some modification of the original plan is indicated. My suggestion is that both these

chimneys belong to Period II. Possibly in Period I the kitchen fireplace was in the north wall, and when the room was extended a new fireplace was made on the east side in the earlier wall. An external chimney on the north wall would detract from the uniform appearance of that side of the house which, as previously mentioned, seems to have been the objective of the later sixteenth-century builders.

*The Parlour.* The western wing contained the private quarters of the owner and his family and, according to the usual custom, they were situated so as to be as far from the noise and smells of the kitchen and other domestic offices as possible. Entrance to the parlour was probably obtained by a door in the west wall of the hall, but the position of this cannot now be discovered. None of the present internal features is of sixteenth-century age. Above was the bedroom, adapted to other uses in a later period when the fine ornamental plaster ceiling was added. Its seventeenth-century fireplace was inserted in modern times.

A square-headed doorway in the west wall of the lower room, just south of the turret, is modern, as is also the window over it. The wall south of the turret has been re-faced recently and the turret itself rebuilt a few years ago more or less in its old form. A wide, blocked opening in the south wall may mark the position of an original window.

The south-east corner of the Tudor west wing was destroyed by the seventeenth-century modifications carried out on this side of the house.

Lighting the west side is a bay window of fairly modern construction. There is no doubt that it replaces a Tudor feature of approximately the same form, for in an early nineteenth-century drawing a bay is shown here reaching both floors as at present. In place of the present tracery there then existed two pointed openings in each face at both levels, but this was almost certainly not its original form. Apparently the sixteenth-century tracery was later blocked up and the pointed openings made in its place. No doubt the present reconstruction restores the window to something very like its sixteenth-century appearance.

In Period I the upper floor of the west wing only extended as far north as the line of the partition now separating the parlour from the chapel. This is shown by the presence on the outside of the west wall of a quoin like those in the walls of the kitchen previously referred to, and of similar significance. But this quoin does not extend below the level of the upper floor, seeming to show that the chapel and the room adjoining its north side were in existence in Period I only as one-storey buildings. In Period II, when the north end of this wing was heightened, the wall between the parlour and the chapel was demolished and replaced by the existing timber partition. Apparently this was built before the wall was taken down and is therefore slightly north of the original outer face of the wall, thus accounting for the fact that the

east window of the chapel does not occur centrally as would be expected.

*The Chapel.* Running approximately east and west across the north end of the parlour is a narrow room formerly bounded on its north side by a partition, and undoubtedly intended for use as a small chapel or oratory. Its east window is of different character from any other in the house, consisting of three pointed lights with cusped heads enclosed under a four-centred arch. An altar must have stood under this window and there is a very significant arched recess adjoining in the north wall, resembling an aumbry or a credence, such as are found in the chancel walls of pre-Reformation churches. As there are no signs of hinges or a rebate for a door it was more probably a credence, and most likely it was constructed when the chapel was used for Catholic rites. This is particularly interesting, as the arched recess is formed in the same brickwork which elsewhere in the house appears to belong to Period II. If this second phase of construction was due to Justinian Champeneis soon after his father's death in 1556, as has been suggested, it could have taken place during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary (1553-1558), or her successor, Elizabeth, who tolerated the Mass in private up to 1570.

Lining the south side of the chapel is some ancient oak wainscoting which is probably an original feature, in contrast to most of the other panelling in the building.

The original purpose of the long, narrow room adjoining the north side of the chapel is uncertain. Two cupboard recesses in its east wall may have been for the accommodation of books, and as there appear to have been only two windows before modern alterations, the room was poorly lighted. The bay window on the west is entirely modern and replaces a window of similar type to that remaining above, as shown by the nineteenth-century drawing. A view of the house published about 1844 shows that the northern of the two windows in the east wall did not then exist. The west wall is earlier than those to the north and east which are of the same construction as the north wall of the chapel, being lined with brickwork typical of Period II. The explanation of this seems to be that these walls were rebuilt or strengthened when the upper storey was added, and that the plan of this end of the west wing followed these same lines in Period I. This view is supported by the fact that the brickwork of the east wall rests on chalk-lined walling in a manner similar to the staircase alcove in the buttery previously described.

*Chequer-work Facing.* Flint and freestone chequer-work covers part of the north and west sides of the Tudor house, much of it being modern restoration. The original chequer facing was probably applied in Period II and never completed, as suggested by its irregular termination on the west side just south of the chapel.



## HALL PLACE, BEXLEY

### THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BLOCK

A view of Hall Place from the east or west shows very clearly the marked contrast in the appearance of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century work, the grey stone of the former giving way sharply to the red brick with limestone dressings of the later addition. Architectural evidence points to the south block having been built during the second half of the seventeenth century. At that time the house was in the possession of the Austen family. On a spit-rack over the fireplace near the south-west corner is carved the date 1651, though this seems rather earlier than the general architectural character of the block in which the room is situated.

Little alteration was made to the ground plan of the Tudor house by these seventeenth-century modifications. Only the south-east corner of the west wing was destroyed, with the entrance porch on the south side of the hall. Against the earlier structure were erected three ranges of two-storey buildings with attics above, enclosing a small quadrangle. Corridors at both levels on the inside of the enclosure connect the rooms, and a wooden staircase was provided in a structural extension adjoining the corridor flanking the south side of the Tudor hall. Another staircase of the same period occurs in the middle of the west range. Above the main stair is a louvre, capped by a cupola which retains its original vane. The entrance to the later block is on the south side, and there were openings into the quadrangle from the east and west lower corridors, though these have now been bricked up.

Sash windows were inserted in the eighteenth century, but on the east side a few examples of the earlier transom and mullion form remain. The letter D surmounted by a coronet occurs on the heads of some of the downpipes and recalls the ownership of Hall Place by the Dashwood family in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Internally very considerable re-arrangement has taken place and little that is original survives. Most of the rooms at this time present an appearance of melancholy dilapidation which has increased since the house went out of private ownership during the last war and became a billet for American troops. A point worth observing is that here and elsewhere in the house fireplaces, panelling and other features, some being genuine objects of antiquity, have been inserted from elsewhere, during the present century, and this may give rise in future to misunderstanding. Some instances of these insertions were given in describing the Tudor house. Another is the "half-timbered" lining of the north corridor, while the doorway at its east end is of uncertain age and origin.

Balconies which remained until lately on the ends of the two projecting Tudor wings were probably eighteenth century and were entered by large double doors which still remain to mar the otherwise

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very attractive appearance of the older part of the house viewed from the main road.

South-east of the house is an interesting barn which from the character of its brickwork is judged to have been built in the seventeenth century.

Hall Place is now scheduled by the Ministry of Works as an Ancient Monument and is the property of Bexley Borough Council, to whom I am grateful for facilities afforded me in making my survey.

NOTE.—Since the foregoing account was written, Hall Place has been adapted for use as a school. This has involved the construction of steel fire-escapes at the ends of the Tudor wings in place of the old balconies and the replastering of much of the interior. The latter work has hidden many of the features mentioned as evidence of the constructional history of the building, and it is hoped that these notes may therefore form a record of what was observable when the walls were stripped prior to 1957.

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