

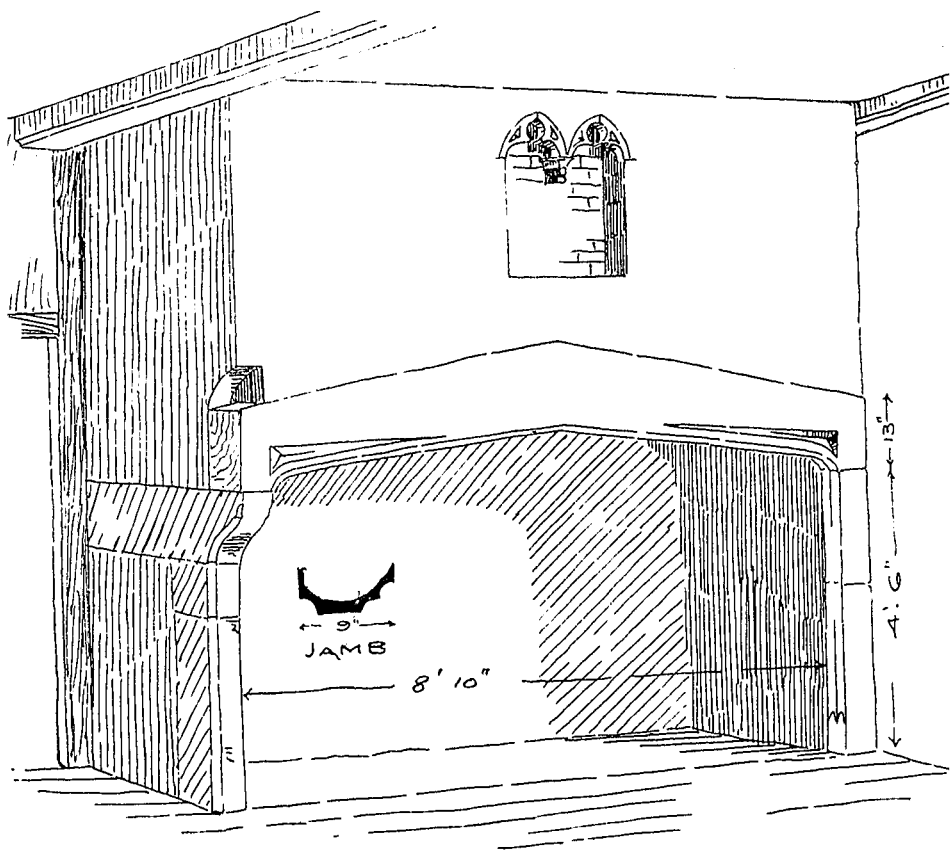
OLD CHIMNEY-PIECE FROM BACK'S HOUSE,
MILTON-BY-SITTINGBOURNE.

COMMUNICATED BY AYMER VALLANCE, F.S.A.

THROUGH the kindness and courtesy of Mr. Marshall Harvey, Architect of Sittingbourne, in supplying me with the admirable drawings he had made, and also a transcript of the late Canon Scott-Robertson's lecture delivered in the Assembly Room at Milton on December 6th, 1877, I am enabled to place on record an interesting relic of the past: I refer to an ancient chimney-piece from Back's House, Milton. This dwelling, situated on the east side of the street, is nearly opposite to the Saddler's Arms. It formerly belonged to the Allens, but came into the possession of Humphrey Back in or about 1638. His son and successor, Thomas Back, owned it in 1658. It is now, as it was at the time of Canon Scott-Robertson's lecture, the property of the Jordan family.

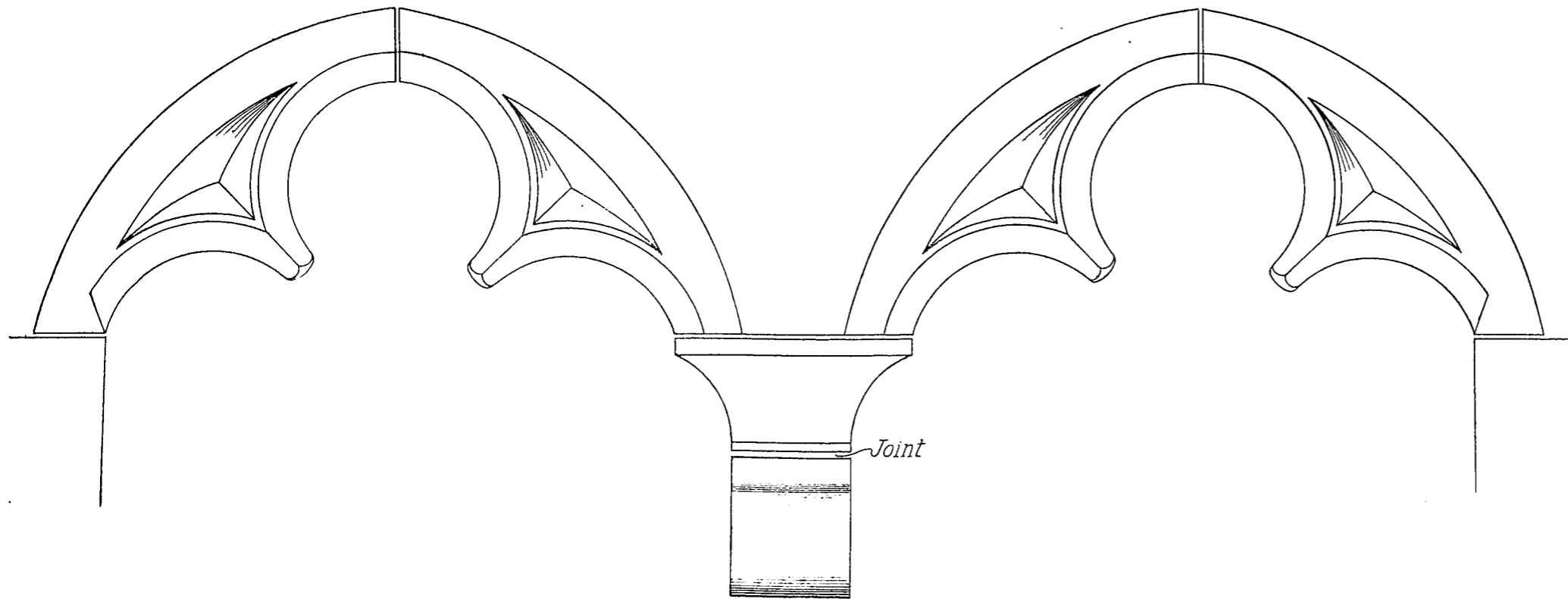
The street frontage of the ground floor is sufficiently noteworthy, recalling as it does—or rather did—the example, more familiar to archæologists, of the mediæval shop-front at Lingfield in Surrey. Like the latter, that of Back's House, Milton, had originally an open, unglazed arcade of timber-work. There were two “round-headed broad lights, with a slightly-moulded mullion between them,” and they used to be “closed by means of an internal shutter, held by a wooden bar across its width. Mr. Jordan,” continues Canon Scott-Robertson, “has glazed them. The door is broad, square-headed, with moulded spandrels and jambs.” Recent alterations have unfortunately transformed the aspect of this ancient shop-front to something considerably different from what it was when Canon Scott-Robertson knew it.

OLD FIREPLACE
BACK'S HOUSE
MILTON (1)



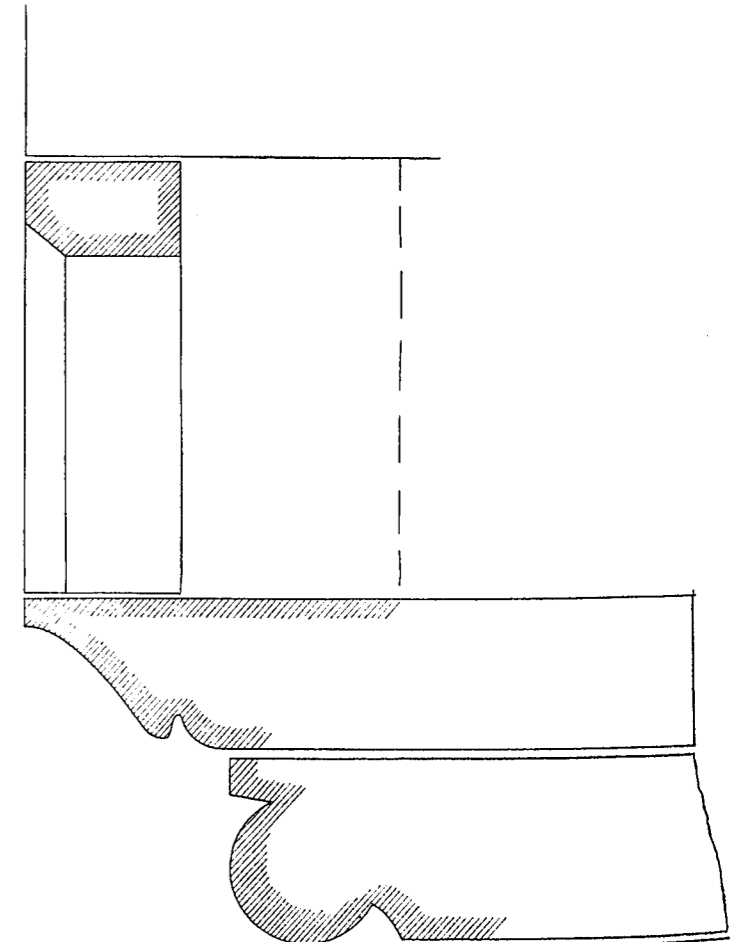
BRICK TRACERY.

From BACK'S HOUSE, MILTON (II).



ELEVATION.

Size: About 3/8 linear.



SECTION.

“In the back portion of the house there is an ancient step-ladder, leading from the floor to a loft or upper storey. The two supporting beams are from six inches to nine inches square, with chamfered under-edges. They rest upon a large block of timber, which forms the first step. The other steps or risers, seven in number, were formed very simply by sawing diagonally in half beams six inches square; these half-beams were then nailed to the two solid sloping supports. Some ancient step-ladders are occasionally found in some of our churches. They are very old and few of them remain.” Canon Scott-Robertson might appositely have cited the instances of similar ladder-stairs in the chapel of St. Nicholas’ Hospital at Harbledown, in Westwell Church, and in Brook Church also, visited by our Society on July 9th, 1908.

But, to resume, the most important feature of the interior of the house was “a huge . . . chimney,” measuring internally 8 ft. 10 in. from jamb to jamb, with a massive lintel of oak forming a chimney opening in the outline of a flattened four-centred arch. Its jambs, which are of stone, “are not alike; the western jamb (towards the street) is straight and flush with the huge horizontal cross-beam. Two hollow mouldings run side by side round the curved junction of the jamb with the transverse mantel-beam, and are continued straight down the jambs. On the eastern side, however, all the lower portion of the jamb is cut away”—or rather set back—“so as to leave its head, rounded and moulded, to look like a projecting shoulder. The cross-beam is 18 in. deep and 11 ft. 6 in. long,” and has “sunk triangles cut in the spandrels. About three feet above the centre of the mantel there is a large niche, with a double-arched head.” These arches are two-centred, with trefoil cusping and mouth. Their outer extremities rest on the sides of the recess on either hand, but the central support and springing-point is a corbel. In the opinion of Canon Scott-Robertson the niche “was no doubt intended to hold the figure (or figures) of a patron Saint.” Its lining consists of bricks laid in courses, but what is by far the most remarkable fact about it is that it is composed of comparatively rare medium-size

moulded bricks or terra-cotta. They must, I think, have been imported from the Low Countries. Not only were they found to be of a different colour from all the rest of the bricks in the place, but they had been put together unintelligently, as though by the hands of strangers. "The left-hand arch," wrote Mr. Marshall Harvey on 22 April 1907, "has stops formed to the chamfers," but this "does not occur in the right-hand arch." Obviously, so it seems to me, they were intended to be set with the stops balancing one another at the opposite ends, as represented in the detail drawing. The corbel consists of two bricks, projecting endwise. The upper one of them is of the original length, as made; the lower has been broken off at the back to the length of the top brick, as the drawing shews. It was not until these bricks were taken down (on the removal of the fireplace bodily in the early part of the year 1907), and were cleaned by Mr. Geering, into whose possession they had come, that the real nature of their material was revealed. Had Canon Scott-Robertson been aware of it, one may be certain that he would have esteemed the chimney-piece even more highly, if possible, than he did. As it was, he pronounced "the whole work" to be "the most interesting relic of domestic architecture that I have seen in Milton." He was probably right in dating it from the time of Henry VII. or VIII.

It only remains to add that the present owner is Edward Locke, Esq., J.P., of Hartlip, who acquired the component parts by purchase from Mr. Geering.