

HILLE'S OR HELLE'S COURT, ASH.

BY W. P. D. STEBBING, F.S.A., F.G.S.

THE manorial history of this ancient domain is traced in Hasted (Vol. 9 (1800), p. 203) and in Planché's *A Corner of Kent* (pp. 89-92). On page 130 of the latter book Planché refers to the court as "the remains of the Manor House of that name, sometimes called Hill's Church Gate, the residence of Sir Edward Peke at the close of the seventeenth century, and", loftily, as now presenting "no features of either beauty or antiquity to arrest our attention. It is inhabited only by the farm servants and other persons in the employ of the present tenant of Goshall, which, embosomed in trees, rises just beyond it."

The contiguity of this manor house with Goshall and another small manor house known as Levericks, of which the site in the field opposite has utterly disappeared, is due or mainly due to the abundance of water. With perennial springs and a fertile soil the land was always valuable and could support many landowners, not one of whom became powerful enough to absorb his neighbours, except by marriage, till modern times.

A family named Slaughter owned the manor in the sixteenth century and they or Henry Harfleet of Ash, who married Mary Slaughter, must have built the original house. Levericks was probably pulled down at this time. Late in the next century it was either Thomas Peke, who died possessed of the manor in 1678, or, more likely, his eldest son Sir Edward, who reconstructed and enlarged what was a small place into something more in fashion with the period.

The following survey of the architectural history of this unfortunate building is due to the kindness of Mr. T. S. Coleman of Goshall, the owner.

Before its almost complete demolition the house which fronts nearly due south was, to all outward appearance, a red brick building rectangular in plan, with Flemish gables, and



FIG. 1. HILLE'S COURT, ASH.
Great chimney stack at back of house
during demolition. April, 1940.

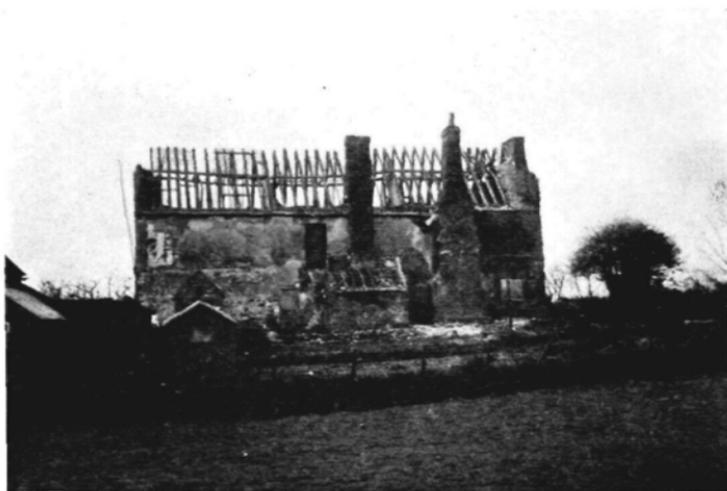
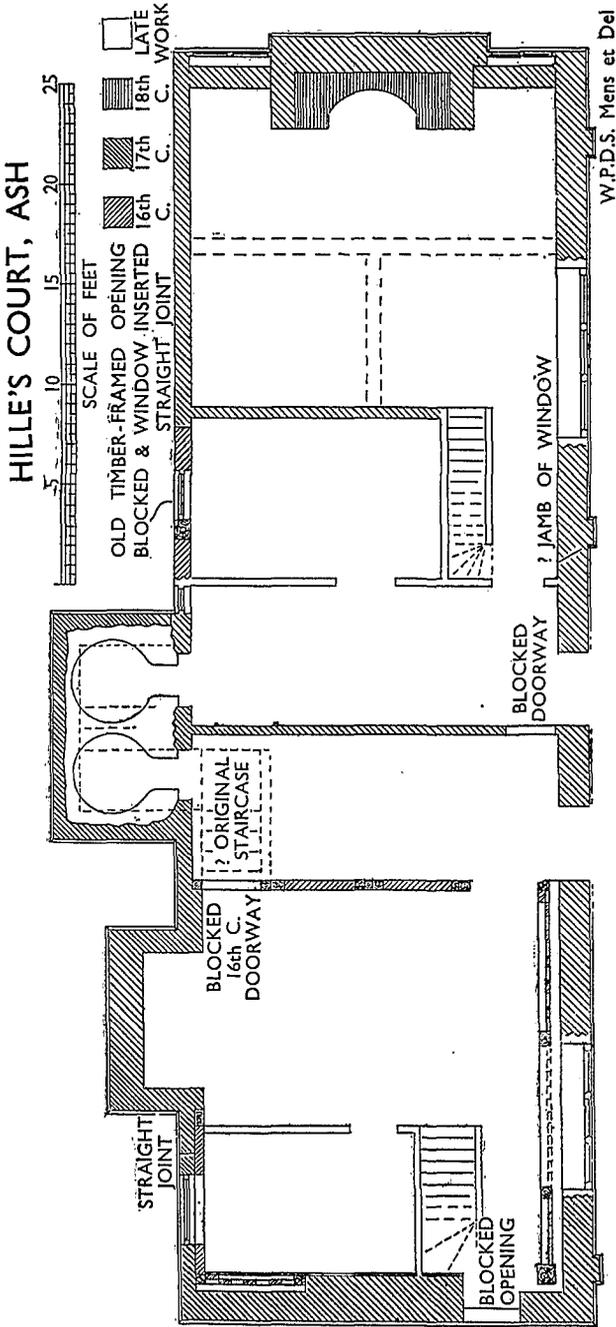


FIG. 2. HILLE'S COURT, ASH.
During demolition. Back view.



chimney stacks which rose through these gables. In its last age as two labourers' cottages the ancient porch and doorway had disappeared, and all the original openings on the ground floor had been blocked. At the back the feature was a very fine chimney stack with two flues which rose in three reducing stages to the plain rectangular upper part (Fig. 1). The head of the stack had unfortunately been rebuilt with modern brick of a different colour and size. On plan its dimensions were $9' \times 3' 3''$. The size of the bricks is $9\frac{1}{4}'' \times 4\frac{1}{2}'' \times 2\frac{1}{2}''$ which corresponds with those of the seventeenth century reconstruction. This opens to speculation the character of the original stack which served the fireplaces, unless the stone chimney piece mentioned later was brought from another house. (Levericks?)

No original window openings remained in use and the two mullioned and transomed three-light windows on the ground floor were of very light timber with quarter round mouldings, and of uncertain date. There were no sash windows in the house although the brick-work might have belonged to the period when such windows were beginning to replace casements, at any rate in progressive centres.

As revealed in the demolition the original house was of half timber construction and had an upper storey which overhung to the extent of $15''$. In the second half of the seventeenth century the house was lengthened and brick-faced. Square pilaster strips relieved the surface. The remodelling included the Flemish gables. The timbering of the roof was of closely set square rafters and possibly replaced an earlier roof of greater merit (Fig. 2).

The length of the house as enlarged was $63' 3''$ above the plinth, with a width of $21'$. The early timber-framed structure was $18' 3''$ in width with a length of $44' 6''$. This last is more or less fixed by a straight joint in the brickwork at the back. The original house, ignoring possible annexes, had only two rooms on ground and upper floors, with probably one long one in the roof. The western ground floor room, measuring $19' \times 17' 3''$, retained most of its timber framing and had at the eastern end in the corner an oak-framed doorway. This before it was blocked seems to have given

access to the staircase which, as mentioned later, was housed in a projecting bay (see plan). The doorway was 3' wide with plain chamfers. Its Tudor arched head gave it a height of 6' 9" in the centre by 6' 6" at the sides. The reveal was limited to the head. The cross wall containing this had a central post and this was strutted by curved diagonal struts. This strutting was also followed in panels on the upper floor at the back of the house.

The framework of the front of the timbered house was of angle posts and uprights set 6' 8" apart except for a narrow bay at the western end. Between the uprights the framework was of timbers 7" or so in width but only averaging 2" in thickness. These were set 7½" apart. The back of the panels was braced by a diagonal. The whole rested on a timber sill which was mortised to take the feet of the framing. The inner face of the sill was widely chamfered off and was painted a dull red (ruddled). This colour was also used on panelling.

The main framework and most of the beams had plain stop chamfers suggesting that the house was a simple one of its class; an exception was a single beam 4' 6" long which was found built in on the upper floor at the western end, and had good Gothic mouldings. It is, however, more than probable that this solitary member with its mortise holes came from a still earlier structure (Fig. 3). The great angle post which remained buried at the south-west corner was a massive timber, 11½" square, set butt upwards. It had a moulding 5½" deep cut out of the solid on its external angles. Above it projected in the usual way on the angle to carry the beams for the overhanging upper storey.

The position of the original doorway was indicated by a 9" chamfered upright at a distance of 20' 3" from the outside edge of the angle post. The height of the ground floor in the western half of the house was 7' 9½" from the bottom of the sill to the lower side of the wall plate; that of the later eastern room 9'.

On the upper floor in the back wall there was a fireplace with a good chimney piece of Hearth Stone (Upper Greensand age) with moulded jambs and a two-piece typical late

Tudor head. It was 6' in the opening, with a height in the centre of 3' 9". The details of the mouldings are Renaissance in feeling especially seen in the circles inserted in the wide chamfering. The shields in the spandrels unfortunately are blank. Presumably, if this is not another case of re-use,

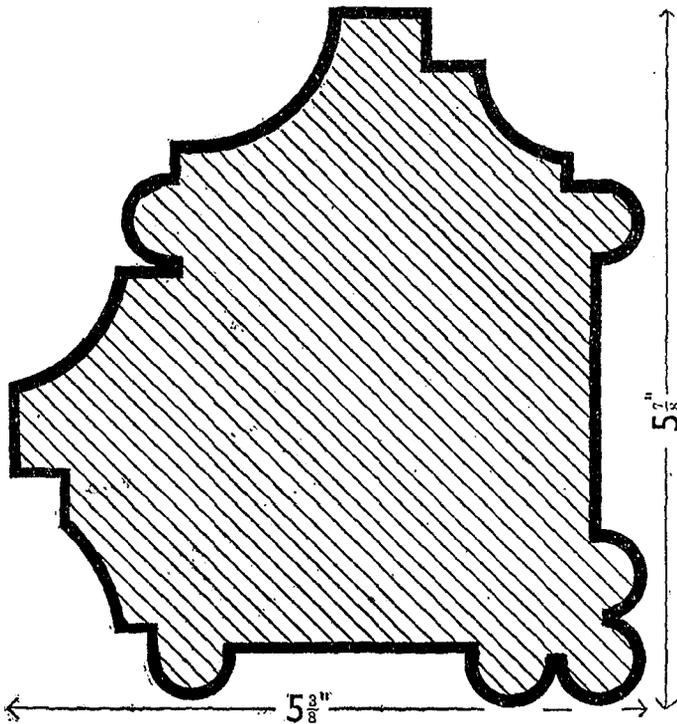


FIG. 3. SECTION OF A LENGTH OF MOULDED OAK,
HILLE'S COURT, ASH.

there was a corresponding chimney piece on the ground floor but what there had been was missing, and all that was to be seen was an early Victorian grate flush with the wall.

Part of the evidence for the junction of the eastern extension to the house was in a break in the scantling, and in the level of the upper floor timbers which were exposed on the front as the brick facing was pulled down.

In the eastern room, which had been panelled in late seventeenth century style, there was a huge fireplace 2' 10" deep and 7' 10" in width. Its oak bressumer had a plain chamfer with a double stop. Later the opening had been reduced in width to 4' 6" and lined with large coloured tiles. In its latest history a cheap kitchener partly filled the space. On the floor above, the fireplace with its bressumer was 6' in width. Each side of the fireplace in the lower room there was a two-light oak-framed window with good mouldings. In the upper room there was a similar one on the right side. From the mouldings these must have been removed from the end wall of the sixteenth century part and re-used in the extension.

At some period in the latest history of the house when its fate was to become two tenements the original staircase, probably of three flights, was pulled out and the lower part of the bay occupied by two ovens (see plan). As the upper part was not needed it was destroyed and the roof rebuilt at a lower level, with a chimney stack for a copper rising above it. A blocked opening in the wall above, which could be seen before the demolition, was possibly the connecting link of the staircase bay with the house (Fig. 2). One interesting feature, however, remained, although hidden from sight by lath and plaster both externally and internally. This was an openwork screen of shaped balusters of a white wood which had shut in the upper part of the staircase as it mounted to the first floor (Fig. 4). From this level three treads remained of the staircase to the roof. Its width was 3' 1" with 10" treads and 8" risers.

The most interesting single feature of the house dated back to its erection when painted walls were as characteristic a feature as panelling. As the first floor was being dismantled a canvas lining, on which were many layers of nineteenth century wall papers, was pulled away from the framed lath and plastered western wall of the original eastern room. This exposed a layer of brown slurry which covered whitewash. Below this on the plaster considerable remains of decoration in sepia was to be made out on the upper part of the wall, and this must originally have covered

the whole surface. The scheme was in panels, each divided up by florid pilasters, with creepers, with large conventional leaves, twining up them. On the upper part of three panels which were intact naturalistic leaves filled that to the left, and a large flower of Tudor-rose type that to the right. The centre panel contained the upper half of a curious



FIG. 4. ONE OF A SCREEN OF BALUSTERS ON THE DESTROYED 16TH CENTURY STAIRCASE AT HILLE'S COURT, ASH. Whitewood (? Sycamore).
Greatest width $3\frac{1}{2}$ ". Thickness $2\frac{1}{8}$ ".

bearded figure in a buskin with his arms folded across the lower part of his body. On his head was a fancifully shaped cap. The figure was given a rounded outline by brush-work lines, while the lines indicating the bust almost gave it a feminine appearance.

On the east wall of the west first floor room the panelling remained. This had been preserved by a covering of battening and canvas on which were many layers of the

cheapest of Victorian wall papers. One of the original oak doors also remained here. There is also an interesting moulded 4-ledged door of pine which may be early. It is 5' 11" high \times 2' 5" wide, and is made of three $1\frac{1}{2}$ " planks, 11", $7\frac{1}{2}$ " and $10\frac{1}{2}$ " wide, half-tenoned together. An oak strip fixed as a cornice round the Western ground floor room had a moulding similar to that used on the door.

The late seventeenth century work included typical pine panelling, with plaster mouldings at junction of walls and ceilings. The iron door latches on the panelled pine doors had had nice pierced plates, and the iron casement frames had the usual closing grips and the wrought catches typical of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. From a fragment of a white marble slab with the under surface rough it would seem that in the seventeenth century an entrance or hall had been paved with white or a chequer work of black and white slabs.

The ancient abode had become very shaky in the course of many decades of neglect, but faulty foundations to the applied skin of brickwork, and decay of the buried timbering had helped. Its condition had not been bettered when it was cut up into tenements. Finally the bulging walls, decaying window frames, and various ominous cracks condemned it for habitation. So a minor manor house full of those small features of construction and reconstruction, which are so fascinating, has been pulled down when in happier times it might have been repaired so as to be of lasting value. Goshall its neighbour never had anything like its interest.



PLATE I. HEAD OF JUPITER AMMON.
No. 63 (and p. 136).