

THE ECCLESIASTICAL COURT HOUSE OF THE HUNDRED OF EAST MEON

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IT is recorded that in 1079 Bishop Wakelin (cousin of William the Conqueror) began to rebuild the Cathedral Church of Winchester and to remodel or rebuild the various churches in his Hampshire manors. East Meon was known to be the favourite residence of this Bishop, and it is, therefore, not surprising to find the tower and Norman work recalling his work at Winchester. The resemblance of the tower could be seen at once if the modern broached roof could be removed. So noble a tower should never have been capped by so incongruous a feature associated more with a small rural type of building. The church must originally have been much larger to justify such a tower, and one pictures it originally extending out much further east at the intersection of the nave and transept.

No domestic work of this period remains to even indicate the manner of the Bishop's residence. The noble Manor Court which still stands is of a much later period, although it is suggested that possibly the outer walls may be part of the original Norman walls of the Court attached to the residence of the Bishop. The windows and the roof seem clearly to be late 14th century work. So many descriptions of the Meon Court Hall as existing suggest that its uses were domestic and refer to a screen dividing the usual buttery and other apartments from this. The rough boarded screen shown in many recent photographs and drawings was comparatively modern and was really used to form a passage across the Hall. The southern half of the Hall when I found it had a three-floored house for farm servants built therein, and the remaining half was used as a cow-byre. The rough partition (referred to as a screen) was used to shut off the latter from the passage to the farmer's 17th century timbered house built up to the Court Manor Hall. The rooms opening out of the Hall to the north were, it seems to me, retiring rooms from the Court, and the small apartment opening out of this probably a place of confinement. It is difficult to know the uses of the very fine room with open timber roof over these rooms with a similar small room opening therefrom. This lofty room has a fine open stone fireplace and is always known as King John's room, whose head certainly forms a corbel under one of the principals of the Manor Court



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Fig. I.

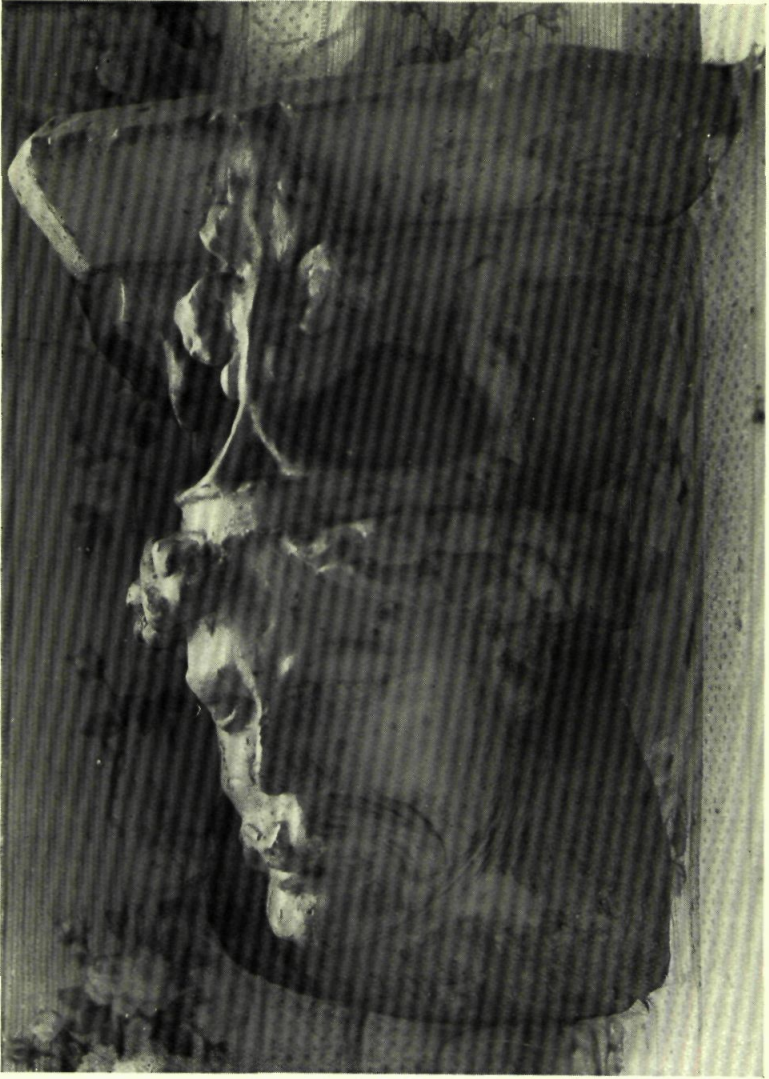
VIEW OF A PORTION OF THE HALL BEFORE RESTORATION AND SHOWING
ONE CORBEL.



Fig. II. 1930.



Fig. III. COURT HOUSE IN 1926.



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Fig. IV.
CORBEL. HEAD OF KING JOHN.

Hall. There is an external triangular oak block stairway leading to this upper chamber which would certainly not be earlier than the middle of the 14th century.

I have never understood why the existing south wall of the Hall is built so definitely out of square, but I feel convinced that the Hall must have been two bays longer. Possibly when the living room of the Palace became ruinous, the end of the Hall also collapsed and was built up in the 18th century with its chimney of this period in 2in. bricks. I found a very interesting Gothic frieze with quatre foils and shields, once heraldically coloured, and this fitted on to some moulded jambs in the south wall and now forms an end fireplace to the Hall. This Gothic frieze must, I think, have been used in the Bishop's apartments as an ornamental recess, familiar in such apartments. The fireplace of the Court was originally in the centre of the Hall, as in the St. Cross Hall, and there is evidence that the roof principals are original, by reason of their blackened condition in the centre. The eight heads forming the corbels under the roof principals are mitred, with the exception of the Crowned head of King John.¹ I have not been able to identify the Bishops' heads, but one seems to be William of Wykeham. Two of the heads have unfortunately been badly mutilated by having the partition of the house, now removed, built into them.

Among the confiscations of Church land which William made in Hampshire was that of East Meon, which belonged to Stigand, Bishop of Winchester, by which the King appears to have marked his displeasure at the course the Bishop took against him. This property was very extensive as it included the Hundred as well as the Manor, and it was not again restored to the Church until the time of King John. From the time of John, this Manor remained with the Bishop until it was sold in 1648 as a result of the Root and Branch Bill. In 1660 came a general restoration of the Bishop's land, and this remained an ecclesiastical Manor until 1852, when it was decreed by order of Court that the next ordnance of See through patronage with Froxfield and Steep be transferred to the Bishop of Lichfield, who made an exchange with the Lord Chancellor. The Church had long ceased to be part of the Manor made by Henry II to the Church of Winchester, and both Church and Manor are now in the new Diocese of Portsmouth.

There is an interesting account of the Church, the Village and the Hall in the *Gentleman's Magazine* dated 1816 :—

“The Village of East Meon, Hants, is of high antiquity, situated at the foot of a lofty and stupendous hill, at the side

1. In 1198, when living at East Meon as Earl of Mortmaeon, married Avice, daughter of the Earl of Hereford and Gloucester.

extremity of a valley interspersed with rich meadows, numerous woodlands, and extensive downs. Though we possess no authentic resources from which we may learn its state in the time of the Saxons, yet it seems pretty generally acknowledged that even at this early period the very large and extensive parish to which it gives a name, with the addition of a fine tract of land to the south-west, was considered of some importance.

When the Saxon power was superseded by that of the Normans, this parish appears to have engaged the particular attention of Walkelyn, the Conqueror's cousin; and this circumstance may, perhaps, be accounted for by the intimate connexion subsisting between the Parish and the opulent see of Winchester. However this may be, it is a fact well authenticated, this enterprising prelate evinced his liberality and taste by erecting the present Church in a style of elegance, which, after a lapse of seven centuries, will not fail to command universal admiration."

To tell rightly the history of the place far more research is necessary into the records from the time of the Normans, although it may be that this has been done already. All nobly-built fragments, such as the Manor Court Hall, are surely worth preserving. The close association of the monastic Church and Court with the great See of Winchester, once the capital of England, and in particular the great Ecclesiastic, Educationalist and Architect, William of Wykeham, is surely a sufficient argument for its preservation. From the Will of the great Architect-Bishop it appears that East Meon partook of his bounty :—

"Item lego consimili modo ecclae de
Estmeone unum aliud portiforium
dictae capellae meae et unum calicem."¹

In the days when the Court House was built the County existed on its agricultural activities, and the industries connected therewith. The customary tenants held their lands by virtue of a fine certain, and no tenant forfeited his estate except in cases of felony or treason. We are beginning to realise the revival of these local activities are becoming vital to our existence as a nation. The Court of the Manor was the seat of that justice as administered by the Bishop in connection with the customary task rendered by the villeins in exchange for their holdings. There were constant frictions in their multifarious duties, and here at the Manorial Court they were heard and fines imposed by the Bishop or his bailiff.

1. "Also I bequeath in a similar way to the church at East Meon one other breviary of my chapel aforesaid and one chalice."

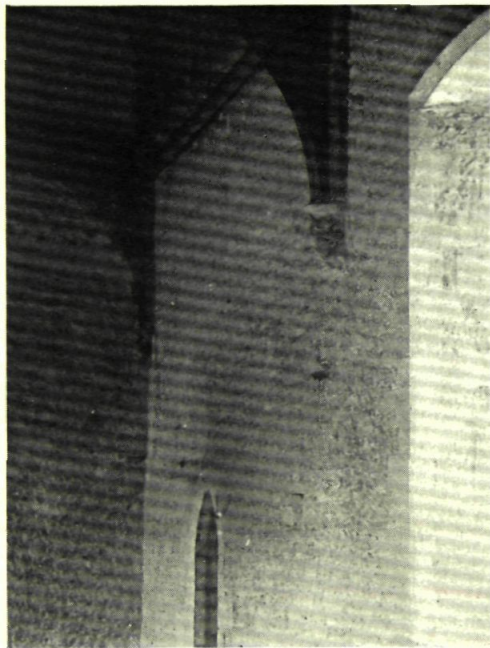


Fig. V.

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TWO VIEWS OF THE END OF THE HALL AFTER THE REMOVAL OF THE LIVING ROOMS THEREIN.

Surely it is interesting that the history of the evolution of the English farm is so inseparably connected with the Church up till the 18th century. It would seem as if the preservation of the beauty of England, the destruction of which so much time is spent in deploring, can only be accomplished by a return to pursuits which are associated with a Church and Court building of this nobility and the craft of building which produced this and its satellite cottages. The resources of Hampshire with its speedily-flowing chalk streams are assets which a more scientific age should be able to use to even greater fruitfulness than in the past.