

Notes on the Mural Decoration at the old  
 "White Hart" Inn, St. Albans.

BY F. G. KITTON.

In a paper read before the St. Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archæological Society about two years ago,\* I gave a brief account of this ancient hostelry, which was formerly called the "Hartshorn," and dates back to the beginning of the 16th century or end of the 15th century. Some ten or twelve years since, when preparations were made for adapting one of the rooms in this building to the requirements of a small local club, the late Mr. John Chapple (clerk of the works at the Abbey Church) here detected vestiges of wall-decoration of a peculiar kind, but no record as to the character of the design seems to have been made. During the autumn of 1901, that portion of the old hostelry which had been used in recent times as grocery-stores underwent reparation, and Mr. S. Flint Clarkson, F.R.I.B.A., who superintended the work, kindly notified to me that in the room over the archway the walls had just been stripped of paper-covered canvas, thus exposing the original plaster surface, upon which were painted curious designs—the same, of course, as those alluded to by Mr. Chapple. The room measures 19 feet by 13 feet 6 inches, height about 7 feet 6 inches; a window on the west side overlooks Holywell Hill, and another on the east faces the yard in the rear. On the north side of this apartment is a match-boarded partition, separating it from a larger chamber, panelled throughout, and containing an interesting 17th century fireplace and overmantel. In the room under consideration there is a dado, painted to represent woodwork, and the timber-framing is clearly visible on each side except the north, where we find the modern partition. The walls are plastered between the framing—a white plaster laid over a coarser kind containing an abundance of hair—and upon the surface have been painted quaint embellishments, somewhat heraldic in character, portions of which remain in a fairly good condition, while other parts are entirely obliterated. The designs are believed to be

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From a Photograph by C. H. Ashdown, F.R.G.S.



early Jacobean (*circa* 1625), as evidenced by the suggestion of the "strapwork" and floral scroll-work peculiar to the period. On the west wall is portrayed the head of a cherub surmounted by a basket containing



fruit and flowers, while below is seen another cherub on horseback, grasping a floral scroll. On the south wall, to the right of the fireplace, is an elaborate design (measuring 6 feet by 3 feet 9 inches), having in the centre a lion's head crowned with a trophy of fruit, and flanked on the right by a rampant griffin, whose tail

forms a scroll, and on the left by a horselike animal, probably intended for a unicorn. Perhaps the most striking feature is the heraldic representation of an eagle, occupying a space two feet square at the right-hand upper corner of the west wall, and I am glad to say that the owner of the property (Dr. Martin) has kindly allowed it to be cut out and transferred to the Hertfordshire County Museum, where it now is. Below the eagle the artist depicted a lion, with its tail continued into a scroll, and on the left of this is seen a portion of what appears to be much later work. The designs are executed in black only, on the white plaster; they are in outline, which was first drawn with a free and vigorous hand, by means of the brush, and then the black background filled in, thus effectively throwing up the general composition. Each of the principal designs is enclosed laterally by the timber-framing and at the top by a cornice, the timbers and cornice being ornamented with a simple scroll device, thus forming a kind of border. This interesting example of wall-decoration is undoubtedly a spontaneous effort and the work of one who was evidently skilful, not only in the use of his materials, but in conceiving the broadly-felt design. It is not unlikely that other houses in St. Albans were decorated in this manner, prior to the introduction of wall-paper.

