

Mural Paintings at Rothamsted.

BY VICTOR TYLSTON HODGSON.

Rothamsted House, near Harpenden, like most old houses, has undergone changes and enlargements from time to time. During some alterations, begun a little over a year ago by its owner, Sir Charles Lawes, the panelling in the hall was temporarily removed, and when the wall behind was being examined, with the view of seeing how best to bring this room back to its former state, traces of decorations were observed under a thick coat of whitewash.

Upon further search these were found to have been fairly extensive and to have covered at least the greater part of one wall of the apartment. It was through the courtesy of Sir Charles Lawes that I was able to examine the paintings, and make notes and drawings of them. Having found this first series of paintings in the hall, interest was aroused, and a part of the panelling in the dining-room immediately at the back of this same wall was removed, and the other, and more interesting paintings brought to light.

When it was suggested that I should read a paper upon them before this Society, I made several enquiries, and corresponded with various people, among others, Mr. Keyser, who used to live near Bushey, and was one of our members. He has published a South Kensington Handbook on Mural Paintings. Fortunately he was able to come and see the paintings at Rothamsted, and was so interested that he read a paper upon them before the Society of Antiquaries, illustrated by enlarged photographs and lantern-slides. These he has kindly lent me for to-night. The upper portion of the painting in the dining-room represents some battle scene, siege, or military parade. The picture appears to have been continued at either end farther than we now see it, although, even as it stands, it is quite a well-balanced composition, the chief figures being near the centre of the picture.

On the left, the painting finishes abruptly, but the plaster itself is continuous, the break occurring in the centre of one of the lower panels. This looks as if there had been some fixture against the wall, round which the painting had continued.

On the right, the panelling, which has not been



Mural Painting at Rothamsted.
(Block lent by the Society of Antiquaries).

removed, overlaps the painting, but I could not see if the latter runs on for any distance or no.

A small and much damaged portion of a somewhat similiar painting has since been found behind a part of the panelling on the opposite side of the room. Of this I was unfortunately unable to take a record, before it was again covered in ; otherwise it has not been thought worth while removing any more of the panels.

The wall is composed of wattle and dab, and instead of the face of the timbers, which are very rough, being brought to an even surface, the painting is carried into the cracks and shakes just as they come, except on the left hand post, where some of the cracks are very roughly filled with plaster. The space of three or four inches between the wall and panelling was found to have been filled with gorse.

The battle-scene, in the upper part of the painting, in which the action takes place from left to right of the spectator, is a continuous panel some three or four feet deep, and immediately below the cornice of the room.

The lower part, or dado, is painted to represent a series of arches or niches between columns, which support an entablature. This is very "renaissance" in treatment. The heads of the niches are formed of scallop shells, and in each niche is seated an animal. These are rather difficult to make out, but seem to comprise a cat, a dog, and a bear. The base of each column has a lion's face upon it. The whole is of a yellowish brown colour shaded with black lines and relieved with white high lights, probably meant to represent "jallo antico," "Siena," or other marble, and it may be noted here that some of the old fireplaces are painted and grained in imitation of marbles.

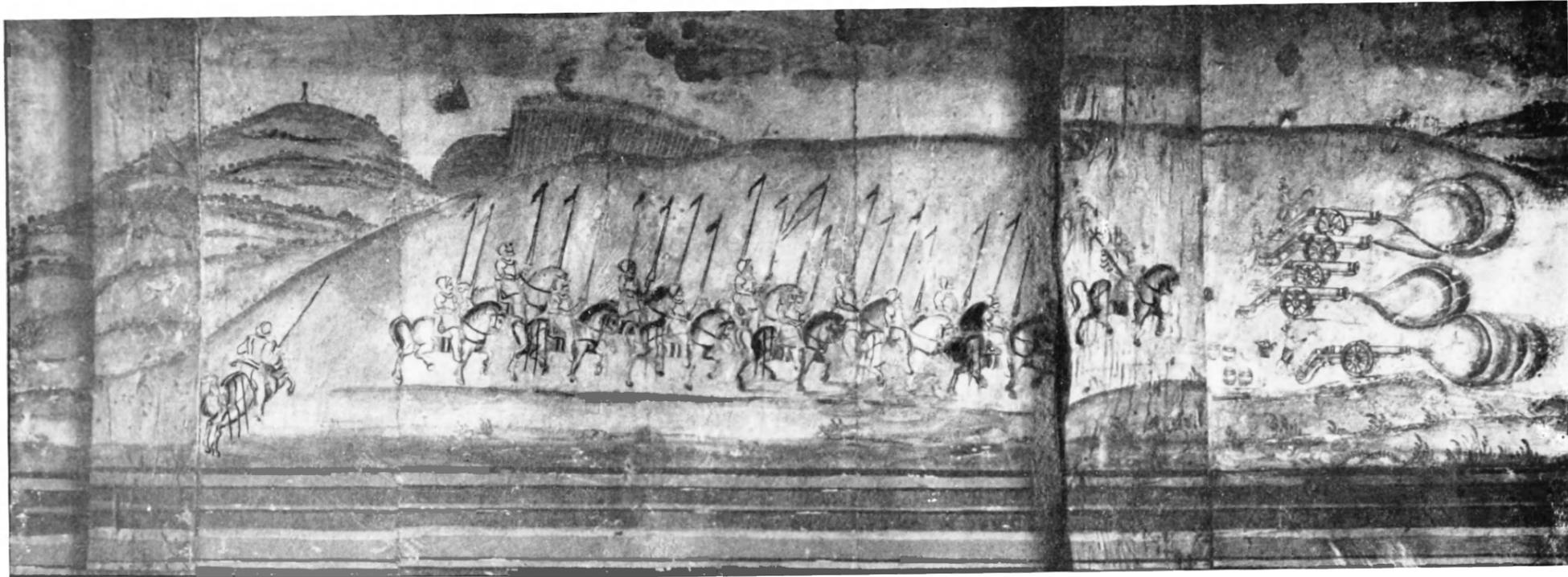
The lower painting is much mutilated, and I can discover no trace of inscription here or elsewhere. In one of the niches may be seen the curious jewel-like pendant, which occurs again in the hall paintings. This may be given as evidence of the paintings being contemporary, although some experts who have seen them put the arcade later. They may be, I think, put down to about the latter half of the sixteenth century. The pendant in the dining-room does not appear to mean anything, and is hung at the back of the left-most niche. In the centre niche is scratched the date, 1632; and this may

have been done by a workman at the time the paintings were covered with the panelling. A nearly identical date, 1635, was found scratched on one of the jamb stones of the old wide fireplace in the hall. This fireplace had been made narrower by having splayed jambs built within it, of bricks, of a size which corresponds to that of other bricks, used at about the same date in other parts of the house. The fireplace was narrowed again at two subsequent dates. The year, 1632, is also about the time when the ancestors of the present family bought the house.

These ancestors were members of the Wittewronge family, who had fled from Holland during the persecutions. They also got possession of Stantonbury, in Bucks. From them Rothamsted descended through the Bennets to the Lawes family.

Before the above date, the manor belonged for some 100 years to the Bardolphs, who about the middle of the sixteenth century bought it from the Cressy family.

Returning to the military subject in the upper panel. The principal figures are a number of men on horseback. The foremost horse is ridden by a Knight or Squire, who carries a halberd, thus being differently armed to the rest of the horsemen, who have got long lances with pennons. These lances are more like tilting lances than the real weapon of the day, but this may be because the artist was not acquainted with the latter. It is noteworthy that pennons were usually only carried by knights, and not by common troopers. The artist has given in a clever way the appearance of a large body without overcrowding the figures. There are six horses in the file nearest the spectator, and six behind these, each with its rider and his lance, but if counted, there will be found to be 22 lances, one rider near the centre carrying a much larger pennon than the others. These pennons are red and white. Behind the main body, and galloping to them, with his three-quarter back to the spectator, is a single horseman. He carries a lance without a pennon, and wears a morion or helmet, which is usually supposed to belong to the Commonwealth times, but is known to have been in use at a much earlier date. The horses are either grey, black, or roan, and the trappings are similar to those usually seen in illustrations of this period. The men are



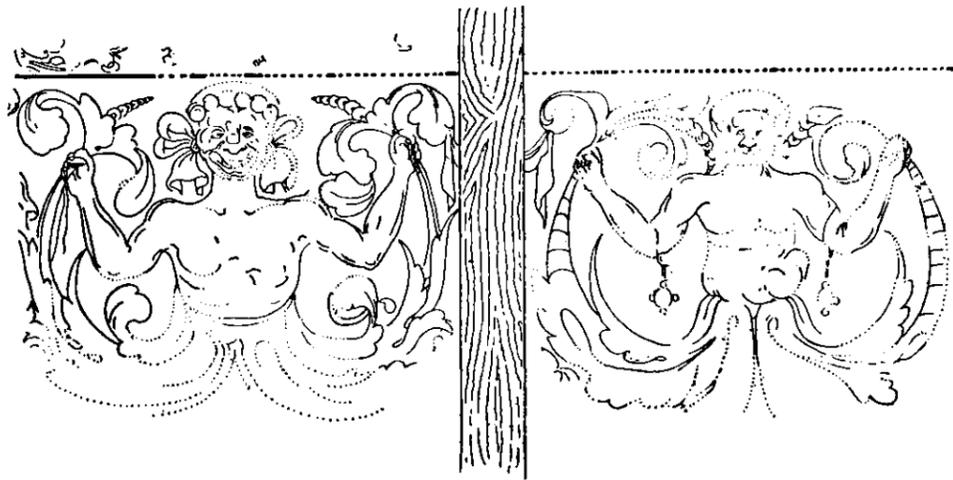
Upper Portion of the Mural Painting at Rothamsted.
(Block lent by the Society of Antiquaries).

dressed in demi-armour, which came into use at the same time that firearms began to be employed in warfare, as it was found that the old plate-armour was really no protection against shot and shell, and was needlessly cumbersome. The helmets have vizors and are of the usual type. Corselets cover the upper part of the body, and the arms seem to be protected by plate-armour, with smaller hinged plates at the elbow. Below the waist buskins are worn. In front of the horsemen, and pointing away from them, are seen five cannon, four being in a straight row, the other, of rather more elaborate design, nearer and slightly advanced. They are attended to by three gunners, who have evidently just applied lighted torches to the touch-holes. Dense volumes of balloon-like smoke issue from the muzzles of the guns. This is evidently before the days of smokeless powder. One gun has apparently gone off of its own accord. The fifth gun is silent. The gunners have a peculiar head-dress, with a rosette on top. It is difficult to say if their bodies are protected by armour or leather jerkins. The torches are of some twisted material. The cannon are of a yellow colour, representing brass or bronze, or, as was frequently used, iron gilt. Behind the gunners are four or five kegs of powder, and some spare cannon balls in what looks like a modern waste-paper basket. The horses do not seem to mind the explosions, and walk calmly on, all keeping perfect step with one another. There was no stampeding of untrained animals, ordered by the thousand at the last moment from Hungary or elsewhere. The background to all these figures is a sloping hill of green colour, shaded to red in the foreground, and over the left end of this appears what has been pronounced as a cornfield, a stockade, and the spears of a body of infantry. I am inclined to favour the last supposition. Since first writing this note, I have been shown an old print representing the engagement of Carberry-hill, near Edinburgh. Here an almost identical mass of spears or pikes occurs appearing over a hill, as in this instance, and they are also shown in another part of the picture together with the pikemen who carry them. In the background, at either end of our paintings, are rolling fields and hedges of a vivid green; also a couple of villages, and on the top of a hill what appears to be

a tower or beacon. What particular event the whole is meant to represent I cannot make out. The painting would be executed a century after the battles of St. Albans, one of which has been suggested as the subject, but it is possible, if one of them is represented, that the two towns or villages are meant for St. Albans and Sandridge, and although the spire of the latter is somewhat different in reality, we may allow so much latitude to the artist. I cannot find any mention of a Cressy or a Bardolph being present in these engagements. One of the members of the latter family is, however, believed to have taken part in the expeditions to Scotland at a latter date, but here again I do not know in what particular engagement he distinguished himself. I was very much struck with the similarity to these paintings of some prints published by the Society of Antiquaries. These prints are of some historical mural paintings, which used to exist in Cowdray House, in Sussex, and represent scenes during the reign of Henry VIII., such as (1) The march of Henry from Calais to Boulogne; (2) The encampment of the English forces at Marquisse; (3) The Siege of Boulogne. They were in the dining parlour at Cowdray, and were whitewashed over by the owner at the time of the great rebellion, when the Parliamentary forces were quartered there. An account of them is given in "Archæologia," Vol. III.

Turning our attention now to the paintings in the hall at Rothamsted, the first thing to note is their position. This is at the end above where the dais probably existed, and, that it was the principal end, is borne out by the fact that I can find no trace of further decoration on any of the other three walls. This end, then, between the bay window and the door to the present dining-room, is divided by timbering into three compartments, and it is across these that the painting occurs. The timbers were probably always visible as such, because the design coincides with the compartments. It was, however, carried across them in the form of swags. The face of the timber on this side is flush with the plaster, whereas on the other side it projects some two or three inches, leaving the thickness of the plaster wall about two-and-a-half inches. Where the plaster was carelessly washed, so that its surface on which the

paintings occur was destroyed, another surface was visible, and on this, sham half-timber work had been painted, as was the custom. On the drawing, the black ink lines show as much as I was able to trace with certainty, the dotted lines being conjectural restoration, so as to give an idea of the whole design. There is a thickish black line reaching from end to end, at the height of six feet seven inches from the floor. Above this the plaster was so mutilated that it was with great difficulty I was able to recover as much design as is shewn on the drawings. This, as far as it exists, does not show sign of figure subject, but is generally floral. It is executed in a thin firm black line on a white ground, and there was a slight trace of colour on some of the leaves. It is most unfortunate that this was in such a bad state, as I am inclined to think that the central design would have been an achievement of arms, or some definite subject connected with the family. The leaves are somewhat similiar to those in a coloured frieze of about one foot deep, found above an old fireplace, and behind the panelling at the other end of the dining-room. This frieze represents various fruits, such as oranges, apples, grapes, etc., and was executed in delicate greens, reds, and yellows. Of the three compartments below the line in the hall, that on the left



Mural Painting in the Hall at Rothamsted.
From a Tracing by V. T. Hodgson.

represents an archer. In the centre and right compartments are figures of mermen, or fearsome creatures, with the upper part of the body of human form, and the lower part from the waist downwards divided into

two fish-like and foliated tails, the narrowest parts being grasped and held up by either hand. I don't



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think they are family portraits. These have all been painted on a yellow ground, and traces of green colour occur, not on the foliage part, but on the drops of the swags. There is a good red colour on the nose of the central monster. Suspended by a band from each arm of the right-hand monster is the jewel pendant to which I drew attention before. There was a trace of green colour on one of them, which may have been meant to imitate an emerald, but there is no record known of any special family jewel. There are other old painted decorations in the house, such as black and white squares in the fireplace jambs. Also sham newels on the walls of the staircase; and in a small corridor off the staircase on the first floor, panels enclosed by upright strips painted to represent marble, very like what is done in Italy at the present day.