

Two Seventeenth-Century Manor-Houses

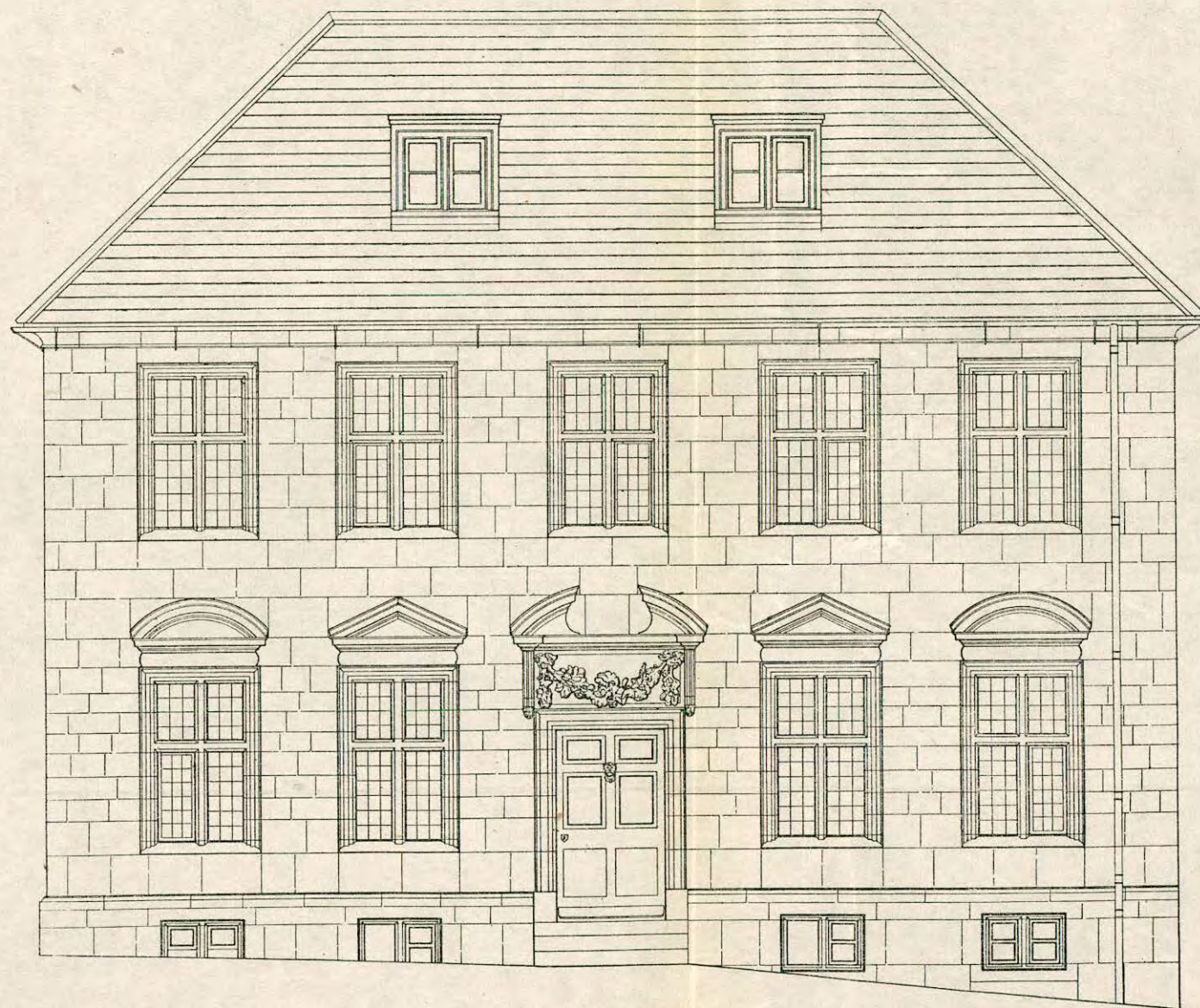
BY THE RT. HON. LORD HYLTON, F.S.A.

THE district of north-east Somerset lying between Norton St. Philip and Radstock, 'champayne ground' to a large extent when John Leland rode by in the sixteenth century, still contains a number of picturesque houses dating from somewhat later, and formerly inhabited by gentry, owners of the surrounding small estates, farming their demesne lands. These houses were built of the local oolitic stone, supplemented in some instances by better material from quarries nearer to Bath, and roofed with stone tiles. A small courtyard was generally formed between the house and the public road, approached from the latter by a few stone steps, supported by piers, surmounted by vases or balls, with an 'upping stock' in the road for the convenience of riders. Barns, other farm edifices, and usually a pigeon-house, stood near the mansion; a walled garden provided vegetables; a smooth stretch of turf levelled for a bowling-green, or a short terrace-walk completed the design.

Before the close of the seventeenth century the great Hungerford possessions in this neighbourhood, comprising a score of manors, centred in Farleigh Castle, had been broken up, owing, as is said, to the foolish extravagance of their spendthrift lord, and their fragments chiefly acquired by wealthy clothiers from Frome and Bradford, who seem to have built, or rebuilt, the existing manor-houses of Hassage, Foxcote, and Baggeridge. Bristol was then the chief seaport of England, and successful Bristol merchants were also investing their commercial profits in the purchase of land. 'In this late age by country trades

WRITHLINGTON MANOR. SOMERSET.

PLATE V.



EAST ELEVATION.

SCALE OF FEET

MEASURED AND DRAWN
BY A. E. BARRINGTON
AND A. D. WALLER.
AUGUST, 1927.

many are come to great estate', wrote Sir Symonds d'Ewes of the county of Stafford about this period, and a similar process was taking place along the border between Somerset and Wiltshire. The Lansdownes at Woodborough, Stephens at Camerton, Oranges at Writhlington, Smiths at Foxcote and Stony Littleton, Coles at Hassage, Goodmans at Kilmersdon were among the newcomers. Traders and merchants who, after acquiring a comfortable fortune at Bristol or Bradford, bought Somerset acres, were often the younger sons of ancient families entitled to bear coats of arms. Such was Gabriel Goodman, who purchased the manor of Kilmersdon in 1659, descended from 'the Goodmans of Northamptonshire', and his contemporary William Orange, 'lord-farmer' of the manor of Writhlington, and Robert Smith of Stony Littleton, to whose munificence we owe the Palladian church at Foxcote.¹

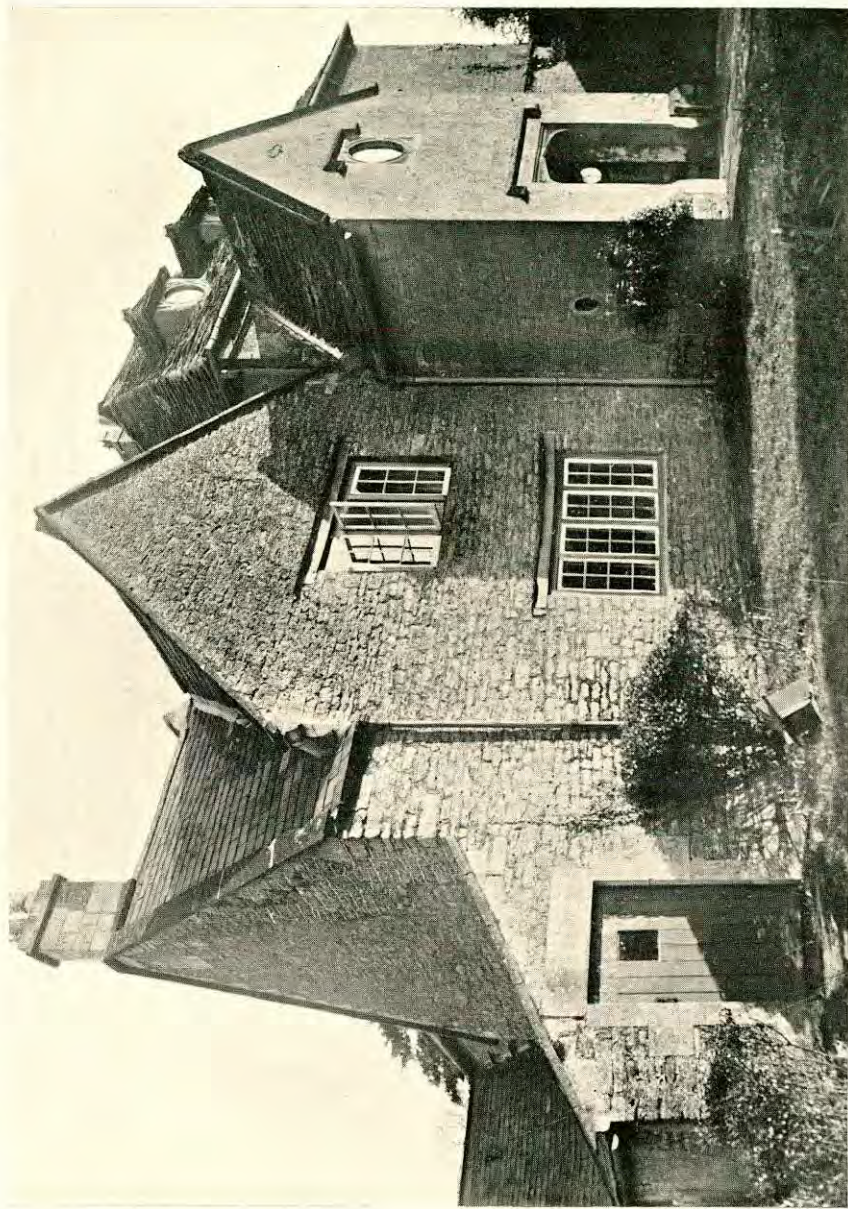
Macaulay tells us that the late seventeenth-century squire 'troubled himself little about decorating his abode . . . the litter of a farm-yard gathered under the windows of his bed-chamber, and the cabbages and gooseberry bushes grew close to his hall-door', but we should be mistaken in supposing that within the walls of the small manor-houses there lacked good breeding and good cheer and open-handed hospitality to kinsfolk and friends, and active benevolence towards the poor man at the gate. The Diary of Thomas Smith of Shaw, published in vol. xi of the *Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine*, affords graphic glimpses of the daily interests and amusements of the lesser squires during the reign of George I, in this region of the West Country. They lived in, and on, their respective estates, wages, quoted in the Diary as £6 to £3 per annum for men and women servants, proving how cheaply a country gentleman was able to maintain a modest establishment; and though dinner-parties at home, followed by cards and dancing, or club-feasts abroad, were frequent, the numerous bowls of punch consumed were not very expensive items of expenditure. The prosperous style of existence depicted by the diarist lasted for about a hundred years, but dwindled as the eighteenth century drew to its close. The

¹ M.I. Chew Magna Church.

heavy taxation of the war years crippled their resources, which were further drained by the general rise in the cost of living, while their families ceased to be content with the simpler standards of the previous generation. The small estates became almost universally mortgaged, the residences described as 'mansions' in previous documents sank to the condition of farm-houses, if no worse fate befel them. Such was the case with the manor-houses of Writhlington, Foxcote, Stony Littleton and Hassage among others, and before it be too late I have endeavoured to gather up what remains of the history of two among the group, the mellow aspect of which still retains a certain charm, their exterior at least having suffered little alteration for the last two centuries.

From very early times the entire parish of Writhlington, save some pieces of glebe, belonged to the cathedral church of Salisbury; being held in conjunction with Fordington in Dorsetshire by one of the prebendaries, and leased on lives to a series of individuals, styled lord-farmers, of whom one John Hodges is recorded in 1638, the custom being for the prebendary on payment of a fine to grant a lease of the manor to a tenant for three lives at a small reserved rent. The dignitary lucky enough to find himself in enjoyment of the prebend when the last life expired was thus enabled to pocket a handsome sum. The lifehold tenure, widespread particularly in the west of England, gave rise to obvious abuses, and is now practically extinct, though in Writhlington it held sway for a lengthy epoch. An indenture dated 20th December 1649¹ between Sir John Wollaston and others, and William Orange of Redlinch, Somerset, reciting that the former are trustees by Acts of the present Parliament 'of the Coñons of England' for abolishing Deans and Chapters, etc., 'grants to the latter the manor of Wristlington, *alias* Writhlington . . . and the mansion or farm-house, of the Manor . . . and all copyhold rents, Courts Leet, Courts Baron', etc., which the late prebendary had held or enjoyed, and as by Indenture 7th April in the eighth year of Queen Elizabeth were demised to John Young of Abbotsbury for eighty-six years at a reserved rent of £14.

¹ Ammerdown MSS.



HASSAGE MANOR-HOUSE, WELLOW. From the S.W.

From a Photograph by Rev. Father E. Horne

In 1658 Wm. Orange, and Elizabeth his wife, mortgaged the 'Chief Mansion-house of Writhlington', etc., to James North of Bristol. At the Restoration in 1660 the Dean and Chapter of Sarum must have regained the manor, but Wm. Orange apparently remained in the position of lord-farmer, since he granted leases in 1663.

In 1684 Humphrey Orange, Esq., conveyed his interest in the manor, stated to be then held on the lives of his son, Edward Orange; his grandson, James Griffin; and Edward, son of Hugh Fry, clerk, to Henry Pollexfen, and another deed, dated 2nd February 1690, recites many debts owing by H. Orange, 'now of Foscott', and conveys his residue of lifehold tenure in the manor to a neighbour, John Salmon of Holcombe. A volume in my possession entitled 'The Court Rolls of the Manor of Wriglington' contains an entry that John Salmon, jun., purchased the manor 6th December, 1690. His will, proved at Wells, October, 1740, mentions his sons, James and William Henry, the former of whom succeeded his father as lord-farmer, and held his last court in 1763. Five years later another John Salmon is named as lord-farmer, but the family's connection with the parish ceased before 1777, when William Moore of Charlton held a court, as did his heir-at-law, Benjamin Greenhill, in 1801, and John Dory Greenhill in 1809. These gentlemen appear to have been the last resident lord-farmers. Coal mining began in the parish, a pit was sunk not very far from the manor-house itself, and the 'rich meads' described by Collinson as bordering the river and adjacent to the mansion, became partly obliterated by great heaps of wark, and partly covered with buildings. The deserted manor-house fell on evil days; there is some faint tradition of its temporary use as a school, later still it was divided into tenements: it is at present unoccupied. Its situation must have been attractive a century ago, placed in a well-sheltered valley on rising ground above the little river Somer, whilst a stately avenue of lime trees, of which a remnant survive, stretched from the door towards a wooded combe. The parish church, 'a humble pile' in Collinson's words, stands close to the manor-house, and the rectory is divided from the churchyard by a road.

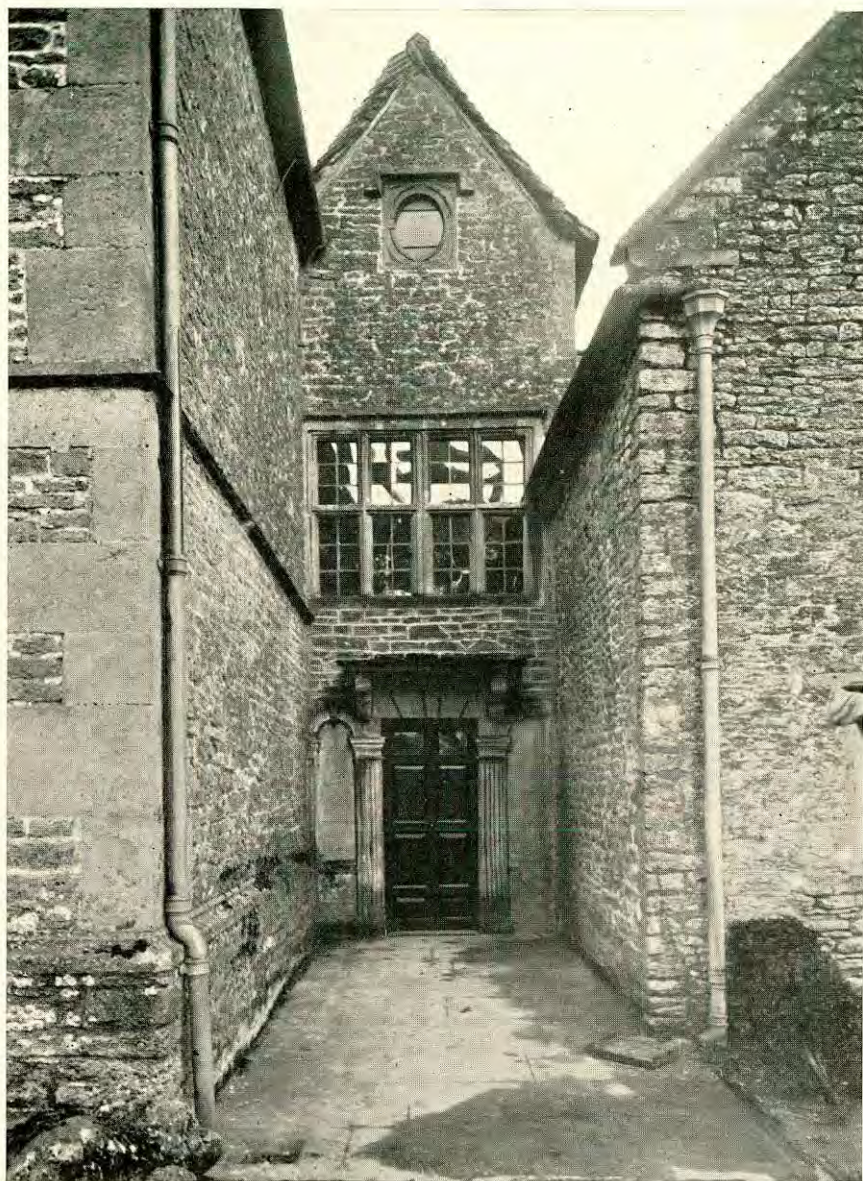
The principal front of Writhlington House faces E., 42 ft.

in length. The entrance door, placed in the centre, is approached by two stone steps, and on either side is a pair of windows, all surmounted by finely-carved pediments and swags of foliage. A range of five windows light the upper floor, while two smaller garret windows are inserted in the roof above (Plate V).

The s. side of the main building retains its original four-light windows similar to those on the e. front, but a bow thrown out on the n. side with sash windows is evidently a more modern alteration, whilst the western portion of the edifice appears to be older than the eastern block. On the whole I am disposed to attribute the latter to William Orange, not long after Charles II's restoration, and he probably left standing at the western end part of the earlier mansion-house mentioned in the deed of 1658. It seems not unlikely that the embarrassments which compelled Humphrey Orange to leave the place were due to expenditure on this house beyond the means of his family. It may be added that the main staircase, a chimney-piece or two, and some bits of panelling must be coeval with the tenure by the Oranges.

In order to reach Hassage from Writhlington by the shortest way we have only to make a journey of about three and a half miles; leaving Foxcote on the left, passing the village green of Falkland with its stocks,—recalling a less sentimental age than the present,—a narrow lane quickly brings us to our destination, where in the seventeenth century we should have found a hamlet, now reduced to one farm-house and three cottages, built on the eastern slope of a lonely valley, terminated by the high grounds of Hinton Charterhouse to the n. and closed by the saddle-back of Falkland Knoll in the s.w. Its name, anciently spelt Harserig, may simply be a corruption of Ashridge, as the farm of Baggeridge on the opposite side of the valley may similarly be derived from Beech-ridge. Both are within the bounds of Wellow parish, but reputed to be independent manors.

The house to which I now invite attention is erected on a platform of level ground, falling steeply towards the n. and w., and rising to the e. There is a small garden to the n., enclosed by a stone wall, pierced by a gateway directly opposite the



HASSAGE MANOR-HOUSE, WELLOW. North entrance

From a Photograph by Rev. Father E. Horne

entrance to the mansion, between a pair of piers, once crowned by ornamental finials, now missing, whence a road through a paddock or orchard passed down into the lane. The present buildings have evidently been considerably altered from time to time. It would appear that the gabled kitchen and offices on the western side are earlier than the eastern block, with its hipped roof and attic story lighted by small round dormer windows, and southern porch, bearing the date 1677 (Plate VI), while the sash windows on the northern face are clearly substitutions of the eighteenth century. The original windows on the E. side have all been built up, in order no doubt to avoid window tax. The two parlours into which the floor-space of this block is now divided are rooms of fair size and height, that to the N. containing a stone chimney-piece, obviously too large for its present position, and probably removed from the hall of the earlier mansion. The oak newel staircase with flat balusters, straight and pierced, is inserted within a gable facing N., and lit by a four-light window with stone mullions and transoms, beneath which stands the door, evidently the principal entrance in former days, protected by a stone hood supported on brackets, and flanked by fluted pilasters, and arched recesses on either side (Plate VII). As at Writhlington, several of the rooms retain bits of original panelling, doors, and chimney-pieces, though much has been modernised. A residence no doubt stood on this site from very early days, but I can discover no trace of its occupants before the year 1676 when, by indenture dated 25th October, Henry Coles of Hassage, son of John Coles of Whatcombe, Frome, demised to William Coles 'a chamber over the little kitchen in the house called Hassage farm,' which may have formed part of the Hungerford estates, including as they did the manor of Wellow, and on their dispersal shortly afterwards been acquired in fee simple by the Coles family. At all events it became the freehold of William Coles of Hassage, gent., who died 24th August, 1724, aged eighty,¹ and was succeeded by his son John, Rector of Radstock, on whose death, 1st June, 1739, aged fifty, the

¹ M.I. Norton St. Philip Church. His mother Elizabeth d. 30th Oct. 1693, aged 72, and his wife Sarah d. 4th Aug. 1723, aged 64.

property passed in moieties to the two sisters of the latter, *viz.* Ann, wife of the Rev. Henry Merewether, rector of Foxcote ; and Rachel, who remained unmarried. Mrs. Merewether died 10th November, 1747, aged forty-five.¹ Her husband followed her to the grave three years later, when Rachel, 'the last of this respectable family', became possessed of the whole, which she enjoyed until her decease, 26th April, 1769.² Considerable litigation followed respecting the true construction of her will, and of a settlement made by Mr. Merewether. Judgment of the House of Lords, 12th June, 1782, confirmed the succession of John Morris (apparently no blood-relation) for life, with remainder to members of the Veale family, who were akin to Miss Coles, which reversion took effect on the death of Morris in November, 1814. Representatives of Green Veale sold the property to a Mr. Cleverley in 1867.

A complicated network of green lanes, many over-grown and barely passable even on foot, traverse this sequestered country, and tales are still related of the long strings of donkeys laden with smuggled goods, which passed along these hidden ways from the Dorset coast in the days of good old King George III.

'Five-and-twenty ponies, trotting through the dark—
Brandy for the Parson, Bacey for the Clerk,'

as sings Mr. Rudyard Kipling.

¹ M.I. Foxcote Church.

² M.I. Norton St. Philip Church.