

The Manor Houses of Hardington and Vallis

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

ON the N. side of the highroad leading from Frome to Radstock about one mile W. from the village of Buckland Dinham stands a slender pair of mouldering stone piers, known as Hardington Pillars. Between these a narrow lane leads down hill for some distance to a brook some 200 yards above which, on the opposite bank, appear the remains of an ancient manor-house, and the tiny parish church. Behind these buildings a fine deer-park once extended up the northern slope of the valley, and, flanked by spacious woodlands, spread eastwards towards Buckland.

Collinson¹ describes how this place with adjoining large possessions came into the hands of the Bampfylde family in the fifteenth century through the marriage of John Bampfylde with Agnes, daughter and heir of John de Pederton, a union which produced two sons, from the elder of whom, William, the present Lord Poltimore traces his line, while Peter, the younger, inherited Hardington, where his descendants flourished for the next 200 years.

The spot preserved till recently more than one sign of its better days, but the hand of the destroyer has been busy in the last years. The park has been stripped of nearly all its old trees,—its boundary-walls have nearly disappeared—farm sheds now mar the approach to the church, and unless a few notes be forthwith recorded, all tradition connected with the Bampfylde owners may be lost. It is true that these Har-

¹ *Collinson*, ii, 453.

dington squires seem to have played little part in the civic life of Somerset, none of them having served as a knight of the shire, nor even as sheriff before the year 1693, but it would appear that seasonable employment was long afforded by their means to many a poor man about their mansion and estate, the decay of which must have been sincerely lamented by the village folk.

Peter Bampfylde, who probably inherited before the year 1452 (when his brother William presented to the rectory of Dunkerton, another Pederton manor), was followed by his son John, whose will was proved 11 November 1528. John's eldest son and successor, by name Thomas, presented to the rectory of Hemington in 1545, and the latter left a son and heir, Thomas Bampfylde II, who lived to be nearly a centenarian, though 'being infirm, kept to his bed six or seven years before he died, intestate'. His grandson and heir, Thomas III, was engaged in Chancery proceedings, 29, 30 June 1620, against servants for maladministration of the old gentleman's affairs. In 1631 this Thomas III paid the composition for refusing the honour of knighthood. Which side he espoused in the Civil War is uncertain, but he died during the Protectorate, his will being proved 16 August 1656. His elder son, John, after a very short ownership of the manor dying unmarried in 1661, was followed by his next brother, Colonel Warwick Bampfylde, who being regarded as an undoubted Cavalier and owner of an estate reckoned as worth £1000 *per annum*, was included among the intended¹ Knights of the Royal Oak after the Restoration of Charles II. Like his friend and neighbour, George Horner, of Mells, who was celebrated for his 'Old English hospitality and had generally an open House, and a crowded Table' in that 'age of national jollity and hard drinking',² Colonel Bampfylde probably copied this good example at Hardington, where the stables would have held a troop of cavalry. He served as High Sheriff in 1693. Being then upwards of seventy years of age and realizing himself to be the last representative of his own branch, he executed a will and settlement, dated 14 April 1694, appointing

¹ *Peter le Neve's List.*

² Lady Horner's MSS.

his old crony, George Horner, an executor, and leaving all his possessions to Sir Coplestone Warwick Bampfylde, his very remote Devonshire kinsman, as 'Heir and Successor', with the rather touching proviso that the latter, 'or any other Bampfylde', should 'live and inhabit in the ancient Mansion-house at Hardington and keep the said house gardens park and warren up and in good repair and employing the poor labourers there for his natural life'. The testator further charged the estates with annuities for ever to the poor of Hemington and Buckland parishes, and dying this same year is commemorated by a 'stately mural monument of white marble'¹ in Hardington church, inscribed to the memory of several members of the family.

Sir Coplestone survived his worthy benefactor thirty-three years and, sitting in the House of Commons as member for Exeter and for the county of Devon, can have resided but little at Hardington, though it may have occasionally been used as a half-way house between Poltimore and London. To the time of his son, Sir Richard, also an M.P., belongs a note that 'the old part of Hardington House can give a tolerable idea of Gentlemen's Houses built before the beginning of the sixteenth century'.²

Sir Richard was followed in 1776 by his son, Sir Charles, a gay young spark, whom convivial talents, coupled with zealous attachment to the Whig Party, introduced early in life to the expensive circle presided over by the Heir-Apparent at Carlton House. The pace set soon becoming too fast to last, most of the prince's court, as well as their royal patron, became involved in financial straits. The timber in this neighbourhood suffered cruelly in order to pay Sir Charles' debts, leaving in the words of an observant neighbour, 'a view from Hemington Down as cheerless as at sea'. It must have been during a period of this embarrassment that the baronet took up his abode at Hardington, for in my own youth his dashing appearance, splendid equipage, and ingratiating manners were still remembered by one or two very old people. He was, I suspect, a far more popular figure with the country-side than

¹ *Collinson*, ii, 453.

² Lady Horner's MSS.

his brother-baronet and neighbour at Orchardleigh, Sir Thomas Champneys, a fantastic personage, who might well be designated a lesser Beckford, squandering his substance in building sham ruins and temples, digging a vast artificial lake, giving gorgeous masquerades, and appearing as litigant in a score of petty disputes and scandals, which finally landed him in the King's Bench. The estates of this couple of remarkable individuals adjoined, but while Orchardleigh was enjoying its short-lived tinsel glories, Hardington House fell 'in ruins',¹ owing to a disastrous fire, half at least of its buildings being shown as roofless in an engraving in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1802. The still existing portion either escaped the flames, or was restored later, its pseudo-Gothic windows being almost certainly of the early nineteenth century, though the s. side retains various Tudor mouldings and transomed lights. The house was faced on the n. by a fore-court, bounded by an embattled wall, divided at set intervals with lofty piers of dressed stone, each formerly crowned by carved figures of couchant animals, perhaps intended to represent deer. These emblems distinctly shown in the engraving of 1802, have all perished, but part of the wall and some piers survive. Beyond the fore-court a road runs straight through a second and larger enclosure, shaded by double avenues of lime and chestnut trees, until it passes under a central passage-way through the block of stabling into the park. The stables evidently date from the seventeenth century; their s. wall presents handsome ranges in two tiers of windows of that period, and two painted boards over the stalls still bear the names of Sir Charles Bampfylde's coach-horses, 'King Arthur' and 'Marmion'. The deer-park, as mentioned, swept up the hill-side beyond the stables towards Highchurch, where a drive left the demesne between two stone piers,² somewhat similar to the 'Pillars' on the Frome road.

Allusion has been made to Sir Charles Bampfylde's financial distresses, but as time rolled on they seem to have become mitigated, and according to a work called 'The Jockey Club'

¹ *Collinson*, ii, 453.

² These piers are now in the garden at Ammerdown.

he long continued 'the life and soul of every social circle'. Grim disaster, however, closed his epicurean career, when on the 19 April 1823, death ensued from a pistol shot fired at him a few days previously in the street outside his town-house. The murderer, one Morland, husband of a woman employed as the baronet's housekeeper, turning the weapon on himself had instantly fallen dead before any bystander could interpose.

Catherine, Lady Bampfylde, Sir Charles' neglected wife, from whom he had long been separated, was in her young days a beauty, the print of a full-length portrait by Reynolds perpetuating her good looks to posterity, but her married life was unhappy. She and her husband had probably not met for many years, but learning of the attempted assassination, she instantly hurried to his side.

Sir Charles' corpse was conveyed to Hardington Park and 'consigned to the family vault' on 29 April 'attended by his two sons, and a few of his intimate neighbours, eager to pay the last tribute of respect to the memory of one who proved himself a most kind and liberal landlord. The service was performed in a very impressive manner by Rev. T. R. Jolliffe of Ammerdown'.¹

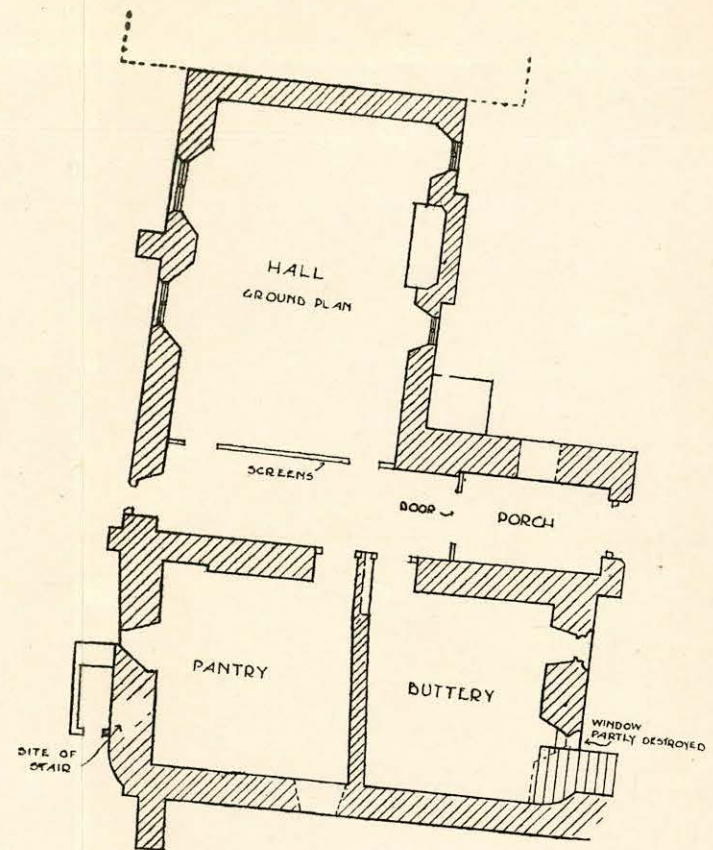
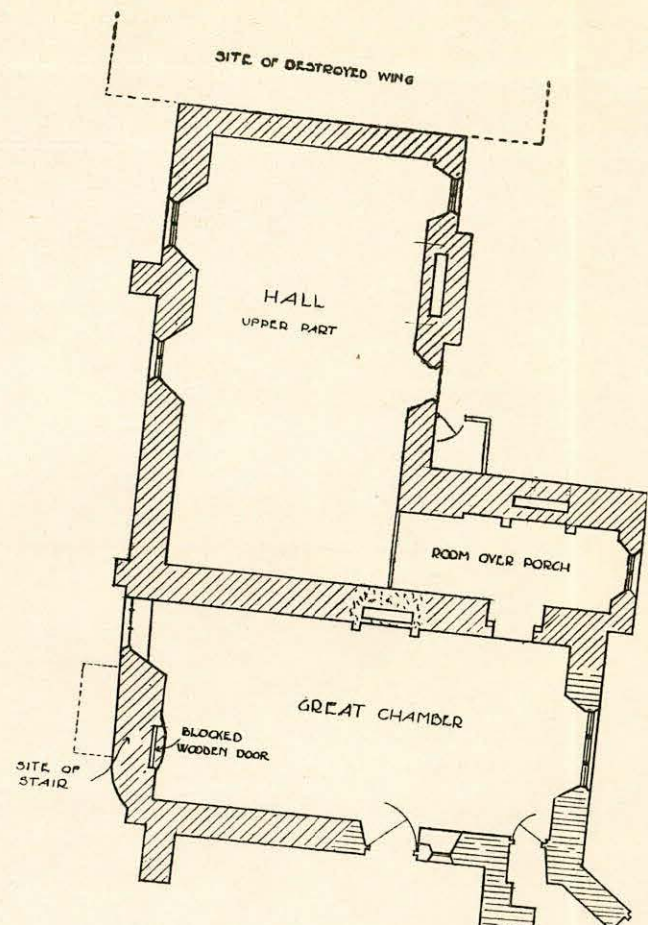
Lady Bampfylde died at Egham in 1832, and is buried in Hardington Church by the side of her volatile spouse.




A natural son of Sir Charles, having entered the clerical profession, was presented by his father to the family livings of Hemington, Hardington and Dunkerton. Curious tales were rife relating to his reverence, who, residing at the last-named place, would gallop across country to perform perfunctory services in his other churches, top-boots peeping from beneath his surplice. When tithes became due, the rector in person is said to have sat at the receipt of custom, a brace of loaded pistols placed on the table in order to frustrate any attempt at robbery of his dues. 'The Devil of Dunkerton', as affectionate parishioners called their formidable pastor, died about the year 1855, one of the last representatives in this part of the world of the Parson Trulliber type.

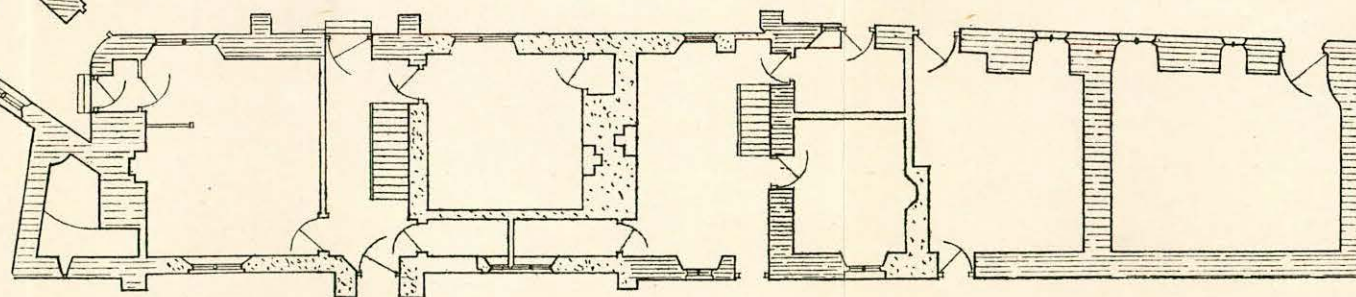
Considerable portions of the Bampfylde estates were sold by

¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*.

MANOR HOUSE VALLIS SOMERSET



-  15 TH CENT
-  16 TH CENT
-  LATER



DRAWN BY
J. A. COLLINS

auktion in 1844; Hardington Park was however then retained, and the grandfather of the present Lord Poltimore told me that in his youth he stayed there for a few days' shooting sometimes. A second sale was effected in 1859, when about 2,500 acres were dispersed in lots, and the Bampfylde connexion after having lasted four hundred years was thus finally severed.

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Vallis House,¹ perhaps of more historic interest than Hardington, and long the seat of the Leversages, a family of equal antiquity with the Bampfyldes, stands remote and hidden from any public road on the edge of that winding limestone gorge, once well deserving Collinson's epithet of 'delightful and romantic', along which the river flows from Great Elm to Frome, and commanding a view northwards to the rising wood of Orchardleigh. In olden days few spots in this district presented a fairer scene, but here again ruthless man has done his worst to obliterate the former beauties of nature, for rude quarries have made gaping wounds all along the cliff sides. The great Hall of the deserted mansion cries aloud for swift repairs, and though part of the southern range of buildings has been converted into cottages, part stands empty and desolate. To the w. is an enclosed precinct of some extent, once no doubt garden and pleasaunce, but now 'all creeping plants, a wall of green, close-matted bur and brake and briar'.

Mr. Harold Brakspear, F.S.A., A.R.I.B.A., who inspected the place in my company, has been good enough to favour me with the following interesting remarks:

'The hall retains its open timber roof of the fifteenth century, divided by arched principals into five bays, having three purlins on each side supported by curved wind-braces. It is covered with stone tiles which are now falling in.

'The n. end of the hall is blank, but there was probably a two-storied cross wing in the usual manner that has been pulled down.

¹ 'It is called in the old records, *Falois, Faleis, Valeis, la Valaise* and *la Valice*, all which are a corruption of *la Falaize*, an old French word signifying a bank or sloping hill.' *Collinson*, ii, 188.

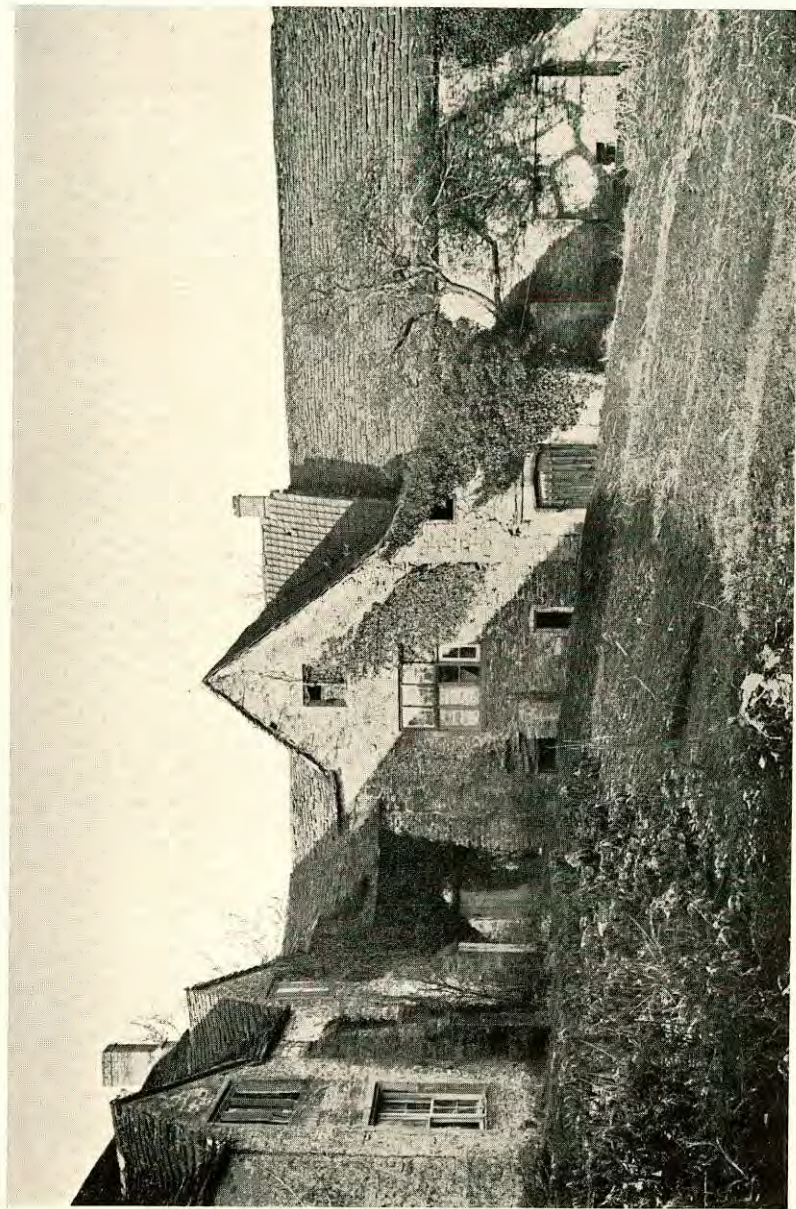
‘The w. wall has in the northernmost bay the remains of a fifteenth-century window of two lights with transom and cusped heads; the middle part of the wall has been cut away to form an access for carts, and the southernmost bay contains the remains of a small fifteenth-century doorway which appears to have been inserted in an older and wider opening, and is the door at the end of the screen. There seems to have been originally a porch of entrance outside this door.

‘The e. wall has the sill of a window in the northernmost bay; there is an arched stone fireplace of simple design in the next bay, and next to it, the jambs of a wide window, destroyed on the face and blocked with plain walling. The wall stops short of the s. end by the width of the southernmost bay. Outside the gap so formed is a deep porch-like projection with a wide outer doorway having an arched head under a flat label, and there is not and never has been an inner doorway in line with the hall, but its place has been taken by a wooden partition.

‘The s. wall runs without a break into this projecting building, and precisely in line with the e. wall is a wide opening with a timber lintel over two doorways. Over the easternmost is cut the moulded apex of a pointed arch apparently of the fourteenth century.

‘These doors led into two chambers each about seventeen feet square in the usual cross wing. They are now mere cellars without any feature, but were possibly originally the kitchen and buttery.

‘Over these cellars is a large room, formerly the great chamber, thirty-five feet by eighteen feet, entered by a destroyed staircase at the w. end. It still retains its medieval roof of arched principals and curved wind-braces. In the sixteenth century a large mullioned and transomed window was inserted in the e. gable, and at the beginning of the eighteenth century a stone fireplace was set in the n. wall. At the same date the room was covered with a flat ceiling. In the w. wall is an arched timber door-frame of the fourteenth century. The room is now entered by a lobby in connexion with the s. range of buildings already mentioned, and has a doorway in the s. wall opening on



VALLIS MANOR HOUSE

From a Photograph by Dom Ethelbert Horne, F.S.A.

to a bank of earth which has been formed against the s. side of the house in later times.

‘ Over the projecting building of the hall was a room entered by a doorway from the great chamber, and it has the remains of an early fireplace in its n. wall.

‘ The whole place is so overgrown with nettles and under-wood that it is almost impossible to discern the remains of any other buildings, but the fore-court seems to have been on the w. side of the house and was probably entered by a gatehouse.’

In the days of its prime the house of Vallis must have been a dwelling capable of offering some measure of resistance to any attack, the cliff dropping almost sheer on the n. and n.w. from its enclosing walls to the stream far below, the only access in this quarter being along a narrow paved way climbing the slope of the ravine. The situation resembles that of the Hungerford Castle at Farleigh, though there is no evidence that Vallis was ever crenellated.

More than one avenue of stately elms still mark former approaches to the mansion through park-like meadows from the direction of Frome, and are old enough to have seen

‘ beauties that were born
in tea-cup days of hood and hoop
or when the patch was worn ’.

Unfortunately it seems difficult to retrieve much history either of the house or of its successive owners. Collinson¹ narrates the first acquisition by a Leversage through marriage with an heiress in 1431, and the subsequent prosperity and influence of their descendants until the reign of James I, when many of their lands in and round Frome were sold to the Thynnes of Longleat. Before this period the Leversages must have modernized their old house to a great extent by the insertion of Tudor windows and in other ways, after the fashion of George Luttrell, who in the reign of Elizabeth made a ‘ comfortable mansion ’ out of his venerable Castle of Dunster. The gabled s. wing would have been also added. Their loyalty during the Civil War ‘ brought ruin ’ upon the Leversage

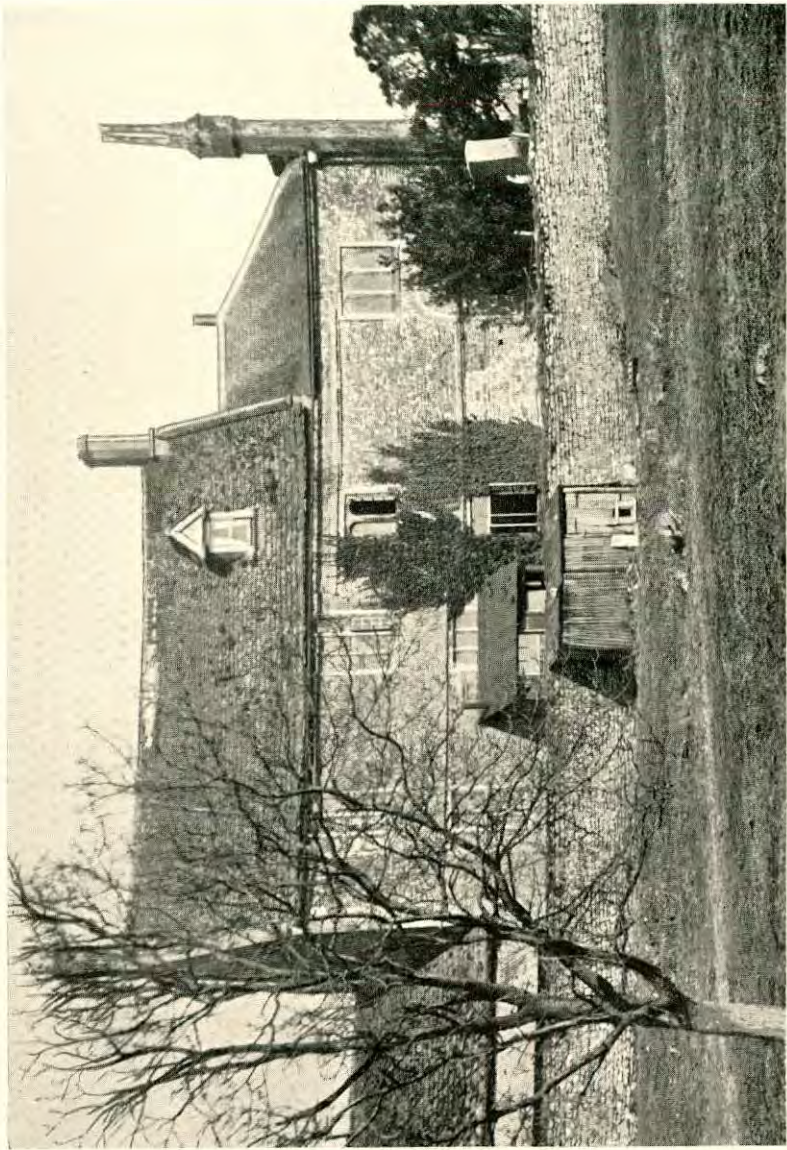
¹ *Collinson*, ii, 188.

family, according to an eighteenth-century MSS. in the possession of Lady Horner, written by some one well acquainted with the district, but Robert Leversage who died in 1673 was rich enough to erect a fine iron screen, bearing his arms impaled with those of Prater of Nunney, in Frome Church. Roger, the last male of the race, died in 1706, bequeathing the manors of Frome-Branche and Vallis to his son-in-law Edmund Seaman, from whom they came to Rev. Lionel Seaman, vicar of Frome, who sold them in 1751 to John Boyle, Earl of Orrery (proprietor of the neighbouring domain of Marston) including the chapel in Frome Church, the place of sepulture of many generations of Leversages, and subsequently of the Boyle family down to the middle of the nineteenth century.

A brief glimpse of Vallis is furnished by a letter in the 'Orrery Papers' published in 1903, the earl writing from Marston, 7 February 1752, expressing infinite pleasure with his recent purchase—'a most delightful situation and vast command, an old house about a mile and a half from my own, that employs me in cutting ivy and pruning up old trees, and if it rains I have a large antique room to stretch my legs in, and a little closet of books within. In the summer I shall probably put up a bed in the Haunted Room . . . there has been formerly a Park but it is now turned into a farm. However, many of the trees stand and are very beautiful. Time may re-park it. . . . My mare is neighing at the stable-door and I must go to Vallis to see an old lock mended'.

Though at that date in need of some repair, the mansion seems to have still been habitable; but after this Lord Orrery's death in 1762 Vallis House perhaps ceased to interest his immediate successors, and the erection of a new residence for the farm-tenant about the year 1870, at some little distance from the old house, proves that the latter was then considered not worth further patching.

The Somerset Archæological Society possesses two water-colour drawings, dated 1844, of the exterior and interior of the hall, misnamed the 'old chapel', presenting a forlorn and neglected appearance. Vallis remained part of the Marston estates until after the death of the 9th Earl of Cork and Orrery, when a sale by lots dispersed the whole in the year 1905.



HARDINGTON MANOR HOUSE

From a Photograph by Dom Ethelbert Horne, F.S.A.