

THE LORD LEYCESTER HOSPITAL, WARWICK

*Anniversary Address given by Rear Admiral S. A. Pears, C.B.E.,
Master of the Lord Leycester Hospital, at the 42nd Annual General
Meeting of the Society, held in Warwick on 12th June, 1965.*

I HAVE been asked to start my address with a brief outline of the historic buildings of Warwick, and then to apply myself to the Lord Leycester Hospital in particular. Warwick is so redolent of history, however, that I find it quite impossible to do more than mention a few of its most notable features. To attempt more, by way of enlarging on the few or listing all buildings with a claim to be considered, would be more likely to give rise to offence locally than to interest generally. Moreover, although I have been in Warwick over seven years, my knowledge is no more than patchy, the field being so extensive in all dimensions.

The dominant feature as one approaches from any direction is, of course, the Collegiate Church of St. Mary. It is large enough to be a pro-cathedral—and indeed once narrowly missed becoming a cathedral—with its great square tower standing at the apex of the great mound upon which Old Warwick was built. At its south-east corner there is the ancient and famous Beauchamp Chapel.

Approaching Warwick more closely from the south and east, the castle takes over the dominance from St. Mary's. Warwick Castle is so famous all over the world that it surely needs no comment from me to you. It claims to be among the oldest continually occupied buildings in the country, at least a part of it.

Similarly, on an incomparably smaller scale, approaching from the south and west, this Hospital, with the Chapel of St. James over the West Gate, gradually occludes St. Mary's. The East Gate also still stands and, if I may mention just one small building, half way between the two gates, and under the Castle Wall, there is Oakin's House, now a Doll's Museum.

What impresses me most, however, as giving Warwick its

special character, is none of these. In 1694 a great fire started almost opposite the Hospital and swept across the Old Town, driven before a sou'-wester right up to St. Mary's, which it partly destroyed. It is the rebuilt town deriving from this event which, to my mind, gives it its specially pleasing character.

Turning to the Lord Leycester Hospital in particular, I must say at once that there is an element of speculation present in any account which may be given of the buildings in an archaeological sense. This is due to an almost total lack of records of not only repairs, but quite major alterations right down to the year 1860. They passed through two critical periods, one in Tudor times, and the other at the beginning of the last century, but while I have a so-called Old Book which has been maintained since 1660, and fourteen packing cases of carefully sorted documents the oldest of which is dated 1383, they are all concerned with administration, finance and personnel in great detail and not with the buildings as such, except for such remarks as "Paid master mason £4 8s. 6d. and ye carpenter £3 4s. 8d."—tantalizingly uninformative!

You have all been supplied with a copy of a leaflet I wrote for general purposes and this may act as an *aide memoire* for you as we go around later. Half of it is history which I do not propose to enlarge upon except to apologise for an editorial error. As printed it appears that Lady Mary Dudley inherited all the considerable property of the Earl of Leycester; in fact a considerable share passed to her including the patronage of the Hospital. For further information on this I recommend the Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society for 1940, by E. G. Tibbits.

I should also mention a Transaction of 1954, by the well-known and much loved Philip Chatwin, F.S.A., who died recently and is receiving the unique honour of the burial of his ashes in the Beauchamp Chapel. The factual information in his brochure can be taken as Gospel but most unfortunately, as we cannot help seeing as we go along, his deductions cannot all be accepted. I am very well aware that my light is as a candle to his searchlight but I have the advantage that whereas he had only £5,000 to spend on his work here in 1950-51, I have spent £75,000 with the able assistance of our architect, Mr. Donald James, without whom I could not venture anything here, as well as various opinions from

the Ministry of Works and others. Although I was asked by Lord De L'Isle, Patron and hereditary Chairman of Governors of the Hospital, to take the responsibility and supervision of the present restoration, I do not speak with my own authority. I have tried to form an amalgam of expert opinions, both of those mentioned above and many others, on which to base decisions and the conclusions I have reached.

Turning now to the individual buildings, which I shall tackle in the order in which those of you who go around with me will see them, we start with the Great Hall in which you sit. In common with the other main buildings of the group it was built in the fifteenth century by the United Guilds of Warwick who established themselves here in 1383 or soon after. Chatwin has it that the buildings are all of the late fifteenth century, replacing the first early fifteenth-century erections. I do not deny the possibility of this assumption but I see no necessity for it. He speculates on the purpose of the Great Hall and in this he is misled by a great boss which hung from where can still be seen a patch in the timber roof. In his time, it was within the Master's House, and he did not know that it had been stolen, together with a number of carved spandrills, from the Guild Hall. I think the simplest explanation is the truest, it was known at one time as the Great Hall of Warwick. Every town of this class needs a Great Hall and who would be so likely to supply the need as the Guilds in their time. It continued to supply this need after the Hospital was founded; James I banqueted here, assizes were held in it, and it was used for innumerable functions as it is today. Later, however, it was neglected and fell into decay with the result that in 1958 the entrance was a plain breach in the stone wall to the east, the west wall consisted of fourteen inches of brick very badly put together about 150 years ago, the floor was of rough bricks in the main and there was an increscence of brick in the south-east corner with store places below, a staircase and landing above giving access to quarters to the south and east. The Hall had been shortened by a wall thrown across it at the north end with the object of incorporating the upper room now known, probably incorrectly, as the Minstrels' Gallery, in the Master's House; it has a fine view over the race course and away to the Cotswolds.

The walls were lined with coke and coal storages and a battery of lavatories, for right up to that time hardly any of the quarters had any water laid on. I hope you will agree that the money spent on this hall was not wasted. It is only fair to mention that while the Ministry of Works sought to compel us to repair the brick wall on the west side rather than reproduce the original, we were able to defeat such an ignoble proposal by rising to Ministerial level armed with a report with photographs from your Society, £5,000 from the Pilgrim Trust, and a special contribution from a Mrs. Sherrard towards a handsome oak floor. Two relatively minor points may interest you as illustrating decisions that have had to be made. One concerns a quite heated discussion on the question of painting the plaster panels. The view which finally convinced me and later the Governors was that of the Head of the Coventry School of Art, who said that the plaster harmonized so wonderfully with the timber that paint would be like "tarting up a lovely old lady". The other concerned the lighting, for which the requirements were first that the source should be as diffused as possible to avoid complicating the beauty of the roof timbers with shadows; second that there should be enough light at table level to eat or read by; third that the light fittings should be as inconspicuous as possible. In this case many designs were invited and received but none seemed to meet my requirements and for once I had to fall back on a design of my own.

Our next move will be through the Master's House and into the garden. These are not open to visitors but I felt this Society should have the opportunity to see my dining room and the back of the house which is at least suspected of being the oldest, although much repaired, original part of the buildings. As you pass through the dining room I hope you will be able to picture the state in 1958. The roof beams had been under-covered with a plain white ceiling. The floor had been lowered one foot six inches, presumably to give head room, so that there were two steps down and two up to the other side. The walls were thickly plastered and then decorated in yellow with black striped carrying texts. The whole was so damp as to be unusable.

The front of the house, as you probably glimpsed on the way in, was rebuilt in brick about one hundred and fifty years ago and

decorated in plaster, black and white in typical Victorian manner. It has been and is being left partly because it was the only truly safe part of the whole group of buildings in 1958, and partly because visitors, especially from overseas, having come to see our fifteenth-century buildings mostly admire and photograph most our Victorian cameo. The back of the house, on removal of inches of plaster, was found to be in such a state that the builders would not touch it until the roof was off which led to our spending the winter of 1958/59 under a polythene roof. This may be the point at which to mention that we had to shore up or strap up at a number of parts of the buildings long before we were able to take them in hand. In the garden are a vase allegedly burgled from the banks of the Nile by an Earl of Warwick before they acquired the famous Warwick Vase which they now display; and an isolated Norman arch believed to have been the gate of Warwick before the Chapel was built. There is also the great wall of Warwick to be seen which bounds the Hospital along all of its western side.

Leaving the garden eastwards we shall proceed back to the front, so to speak, passing the Malt House on the way. This is most remarkable for its fine state of preservation considering that for very many years it was left without attention and unoccupied except for hordes of mice and cockroaches which spread like a plague over the Hospital when their home was taken in hand. It now contains modern flatlets for the Brethren. Chatwin attributes it to the beginning of the seventeenth century. Turning right along the front we shall pass the Anchor Inn of the same period which was found to be in much worse condition requiring considerable repair before being also converted into modern quarters. Its name is probably a confusion from the Sidney blazon.

The Guild Hall is the area in which Mr. Chatwin did his work and it is very ably described in his brochure in some detail. It was the council chamber of the Guilds but the Hospital converted it into quarters for the Brethren by partitioning. These, of course, he removed but what he was unable to do was to re-establish the foundation and the structure upon which it rested. The timber is fine old Heart of Oak upon which neither beetles nor woodworm had been able to make any impression, but the indiscriminate use of plaster had so occluded the blessed air that, in the absence of

damp proof courses, moisture from the ground had crept upwards softening the main posts. Then the beetles got their chance and took it to such purpose that a main corner post supporting the Guildhall was reduced from 15 inches by 12 inches to 3 inches by 1½ inches. Our main task was to support the Guildhall in vacuo, as it were, by means of shores, scaffolding, etc., with steel ties to hold it back from the street while the understructure was repaired or replaced as necessary. An example of such a post is now exhibited on the front. The Guildhall is now utilised as our Museum and is perhaps the gem of the group.

The Chapel has been shortly described in our leaflet in terms which are a compression of the traditional truth. Chatwin suggests that it is a fourteenth-century building replacing the original twelfth-century structure. I can only say that I know of no valid reason for this suggestion which seems to me to be improbable. Since the restoration work and renewal of 1860-65 the issue is somewhat obscured. Our work upon the Chapel consisted of renewal of mullions and refacing on the south side which some have complained makes it look too new, an effect which has been increased by the cleaning of the old stone. This type of work is required for the north side, but there is no money for this.

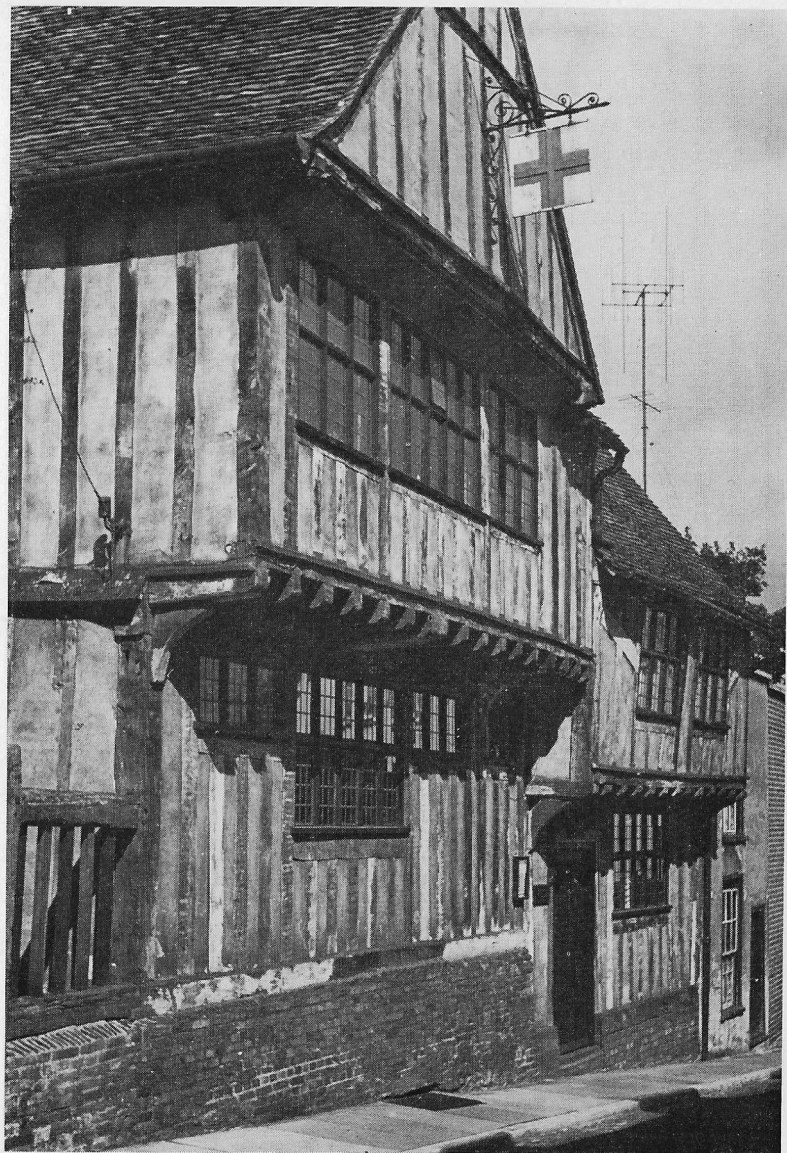
The archway supporting the Chapel is the subject of controversy at the present time. The conveyance to the Hospital of our buildings in 1571 is available and clearly states that it includes the Chapel but not the supporting gateway, but nobody will admit the responsibility for the latter which is in need of extensive repair.

There remains the east range of the quadrangle upon which work still continues and which is not at present in a fit state to be shown. It is a two-storey building with the main rooms on the first floor. These are reputed to have been used originally by the priests attending upon the Chapel before the Reformation, two at one time, four at another, but also for ecclesiastical assemblies which alone might justify three eleven-foot bays as a dining hall and a nineteen-foot bay as a common room. It is of entirely different construction from the other buildings, much simpler with fewer members carrying carpenters' marks which clearly

indicate that it was constructed elsewhere and only assembled on the site. The west wall is furnished with a balcony which can be seen from the quadrangle. The east wall has apparently failed and has been replaced in brick, but, unlike the west wall of the Great Hall, this was well built, is still sound, and will not be replaced. The Chaplains' dining hall is about to be adapted for use as a museum for the Queen's Own Hussars. The relatively uninteresting row of rooms on the ground floor have been used at various times for various purposes, notably as the Master's and the Brethren's kitchens.

There remain two general observations to make. The first concerns heating. There is no evidence of the existence of any original heating. The members of the Guilds must have been hardy fellows or well wrapped in fur coats. Their successors, however, granted themselves the luxury of innumerable fireplaces in outrageous positions served by exterior chimneys. In most cases the flues were carried out most recklessly through the walls encalcing many timbers. Two fire places were actually based with their chimneys upon first floor timbers. The use of electricity throughout has enabled us to get rid of these dangerous excrescences, thus reverting to the original appearance.

The last subject is the unpleasant one of finance. The Hospital has a wholly inadequate endowment, is currently heavily overdrawn, and has had to borrow most of the cost of modernising the Brethren's quarters. The hiring of these halls and the attraction of visitors offer a slender hope of approaching some sort of stability in, say, twenty years' time.



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