

GAWSWORTH OLD RECTORY

NEAR MACCLESFIELD, CHESHIRE

The Home of Raymond Richards Esquire, M.A., F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S.

Patron of the Living

Chairman of the Ancient Monuments Society

THIS much loved and well known glebe house was built by Rector George Baguley, who was parish priest of Gawsworth from 1470 till his death in 1497, and he is thought to have completed the erection of the building about the year 1480.

Rector William Hall, who was incumbent of Gawsworth from 1683 to 1769, and during his residence restored the rectory, left the following valuable note in the parish register for the year 1761, written in beautiful penmanship, "Words written on ye South door of Gawsworth Church, but now almost worn out: 'Fitton this chancel raised from ye ground but Baguley ye Rectory did found.'"¹

The main facade of the rectory, with the exception of one or two minor alterations, is original work of the time of Edward IV. The heavy Kerridge grey slates were removed from the roofs about a century ago, and the present red tile substituted, which time has weathered into a kinder blending with the traditional black and white colouring of the timber fabric as a whole. The rectory was never thatched as suggested by some writers, and the Terrier of 1783 clearly states that the "Parsonage house is chiefly built of timber covered with slate." The brick wall which encloses the house to the south and the short drive were also added at the time the roof was tiled. Formerly, a quaint low lichen-covered wall with stone copings and pillared gateway gave access to the garden, whilst in the foreground was a pleasant green sward, falling away to the church lane.

¹ In the Randle Holmes MSS in the British Museum (Harl.MSS.2161) the antiquary records that an inscription in the "south chancell window" read "Pray for the soul of George Baguley rector of this church who built the rectory anew." Obviously the present rectory occupies the site of a still more ancient house, probably dating from Norman times.

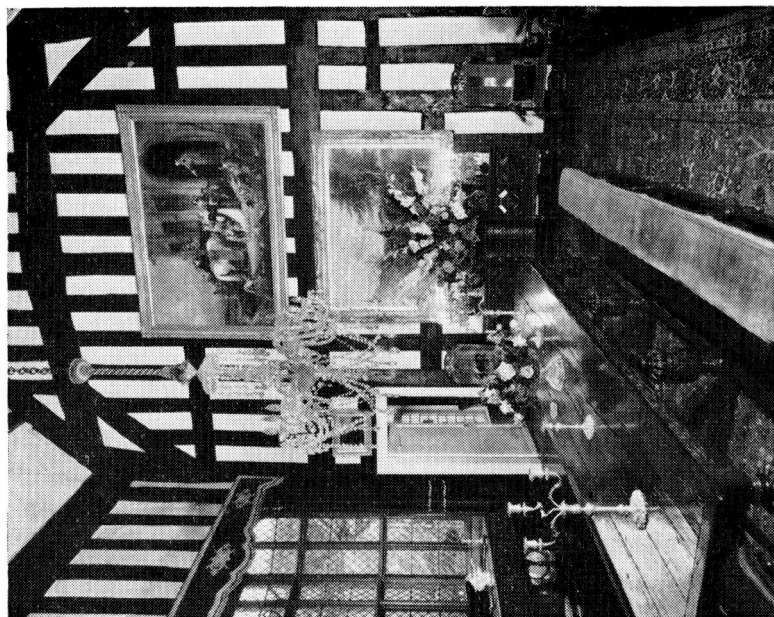
The timber-framed houses of the county are a feature of the Cheshire scene, and the lovely glebe house of Gawsworth takes pride of place for age, and the unique distinction of having been continuously lived in, since the time of its erection. The Old Rectory is older by a century than the neighbouring half-timbered halls of East Cheshire, and the very solid plainness of its construction no doubt largely accounts for its survival with so little new timber having been introduced into the main framing.

Gawsworth Old Rectory today with its massive timbers, curved braces, and the manner in which all the wooden framing is slotted and pegged into one rigid structure, reflects the enduring quality of the oak used and the superb skill and ability of the fifteenth-century builders. In plan the building is long and low with three projections, roughly E shaped, from the main western facade. The two-storied porch is placed in the centre of the building, and contains a half-glazed arched outer storm door, with a most unusual hood-shaped weather moulding, which in turn is surmounted by a delightful small room, long called Theophila's Bower, which over-looks the outer entrance to the great hall. The inner door, a magnificent example of its day, is still secured by the quaint oak original fastenings. It swings on a massive shoulder without hinges, and the back is solidly cradled. Despite its great weight the door is perfectly balanced and swings with the slightest pressure. The iron closing ring of the door is a remarkable survival of the blacksmith's art of 1480. The circular rose or scutcheon-plate (diam. 8 inches) is pierced with four groups of triple holes alternating with rose-headed bolts, and has a raised rim of fret pattern. The heavy oval drop handle is of flat section cut with elaborate design, with medial ribs at its base and small projections on either side of the square spindle.

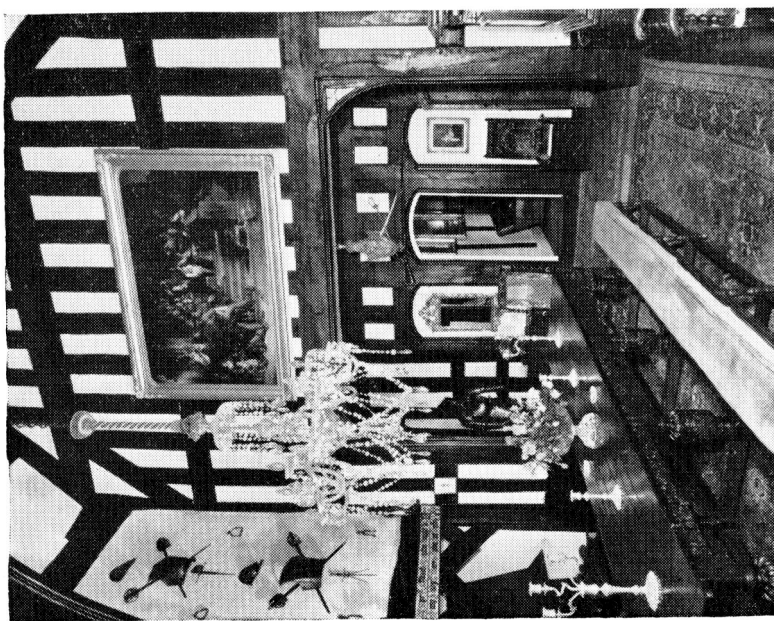
It is difficult to understand the Victorian taste which on various occasions enamelled the ancient oak in a variety of colours, and when the paint was scraped off in 1908 it was found that various layers of enamel had at one time been grained and varnished actually to resemble oak.

Seats are placed on either side of the porch, and in the east wall the cavity which formerly contained the old parish records was probably the site of the pre-Reformation wayfarers' cupboard.

The chief glory of the old rectory is the great timbered hall, open to the steep pitched roof. It is of Queen's Post formation, having a lovely carved and gilded boss placed between the two enormous carved struts supporting the main tie beam. Through-



THE GREAT HALL, LOOKING WEST



THE GREAT HALL, LOOKING EAST

out, the timbering is uniformly placed, and the proportions are unchanged, with the exception of the loss of the staircase and gallery at the west end. The former large hall window has been converted into a large bay, which, it must be conceded, was a good improvement in design, even if the timber used in its construction has since rotted, and has had to be renewed in recent years. The four shields of arms emblazoned on the windows of the great hall were formerly in the church, and have been put in the wrong way round if intended to be seen from the inside of the hall. The arms include Davenport of Henbury and the Erdeswick and Egerton families.

The early methods of heating a great hall such as the noble example of Gawsworth were primitive, and what became of the open fireplace nothing is known. Early this century ugly and cumbersome radiators served, but when these were thrown out in 1904 a poorly designed fireplace was erected against the north wall, employing as a mantel-shelf an elaborately carved and heraldically coloured Tudor home-coming board, which for many years had hung under Theophila's Bower. The inscription reads:

"SYR EDWARD FYTON KNIGHT Wt MY LADY
MARE ffYTON HYS WIFFE"

It commemorates Sir Edward Fitton who died in 1547 aged about 47, and his wife Mary, younger daughter and co-heiress of Sir Guiscard Harbottle, Knight of Co. Northumberland. Both were married at Gawsworth; the widow dying in 1556. The board is beautifully carved and embellished with two shields of arms, each of four quarterings.

The lesser rooms to the east and west of the great hall retain much of the original timbering, and the medieval character of the house is preserved by the unchanged proportions of the half-timbered steward's room, the brew-house and the kitchen. The great open fireplace has been bricked in, but some seven feet of space behind the existing walling is a reminder of more spacious times, when the spit could no doubt roast a carcass in its entirety. The many hooks secured to the kitchen roof beams are also a pleasant survival of a by-gone age. Much old glass survives, mostly in new leads, but some windows still retain the old fashioned and quite delightful concave and convex glazing.

Of the bedrooms the hall chamber still preserves the name used when access was possible from the great hall staircase and gallery, and contains over the fireplace Rector Hall's overmantel, bearing

his inscription commemorating his restoration and "Decoravit" in the first half of the eighteenth century.

The delightful Mary Fitton bedroom, situated immediately to the east of the central porch, contains a rare window having four panes of old glass, painted with the following Latin lines:

Paelicitas unica intus nil strepere
 Praecipitis consilii assecla poenitentia
 Murus aenus sana conscientia
 Calumniae morsui remedium nullum

Freely translated they read:

The only happiness is in inward peace.
 Repentance is the follower of rash counsel.
 A healthy conscience is a wall of brass.
 There is no cure for the bite of slander.

What rare advice for a country parson to bequeath to his successors—a pocket sermon to be seen morning and evening. It is thought these pungent lines were written by Rector William Hall about the year 1750. Born in 1692 he came to Gawsworth by way of Siddington and Marton. On his presentation in 1724 he resigned both these parishes, and remained rector of Gawsworth until the time of his death in 1769, having held the living for no less than forty-six years.

The Mary Fitton bedroom has quaint uneven oak floors, and preserves all its ancient timbering intact. For many years this apartment has always been accepted as the haunted room, and many visitors view it with some apprehension!

Possibly the most beautiful bedroom in the Old Rectory is the long apartment adjacent to the original east wing staircase, which survives exactly as it was fashioned in the fifteenth century. The open roof, the lovely timbering, and the exquisite views from the lattice windows, make it one of the most beautiful rooms in Cheshire.

Although the north side of the rectory contains the new wing it must be agreed that it was added in excellent taste by Rector the Hon. Henry Augustus Stanhope, shortly after he was presented to the living in 1872.

He was a man of position, being the son of the Earl Stanhope, and his wife, the Hon. Mildred Vernon was a daughter of Lord Vernon of Poynton and Sudbury. Their joint additions resulted in the Old Rectory possessing eleven bedrooms and four entertaining rooms, which considerably embarrassed their successors.

Actually older than the church and rectory is the giant cruck framing of the tythe-barn forming the eastern wing of the stable



THE LIBRARY



THE LIBRARY

yard. The original tie beams, post and ridge tree are gone, but the great trees supporting the later structure are possibly the oldest survivals in this ancient and romantic corner of Cheshire.

One of Gawsworth's most respected rectors, the Rev. Edward Polehampton, who loved Gawsworth and the Old Rectory, wrote:

"Peacefully lies this interesting old home of generations of parish priests. Wonderful is its setting, beautiful at all seasons of the year. The budding of spring, the glory of summer, the decay of autumn, the hardness of winter, each provide in turn some new charm to make glad the heart of those whose privilege it is to live within its walls. The rustle of leaf, the song of bird, the ripple of water as gentle as zephyr plays it into smiles, the caw of jackdaw round the old church tower, aye, the hoot of owl in stillness of night even, combine to transform sadness of heart into joy, darkness into light."

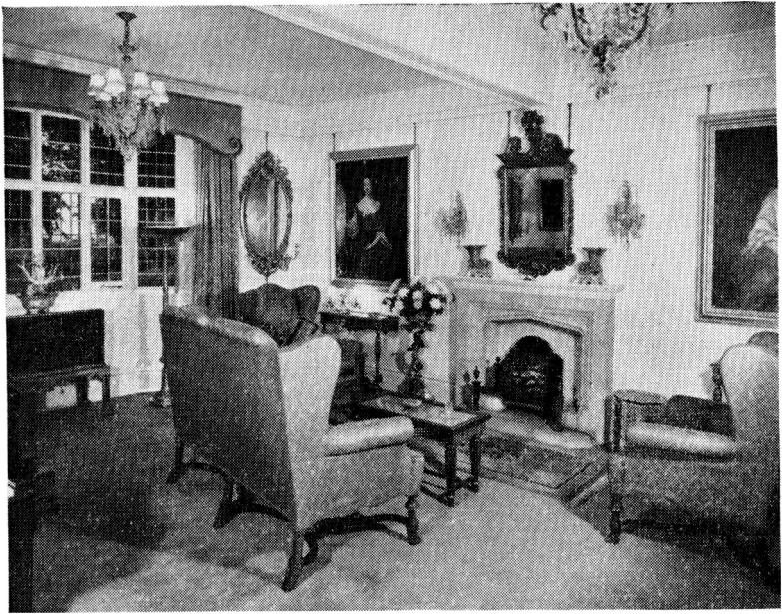
In its long history many well-known people have visited and lived at the Old Rectory, and it is not surprising that the old world charm and medieval character of the ancient half-timbered, fifteenth century parsonage aroused the love and admiration of generations of parish priests and visitors. A charming description of the ancient glebe house, as it appeared in the year 1818, was given by Mrs. Brandt to Thomas Hughes, F.S.A.¹ Her husband, the Rev. Francis Brandt, M.A., was curate at Gawsworth from 1818 to 1844, when he was presented to the living of Aldford near Chester by the Marquis of Westminster.

The Brandts arrived at Gawsworth during the rectorship of the Rev. Henry Forster Mills (1803-1827) who was non-resident. This clergyman never once saw his living, being the son-in-law of the Archbishop of York, and Chancellor of York Minster. In this respect he was no better or worse than his predecessor or successor, both of whom were also non-resident. As a result Gawsworth, for almost a century, was without a resident rector; the clergy, although receiving the rich tithes, were content to leave the welfare of their cure in the hands of poorly paid curates.

At the time when the Rev. Henry Forster Mills and his family were wintering at Bath, the Brandts arrived at Gawsworth. What could be more charming or old-world than the following picture of the new curate and his wife, recently married, arriving in the village.

"It was Christmas Eve in the year 1818 that, leaving the high road, and driving through pretty rural lanes, we entered the parish

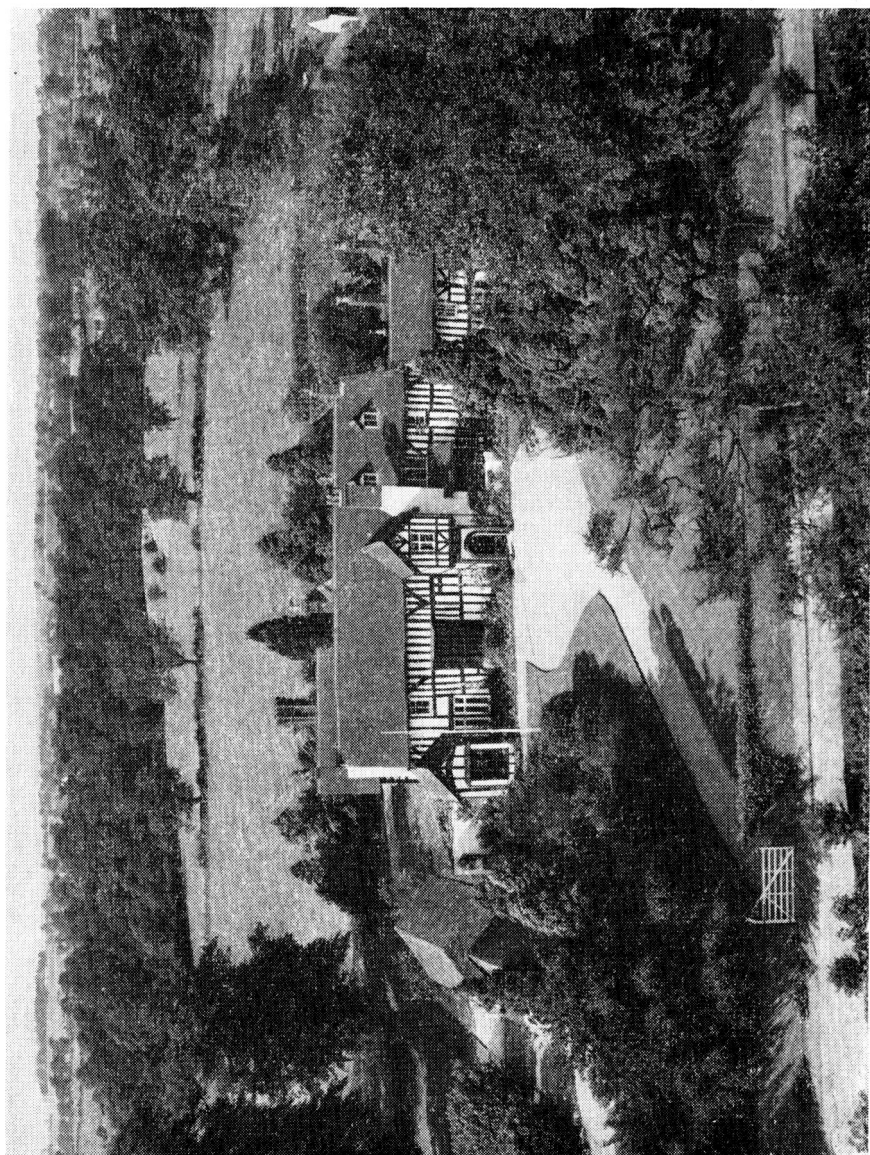
¹ Thomas Hughes (1826-1890), a former distinguished Cheshire antiquary and editor of the *Cheshire Sheaf*. (1s.v.3.)



THE DRAWING ROOM



THE DRAWING ROOM



THE 15TH CENTURY SOUTH FACADE PHOTOGRAPHED FROM THE CHURCH TOWER

of Gawsworth, and first came into sight of the beautiful old church, destined to be the scene of my husband's early ministry for five and twenty years!

"The day was cold, the trees and hedges leafless and bare; but they were thickly covered, and the ground was crisped with a sharp hoar frost. Never shall I forget my first feelings on looking upon that peaceful, lovely spot. We drove up the green to the little garden gate. What a picture did that old Rectory House present. It was very old, built of wood and plaster, gable ended, and painted black and white. Over the centre porch, projected far out, was a bedroom, which in after years was named 'Theophila's Bower,' after a young friend who had often slept there. The windows were many shaped and sized, and glazed with small panes, leaded. This, then, was to be our home, 'for weal and for woe'—very lovely to look upon. I thought it so, at any rate; and nothing to my memory, can be like it again, as it struck me on that afternoon of that December day.

"Our two maidens came down the garden to meet us (our man was with us), and quickly following came my husband's brother Henry, who had been actively busy to get the workmen out of the way and have all things in order for our reception. This he had done and soon left us to join his mother and sisters for their Christmas dinner. It was a strange moment to me—no words can tell it, no pen can paint it.

"The porch was entered by a half-glass outer door; within were benches on either side, and inserted in the wall was an iron safe for the registers, with a moulding round of oak, curiously carved. The inner door was like that in our old churches, of heavy oak, studded thickly with large nails and strong and dressed oaken bolts. From this door we passed into a hall, open to the roof—an old fashioned staircase leading out of it to the best, or state bedchamber, and to that only. A handsome massive arch was thrown across the middle, and the window was large and filled with coats of arms and other devices in painted glass: it was a beautiful and imposing room to enter. Beyond was a smaller, but good-sized sitting room, with painted cross beams in the ceiling, held together in the centre by a gilt rose—denoting the silence to be observed respecting all which passed 'beneath the rose' within those walls. The rest of the house was curiously connected, by mysterious little flights of shut-up stairs and winding passages—a dreamy, romantic house for two newly married young people to come to.

"We sat down to our first meal soon after, and had scarcely done

so when the five silvery bells of our Church rang out a merry peal to welcome their new Pastor.

“Christmas morning came, and our people gathered in the Church. The service was beautifully gone through, as it ever, ever was by him. No, the like will never be heard by me again—I know it, I feel it daily.

“The choir consisted of men, with every description of musical instrument under the sun; and when the 10th Anthem was given out to be sung, I rose with the rest of the congregation; and as I was feeling very quietly happy, and disposed to be pleased with everything, I have no doubt I looked so; until the leader, a man with one eye, laying aside his clarionet, and taking up the solo part, in a cracked voice, sang, ‘They wife shall be as the fruitful vine, &c.’ I can feel now the hot flush and tingling sensation which rushed into my cheeks; but everybody looked so serious, and as if it were quite the right and proper form to go through, that I tried to do the same, and stood it out—I believe, however, I ought to have sat still. Then let me record what in after years befell this same anthem. My husband found that it prevented the young married people from coming to church—he therefore ordered that it should not be sung, unless by special desire. On the strength of that promise from the Pastor, a young couple made their first appearance in church; in due time, however, the 10th Anthem appeared on the board. My husband said quietly to the clerk, ‘that must not be sung!’ upon which the old man very audibly said ‘Yo’re desired not to sing that anthem!’ There was a slight pause, but evident symptoms of resistance, when the clerk called out ‘Yo are desired NOT to sing that anthem!’—still no sign of yielding—there was even a little tuning up—when the old man, tried past his patience, struck his fist on the desk, and them, shaking it at the choir, in a stentorian voice called out ‘Yo MUNNA sing that anthem!’ This was decisive—they all sat down, simultaneously abashed; the ‘Hundredth Psalm’ was put up, and sung, and from that time forward the 10th Anthem was heard no more in Gawsworth Church.”

Alas, many of Mrs. Brandt’s young children lie under the ancient yew tree, in that part of the old churchyard which overlooks the rectory pool.

In another account of the village and rectory, as it appeared in the year 1818, Mrs. Brandt records:

“The Red Rover Coach ran twice a week between Manchester and Congleton, and the driver made this little detour now and then to drop parcels at the Rectory, and please his passengers by a

sight of this lovely spot. I believe there were fifteen miles of by-roads; and it was scarcely possible, when first we went there, for a carriage to get to us even up the avenue. A parish plough we found was kept to plough in the ruts."

Within recent years the house has been occupied by the Patron of the Living, who is also Lord of the Manor. During this time Mr. Raymond Richards has accomplished considerable reparation to the fabric of the building, and in restoring the house and grounds to complete order he hopes they will be handed down to delight generations yet unborn.

The Rectory is furnished with many rare examples of period furniture. The refectory table in the great hall is a notable survival of Tudor times, whilst the eighteenth century is represented by splendid examples of furniture, glass and tapestry. The pictures are distinguished, with well-known examples by Morland, Reynolds, Wilson, and many other old masters.

The extensive library is particularly rich in local history, almost every work dealing with Cheshire and district finding a place there. The great treasure of the Old Rectory library, however, is the splendid collection of muniments, well known to scholars as "The Raymond Richards Collection." This vast accumulation of charters, manuscripts, court-rolls and letters is one of the most extensive of its kind still preserved in private hands, and includes the entire Sneyd, Chetwode and Hatton-Wood collections. The ancient charters include numerous state documents of National importance. Many of the great seals on the early monastic documents are unique, and the only known examples surviving. The letters, too, are voluminous with rarities of every age. Later records include Blenheim Palace building accounts, and the school exercise books of George IV and William IV.

Gawsworth Old Rectory is indeed a remarkable survival from ancient times, and loved for its picturesque beauty, its rare setting, and for its rich variety of interests.
