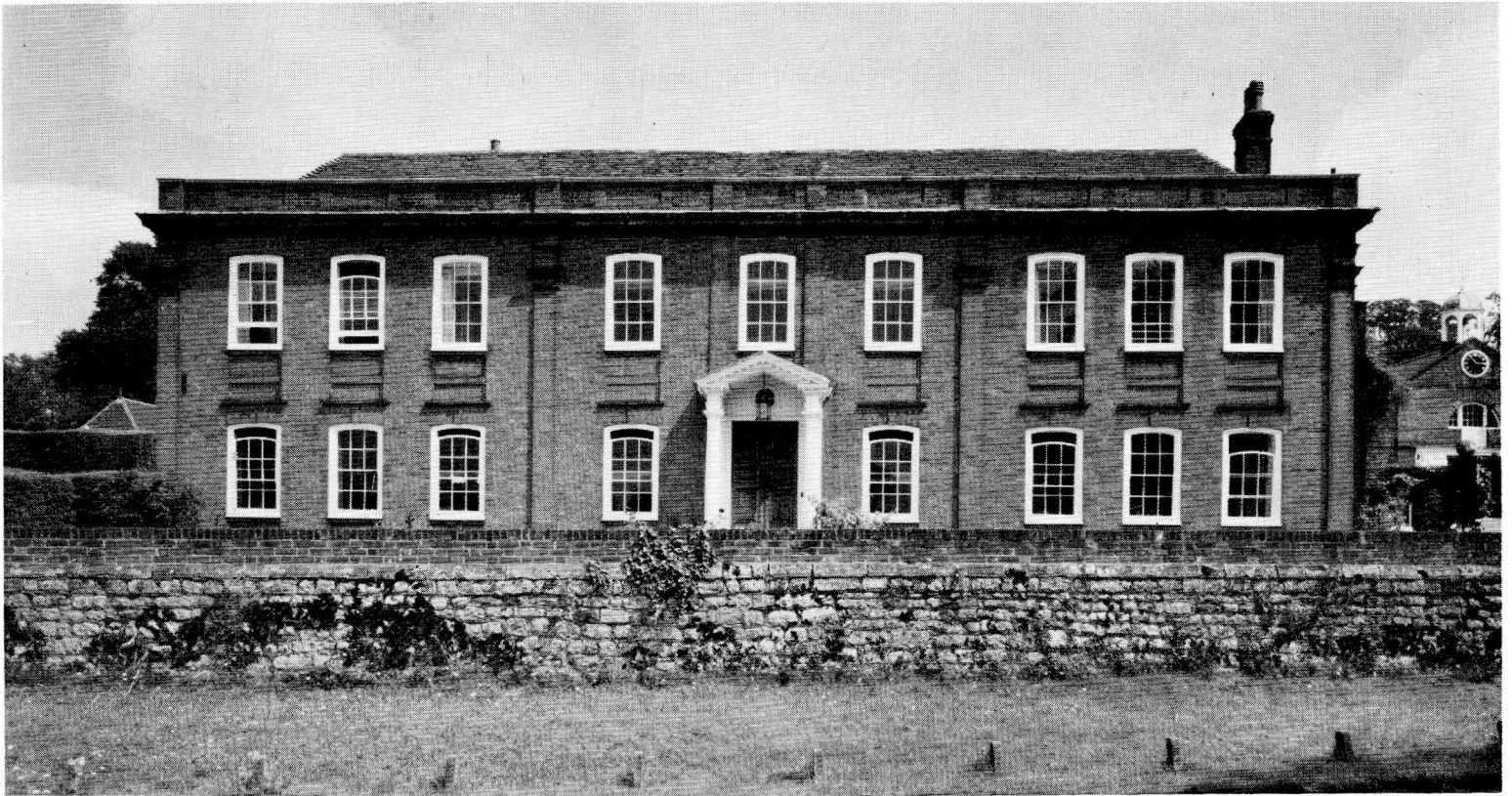


WEST FARLEIGH HALL, KENT—I

HOME OF MAJOR-GENERAL AND MRS. CHARLES NORMAN *By* CHRISTOPHER HUSSEY

Built in 1719 by John Brewer, the Hall is one of the distinguished group of contemporary brick houses in Kent perhaps attributable to the same master bricklayer.



1.—THE MELLOW BRICK FRONT SEEN FROM THE ROAD DESCENDING TO TESTON BRIDGE



2.—THE INNER SIDE OF THE HALL. A single Corinthian pillar supports the ceiling and the gallery where a fireplace would be expected

WEST and East Farleigh lie a few miles south-west of Maidstone along the right bank of the Medway, which between Yalding and Nettlestead has cut a curving valley through the rag-stone escarpment that rims the Weald. The gap extends to the Farleighs, and the charm of these fertile slopes won even from Hasted, usually a phlegmatic historian, approval of their being called "the Garden of Kent"—itself often termed the Garden of England. It is still among the most pictorial reaches of the Medway valley, and the garden of West Farleigh Hall (we shall see next week) bears out the soil's reputation. The russet brick front of the house (Fig. 1), seen from the road that has crossed the medieval bridge at Teston, is depicted (with one notable difference) in Kip's view (Fig. 8), engraved for Harris's *History of Kent* which was published in the same year, 1719, as occurs on the rain-water heads.

In those days the house was called Smiths Hall, although it had belonged since Henry VI's time to the family of Brewer, *alias* Briwer. Their progenitor had been Lieutenant of Dover Castle till King John replaced him by the famous Hubert de Burg, and Brewers were established in Mereworth and Yalding as well as here. Smiths Hall, lying some distance west of the village church and court, was never the manor place but evidently became a considerable house, probably of timber-framed hall type and standing round a court. The present building's disposition suggests that it occupies the same site, incorporating foundations if not parts of the old structure. Thomas Brewer's will in 1689 mentions antique furnishings in several rooms, such as "the bed with hangings in the Purple chamber," and expressed the desire that "my great gilt Cup and the tapestry hangings and embroidered bed in the Great Chamber be heirlooms" to whomsoever possessed the house. This, together with "all my orchard and hop garden," he entailed on his eldest son John and his heirs, making ample bequests also to James, Thomas, Philip and two daughters. (Richard, however, "having already spent a vast proportion of my Estate," received only £100 in trust.) But study of the Smiths Hall muniments deposited at Kent County Archives Office reveals that old Thomas's proud intentions for the future of his ancient house and family were disappointed. In a way, indeed, his son's replacing of the old house by the present one might be termed "unlucky," for the Brewers were to die out by the middle of the century.

John Brewer, who succeeded in 1690, appears to have been a prosperous barrister of Gray's Inn, where he built or



3.—LOOKING OUT THROUGH THE HALL: THE ORIGINAL TALL DOORS REMAIN WITHIN THE ADDED PORCH.
(Right) 4.—THE SAME ENTRANCE DOORS: A NEARER VIEW

acquired several sets of chambers besides "new Brick houses in St. Giles in the Fields and St. Andrew Street" (according to his will which was "written by my own hand" in 1724). John and Jane Brewer, however, had no children, so in 1714 we find him settling Smiths Hall and most of his personal estate on his nephew Thomas (also of Gray's Inn, so perhaps in partnership with him), eldest son of Dr. Thomas Brewer, physician, of Reading. The occasion was Thomas's marriage with Mary, only daughter of Sir Richard May, late of Pashley, near Ticehurst (an early Tudor quadrangular timber house also half rebuilt in brick), "in consideration of the benefit and advancement" which this good match would be to him. These depositions illumine why John Brewer, although childless and towards the end of his life, was rebuilding in 1719, and possibly on the character of the brick house then erected.

As Dr. Thomas Harris's *History of Kent*, containing Kip's plate (Fig. 8) was published in the same year, the drawing made by Badslade presumably depicts the house as intended to be (at least a year before) and not as actually completed, even if that coincided with the book's publication. So it is not entirely surprising to find that there is a discrepancy: the top storey shown in the plate is missing. In other respects the house, and indeed the surroundings, agree with it remarkably closely. Coming along the road from Yalding one still turns into a cobbled yard that, adjoining the south side of the house (Fig. 9), is overlooked at an angle by a coach house (Fig. 10) corresponding to the barn and stable in the print. The coach house, built of slightly larger bricks, with a lunette

window and sham flanking parapets, is evidently later than the house, perhaps contemporary with the classical porch added to the front door (Fig. 5). Yet it repeats in its lower storey the nice brick arching seen in this side of the house and carried round the re-entrant court that bites into it (Fig. 9), which can scarcely be other than contemporary with the main building. Indeed the arch motif may have been intended throughout the fenestration of the front, as shown by Kip, instead of the actual segment-headed windows. This discrepancy could of course be due to a misunderstanding on the artist's part; yet

fully arched windows are integral to two at least of the other elaborate brick façades (Finchcocks, 1725, and Matfield House, 1728) comparable to West Farleigh.

Mr. Arthur Oswald has lately drawn attention to the group of brick-built houses around Maidstone, dating between 1710 and 1730, the stylistic resemblance of which is so marked as to suggest that they are the work of a single accomplished builder. They all make great play with polychrome effects, all their elevations feature a giant Tuscan or Doric order which, with their variation of window-forms (flat, segmental arch-headed, and occasional *oeil-de-boeufs*), show progressive acquaintance with "the current Baroque trend in the work of Vanbrugh, Hawksmoor and James." Besides those mentioned above, which are the latest and most mature, there are Westwell at Tenteiden (1711), Bradbourne (1713, the most elaborate), and the house called Ferox Hall, Tonbridge (opposite the school buildings), the date of which I have not ascertained. Another characteristic, most marked at Finchcocks and West Farleigh, is the elevation's lack of correspondence with the plan and with the rest of the building.

In technique the West Farleigh façade is most nearly related to Bradbourne (COUNTRY LIFE, April 6, 13 and 20, 1967). In both the basic brickwork is of mauvish stocks ranging from buff to pink and purple, with fine scarlet rubbed bricks in the architraves and "aprons" and framing the pilasters. The architraves, here segmental, are similarly cut to a wavy profile, and the slightly recessed "apron" panels form continuous bands of red in which the windows are set (as also in a stately little

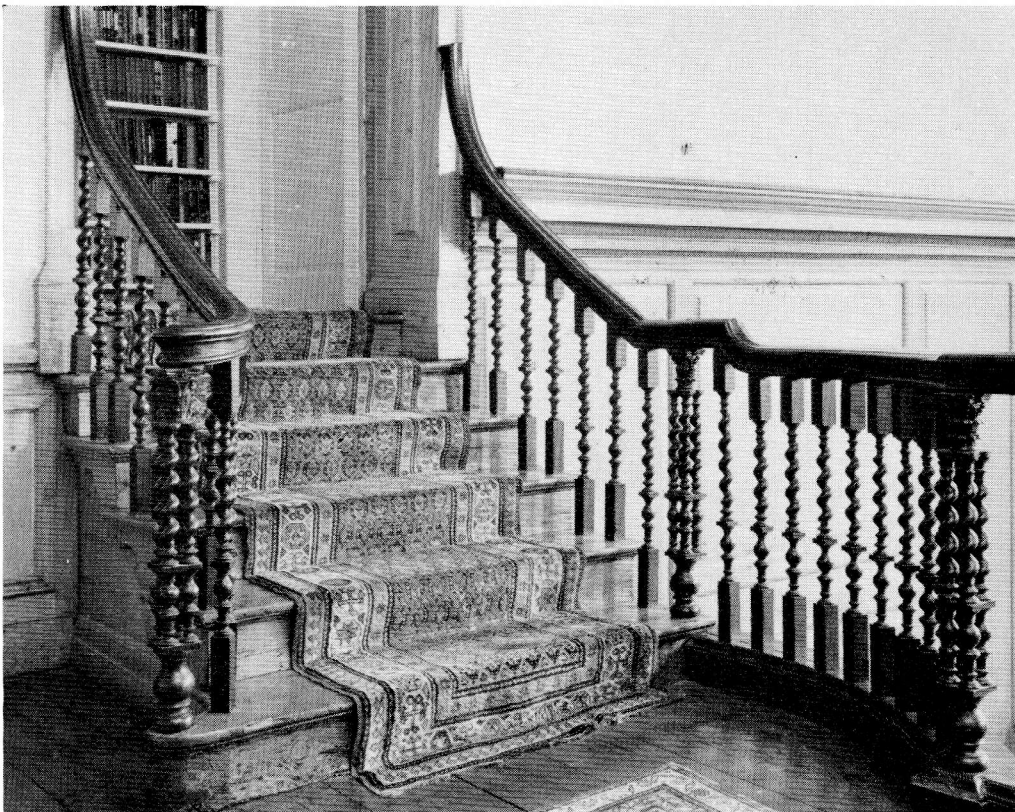


5.—THE PORCH OF ABOUT 1775 STANDS OUT FROM THE RUSSET AND SCARLET BRICKWORK OF 1719

brick house adjoining the church at Yalding). The original portal shown in the print was taller than at present; indeed the original great doors (Fig. 5) are still here, their height masked by the lintel of the added porch—in which a blind “eye” was put to occupy the space.

It is annoying that no documentation has so far come to light giving a clue to the identity of the builder employed on any of these houses. From their distribution around Maidstone Mr. Oswald has inferred the possibility of his having been based on that town; yet the conspicuous absence from Maidstone of any analogous buildings rather leads me to doubt that hypothesis. The quality of most of these houses points to their builder having had considerable contact with metropolitan, even Board of Works, practice.

By a curious coincidence an ancestor of the present owner of West Farleigh became connected by marriage with such a man when the Norman family went to live at Bromley in north Kent: namely William Emmett, son of Wren’s master bricklayer at Chelsea Hospital. Emmett, more of whom will be said next week, is shown by his MS notes (now deposited at Kent Archives Office) to have been something of an architect, and built himself a large mansion at Bromley about 1700 besides at least one other edifice in the parish. While this gives no grounds whatever for supposing Emmett to be the missing mid-Kent brick-master, it does, I think, help to strengthen a case for not assuming him necessarily to have been a Man of Kent. The evidence of John Brewer’s property speculations in Holborn



6.—SPIRAL TURNERY IN THE BALUSTRADE OF THE HALL GALLERY



7.—THE STAIRCASE RECESS IN THE SOUTH-WEST CORNER OF THE HALL

makes it not unlikely that he employed his London master-builder to design, if not to build, at least the façade of Smiths Hall.

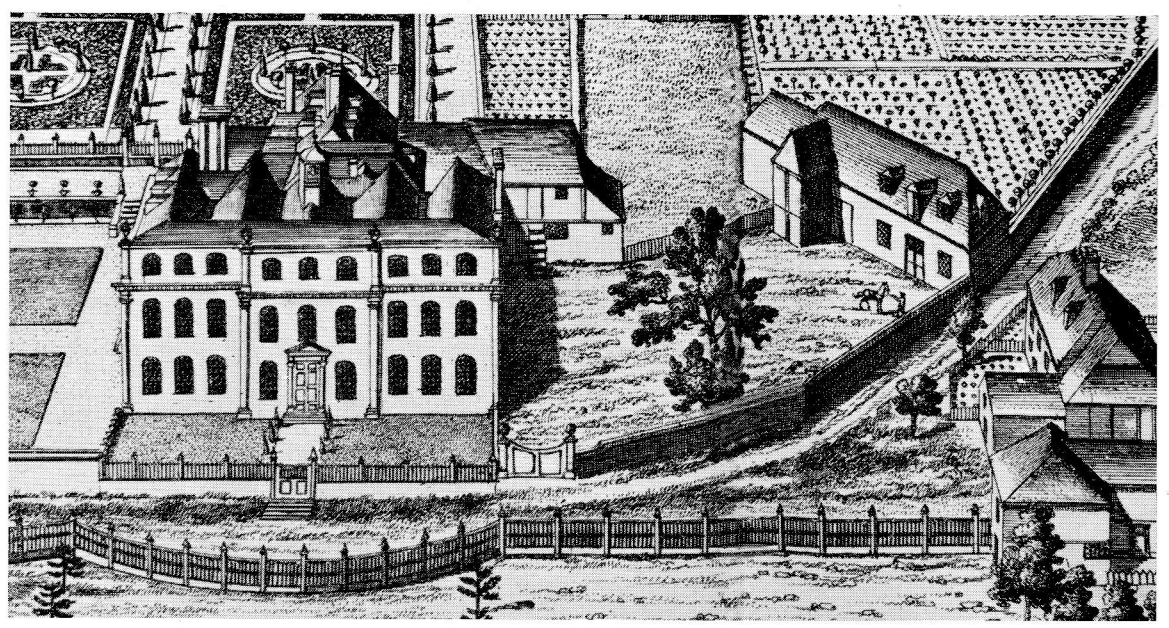
Another characteristic of these brick Kentish houses is the space allotted in them to a large hall, from which in several instances rises a staircase of elaborate carpentry. At that period, from Blenheim downwards, such halls were evidently desirable for the fashionable way of life; and also no doubt, as Mr. Oswald remarked with reference to Bradbourne, as “status symbols, however useless, inconvenient and draughty.” Our brick-master (assuming he was employed on all these houses) notably catered in them for this fashionable demand, irrespective of the effect on their convenience. Here the three middle bays of the front are taken up by a two-storeyed hall (Fig. 3). In its inner side the staircase (Fig. 7) rises in a recess beneath the hanging gallery that connects the upper rooms at its ends; and in the middle of it a single great fluted pillar with a Corinthian capital supports both the gallery and the flat ceiling (Fig. 2). In rear of this pier a corridor runs back in both storeys, serving the further parts of the house, and in each end of the hall a central doorway gives into dining and drawing-room respectively.

A curious result of this arrangement is that it leaves no room for a fireplace. One reads of the amateur architect who forgot the staircase. But a more probable explanation for this omission may be that Smiths Hall was rebuilt by the Brewers of Gray’s Inn mainly for summer residence, and the hall for Thomas and his young wife to entertain parties from Tunbridge Wells, then at the height of its vogue. In very different style, but with little more thought of winter, Col. Fane and Colin Campbell were at the same time planning to rebuild Mereworth Castle with the same object. For such social use the ancient hall (which might never have had a chimney anyway) was quite unsuitable. Indeed it is likely that the new one took its place, and that the rooms at either end represent the gabled wings of a typical Wealden hall-house. But there is nothing visible in the structure to confirm this hypothesis.

It is difficult to reconcile the existing plan and the hall’s wide span with the third storey in Kip’s plate. Yet this is so nearly accurate otherwise that probably it was done from an architect’s drawing of the intended building. The inference from the discrepancies and

actual anomalies should perhaps be that John Brewer found the cost of the complete design too high, so decided that the reduced elevation and somewhat makeshift plan must suffice, with as much as possible of the old house rebuilt behind his smart façade.

If he economised in the brickwork, however, he was liberal in the hall's joinery. The staircase and gallery are a delightful display of a craftsman's ingenious virtuosity. Rising in three short flights within its recess, the ascent reaches the gallery from the back (Fig. 7), all the balustrades being of elaborate spiral turnery resting on a boldly moulded cornice. The makeshift levels necessitated other short ascents at each end of the gallery, where it had to be projected forward slightly to reach the bedroom doors (Fig. 6). At these points the single baluster is replaced by a newel consisting of



8.—“SMITHS HALL” IN 1719. Part of Kip's engraving, showing the omitted upper storey



9.—THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE HOUSE FROM THE STABLE YARD

after my decease” at Smiths Hall. We also learn that the Pipe Office and Estreate Office were in occupation of others of his Gray's Inn chambers. When Thomas Brewer died six years later, also without children, he was succeeded under the entail by his sister Jane, married to John Carney of Reading. They had an only daughter who in 1747 married John Shrimpton of the Isle of Wight. But she also died childless, in 1762, leaving the property to her uncle, Dr. John Davis, D.D, vicar of Mereworth. He left the place to his son Sir John Brewer Davis.

The latter seems to have lived little at West Farleigh Hall, as it was now beginning to be called, at first leasing, and in 1774 selling, the estate for £12,000 (completed in 1782) to William Philip Perrin of the parish of St. George's, Bloomsbury. Perrin is described as the only son of William Perrin, formerly of the City of London and afterwards of the parish of Vere in Jamaica. It was probably he who added the classical porch to the house, fitted up a library, and inserted Adam-style chimneypieces in some of the rooms. When he died, unmarried, in 1820 the property passed to his nephew Sir Henry Fitzherbert, 3rd baronet, of Tissington Hall, Derbyshire, son of his sister Sarah Perrin, who had married the 1st baronet in 1777. After 1918, when the house was occupied on lease by the Hon. Henry Hannen, a son of a Lord of Appeal holding a life peerage, the property was sold to Mrs. Margetts from whom it was purchased by General Norman in 1949.

(To be concluded.)

a group of four slighter ones standing on a vase-shaped base and supporting a Corinthian capital.

For two-thirds of its height the hall is lined with fielded pine wainscot crowned by a box cornice. Old COUNTRY LIFE photographs (May 11, 1918) show that it was painted with graining to simulate oak. Having much darkened, this has latterly been stripped, lightening the hall but somewhat spoiling its unity of treatment. Under the gallery the panelling was carried across flush with the cornice, as far as the staircase recess (affording a completely dark transverse passage behind it). It has now been set back, except at the north end where the original line of enclosure is retained. The old photographs show the hall decidedly dark, and crowded with the very good walnut and mahogany furniture belonging to the then owners.

When John Brewer died in 1724 his will provided his widow with chambers in New Court, Gray's Inn, whither she wished to retire; and expressed confidence in his nephew's "compliance in respect of my dear wife, who has deserved well of him, that he will invite and entertain her and her servant for six month



10.—THE COACH HOUSE THAT REPLACES THE BARN IN KIP'S VIEW (FIG. 8)