

EARLY ENGLISH WALL INSCRIPTIONS AT COLCHESTER.

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At the end of December, 1925, during alterations and repairs to "Durlston House," 18 North Hill, Colchester, some inscriptions forming a sort of frieze and occupying the wall plate or large ceiling beam of the north wall of the principal room on the ground floor, were brought to light.

It is not without interest, even though a merely accidental coincidence, that this mediæval house is on the site of an important Roman villa. Beneath the south ground-floor room is a Roman pavement. Joists of the floor stand on this Roman pavement. At the back of the house and in close proximity to it was lately unearthed the large mosaic pavement illustrated and described in the last issue of these *Transactions* (vol. xviii., pt. i., frontispiece, and p. 71). This pavement was excavated and exhumed by permission of the then owner, our member, Mr. Harrington Lazell, who presented it to the town for exhibition in the museum at Colchester. During two recent winters Mr. Harrington Lazell had excavations made in the garden. These revealed numerous Roman walls, also a Roman vessel and cover, now in the museum, and many fragments of Roman pottery.

"Durlston House" is a modern name. The title deeds of the house throw no light on its early history. The ancient deeds have disappeared, discarded as of no use or value, an unfortunate mistake too often made in lawyers' offices.

The house is a fifteenth or early sixteenth-century building, faced with modern white brick (nineteenth century). Externally it might not be suspected of antiquity. In the report of the Royal Commission on *Historical Monuments* (Essex, vol. iii., 1922) it is mentioned as "perhaps of the 16th century, but has been much altered; there is a 17th century kitchen wing at the back." The investigators had not the advantage of seeing the walls stripped and the modern



INSCRIPTIONS AT 18 NORTH HILL, COLCHESTER:

NO. 1.—[A ROULYNG] STOON GADYR NOMOS.



NO. 2.—IN OUER MEKYL RIAT VS GRETLOS.



NO. 3.—IN MESUR VS NOLOS.

ceilings removed. The house stands within about fifty yards of the notable "Marquis of Granby" inn (early sixteenth century) and is 25 yards north of 13-15 North Hill, houses which date from the fifteenth century.

The chief apartment of 18 North Hill, on the ground floor, stands over an ancient cellar, and being on the north side, over the lower part of the site, is naturally at a level somewhat higher than the pathway outside. The four beams at the top of the four walls of this room seem to have been originally all painted white and presumably all were inscribed with black lettering—"moral sentences" in verse. The inscriptions on the whole length of the north beam remain. Any inscriptions on the other three beams have disappeared, but on the east beam there are faint vestiges of the former existence of black lettering on a white ground.

Probably the cross beams of the ceiling were decorated in like manner. A fragment of an inscription remains on one of these cross beams—only three words, but enough to show that probably the rest of the beam was occupied by lettering.

All these upper beams had been covered and concealed by a later ceiling. The existence of the inscriptions was unsuspected until the ceiling was recently removed.

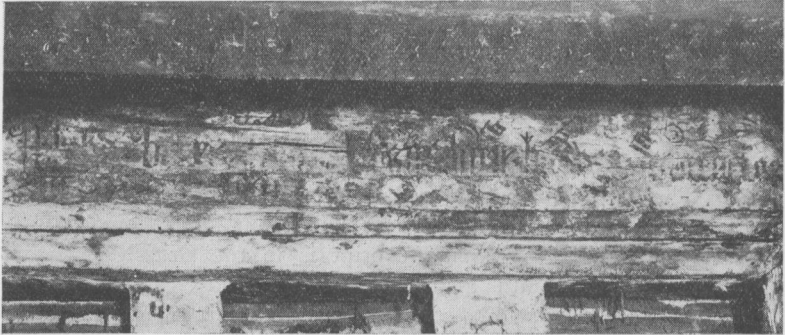
The deciphering has been difficult owing to the obliteration of many letters,—partly by time and partly, no doubt, by rough usage during structural alterations. It is remarkable that so much of the lettering remains clearly legible.

The inscriptions are as follows, the letters enclosed in brackets being conjectural:

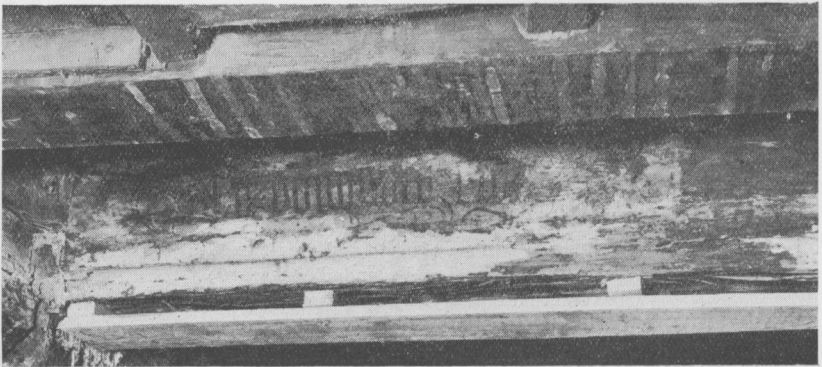
[A ROULYNG] STOON GADYR NOMOS
 IN OUER MEKYL RIAT YS GRETLOS
 IN MESUR YS NOLOS
 BLYSYD B[E] C[RIST] [O]WIRE LORDE H[YS]
 [CROS] DEO GRACIAS

It will be seen that the four "moral sentences" form a rhymed quatrain. "Deo gracias" is a really pious afterthought and addition, for this last line was already crowded,—nearly as long again as any of the others. The spelling is that which prevailed during the fifteenth century, and was becoming archaic and obsolete early in the sixteenth century. The meaning is fairly obvious:

A rolling stone gathers no moss.
 In over much riot (riotous living) is great loss.
 In measure (moderation) is no loss.
 Blessed be Christ our Lord, his cross.
 Deo gratias (Thanks be to God).



No. 4.—BLYSYD B(E) C(RIST) (O)WIRE LORDE H(Y)S (CROS) DEO GRACIAS.



INSCRIPTION ON CROSS-BEAM, 18 NORTH HILL, COLCHESTER:
IN DOMINO CONFIDO.

The three words remaining on the cross beam are :

IN DOMINO CONFIDO

These are the first words of Psalm xi. (*Vulgate*): "In the Lord I put my trust."

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries men of wealth and position had a fancy for adorning their rooms with sage saws and rhymed precepts. Naturally these are lost for the most part. The most remarkable examples of these rhymed wall inscriptions are those which existed at the Manor House of Leckonfield, near Beverley, Yorkshire, and at Wressell in the same county, both residences belonging to the Percys, earls and dukes of Northumberland. The buildings and the inscriptions have long since gone, but fortunately a contemporary record (*temp.* Henry VII.) gives a full transcript of them. This manuscript is in the British Museum (*Bibl. Reg.*, 18, D1) and is also published in full in Grose's *Repertory* (vol. 3). The inscriptions comprise over 600 lines, all rhyming. It might have been expected that among this large number we should find more or less exact counterparts of the Colchester rhymes, but this is not so. Some, however, are fairly near in form and in matter. For instance, "The Proverbes in the roufe of my Lordis Library at Lekyngefelde" consist of 23 quatrains, in each of which, as at Colchester, all four lines rhyme together. Two samples may be given :

After thy purs maynteyne thy fare.
 Tyme is to spende, tyme is to spare.
 To withstande daungers thy self prepare.
 Of had I wyst all way beware.
 Love vertu and hate vice.
 Love them whiche be sad and wyse.
 Of condicones be not nyce.
 Meane is a vertu of greater price.

This is from "the sydes of the innere chambre at Wresill" :

When it is tyme of coste and greate expens
 Beware of waste and spende be measure ;
 Who that outragyusly mekithe his dispens
 Causythe his goodes not long to endure.

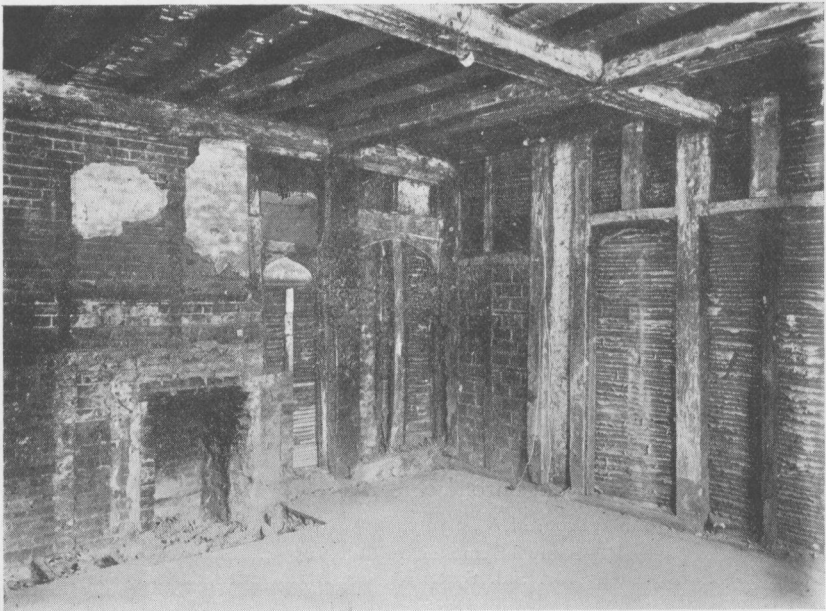
This is the keynote of most of these inscriptions—the inculcation (as at Colchester) of thrift and moderation and the danger of extravagance and "riat." The writing on the wall was, I think, for the special benefit of the son and heir, though also for the other members of the family.

It will be seen by the photograph of the room at Colchester that when the walls were dismantled three concealed doorways of early

sixteenth century style were revealed. They may be of a date slightly later than the inscriptions.

The illustrations accompanying this article are from flashlight photographs by Mr. T. C. Gall, of Colchester, taken specially for the Museum and Muniment Committee of the Colchester Town Council.

I should add that the new owner of the premises, Mr. W. Flower Symonds, chartered accountant, of Colchester, has taken every precaution to preserve the inscriptions; also that he has been most helpful and zealous in giving all possible facilities for examining and deciphering.



INTERIOR OF ROOM, NORTH HILL, COLCHESTER
(showing three Tudor doorways).