

THE REBUILDING OF ASHRIDGE

By "BEORCHAM"

It is an interesting thought that if the third Duke of Bridgewater (the subject of last month's article) had not made a fortune from canals, we might still be able to gaze on the original Ashridge House, built as a monastery over 650 years ago. It survived until the early part of the 19th century, and with its demolition we lost a curious, rambling building which had echoed the footsteps of the Bonhommes, the Black Prince, Henry VIII's children, and several members of the Bridgewater family. Apart from a barn and a stable, the only ancient feature spared was a vaulted cellar or crypt, neatly incorporated in the present ornate mansion and still in a fine state of preservation.

But perhaps the surprise is that the Bridgewaters were content to go on living in a converted monastery for a couple of centuries. It may have been picturesque and historic, but one imagines that home comforts were somewhat lacking. Archdeacon Todd, chaplain to the last of the Bridgewaters, tells us that "the front of the mansion or college was enclosed within a court, to which the entrance was through a handsome gateway, formerly the porter's lodge, but large enough to contain several good apartments, in which the dukes of Bridgewater resided Being entered into the court, the principal front presented itself to view, and along the middle part ran the seven high Gothic windows of the hall."

Ten Years to Build

This hall, with painted windows, a fretted roof, and a gallery, was the most interesting relic of the monastery. It stood on the west side of the cloisters; the frater was on the north, the church on the south, and the chapter house on the east. The cloisters were especially interesting, for as late as the end of the 18th century it was still possible to trace on the walls a series of forty huge scriptural water-colours, painted several hundred years ago by the monks.

The third Duke of Bridgewater was too interested in his canals to trouble about keeping Ashridge in a good state of repair. Roofs were falling in when, with his newly-won fortune, he decided to rebuild on a mammoth scale. But the duke died before those plans could mature, and it was under his cousin and successor, John William, third Earl of Bridgewater, that the new Ashridge House arose.

The foundation stone was laid on October 25th, 1808, and the house inhabited six years later.

The Famous Staircase Hall

It is not surprising that many looked upon the new Ashridge as the eighth wonder of the world. It was not sufficient to provide battlements, towers and pinnacles to give the exterior a mediæval appearance; fittings from other ancient buildings,

at home and abroad, were incorporated in the mansion. Exquisite panelling from the Tuileries was used for lining the dining room; rare 15th century stained glass—purchased anonymously for £27,000 in 1928 and presented to the Victoria and Albert Museum—was brought from a German abbey church for the windows of Ashridge House chapel, to which two 500 years old brasses were also transferred from Ellesborough church. Several ancient chimney pieces were introduced, including one of 16th century Italian design and another made from an equally old green glazed German stove. The library and ante-rooms were sumptuously furnished and adorned with famous works of art, while the 50 ft. long drawing room was hung with crimson damask. Yet none of those features could bear comparison with the grandeur of the staircase hall, with its imposing statues of Ashridge notabilities and sculptured walls rising to a height of nearly 100 ft. As a modern "baronial hall," it was unexcelled.

A College once more

With the completion of the building in 1814, the stage was set for Ashridge to enter upon a glittering chapter in its long history. The Bridgewaters and their successors, the Brownlows, entertained lavishly; yet little more than a century after it was built, Ashridge had outlived its day as the country seat of a famous family. On the death of Earl Brownlow, in 1922, the house was untenanted, and for several years the only visitors were a party of workmen who came to demolish the graceful but unsafe spire, undoubtedly the finest feature of the 1,000 ft. long façade. Incidentally, it is curious to note how, in contrast to 19th century writers who expressed unqualified admiration for the architecture of Ashridge House, those of more recent times have been almost unanimously critical of its showiness and mock antiquity. The Quennells likened it to a wedding cake, and in his recently published "Chiltern Country," Mr. H. J. Massingham says that Ashridge House "makes you blink It is hideous, but it is also comic."

Whether Ashridge appeals to one's æsthetic tastes or not, most of us are glad that the mansion was spared the house-breaker's hammer. Some 15 years ago it was purchased by the late Mr. Urban Broughton (father of Lord Fairhaven) and presented to the Conservative Party as a political training college, dedicated to the late Mr. Bonar Law. For the duration of the war its educational work has been interrupted, but when peace brings victory Ashridge will undoubtedly become a college again. And what more appropriate rôle could there be for a place founded as a seat of learning over 650 years ago?