

"VANBRUGH CASTLE" AND OTHER BUILDINGS.

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The Woolwich Antiquarian Society recently had a visit to Vanbrugh Castle, on Maze hill, Greenwich. This building, which, it is stated, is about to be demolished, was built 183 years ago by Sir John Vanbrugh, dramatist and architect, who was eminent certainly, but withal exceedingly eccentric. At Vanbrugh Castle a paper was read to those present by Mr. F. W. Nunn, of 15 Hendon Road, Lee, who confined himself largely to a description of the "Castle" and the other buildings which Vanbrugh erected in the immediate neighbourhood. Vanbrugh Castle was formerly called Bastille House, or the Bastille, it being said that it was built by Vanbrugh in resemblance of a portion of the Bastille, which was demolished in July, 1789, and in which Vanbrugh himself, when a young man, is said to have been once confined for about ten months. The building possessed extra interest from the fact that it was the custom in Vanbrugh's time for the architect to employ such workmen as he thought fitted for the job, to pay them himself, and call on his employers from time to time for money as it was required. As Vanbrugh was building this for himself he would naturally give it his best attention, and the other buildings close by, erected at the same time (A.D. 1717), doubtless grew up under Vanbrugh's immediate and continuous superintendence. A book giving an account of the legacies, &c., to the poor of the parish of Saint Alfege, Greenwich, written by John Kinbell, and published in 1816, reproduces an old map dated 1695, in which a large area of ground is shown, extending from here as far as, in some directions, the old Woolwich road at the foot of the hill, and this area was described as freehold lands in the lordship of East Greenwich and some lands belonging to Lady Biddulph and others within the manor of West Coombe. It was in the south-west corner of this piece of ground that Vanbrugh erected the Bastille House and the other two buildings in Vanbrugh Fields, which afterwards formed his chief memorials in this neighbourhood, viz., Vanbrugh House and Mince Pie House. The *History of National Biography* 1899, states in reference to the life of Vanbrugh, after Vanbrugh Castle is mentioned, that "the other house in Vanbrugh Fields is called Mince Pie House, but is now known as Vanbrugh House". But that is incorrect, Vanbrugh House and Mince Pie House, were entirely separate buildings. In Drakes edition of Hasted's Kent published in 1886 it is stated that Vanbrugh built four houses under leases granted by the Biddulphs in 1717, and that he and three of his brothers, Adam Leak and Dame

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the arch on which is the date 1714, and that the two houses north of this were built in 1719 for the Duchess of Bolton, the "Polly Peacham" of the

celebrated "Beggars Opera", and Sir James Thornhill who painted the ceiling of the Painted Hall, Greenwich. Mr Nunn is rather doubtful of this, as the general tradition was that the Duchess of Bolton resided at Westcombe Park House, long previously occupied by William Lambarde, the Historian of Kent. But possibly Sir James Thornhill might have lived there, as he was engaged for twenty years on his paintings in Greenwich Hospital. Vanbrugh lived comfortably in this immediate locality for several years, and tradition has it that it was in the "Castle" itself. Mr. Gilbert H. Lovegrove, in a prize essay to the Architectural Association, told that Vanbrugh Castle was built of stock bricks, ornamented solely by key-stones, impostos, corbel-tables, and string courses in projecting brickwork, the whole somewhat resembling a fortification, a conception carried still farther by the crenellated or embattled wall which surrounds the garden and the turreted gateway. This picturesque old gateway, with its square turret on either side, was removed about a year ago for the purpose of widening the road, the frontage line being now set back. The staircase, as was frequent in Vanbrugh's designs, formed a prominent member of the main front although it became as a consequence dark and inconvenient. By another staircase one reached the roof, from whence was obtained a beautiful view over London.

Vanbrugh House, which stood on the opposite side of the road, a little to the left, and nearer Westcombe Park, was demolished about two years ago. It was an immense rectangular building, also of stock brick, with a circular tower at each end. Internally there was a long dark central passage opening into rooms on each side. The hearths were of marble and the chimney pieces were well carved in wood to simple designs. Upon its demolition, an underground passage was found, but whither leading Mr. Nunn had never learned. There was also said to be an underground passage below Vanbrugh Castle which is now bricked up and lost sight of. The Mince Pie House now known as Sherwood still remains; it is well preserved and used as a private residence. It was one of the smallest of Vanbrugh's houses. The entire building is on the ground floor, and, beside containing several rooms of larger sizes and better proportions than the other houses, is much more comfortably planned. In 1805 Mince Pie House was occupied by Eldward Vanbrugh, and afterwards by W. Webber. The building next to Mince Pie House, the Gate House, was attributed to Vanbrugh. Mr. Lovegrove points out since Vanbrugh Castle and Vanbrugh House were built at the same time it was remarkable that they were so unlike. The Castle was built with the well-carried-out intention of obtaining

a picturesque house, placed on the summit of a hill, surrounded by trees with its turrets showing above, while Vanbrugh House was hardly more than a great heap of bricks, with a flat roof, situated on a flat table land devoid of large trees.

Vanbrugh's style of architecture was only suitable to the largest of buildings, and was even then the occasion of much sarcasm and ridicule from the wits of the day; one of his buildings was likened to a dog-kennel, another to a pie and a third to a coal scuttle, a flat candlestick, a piece of floor cloth, a snail, a chaise, a tilt in a boat, a house of cards, a mouse trap, and so on. This was doubtless the cause of the name Mince Pie House just as the house which he erected from the ruins of the palace of Whitehall in which he died in 1726, came to be known as "the Goose Pie House" through Dean Swift, who seems to have observed it during its erection, as he wrote in derision:—

" At length they in the ruins spy
A thing resembling a goose pie."

That building thus obtained and retained the name of "the Goose Pie House"; but in its declining days it was known as "the Pill-Box." Voltaire, who stayed three years in England, had knowledge of some of Vanbrugh's buildings, for he wrote that "They would be more comfortable if Vanbrugh had made the rooms as wide as the walls were thick." Sir Joshua Reynolds, the great portrait painter, was one of the few who appreciated Vanbrugh's originality of invention. He writes that "In the buildings of Vanbrugh there is a greater display of imagination than we find in any other, and this is the ground of the effect which we feel in many of his works." Had Vanbrugh received a more sound architectural education the probability is that his name would have occupied a more prominent position in the temple of fame.

Returning to Vanbrugh Castle Vanbrugh's widow, Dame Henrietta Maria, sold that house, about the middle of the 18th century, to Lord Trawly, who made it his residence for several years, and then sold it to Charles Brett, who sold it to Henry Goodwyn. After this it was used for many years as a boarding school for young ladies, and was occupied as such up to 15 years ago, when it became untenanted, and through age and neglect many parts quickly got into an extremely ruinous and dangerous condition.

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Subsequently Mr. Nunn read a paper upon the life of Vanbrugh. His great grandfather, Van Brugg, was a native of Ghent, and fled from Ghent into Holland on account of the Duke of Alva's persecution of Protestants. His grandfather, Gillis van Brugg, also a native of Ghent, first came into England from West Flanders about the latter end of Queen's Elizabeth's reign, and resided as a merchant in the Parish of St. Stephen's, Walbrook, became a churchwarden, died, and on June 21 1646, was buried in a vault which he had bought in the Parish Church of St. Stephen's, Walbrook.

Giles Vanbrugh, third son of the last mentioned, and father of Sir John, was born in St. Stephen's parish, but migrated to Chester in 1667. set up there as a sugar baker, and acquired an ample fortune. In Tong's life of Mathew Henry he is described as "one of those worthy gentlemen who had habitations there." Giles died in 1689, and was buried at Chester. His family consisted of six daughters and eight sons, of whom John was the second. He was probably born in the City of London, as his baptism is recorded in the parish register of St. Nicholas Acons, one of the old churches now destroyed. The date of Baptism is June 24th, 1663-4, and the infant is mentioned as the child of Giles Vanbrugh and Elizabeth his wife, and the fact is recorded that he was " christened in the house by Mr. John Meriton - the rector." The elder D'Israeli mentions incidentally that he was born at Greenwich, but there is no proof of this being so. Very little is known of John Vanbrugh's early years. He was probably educated at Chester Grammar School, and when about 19 years of age (1683) was sent over to France, where he received his architectural training. His stay there was brief, for, in the close of 1685, he was back in England, and early in the next year received a commission in the Earl of Huntingdon's regiment, afterwards known as the 13th Foot. Owing to his wit, geniality, and handsome figure he soon won a position in society, and became acquainted with many important persons. In the summer of 1690 Vanbrugh was seized in Calais, some say upon information from a lady in Paris, to the effect that he was travelling without a passport. In January, 1692, Louis XIV ordered Vanbrugh to be transferred from a prison at Vincennes to the Bastille in Paris. He was placed in the fourth chamber of the " Tour de Liberte" and was allowed to take exercise at will, and to receive his friends. He was set at liberty on November 22nd, 1692. Before his release, and during his enforced leisure, he planned his famous comedy *The Provoked Wife*, Voltaire repeats a saying of Vanbrugh's that he had not the slightest idea of what gained him the distinction of detention in such a fortress. For a time Vanbrugh seems to have resumed his military duties, for he was, as " John Brooke," granted a captain's commission in Berkeley's Marine Regiment of Foot , and henceforth, until he was knighted in 1714, was known as Captain Vanbrugh.

In 1697 appeared Vanbrugh's famous comedy, *The Relapse*, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. This proved a great success and remained a great favourite with the public throughout the 18th century. It was followed by others, such as *Aesop*, and in May, 1697, Vanbrugh had another play ready *The Provoked Wife* a piece the indecencies of which, according to De Blair, " ought to explode it out of all reputable society." These two plays,

The Relapse and *The Provoked Wife*, supplied Jeremy Collier, the non-juring divine, with ample material for his philippic against the stage. After an interval other plays followed, *The Pilgrim*, *The False Friend*, *The Country House*, *The Confederacy*, and *The Mistake*, the latter not being very successful, as at this time (1705) Vanbrugh found his architectural pursuits becoming more and more engrossing. His sole remaining drama, *The Journey to London* was never completed, but after Vanbrugh's death Colley Cibber recast and finished the fragment, which, as a comedy, became a great favourite, being produced in 1728 under Cibber's title, *The Provoked Husband*.

The first notice of Vanbrugh as an architect was in 1701, when he furnished the design for Castle Howard for the Earl of Carlisle, who appeared to have been his first employer of note. Castle Howard, with its south facade 323 feet long, is said to be one of the finest examples of the Corinthian renaissance in England. The main building was not completed till 1714, but in 1704 the Earl of Carlisle, the then acting Earl Marshal of England, in appreciation of Vanbrugh's work, obtained for him the lucrative appointment of Clarenceux King-at-Arms. In 1703 Vanbrugh bought land in the Haymarket and built a theatre there called the Queen, in honour of Queen Anne. Whilst the building was going on the Society for the Reformation or Manners addressed a letter of protest to Alin Tenison, describing Mr Vanbrugh as a man who had " debauched the stage beyond the looseness of all former times."

But nothing came of the protest, and Vanbrugh, as lessee, manager and autlior-in-chief of the new theatre, continued to allow himself the fullest licence. But the theatre did not pay, and in 1707 Vanbrugh was glad to let it to MacSwmney at a rent of £700 per annum. In 1702 Vanbrugh was appointed Comptroller of the Board of Works, which had as its surveyor general the great Sir Christopher Wren. In 1705 Vanbrugh was appointed architect and surveyor, by the Duke of Marlborough, of the palace it was proposed to erect at Woodstock in commemoration of the victory of Blenheim, a work which was not completed till 1724. It led to much trouble and loss to Vanbrugh, for the Duchess Sarah, "that wicked woman of Marlborough," as he calls her, caused him to be discharged from HIS post of architect (1712), and, moreover, refused to pay what was due to him as salary. The Duchess appears to have done her best to irritate and annoy him and to make him liable for outlays made on her behalf. Vanbrugh was heavily out of pocket by this transaction, though some of the arrears were paid in the next reign (George I). Blenheim Palace is probably the largest domestic building in England, with a frontage 348 feet, a library 183 feet long and a hall 67 feet high. Vanbrugh was knighted at Greenwich on September 9th, 1714. In 1716 he was appointed architect to Greenwich Hospital at a salary of £200 per annum, and he is said to have designed the centre of the more southern range of the west front (King William's block) in red brick with stone dressings, and some of the external decorations of the Painted Hall are attributed to him. Vanbrugh Castle, Vanbrugh

House and the Mince Pie House, as we have seen, were built in 1717. Mr. Gilbert H. Lovegrove, in his book on *The Life, Work and Influence of Vanbrugh*, gives a list of Sir John's chief architectural works, numbering some forty-two, all curious, and many of them great massive buildings, many now disappeared. In 1719, two years after building his houses at Greenwich Sir John married Henrietta Maria, eldest daughter of Colonel Yarborough, of Haslington, near York. Of this lady Lady Mary Wortley Montagu once wrote " Your Vanbrugh's taste was always odd, his inclination to ruins has given him a taste for MrsYerborough." After a honeymoon of only one week Vanbrugh was back superintending alterations at Mottingham Castle.

After this he spent an increasing portion of his time at Blackheath, and some of his later letters to Carlisle give a pleasant picture of his family life. The Vanbrughs had three children, one of whom died in infancy. A son, Charles, much loved by his parents, survived his father, became about the year 1740 an ensign in the Coldstream Guards, was wounded at the battle of Tournay, and consequently died in 1745, and Vanbrugh's wife in her [missing words].... After a life of the greatest activity, Sir John Vanbrugh's health had begun to fail. In 1723 he paid a visit to Scarborough in order to take the waters. Three years later in 1726, on March 26th, at the probable age of 63, Vanbrugh died of quinsy, in a diminutive house he had built for himself in Whitehall with the ruins of the old Palace. He was buried on March 31st, 1726, in the family vault in the north aisle of Sir Christopher Wren's beautiful church of St. Stephen's, Walbrook. All will remember his epitaph as written by Dr. Evans, alluding, of course, to his exceedingly massive style of architecture,

" Lie heavy on him earth : for he
Laid many a heavy load on thee."

His widow, thirty years younger than himself, the *Dictionary of National Biography* states, died at East Greenwich on April 26th, 1776, " at the age of 90." Her real age being 82, but in the register at St. Stephens, Walbrook, there is the following entry, " 1776 May 3, was buried Dame Henrietta Maria Vanbrugh, in the Vanbrughs' family vault in the north aisle, brought from Whitehall, aged 84 years." The best portrait of Vanbrugh is by Kneller, on a canvas about 36 by 28, when Vanbrugh was about 40 years of age. This is still preserved at Bayfordsbury. This has since been engraved by John Simon, by T. Chalmers, by Coopey and others. There was another portrait of him painted in 1725 by J. Richardson.

We understand that Vanbrugh Castle can be seen by any of our readers on making application to the caretaker. We recall as an interesting fact that the earliest copies of *The Kentish Mercury* were printed on a bandpress in a building practically at the rear of the Castle.

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