

OLD TOWNS RE-VISITED—XVII

BAMPTON,
OXFORDSHIRE—II

Until 1845 Bampton was unique in having three vicars. Their vicarages, the Deanery and the old grammar school form a miniature close grouped around the fine church, the presentation of which has belonged to the Dean and Chapter of Exeter for nearly 900 years.

By ARTHUR OSWALD

MOST of the church spires of England are to be found rising out of flat country, as though the dwellers in those regions sought some compensation for the absence of heights from their habitual horizons. Oxford, before the towers of Merton and Magdalen were thought of, had the spires of St. Frideswide and St. Mary, and as you work your way westward along the valley of the upper Thames, Witney, Bampton and Lechlade carry on the succession, with Burford an outlier on the Windrush among the dying ridges of the Cotswolds. At Bampton the church spire is not only a landmark in the level countryside and a focus from almost any part of the little town, but it also forms the pivot round which a group of houses are disposed very much in the manner of a cathedral close. This secluded precinct, with its extensive graveyard, its tall trees and pleasant gardens, comprises the Deanery, the three vicarages (for Bampton in the past boasted three vicars), and the old grammar school, while a little farther to the north, in tree-girt grounds of its own, stands the manor house. The whole ensemble perpetuates an association nearly nine hundred years old between the church of Bampton and the Dean and Chapter of Exeter, who here had a manor within a manor, still visibly suggested by this enclave of church property within the confines of the town.

The connection with Exeter goes back before the time of Domesday Book, which records the six hides in *Bentone* which the Bishop held of the King. Exeter replaced Crediton as the see of the south-western diocese as a result of the energetic action of Bishop Leofric, and it was he who gave the church of Bampton to the chapter, obtaining a charter from the Conqueror confirming the gift in 1069. Leofric, who had been one of Edward the Confessor's clerks and was the first Chancellor of England to be so styled, had probably been granted the estate by the King. But Domesday Book only has the bald statement: "Bishop Leovic held it." In the charter of King William, however, the six hides are called "the land which King Eadwic gave to the saint and the community at Bampton," a phrase which, Professor Stenton has suggested, may record the endowment of a local "minster" at a time before the organisation of parishes as we know them, when large districts were served by groups of priests living together in a community. In Lambourn, Aylesbury, St. Mary's, Reading and Sonning he sees other instances of these Saxon



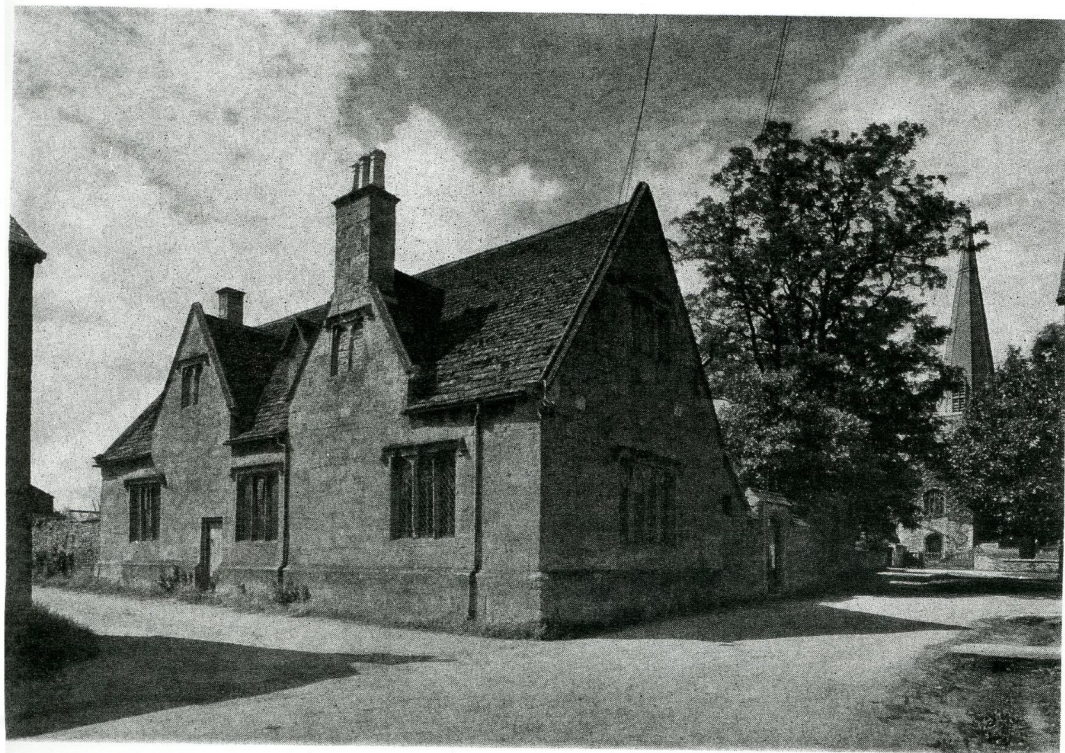
2.—THE GABLED PORCH OF THE SCHOOL HOUSE, RISING TOWER-LIKE OUT OF A GREAT SWEEP OF ROOF

"minsters" (which were not necessarily monasteries) founded by kings or bishops on their larger estates. Bampton, we saw last week, was a royal manor and a hundred town; it had a market in the Conqueror's time; in fact, the indications are that it was a place of some importance even before Oxford was of any account.

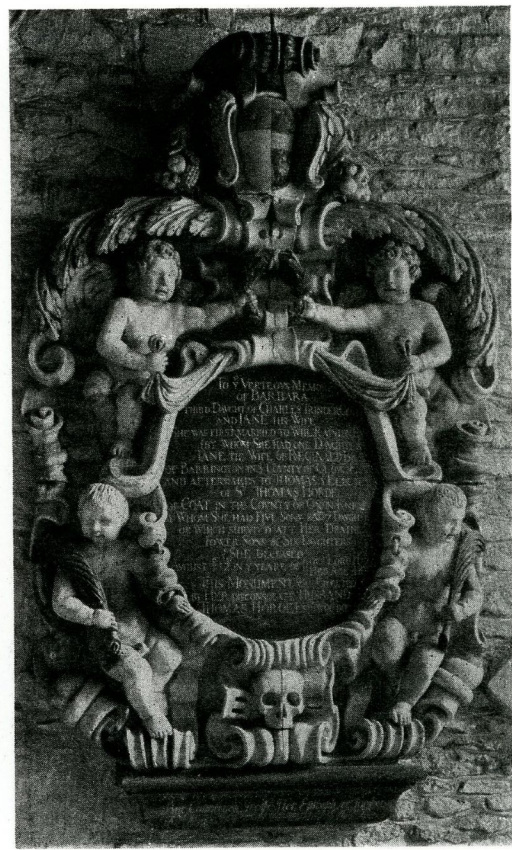
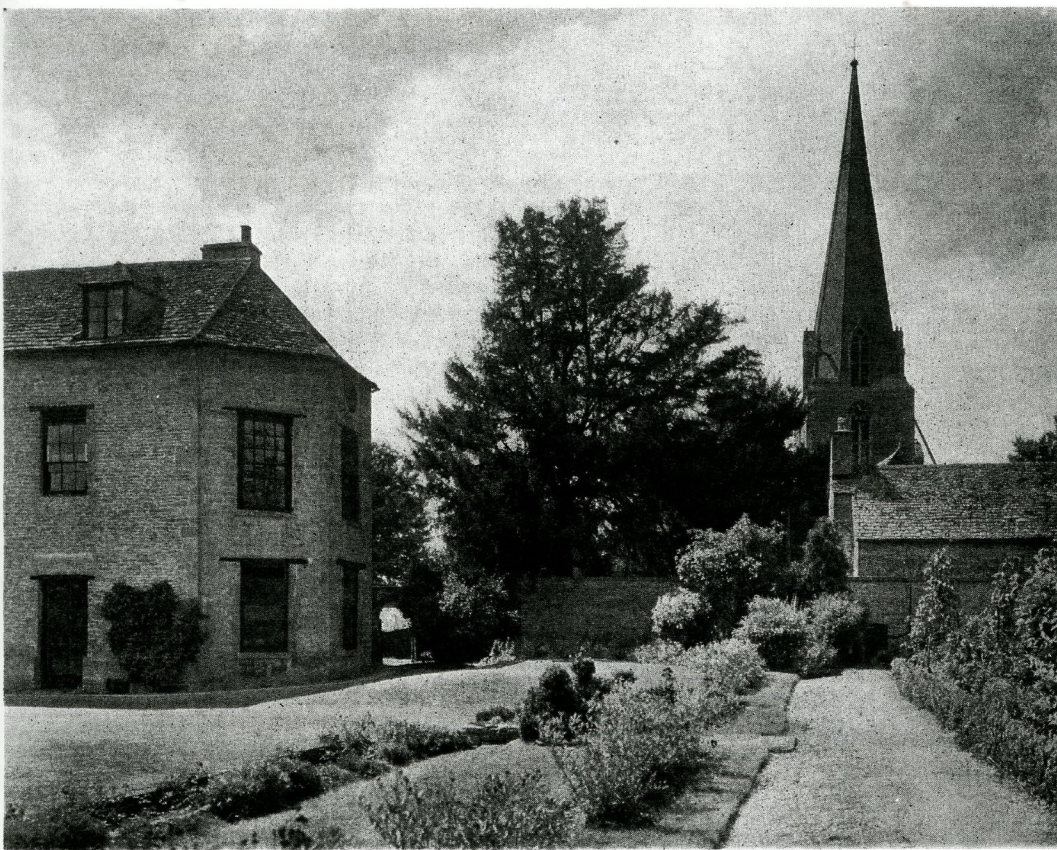
Until a century ago, when new churches were built at Aston and Lew, the parish covered more than 10,000 acres, and in early times it was probably larger still. The fact that the adjoining villages of Clanfield, Standlake and Yelford paid dues to Bampton, points to their having been at one time chapelries of the mother church. It is possible that the unique arrangement of the three vicars

or portionists of Bampton was a survival of the old community system and went back to Saxon times; it certainly existed in the thirteenth century, when two of the rectorial portions were re-formed to provide three vicars instead of two, but it is possible that the third rectory, which was annexed to the chapter of Exeter, had supported a third vicar at an earlier period. The arrangement may have been retained on account of the numerous hamlets in the wide-spreading parish. Divided from Bampton itself only by the Highmoor Brook is the hamlet of Weald, where Aymer de Valence built his castle. To the east are Aston, Coate and Brighthampton, Coate containing the old manor house of the Hordes, which was illustrated in these pages last month. Lew lies northward on the road to Witney, and beside the Thames are Rushey, Chimney and Shifford, the last having a chapel of its own.

The three vicars, at least after the Reformation, evolved a comfortable system, whereby each was on duty for only four months in the year, until this easy-going arrangement was upset by a conscientious incumbent, who took the matter to the courts, and a rota of duty every third week was substituted. There were times when two portions were held by the same man, and many of the vicars in the bad old days being



1.—THE OLD SCHOOL HOUSE IN CHURCH STREET. A COTSWOLD BUILDING OF 1650



pluralists were non-resident. But, resident or not, each vicar had his vicarage, situated (wisely, perhaps) on different sides of the church, north, south and east. Two mediæval vicars, Master Thomas Plymmswode (presented 1401) and that "venerable and scientific man," Master Robert Holcot (1500) are commemorated by brasses in the church. One of the three vicarages was the birthplace of John Phillips, author of "The Splendid Shilling," which Addison called "the finest burlesque poem in the British language"; he also wrote a poem on "Cyder" in imitation of The Georgics. His father was one of the Bampton vicars. Like Keats, he died young, a victim of consumption.

The church and what we may call its close lie in the north-west sector of the town. From the Market Place, where the three main streets converge, Church Street leads off northward, forming a pretty approach with the old grammar school building standing at a corner on the left (Fig. 1). The school was founded under the will of Robert Vesey of Chimney, who died in 1635, but the first schoolmaster was not appointed until 1653. In the interval the school house of clean "Ashleane worke," to use the words of the contemporary document, was erected at a cost of £100—a charming little Cotswold building, which harks back to Tudor traditions of stonework in its arch-headed mullioned windows and its doorways of flattened four-centred form. Fig. 2 shows the three-storeyed gabled porch and the great sweep of Cotswold roof out of which it springs tower-like on the north side.

As at Witney and Burford, the church is a cruciform building with central tower and spire rising above aisles, transepts and chapels, which have been pushed out at various dates (Fig. 5). The main reconstruction took place about 1270, but in the tower piers and arches portions of the eleventh



(Top Left) 3.—ST. STEPHEN'S (THE OLD ASTON VICARAGE) AND THE CHURCH SPIRE

(Top Right) 4.—ENGLISH BAROQUE. Wall tablet to Barbara Horde (died 1671)

(Right) 5.—THE CHURCH FROM THE SOUTH-WEST



6.—THE DEANERY. A mediæval building reconstructed early in the seventeenth century

century church remain. On the broach spire carved figures of saints stand out at the four corners on tall clustered shafts; they are in a remarkable state of preservation considering that they have stood on their elevated perches exposed to rain, wind and frost for close on seven hundred years. The great treasure of the church is its carved stone altarpiece of the fourteenth century with figures of Our Lord and the twelve apostles—a very remarkable survival. The connection with

Exeter appears in the choir stalls and misereres where the arms of the see are carved and the initials T H, probably for Thomas Harris, Precentor of Exeter (1509-11). The chapel on the south side of the chancel became the burial place of the Hordes of Coate. The tablet to Barbara, the first wife of Thomas Horde, with its four *putti* worked into a vigorous baroque design, is of a type that appears at Oxford, in the cathedral and elsewhere, and is therefore probably

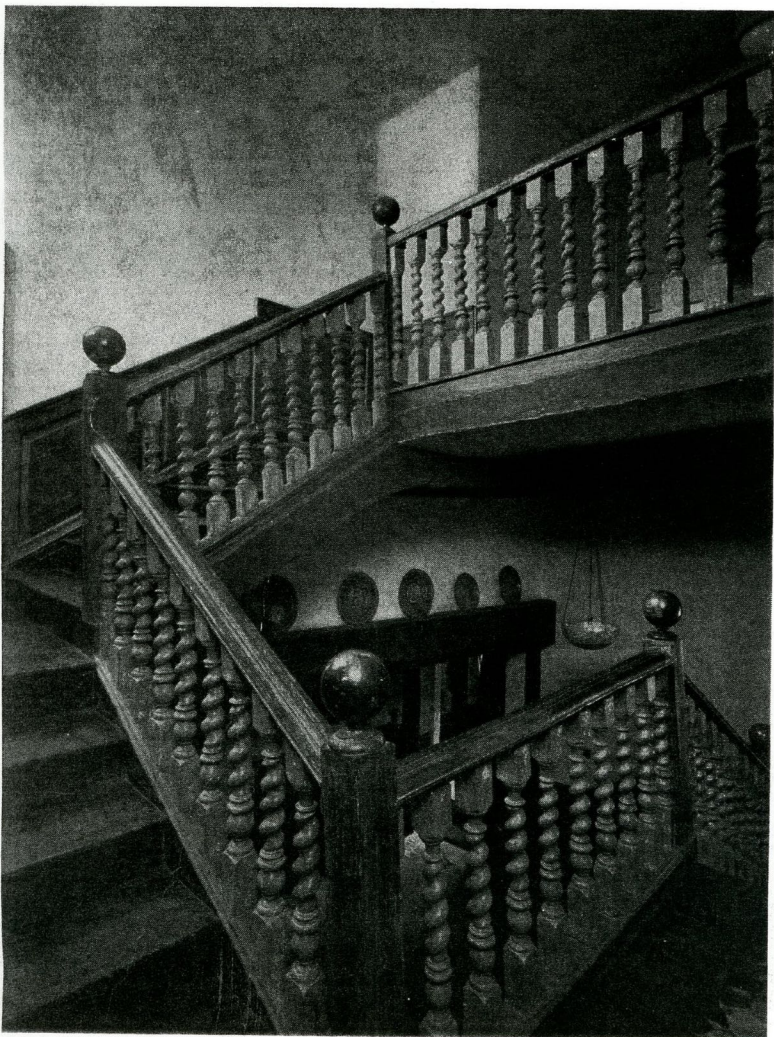
the work of an Oxford statuary (Fig. 4).

Of the three vicarages two have become private houses since the re-arrangement of just over a century ago, when Lew and Aston acquired churches of their own. All three are old buildings which have undergone alterations at various dates and been given a Georgian dress. The Lew vicarage lies to the south of the church. The Aston vicarage, east of the church, now known as St. Stephen's, appears on the left of Fig. 3. It contains a good Georgian staircase and has a three-sided bay at its north end, added about 1730. On one of the crown glass panes in the first floor bedroom of this bay, a love-sick swain has scratched the words

Dearest of my Desires
Charming Betsy Colleton.

Alas! her charms have vanished with all but her name. The northern vicarage remains in use. To the street it presents a plain Georgian front with a hipped roof. A long wing runs back northward with the pot-bellied bow projecting below a gable on the west side (Fig. 8). As in many of the houses in this part of Oxfordshire, the rough stone walls are covered with rough-cast. Adjoining the vicarage to the east is an old house about which Dr. Plot tells a curious story. It belonged to some people called Wood, who were forewarned of impending deaths in the family by mysterious knockings. Hauntings continued under later owners, until one of them replaced the old roof with a new one, which proved fatal to the ghost.

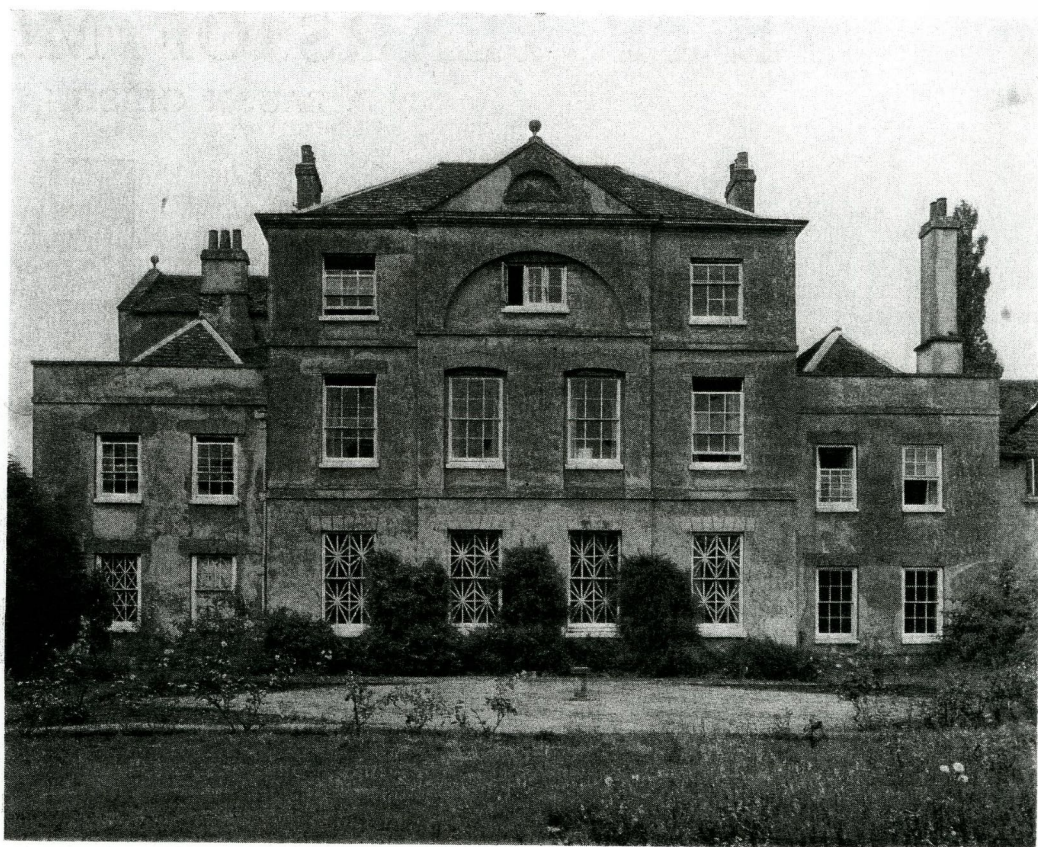
Bampton Deanery, or Deanery Farm (Fig. 6), is the most interesting of this group of houses. It stands immediately west of the churchyard and is of mediæval origin, as the buttresses projecting from its east and north wings disclose. Bampton never had a dean, and the house was probably the bailiff's house of the dean and chapter of



7.—STAIRCASE IN THE DEANERY



8.—GABLE AND BOW OF THE BAMPTON VICARAGE



9 and 10.—THE MANOR HOUSE. (Left) THE GOTHIC PORCH ON THE SOUTH FRONT; (Right) THE EAST FRONT

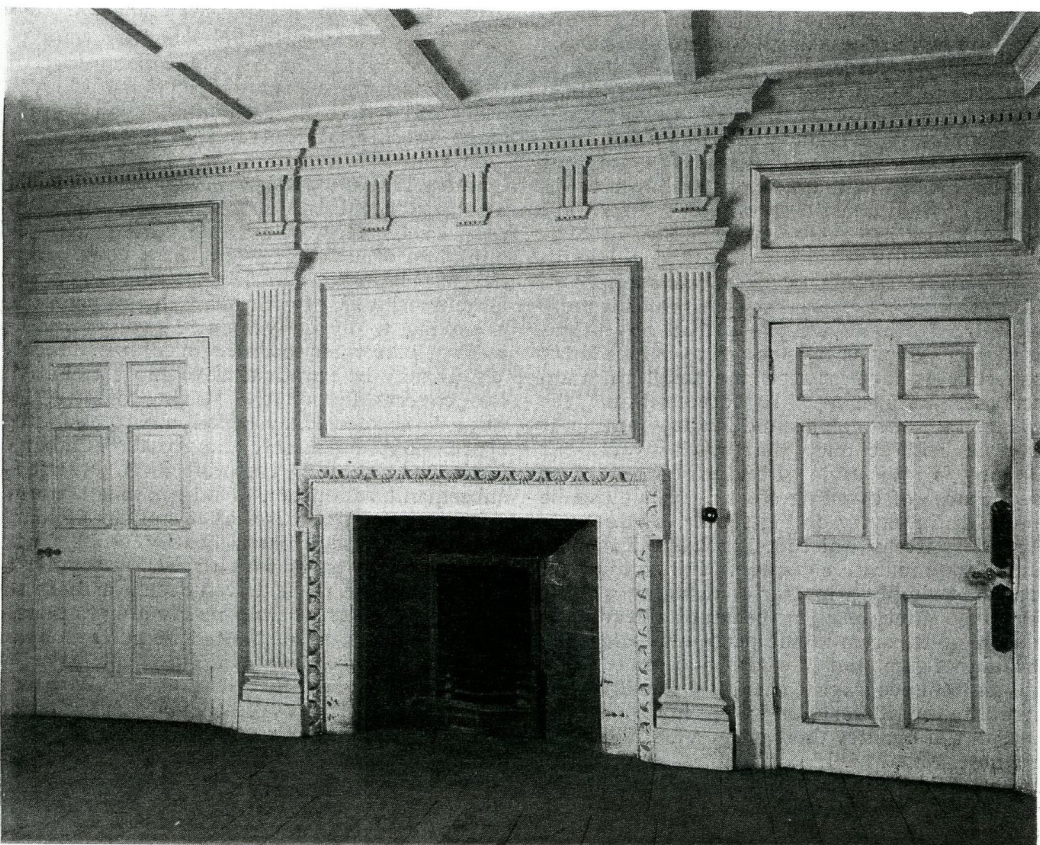
Exeter, although it may have also been used to accommodate the dean or his representative when visiting their Bampton manor. The original house was in the form of the letter L with the arms pointing north and east. To this in the sixteenth century was added the wing with the gable seen on the left of Fig. 6; it contains a parlour with a ceiling of massive timbers. The whole house was largely reconstructed early in the seventeenth century, when the mullioned and transomed windows were inserted and a cross gable built in the east wing. There are several stone fireplaces of this date, including one in the outside wall of the north wing, which must have been extended at this time, though the addition has since been destroyed.

Further additions to the west were made about 1800 and in 1921. The most notable feature of the interior is the late 17th-century staircase with its twisted balusters and ball-topped newels going up in wide flights in the centre of the house (Fig. 7).

The manor house of the Deanery manor wears a Georgian appearance (Fig. 10), but it incorporates an older, perhaps Elizabethan, building in its walls. In the middle of the eighteenth century the manor was held on lease by Gascoyne Frederick, whose name appears on the stables with the date 1755. He was probably responsible for the tall Georgian centre to the east front. After his death Whitakers succeeded, and it was to Frederick Whitaker that Dr. Giles dedicated

his *History of Bampton* a century ago. The main entrance is in the centre of the south side under a "Gothick" porch on clustered columns (Fig. 9). The ground floor room at the south-east angle is well panelled with early 18th-century woodwork (Fig. 11). To frame the fireplace in a pilastered composition with a Doric entablature was a favourite treatment of the Bristol joiners of the time, although Oxford would have been a much nearer centre to Bampton than Bristol.

The last photograph (Fig. 12) is of the staircase in Lime Tree House—the house with the shell hood in High Street illustrated a week ago. It is a good example of the mid-Georgian staircase with turned balusters, not unlike the one in St. Stephen's.



11.—EARLY 18th-CENTURY PANNELLING IN THE MANOR HOUSE

12.—STAIRCASE IN LIME TREE HOUSE