

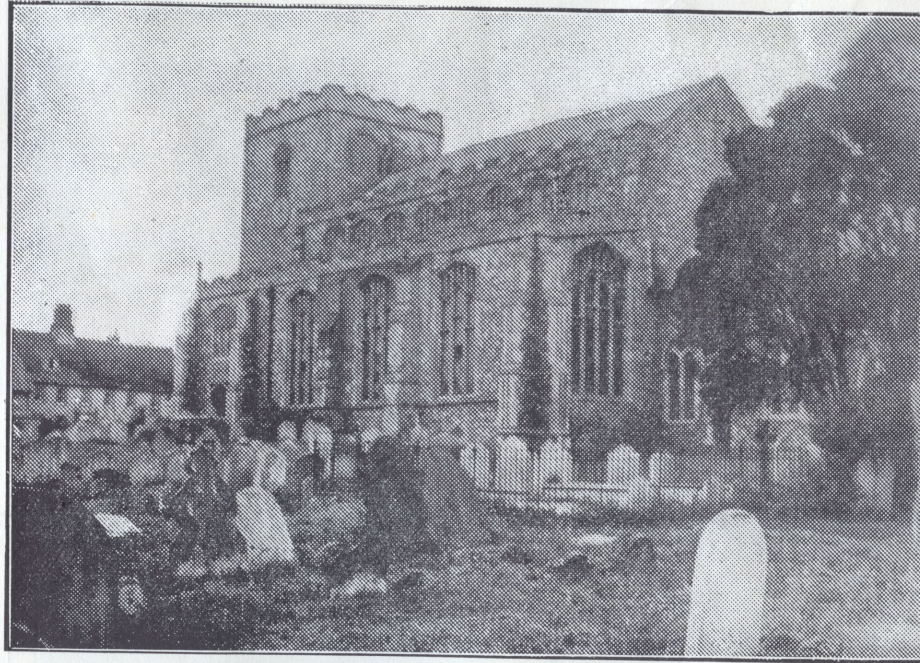
POCKET HISTORIES OF SUFFOLK PARISHES.

No. 33—DEBENHAM.

Some hundred years ago Debenham was described as "a very clean town, situated on a rising hill," and these words are true enough to-day. Although there is little that by any stretch of the imagination can be called up-to-date in Debenham, there is a certain neatness connected with its ancient streets and an appearance of pink and white freshness about its timbered houses which are responsible for making the town a place of infinite interest. To those who prefer the hustle of an industrial neighbourhood, Debenham would undoubtedly prove a sore disappointment, but to the others—less engrossed in the material side of things, and more interested in the study of the past—there is a quiet dignity and a certain attraction which is not only pleasing but undoubtedly appealing in a restful, care-free kind of way. And this old-world spot—apparently unmarred by the stinging blows dealt by the hand of time and seemingly unruffled by the gales of progress—is well worth the visiting. In the Domesday Book mention is made of three churches, but only one of these—Saint Mary's, the register of which dates from 1559—now remains. Consisting of aisles and nave, clerestory, chancel, and embattled Western tower—which tower with its magnificent porch is considered to be the finest in the county, and was built some thousand years ago—the church is an edifice of flint and stone, in the Early English, Perpendicular and Decorated styles. In the tower are eight bells, and one of them has the following quaint verse:—

"In Wedlock's bonds all ye who join
With hands your hearts unite,
So shall our tuneful tongues combine
To laud the nuptial rite."

Against the South wall is the monument and tomb of John Simson, who died in 1697, and left a bequest for a quantity of bread to be distributed after every Sunday evening service, besides an annual grant of clothes to the poor,

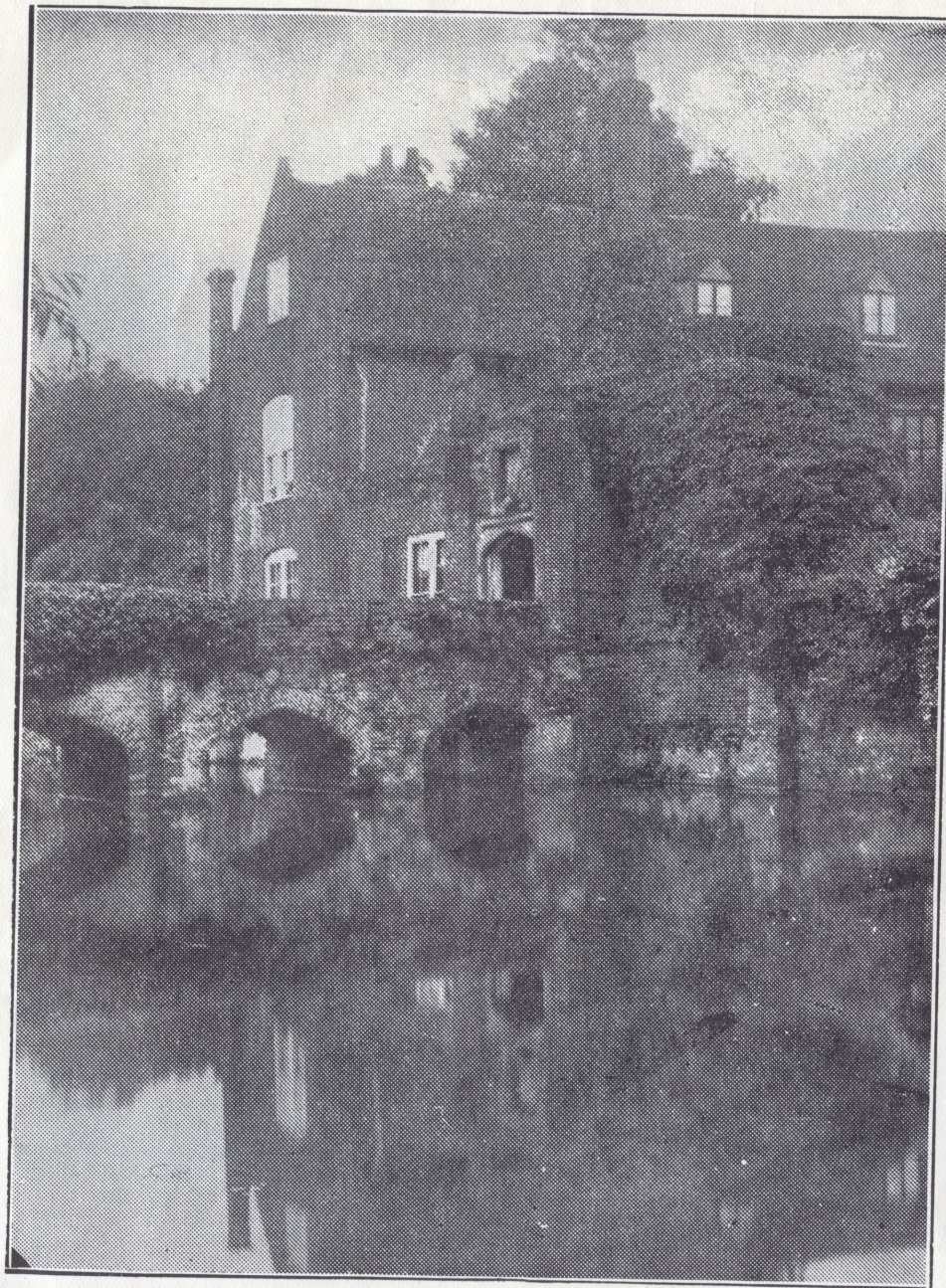


but the most interesting part of the church is undoubtedly the chancel, where there are several relics of the families who had their being in Debenham many years ago. Included in these are two half-length brasses, believed to be those of John Framlingham and his wife, Margaret, who lived at Crowe's Hall about the early part of the fifteenth century. Their descendant, Charles Framlingham, was knighted in 1581, and became Sheriff of Suffolk three years later, and he is buried in a beautiful altar tomb of alabaster. It shows the effigies of himself and one of his wives, and above these the inscription—

"Here lieth the bodie of Sir Charles Framlingham, Knight, who dyed the 28 daye of July, Ano. 1595. The sayde Syr Charles had

two wyfes, the first named Doretye, daughter of Sir Clement Heigham, Knight, and by her he had issue, Clement that dyed without issue and Anne that was married to Sir Bassingborne Gawdye, Knight, and for his second wyfe he had Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Thomas Barnardiston, Knight, which second wyfe overliued the said Syr Charles, and caused this monument be erected, Ano. 1598."

Another interesting inscription is on a brass plate attached to the south wall—a plate which was removed from a vault in May, 1806. It is far too long to quote in detail, but the quaintness of the wording and the sentiments it contains seem somewhat strange to modern ideas. The brass was formerly on the coffin of Charles Gawdy, Knight, who "in his life time was blessed in the happie choice of a most ver-



CROW'S HALL.

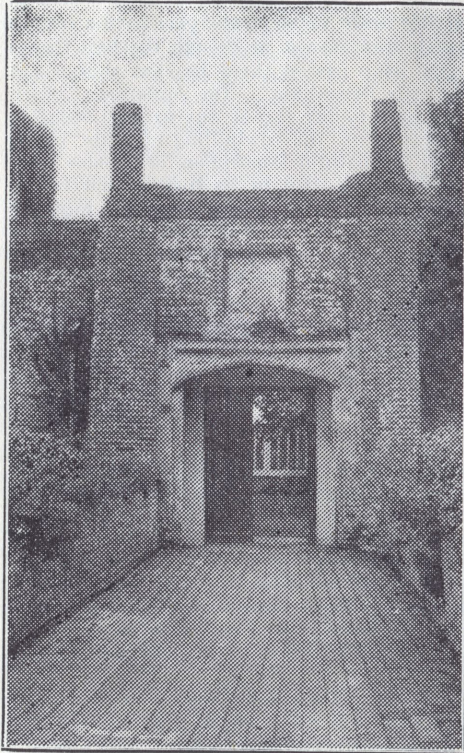
tuous wife . . . a Lady, to say no more, severely modest, and of a most pure and unblemished conjugall affection." Sir Charles was a stout adherent to the Protestant religion, besides being an ardent supporter of King Charles the First in his struggle with the Roundheads, and through this unswerving loyalty to a lost cause he was considerably the poorer, as he was compelled by the Parliament to pay a fine of £529, and an annuity of £150 to the church—the latter amount being remitted at the Restoration. This happened, however, several years too late as far as Sir Charles was concerned, his death having occurred in 1650—a death he met with every sign of calmness, as, according to the inscription, "he departed, I cannot say hee died, for, by a voluntary, cheerful and devout resignation of him selfe into the hands of the Almighty (to the wonder and astonishment of the beholders) though he prevented not the stroake, yet assuredly he felt not the bitterness of Death." Could anybody wish for a better end?

The chancel also contains a piscina and some old stalls with poppy heads, but the church was reseated in carved oak about fifty years back, when the aisles were restored, a gallery being removed at the same time. Steps which originally led to the rood-loft still exist in an excellent state of preservation, but the loft itself was probably demolished during the reign of Edward the Sixth. A link with a famous battle of the past is provided by a tablet recording the death of Robert Green, a lieutenant of the Royal Marines, who was killed whilst fighting on the "Royal Sovereign" at Trafalgar.

At the present time Debenham can scarcely be described as a place of any great importance, but in early days it was a thriving town, for which the River Deben—then a navigable waterway—was, no doubt, partly responsible. As far back as Norman times the inhabitants possessed the privilege of holding a weekly market and an annual fair, and although the former ceased to exist about the middle of the eighteenth century, it was revived about 1850, and continued for some time. The fair, however, was held without a break from its original inception until about fifty years ago.

As a further proof of the former importance of Debenham, it originally contained at least seven manors, whilst the Priory of Ely owned

certain possessions here in the time of Edward the Confessor; and in connection with this it is interesting to discover that about a hundred and twenty years ago the foundations of an ancient and massive building were brought to light on a place known as the Priory Field. One of the manors belonged to the Priory of Butley, but was eventually granted to Francis Framlingham by Henry the Eighth, and later, through mar-



GATEWAY AT CROW'S HALL.

riage, came into the possession of the Gawdy family, who had their seat at Crow's Hall, that beautiful old moated mansion which is now a farmhouse. Afterwards the manor was purchased by John Pitt, Esquire, described as a "worthy gentleman." There appears to have been a Crow's Hall in Debenham as far back as the early fourteenth century, but some of the Crow family were living in

the town many years before that date. The present building was probably erected by one of the Framlinghams about four hundred years ago, and even to-day it retains more than a trace of its former magnificence. In fact, it is one of the old homes of England to which the passing of the centuries has given a beauty that only age can bestow, lending it an air of quiet dignity combined with a certain stateliness which seems to suggest that it holds in its keeping many a secret of the past—a past of more than ordinary interest.

Another of the old manor houses is Ulverston Hall, which is also now a farmhouse. This moated residence gave its name to the Ulverston family, who owned it soon after the Norman Conquest, and eventually the hall and manor came into the possession of Henry Tooley, who died in 1551 and bequeathed it, together with Sackvyls, another manor, to the corporation of Ipswich for charitable purposes. Another charity was provided by Sir Robert Hitcham, who directed in his will that twenty poor children of the parish should be educated at the school he endowed at Framlingham, but for some reason or other this was found to be impracticable, and to carry out his desire an amount of £20 per annum was allowed for the provision of a school and schoolmaster in Debenham—which certainly seems a more sensible arrangement.

One calamity, at least, has overtaken the town, for in March, 1744, it suffered severely from a great fire, which, starting at a baker's, was responsible for destroying in a very few hours over thirty houses. This conflagration would probably have become far less serious if the weather had been different, but owing to an exceptionally dry season water was difficult to obtain, with the result that the large number of willing helpers were severely handicapped in their fight against the flames.

It is not often that one finds a Nonconformist place of worship having more sittings than the church, but the Congregational Chapel at Debenham, which was erected as far back as 1824, is able to claim this satisfaction—if satisfaction it be—for whereas St. Mary's can accommodate a congregation of 550, the chapel has room for 150 more than this. A building which seems to stand out amongst its older neighbours is the Foresters' Hall, built in 1905,

whilst in one respect Debenham has set an example which many other places might well have considered. This is in connection with its war memorial, for instead of a useless piece of masonry—which in the course of a few years will probably have lost its original significance



THE SIMSON MONUMENT.

—its inhabitants have very wisely chosen a reminder of lasting worth and utility. This takes the form of an Institute, and although to some people a building of that kind probably lacks the significance of a cenotaph, it is surely a better policy to provide something for the living—something that will remind



TOMB OF SIR CHARLES FRAMLINGHAM.

them every time they pass through its doors of the reason for its existence, and thus keep the lamp of remembrance burning in the hearts of men, now and in the future.

Debenham seems originally to have been founded by the Anglo-Saxons, and it has been suggested that it was the home of one of their

princes. Also, according to White, the Kings of East Anglia "occasionally held their courts here," but some authorities question both these statements. After the Conquest, it was held by four of William's mightiest barons, one of whom was Robert Malet, of Eye, but chiefly through rebelling against their liege they lost

their property, and the manor was divided amongst several families, and perhaps this association with many ancient lines accounts for much that on the surface seems inexplicable in connection with Debenham. There is scarcely a town of its size existing anywhere which seems quite so much in touch with the mediæval, as its streets and the very appearance of its buildings seem to speak more of the past than the present. Many places, through the decay of some industry which at one time made them prosperous, have a certain desolate appearance, as though the best things of life have passed them by, but this is not true with Debenham. The quietness which exists here to-day is not due to any cessation of industry or the dwindling of trade, but is simply the natural atmosphere of a place more or less wrapped up in its history—not broodingly, but in a somewhat puzzled way, as though wondering why the world around has changed to such an extent—and in the changing left it with its dreams of the past as an only consolation.

For although Debenham has a light railway, opened in 1908, and the town is lighted by gas, there is nothing of the commercial in its outlook. Even its market square seems to typify the simplicity of former days rather than tell of busy people rushing here and there buying and selling and bargaining. But, after all, the fact that places like Debenham—even in go-as-you-please Suffolk—are few and far between makes them all the more interesting, and not only interesting, but soothing—veritable oases in the deserts of modern existence. And because of this who would wish them otherwise?

YEOMAN.