

Cossington Rectory

By Anthony Herbert, A.R.I.B.A.

COSSINGTON Rectory is situated in a pleasant garden to the south-west of the church. The house, generally of two storeys in height, is built principally of the local Syenitic rock with freestone dressings, and is roofed with Swithland slates.

The front, or east façade, of the house, presents two prominent features of interest: a large stone bay window, with traceried lights, rising through the ground and upper floors, and a "black and white" ornamental timbered gable-end of a type more usually to be met with on the Welsh border. More detailed reference will be made to these features later.

The west, or garden, front has a somewhat more formal appearance, consisting as it does, for most of its length, of a well-proportioned symmetrical early 19th-century façade. When this section of the building was erected, the plan of the house was entirely re-organised. The existing principal rooms of the house were relegated to subsidiary purposes, and the main entrance to the house was superseded. The plan of the house was then reversed, and the new wing contained the principal entrance and a staircase hall, as well as large and lofty drawing and dining rooms. In more recent years, the earlier doorway has again been reinstated as the front entrance, and the 19th-century doorway has been given the humbler task of providing access to the garden.

The buildings seem to have been erected at five main periods. The earliest section, at the north end of the house, is now principally used for pantries, larders and stores. It consists of a three-storey building, the third storey being in the roof. The ground-floor storey has walls of Syenitic rubble, slightly battered externally and having small undressed openings for windows. The first floor, now a bedroom, is entirely of timber construction. The timbers, of English oak, are some four inches thick. The spaces between them have been filled with rough-cast in modern times, but no doubt the original treatment was an external and internal skin of the wonderfully hard and durable lime plaster so frequently used in medieval buildings.

The steeply-pitched roof is constructed entirely of oak, and consists of common rafters of stout section supported by one purlin on each side; there are no trusses. The roof is covered with wide oak boards and Swithland slates in graduated courses.

The third floor is entirely in the roof, and is approached by a short flight of steps from the landing. It is worthy of note that this access is to-day closed by a delicately moulded panelled Elizabethan oak door.

The storeys in this oldest section are considerably lower than those in the remainder of the house, and the work quite obviously belongs to a considerably earlier period than that of any other part. It is somewhat difficult to assign a date to this work with any degree of certainty, owing to the absence of features characteristic of any particular period; but it seems probable that it belongs to the early part of the fifteenth century.

The next portion, in order of date, is very probably the wing to the east and south of the work just described. This consists of a two-storey block, the storeys being considerably more lofty than those of the first section. It is very probable that, in the erection of the second portion of the house, parts of the original structure were demolished and supplanted. The ground-floor storey is to-day principally of brickwork, but much of this is obviously of comparatively recent date. The upper floor, however, terminates at the eastern end in the timber-framed gable previously referred to. This is of most decorative design (see plate i) and incorporates the initials I Æ. The precise significance of these symbols is not clear, but they may possibly be connected with the builder of this section of the house.

The roofs, again, are steeply-pitched, mostly constructed of oak, and are covered with Swithland slates. Indeed, the main roof of this portion of the house is particularly beautiful, owing to the exceptionally thick slates and the skilful manner in which the courses are graduated.

It is, again rather difficult to be dogmatic as to dates, but the general design of the timbered gable-end is suggestive of mid-fifteenth century, or perhaps a little later.

The next section of the house, chronologically, is the two-storey block comprising the present kitchens; its most noteworthy external feature is a large stone-mullioned bay window,



Photo—Alfred Newton & Sons

**COSSINGTON RECTORY
VIEW FROM NORTH-WEST SHOWING NORTH WING**

PLATE IV.



PLATE V.

Photo—Alfred Newton & Sons

COSSINGTON RECTORY—INTERIOR VIEW OF KITCHEN

rising through both storeys and covered with a lead flat behind an embattled stone parapet ornamented with heraldic shields. The lights are divided by heavy boldly-moulded stone major and minor mullions, and have cusped traceried heads on the upper floor. In the heads of the ground-floor window-lights there remain some small fragments of painted glass which may possibly be coeval with the fabric.

The most prominent internal feature is a very fine oak-beamed plaster ceiling in the kitchen (see plate v). The beams run through the fireplace wall without any interruption in the mouldings, and the kitchen no doubt forms part of what was originally a much larger room. This supposition is further confirmed by the position of the bay window on plan. On the first floor, however, a false ceiling of Victorian date conceals any signs of the original ceiling.

From general indications, such as the thicknesses of walls, etc., it seems probable that the section of the house immediately to the south of the above, and comprising cloakrooms and the present front doorway entrance, belongs to the same build as the kitchen portion just described. Considerable alterations have, however, been carried out to this part of the house during the 18th century, and it is impossible to arrive at a definite conclusion on this point.

There is a local tradition that this bay window was brought from a monastery close by and built into the rectory—presumably after the Dissolution. It would hardly appear, however, that much reliance can be placed on this theory, because no record exists of any monastery in the neighbourhood. It is quite possible, though, that the window was brought from elsewhere; such a proceeding was quite usual.

In the latter part of the 18th century, Thomas Babington, then rector of Cossington, made considerable additions on the west side of the house. As has been already mentioned, the plan of the house was greatly altered, and a new front door of typical 18th-century design, with a delicate lunette over it, was inserted. The ground-floor line, too, was considerably raised and two steps were inserted to connect with the existing house.

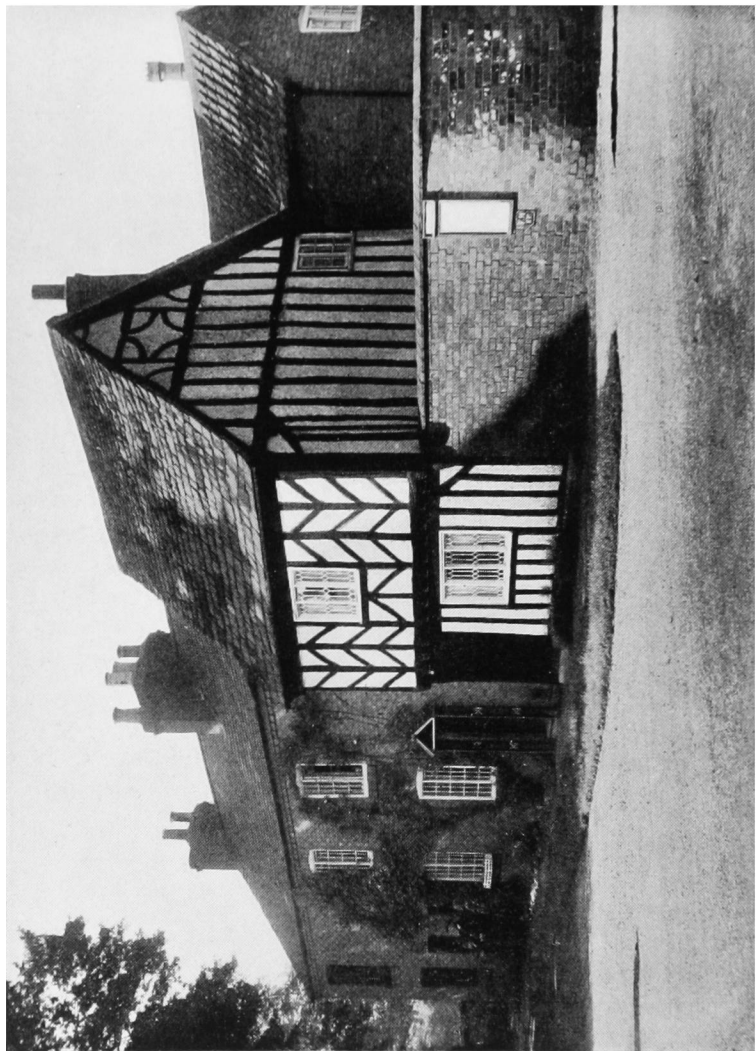
Built of Syenitic rubble with freestone quoins and roofed with slates, the new wing incorporated, on the ground-floor, a drawing-

room and dining-room disposed on either side of a central staircase hall and, on the first floor, two large bedrooms. The south-west bedroom contains a beautiful fireplace and surround of Adam design; the fireplaces in the other rooms have, unfortunately, been replaced with somewhat characterless examples of mid-nineteenth century ironmongery.

The elegant stateliness of the 18th century found notable expression in the classically inspired architecture of that period. The rooms in this wing are spacious, lofty and well-proportioned, and are lit by fine large windows, originally fitted with casements, which have been partly supplanted by sashes. The opening staircase, too, is of oak, and though simple and restrained in treatment, is an admirable example of the dignity of the age.

The final stage in the development of the house was the addition in 1870, by the Reverend Joseph Mayor, of a study, with a bedroom over it, at the south-east corner. It is said that in order to make room for this extension, some low buildings, previously existing, were demolished. There are certain indications, however, that the walls of the previous buildings may perhaps have been in part incorporated in the new work (note the evidences of ashlar quoining to be seen to the right-hand side of the first-floor window on the plate shewing the east front of the house). The external walling, as will be seen, is of Syenitic rubble and is somewhat unusually thick. The mullioned windows have freestone dressings and there are stepped label moulds over them. Internally, there are no features of particular interest.

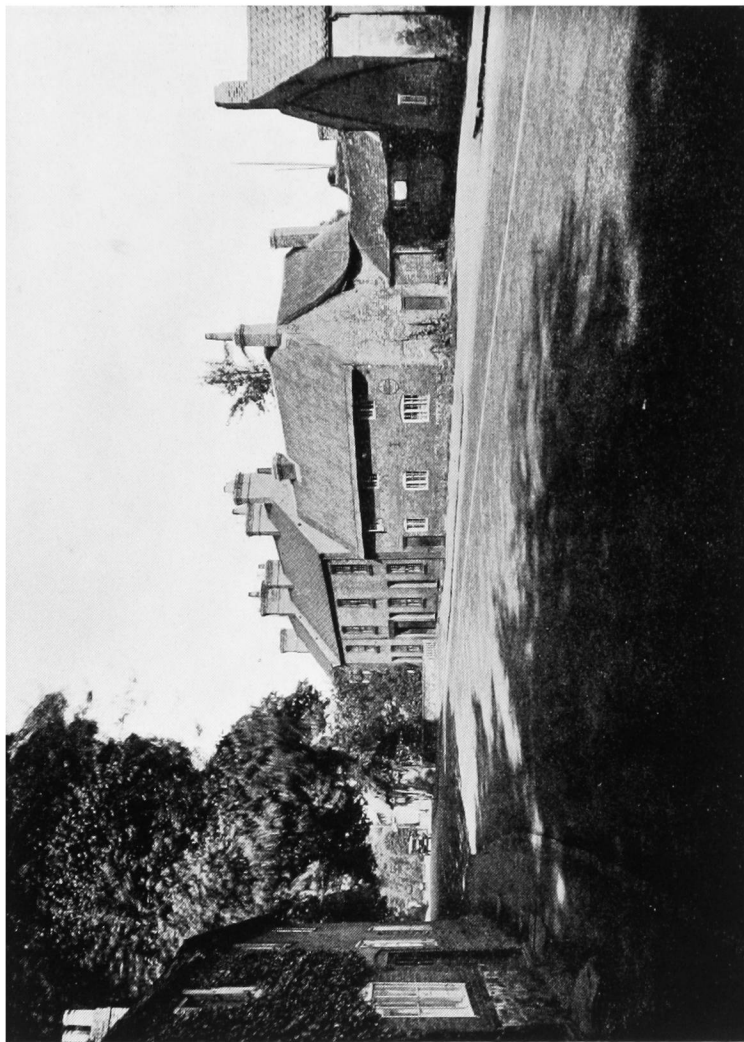
This concludes the description of Cossington rectory, a house of considerable interest and charm. It may not, however, be out of place here to call attention to a somewhat unusual characteristic of the village in which it stands. This peculiarity is the exceptional proportion of quite large houses. In the average small village in this part of England, it is very common to find that the rectory or vicarage is the largest house in the village, with the possible exception of the hall or manor. In Cossington there are four or five houses approximately as large as or larger than the rectory—all erected during the 18th and 19th centuries. Attention may also be called to the interesting survival of an ancient cottage seen to the right-hand side of plate vii. The



Photo—Alfred Newton & Sons

COSSINGTON—MAGPIE ROW

PLATE VI.



Photo—Alfred Newton & Sons

THE STREET, COSSINGTON

PLATE VII.

original timber framings, which are roughly triangular, rising from just above ground level and halved together at the apex to receive the pole ridge, may be clearly discerned incorporated in the later rubble masonry and brickwork.