

**THE OLD HOUSES OF
SHREWSBURY,
THEIR HISTORY
AND ASSOCIATIONS**

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The old houses of Shrewsbury, their history and associations by H. E. Forrest

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The Old Houses of Shrewsbury

THEIR HISTORY AND ASSOCIATIONS

BY

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PREFACE.

ALTHOUGH many books dealing with the history or topography of Shrewsbury have appeared from time to time, no work devoted to the history of its old houses has hitherto been published. In the present volume I have tried to give a succinct account of these interesting old buildings—Shrewsbury's most attractive feature—partly by collating all available data regarding them, and partly by careful study and comparison of the structures themselves.

The principal sources of information as to their past history are Owen and Blakeway's monumental *History of Shrewsbury*, especially the numerous footnotes therein; the *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society* including the famous "Taylor M.S." and Blakeway's "Topographical History of Shrewsbury"; Owen's *Account of Shrewsbury* published anonymously in 1808; *Shropshire Notes and Queries* reprinted from the "Shrewsbury Chronicle"; and *Shreds and Patches*, a similar series of earlier date from "Eddowes' Journal."

Owing to business and other engagements I had little time to devote to looking out details in books or documents, and I have to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mr. H. T. Beddows in searching out many items in the volumes at the Reference Library. I also have to thank Miss Auden for revising the M.S. and supplying valuable notes and criticisms: but more than anyone else I am indebted to Mr. R. E. Davies who has lived in Shrewsbury all his life and made the antiquarian lore of the town peculiarly his own. His unique knowledge of local history and literature was placed at my disposal unstintingly, while at every stage of the book's progress he has given most valuable assistance.

For the drawings in illustration of the text I have to thank Miss Moses and my daughter: the photographic and coloured plates were supplied by Mr. Wilding for the most

part, though three of the former were taken by Mr. J. Franklin specially for this book.

In view of a possible second edition I should be glad if readers would inform me of any errors they may detect in the text.

I send forth this little volume in the twofold hope that it may add to the attractiveness of Shrewsbury for visitors, and that it will lead my fellow-townsmen to take a more intelligent and loving interest in the OLD HOUSES OF SHREWSBURY.

H. E. FORREST.

*37 Castle Street,
Shrewsbury,
May, 1911.*

*The figures in brackets as (37) refer to the position of
the house on the Plan.*

PART I.—HISTORICAL.



THE earliest mention of any house in Shrewsbury occurs in the writings of Llywarch Hen the British poet who is supposed to have lived about the end of the sixth century. [Critics aver that the poem was actually written in late Saxon times, but, even if this were so, it would have some historic value as recording traditions that were generally accredited then.] Llywarch had come from Northumbria to take refuge with Cyddylyan prince of Powys whose home was at Pengwern—the British Shrewsbury. The poet laments the destruction of Uriconium and of Pengwern “whose maidens he bids to behold the habitation of Cyddylyan wrapped in flames.” Probably Pengwern was not wholly destroyed then: at any rate it was soon re-occupied, for in 606 Brochmail prince of Powys had his palace here on the site subsequently occupied by Old St. Chad’s church. Soon afterwards the Saxons took possession of the town, which became part of Mercia and was first called Scrobbesbyrig, this name by a series of mutations taking its modern form—Shrewsbury. Very little is known as to its history from the 7th to the 10th centuries, but early in the latter we learn from a law made by King Athelstan to secure uniformity of coinage throughout his dominion, which specified the number of moneys in each town, that Shrewsbury had one such moneys: in the reign of Edward the Confessor it had three moneys. It is to be inferred, therefore, that in Saxon times Shrewsbury was a place of importance, and that it grew as time went on.

Another clue to the status of the town at this time is to be found in the fact that all its five principal churches came into existence during the Saxon period. Of these the four within the compass of the Severn were almost certainly of stone, but we have the authority of Ordericus for stating that the little Saxon Church which preceded the Abbey was of wood.

All need for conjecture ceases, however, on reference to the pages of Domesday Book, that wonderful compilation made by the Conqueror's order, which records the name and status of every Saxon holder of property at the time of the Conquest.

Prebendary Auden says in his book on "Shrewsbury":—
" We learn from it that in the time of Edward the Confessor the town contained 252 houses, each inhabited by a burgess, so that the whole population would not much exceed a thousand. . . . That the houses were of wood with thatched roofs we gather from the fact that if a house were burnt even by accident without negligence, the burgess to whom it belonged was required to pay to the king the large fine of forty shillings and also a fine of two shillings each to his two next-door neighbours."

When William the Conqueror created his kinsman Roger de Montgomery Earl of Shrewsbury in 1071, he conferred on him, besides other lands, almost the whole of Shropshire. When Roger came to Shrewsbury there was already a castle of some kind on the mound where now stands Laura's Tower. This was probably only a wooden tower defended by a dry moat and palisades: at any rate it was wholly inadequate for this powerful Norman Earl, so he proceeded to enlarge it and build a great stone castle after the accepted pattern of those days. In order to make room for this he laid waste 51 houses, and it is recorded that another 50 lay waste in 1086.

We may here enquire what portion of the town was built over with houses at this period. In order to understand this it will be well to bear in mind that the peninsula on which Shrewsbury stands consists of two hills separated by a depression. The tops of the hills are now called respectively Castle Street and St. Chad's Terrace, whilst the depression is occupied by the Market Hall. It is almost

certain that during the Norman period Shrewsbury was confined to the first of these hills, the Castle forming its nucleus. A strong reason for this supposition is afforded by the fact that the earliest town wall (built about the year 1100 by Roger's son Robert de Belesme) enclosed only so much of the town as would be roughly defined by the lines occupied now by Castle Street, Pride Hill, Butcher Row, Fish Street, and Dogpole.

Earl Robert headed the rebellious barons in their revolt against Henry I., but in the end was defeated and banished by the King who confiscated his estates and took possession of Shrewsbury Castle. This was a good thing for the town, as the King was well-disposed to the townsfolk and did much to ameliorate their condition. On Henry's death in 1135 the country was for twenty years ravaged by the civil war between Matilda and Stephen, and this acted as a serious check upon the development of the town in the arts of peace. It led, however, indirectly to an increase in its size and population, because the disturbed state of the country and the oppression of the barons, caused the country people to resort to the towns for protection. Shrewsbury developed considerably during the reign of Henry II., and it would have done so still further but for the Welsh wars. These certainly rendered it a very important place as a military centre during the succeeding reigns, but can hardly have conduced to much civil progress. Still, in spite of these drawbacks the town did advance steadily so that about the year 1220 it became necessary to increase its area by enlarging its borders. A new town wall was built which, starting at the upper Castle Gate, ran parallel with the old wall to about the middle of Pride Hill, where it parted from the old wall and passed down Roushill to the Welsh Bridge: here it turned up Claremont Bank, and ran parallel with the river, but at some distance within its curve, to the English Bridge, then up the righthand side of the Wyle Cop to the corner of Dogpole where it joined the old wall. The portion which still goes by the name of "Town Walls" was part of this extension. It enclosed the second hill referred to above, and to this day outlines almost exactly the area within the peninsula occupied by houses. The suburbs of Frankwell and Coton had hardly