

V.

DESCRIPTION OF AN OLD TIMBER BUILDING, IN THE LAWN-
MARKET, EDINBURGH. BY JOHN M. DICK PEDDIE, ARCHITECT,
F.S.A. SCOT. (PLATES I. II.)

This old building, which stood at the head of the Lawnmarket, became recently the property of the Free Church. In connection with an extension of their Hall, it was found to be necessary to remove the timber building and those behind it in Milne's Court.

It was with regret that I found myself an active agent in the destruction of one of the comparatively few remaining characteristic specimens of Old Edinburgh architecture, but closer acquaintance with the building showed that on several grounds its removal could only be regarded with unqualified approval. The building had fallen into such decay—decay of its vital parts—that it could not have survived for many years, whilst restoration, even had it been compatible with the proposed extension of the Free Church property, was impossible. Its demolition, on the other hand, afforded opportunities for the investigation of its construction, which would have been lost had it been left to fall by natural decay, as was certainly imminent.

As it stood, the building was simply unfit for habitation, and it was tenanted by people in the last stage of misery and squalor. To have tolerated such a state of matters with a view to preserve a fabric however interesting and picturesque, would have been worse than inexpedient.

Regarding former proprietors of this building little is known, but Wilson, in his *Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time*, states that, from the titles, among the first was Bartholomew Somerville, who, according to Crawford, in 1639 endowed the college with a sum of 26,000 merks. There were no dates or inscriptions on the timber part of the building, but on the west wall was found a corbel stone with a shield and carved device on its face. The device seems to be a trade mark or cypher. Over the door of one of the lands in Milne's Court was a lintel with the words "Blessit Be God In all His giftis," and the date

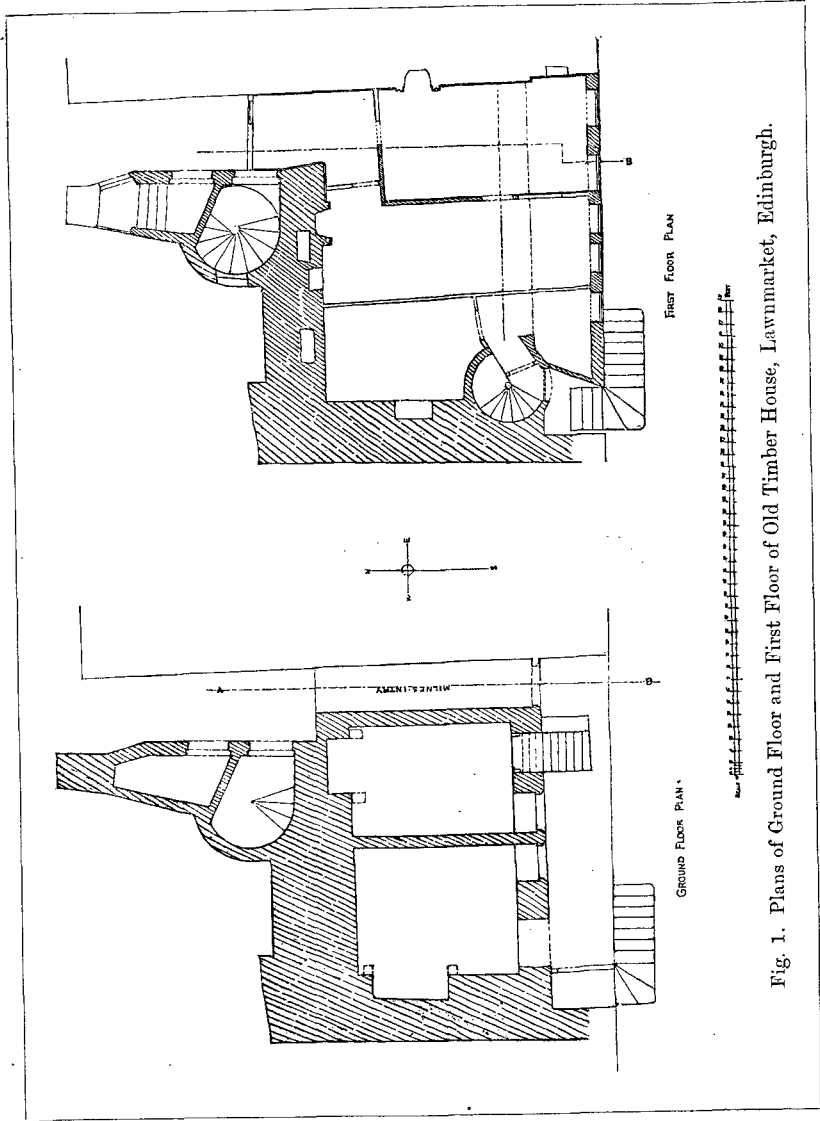


Fig. 1. Plans of Ground Floor and First Floor of Old Timber House, Lawnmarket, Edinburgh.

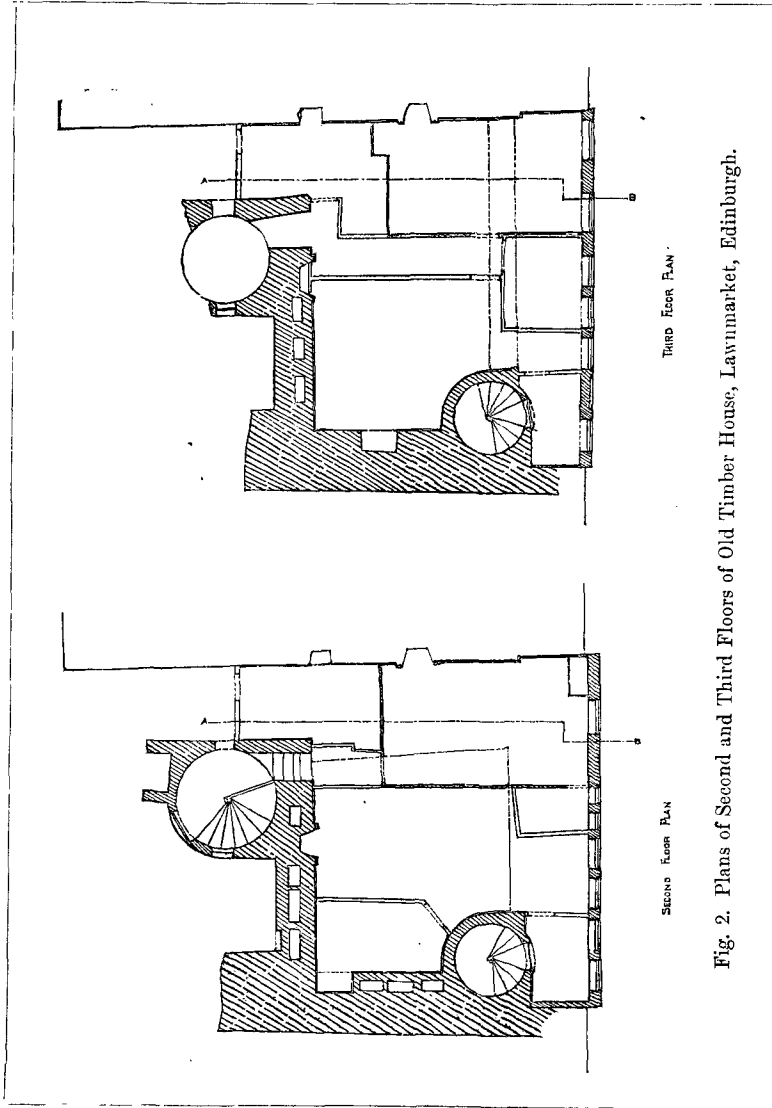


Fig. 2. Plans of Second and Third Floors of Old Timber House, Lawnmarket, Edinburgh.

1580. I am inclined to think the timber building dates from about that period.

I have prepared measured drawings of the building, and Drummond's plate of the Palace of Mary of Guise has in the foreground an admirable view of it, as it appeared when it was pulled down. Plans of the different floors of the building are shown in figs. 1, 2, and 3.

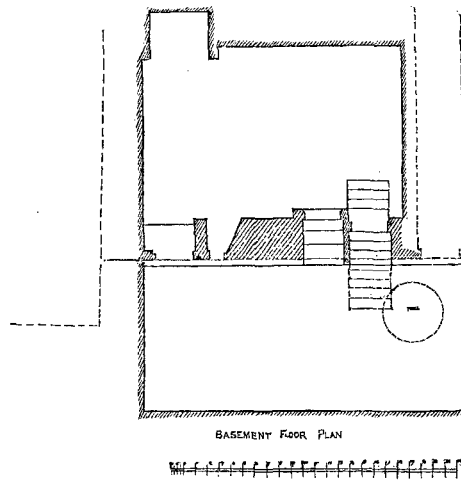


Fig. 3. Ground Plan of Basement Floor.

I was sanguine at one time that, in process of pulling down the building, sufficient evidence would have been found to have admitted of a complete restoration on paper being made, but in several important points evidence for such a restoration is lacking.

Allow me first to direct your attention to the general features of the structure, as indicated on the section which is through the east part of the building (fig. 4). It differs from a section through the west part in respect that here there was a wooden projection to both front and back, that to the back being over Milne's Entry, whilst on the west the back wall was a gable, separating this house from one in Milne's

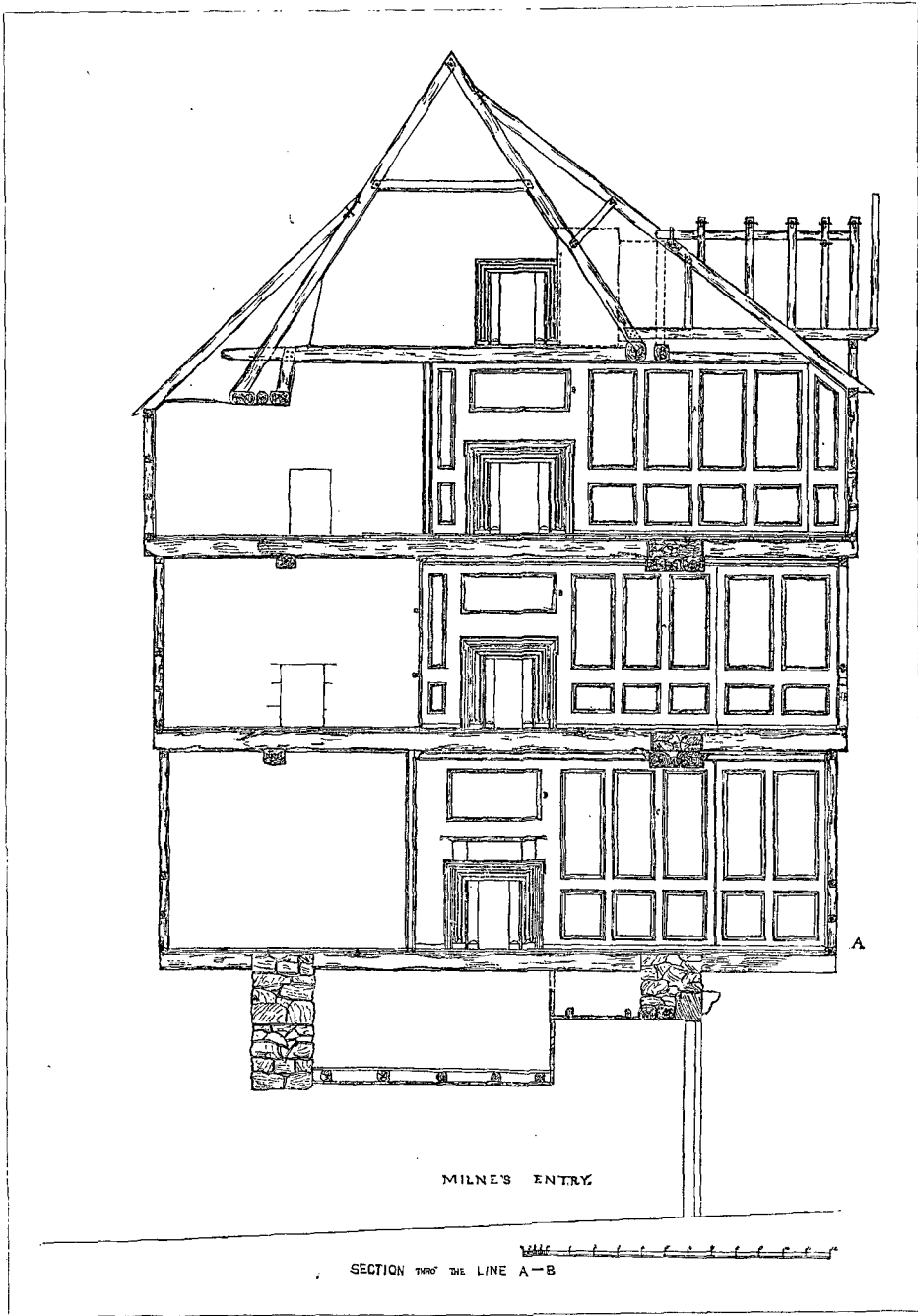
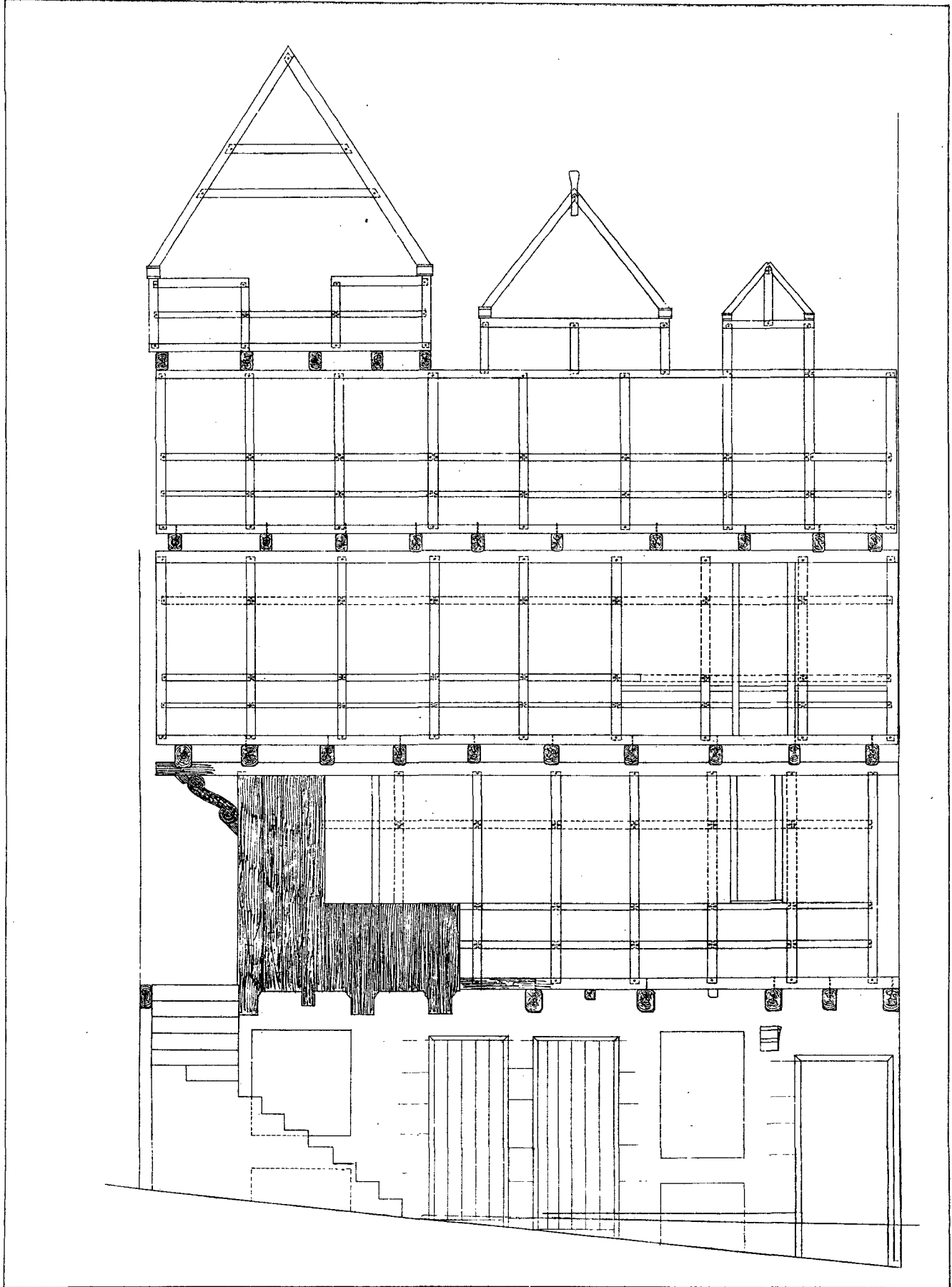


Fig. 4. Section through East Part of Old Timber House, Lawnmarket, Edinburgh.

Court. The lower part of the structure up to the first floor was of stone, measuring across from outside to outside of the walls 19 feet, over which the timber work projected, both to the front and back in successive stages, the breadth of the top floor, also measured from outside to outside of the walls, being no less than 30 feet. The sunk floor was arched with a semicircular vault, and had apparently at one time direct access to the street by a door at its west end, besides by the one shown on the plan of this floor at the east end. There was also a door of communication between it and the sunk floor of the houses in Milne's Court. The cellar which was under the street extended along the whole front of the building, and at its west end there was a hole, perhaps a well, sunk to the depth of 5 feet in the rock, with an opening in the vault to the street which was possibly used for drawing water for the upper floors. The ground floor, which was on the level of the street, was divided by a stone partition, each compartment having like the sunk floor, a large fireplace. One of these fireplaces, the one to the east, had some degree of ornamentation, the sides being corbelled out, but the stone lintel had been removed, an oak one having been substituted for it. There was apparently no access from these apartments to the floor above. The plans of the other floors represent the ground and upper floors precisely as they existed when the building was pulled down. Access to the first floor was obtained by an outside stair from the street, in continuation of which a stone circular stair gave access to the upper floors. Numerous partitions divide these upper floors, some of which are hatched, whilst others are only indicated by lines. Those not hatched are of quite modern date, whilst the others are of considerable age, although I believe in no case are they even the partitions of the original building. The grounds on which I have formed that opinion I shall refer to presently. The first floor and the front of the building are carried on strong oak beams of varying sections, which were built into the back wall, or, as in the case of the east part, projected over it. These rested on the walls, and in the case of the upper floors on oak beams, running parallel to the walls built at their ends, into the side gables. The beams of the first floor were thus, if I may use the expression, balanced on the walls below, being prevented from tilting forward by the cor-



DRAWING SHEWING OUTLINE OF BUILDING & TIMBER FRAMING

responding projection at the back, or by being held down by the weight of the back wall. Owing to the strain put upon them by the weight in front, almost all the beams were broken through at the line of the front wall, where the bending moment was greatest. The beams running parallel to the front, and supporting the beams of the upper floors, had an intermediate support on the first and second floors, formed by wooden uprights, with a cross piece on the top, which transmitted part of the weight directly to the walls below.

The roof was ingeniously constructed to save further loading and straining of the timber front. It was framed with inner principals of oak, having nearly the form of an equilateral triangle, strongly tenoned and pinned, and springing from a continuous beam, which was supported by the two gables at its ends. Placed against the principals were rafters extending from the apex of the principals to the line of the eaves in front, carrying the slates between the gables. The gables were formed as shown on the section, and exhibited some peculiarities of construction too technical, however, to be touched upon here. The roof was covered with thick grey slates hung on pine laths, and secured with wooden pins. It may be mentioned that in several places the roof timbers were much charred. The drawing (Plate I.) showing the outline of the building shows what may be called the bones of the structure, the front stripped of its outer covering as it existed prior to the numerous alterations which have undoubtedly been made upon it. It also shows an elevation of the street floor, the access to Milne's Entry, and the stair to the upper floors. Above the mason work are the ends of the oak beams which passed through the building to the back wall, and on which are supported on each floor the horizontal runners and uprights. The latter were in all cases tenoned and pinned to the runners, the cross pieces between the uprights being secured in the same way. In some cases both uprights and cross pieces have been removed or altered in position. At the west end of the first floor is the opening giving access to the upper floors from the street. The runner under the beams of the second floor extended over this opening, its free end being supported from the westmost upright by a strut rudely shaped to resemble a classic truss. The door in the circular stair had moulded

jambs of common type, and above the lintel a moulding which served as a species of corbel. It may be mentioned that the north-east part of the stair is carried on the oak beams which carried the first floor. Drummond's plate gives a faithful representation of the building as it appeared when it was taken down, but that it differs widely from the original structure is amply shown by the numerous alterations made on the framework, and which are indicated on the skeleton front by dotted lines. I stated formerly that I believed none of the existing partitions were those of the original building. I did so on the following grounds:—The style of the panelling with which they were lined, and which is clearly indicated on the section, is of later date than that to which the building can be assigned. The partitions were made to suit the plastered ceilings which in the case of at least one of the floors did not at first exist, and in the first and second floors the uprights supporting the beams which, from their ornamental treatment, appear at least partially to have been exposed were embedded in the partitions. It is further evident that the windows which were inserted in the front, and which were not part of the original building, were formed at the same time as these partitions. What the original division of the interior may have been there was little evidence to show, excepting in the case of the second floor. On pulling down its plaster ceiling, indications of painting were discovered on the underside of the flooring boards of the room above. The boards were carefully removed, and after much trouble sufficient material was found for the partial restoration of the ceiling. Its position is clearly shown on the plan of the second floor by lines, which indicate the exact area to which the painting was confined. On the assumption, not I think a rash one, that the partitions conformed to the line of the painted ceiling, it will be seen that this floor was practically divided into two parts, the larger measuring $18\cdot6 \times 16\cdot6$, the smaller one to the east measuring $8\cdot0 \times 16\cdot6$. If this division of the floor is admitted to be that of the original building, it will be at once seen that, on at least part of this floor, there must have been a space between the compartments and the front wall, forming a gallery, which Chambers, in his *Edinburgh Papers*, stated was the usual arrangements of such houses. Some correspondence took place in the *Scotsman* on this subject, in which I

ventured to say, that from internal evidence I believed it was open to question whether that arrangement had existed in this building. At that time this ceiling had not been discovered, but with what I think must be regarded as the conclusive evidence afforded by it, and on some other grounds to which I shall refer, I have now little doubt that Chambers' description holds good as regards this building. The position of the door openings from the stairs to the different floors throws some light on this question. On the first floor there was a door at the bottom of the stairs closing the stair from the outside, but the access to the apartments was not that shown on the plan, which is modern, but by a door to the south of it, the stone jamb of which still existed. This door jamb fixes what was the line of the front or south wall of the rooms on this floor, but it is impossible to ascertain how this wall was divided. There is a large fireplace in the west wall, probably one of those originally in use, the two others being of the date of the wooden partitions. On the second floor there was a similar arrangement for access from the stair, there being a door at the head of the stair, and another door from the gallery into the west apartment. On the second and third floors, there were doors communicating with the stairs entered from Milne's Entry, but these are modern. On the third floor there was no jamb on the wall of the stair similar to that on the floor below. Unfortunately there now exists practically nothing to show the construction or arrangements of the walls of the compartments separating them from the galleries. Chambers says of this building—"The wooden forework of the upper floors is now all closed up with ranges of windows, forming as usual narrow but luminous antechambers to the rooms within the stone fabric," and in the accompanying drawing the first floor, which is represented with a continuous gallery from end to end, is shown with a stone wall behind. The stone walls did not exist when the building was pulled down, and the only point in favour of their ever having existed, is the presence of the stone jambs on the east side of the stair. The whole construction rather points to these walls having been of lighter material than stone—wood, or wood and plaster combined. The presence of the stone jambs is quite compatible with partitions of wood, and may be explained

as an expedient for securing a good support on which to hinge. To have removed the stone walls, and to have inserted oak beams of the scantling and length necessary (23 feet) for the support of the floor beams, would have been, even in the present day, a difficult problem, owing to the closeness of the vertical support of the front; but apart from this, the wooden uprights on the first and second floors passed right through the three thicknesses of flooring which had been laid successively, each as the one below wore out, indicating that the posts must have been erected before the first of these floors was laid. The three thicknesses of flooring were also laid over the spaces which the walls would have occupied. The drawing in the *Papers* is evidently a restoration on the lines of the old timber building at the head of the West Bow, which was recently pulled down, and accordingly supports for the front are introduced on the ground floor which, I think, never existed. An open gallery is shown on the first floor with the supports placed at intervals, which the exposure of the framework shows to have been incorrect. Before attempting to indicate the lines of a restoration of the front, allow me to direct your attention to the covering with which the framework was clothed (fig. 5), as it existed when the building was pulled down. There are three separate skins, each of which indicates a different stage in the history of the building. To begin with the most modern, there is a thin coat of plaster on strong laths; below that, pine boarding, grooved and tongued; and below that, oak boarding, also grooved and tongued, both classes of boarding running vertically. That the oak boarding was at one time the only covering, is not to be doubted. The weathered appearance of the wood, and the ornamental finish of the boarding which projected down and covered one of the beam ends, amply prove that it was so. Fragments of the oak lining were found on many of the vertical supports, and at the west end three contiguous boards were intact. These boards were in all 2 feet 7 inches broad. They and the other portions of oak framing are indicated on the drawing of the front. The galleries probably extended along the whole front, excepting in the case of the first floor, where the east part was partly boarded up, doubtless for the sake of greater privacy.

Before closing, allow me to say a few words about the painted ceiling

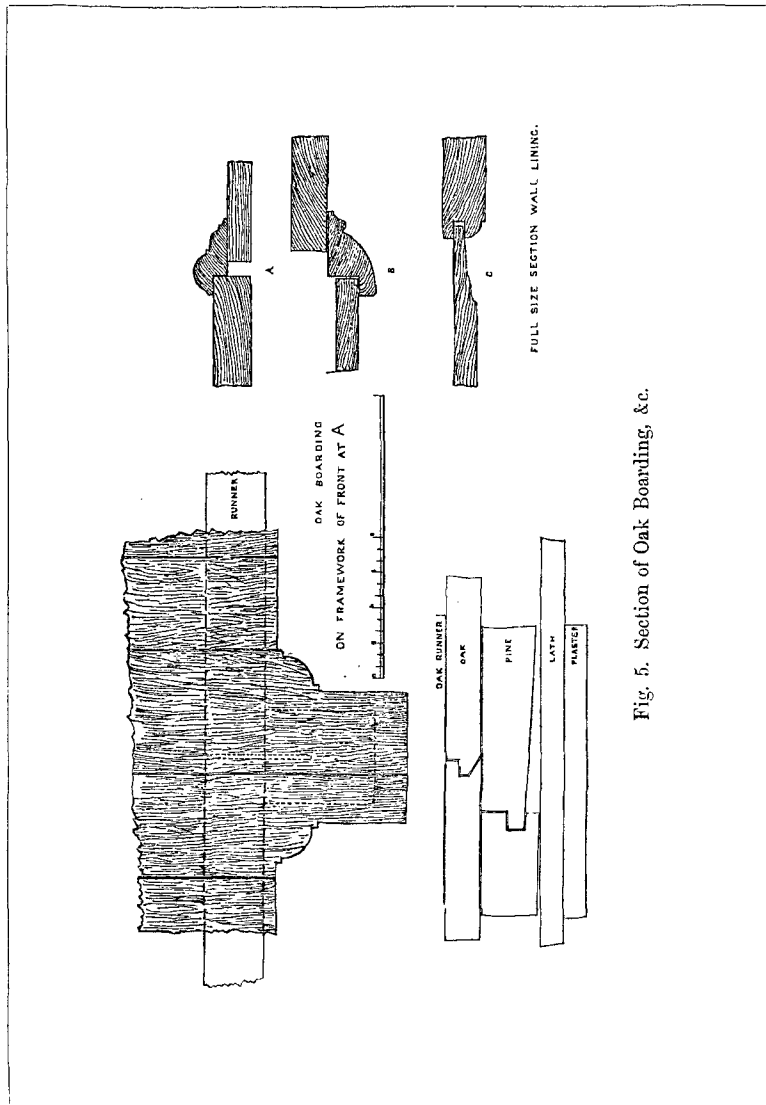


Fig. 5. Section of Oak Boarding, &c.

(Plate II.) Unfortunately in many places the decoration was quite gone, as the blanks on the drawing will show, but what remains gives an excellent idea of the character of the work. The beams which carried the flooring planks, whose reverse side formed the ceiling below, were spaced somewhat irregularly, and the spaces between them were treated as long panels with paintings of birds, beasts, and fishes, surrounded and separated by masses of conventional foliage and ribbon ornaments of renaissance type. In one case the animal (perhaps a wild cat) is represented sitting on its haunches, with leaves and thistles on either side, treated quite naturally and in strong contrast to the other work. The beams were painted white with running ornaments on both soffits and sides, reminding strongly of Pompeian decoration. The ceiling was painted in water colour similar to those found in various old buildings, and of which the Society has a good example in the Museum. As washing at once obliterates the colour, restoration is hardly possible. The colouring, though limited in range, being in fact confined to black, brown, green, and yellow, was harmonious and effective.

